TARGETTING MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS TO CONSUMERS IN FAST-PACED RETAIL SETTINGS

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Suggested Track: Consumer Behavior and Marketing

ABSTRACT

At present established metrics of speed in fast-paced retail environments are difficult to come by, and there are currently no established metrics of customer speed specific to convenience retailers – where speed matters most. Furthermore, no measure exists of the impact of high-paced retail environments on customers' response to in-store marketing communications. The authors conducted focus groups and PDA-documented field observations to establish a foundation of concepts and metrics for speed exclusive to convenience stores. Along with the conceptualization of speed and specific areas of behavior measured, customers' opinions were also gathered to determine which aspects of speed are most relevant to them and, in turn, to their overall satisfaction with the retail experience. Two critical time segments emerged—customer time vs. store time, as well as key factors that influence customer perception of time. The nature of the wait and the customers' perception of that wait provide important directions for marketing communications in fast-paced retail environments.

TARGETTING MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS TO CONSUMERS IN FAST-PACED RETAIL SETTINGS: An Exploratory Study of Speed of Service

Almost suddenly retailers seem to have embarked on a quest for convenience. Retailers ranging from mass merchandisers to discount and dollar stores have begun to mimic the convenience store offer. Some experts in the convenience store industry argue that for traditional fuel operators to remain competitive, they must embrace new technology and enhance customer service [1]. Others in the industry resonate this argument by noting the value of the convenience offer, and value can be demonstrated in numerous ways [2] [3]. For instance, service convenience is sometimes conceptualized as a consumer's time and effort related to buying or using a service [4]. By this definition, one way to deliver value to c-store (defined as gas and no-gas retailers that offer convenience products in a limited square foot area) consumers is by enhancing the customer experience through the convenience of speed.

Intuitively, speed of access and service is one of the greatest values offered by the convenience store industry as well as by other fast-paced retail settings. However, at present there are no established metrics of speed in the convenience store industry, and speed metrics in other fast-paced retail settings are loosely structured and not directly related to customer experience. In his book *Why We Buy: the Science of Shopping,* marketing consultant Paco Underhill describes "waiting time", or speed of service, as the single most important factor in customer satisfaction [5]. He goes on to say that few retailers fail to realize that when this aspect of service is not delivered, the customer's impression of overall service diminishes.

Clearly, the concept of speed in terms of convenience is a multi-faceted term. There is speed of access. Speed of service. Speed of payment. Speed of item selection. And the general speed of the individual. Therefore, the current study was tailored to decipher those aspects of speed that are the most critical to fast-paced retail settings, specifically the c-store industry, in terms of convenience and customer satisfaction. Along with the conceptualization of speed and specific areas of measurement, customers' opinions were also gathered to help in determining which aspects of speed are most indicative of their overall satisfaction with their particular store.

Findings of the current studies relating to distinctions of time in the consumers' minds are expected to contribute to the development of speed metrics for convenience stores as well as other fast-paced retail environments. Furthermore, findings on particular influencers of customer perception of time while waiting in line are expected to provide important directions for marketing communications at the point of sale. According to one study, two-thirds of shopping decisions are made at the point of sale [6]. Furthermore, previous studies have also shown that customer service can have great effects on customer loyalty and trust [7]. Findings from this study reveal that consumers use distinct mental time clocks to measure their own shopping time and the time of the store personnel. Additionally, findings also reveal that perhaps consumers experience a greater level of receptivity to marketing communications while waiting in line to complete a purchase, indicating a window of opportunity for positioning products and messages at the point of sale terminals.

METHOD

The present study involved two phases of research. The first phase consisted of a focus group discussion with a number of typical c-store customers. Information on their appreciation for convenience and for services aimed at providing this convenience began the discussion. Additionally, conversations focused on assessing the manner in which customers conceptualize and perceive time while at the c-store and in comparison to other fast-paced retail venues. Suggestions on improving the perceptions of the time spent at the store were also gathered. Lastly, participants were asked to discuss the significance and overall meaning of their convenience store. Focus group insights were incorporated into the field study methodology.

The second phase of the study involved field observations, time recordings, and customer intercepts at a number of different c-stores across a mid-sized Texas city. Time was recorded on personal digital assistants (PDA's) from the moment the consumers entered the convenience store premises to the point they left these premises. Furthermore, customers were approached with a short list of questions assessing their perception of time actually spent at the c-store, the ideal time to be spent at a c-store, and their general satisfaction with the speed of the store. Supplemental demographic information was also observed. See Appendix 1 for details of PDA screens used in data collection.

RESULTS

Focus Groups

A group of typical c-store customers was recruited to participate in a discussion session of speed in the context of convenience. Focus group discussions were to be used as a guide for the field observation study to follow. Therefore, customers were asked questions relating to types of services they used for the sake of convenience, their perceptions of c-stores in relation to other fast-paced retail settings, and their perceptions of speed in terms of convenience at c-stores.

Recruitment focused on gathering respondents that were representative of the typical, more profitable c-store customer. Therefore, we recruited mostly males between the ages of 18-35 with some college education. We also recruited individuals that mostly purchased gas at a c-store and that had visited a c-store at least once within the previous week. Finally, we focused on recruiting heavy c-store users, defined as anyone who visited a c-store between 3 and 4 times a week. The final sample included five men and one woman. All were between the ages of 18-35 with some college education. Also, all visited c-stores between 3 to 4 times per week.

Participants readily revealed that they made a very clear distinction in their minds between "My time" and "C-store Time." "My time" was described as the time the customer took to drive to and from the c-store, the time to travel between their car and the c-store, and the time it took the customer to select items. "C-store Time" was defined as the time it took the customer to wait in line before paying and the time it took the customer to actually pay. The "c-store time" was the more critical of the two.

Although they clearly distinguished between "my time" and "c-store time," focus group participants were generally content with the speed of service at their c-store. They

estimated their average c-store trip to last between 2 and 7 minutes, and this amount of time was seen as acceptable. However, if a wait was inevitable they believed there were a few key variables that could affect their perception of the time they spent waiting.

The perception of speed was in the participants' minds greatly affected by customer service, store layout, and the presence of distraction. Participants were strong believers in good customer service. They believed that if the clerk was pleasant and friendly, then the overall visit to the c-store was more pleasant, and even detracted from the perceived amount of "c-store time." Also, they felt that acknowledgments of the inconvenience of the wait from the c-store employee altered their perception of time and added "value" to the time they spent waiting. Store layout was also seen as possibly influencing customers' perception of time. Participants felt that if the c-store register area was laid out in a way that made them feel they were obstructing the path of other customers or that their personal space was being invaded, then this made them more aware of the time they were spending in line. Ample room around the register could make "c-store time" seemingly less than time spent in a more crowded space.

Customers seemed to realize that there would be times when a line at the c-store was inevitable. They seemed to be accepting of this inconvenience, but provided some suggestions on what would help them keep a positive perception of the time they spent in line. Some of these suggestions included television sets tuned to news networks, flat screens flashing news tickers or advertisements, magazines or publications to read while waiting, and complimentary candy or mints to enjoy in line.

Overall, participants value the convenience their c-store provides and cherish the relationship they have fostered with their c-store. Some view the c-store as a place to begin and end their day. Although, there may be moments of idleness in their visits to a c-store, they like to feel in control of their visit. They are aware and appreciate the uniqueness of their relationship with a c-store they consider "My C-store."

Field Observations

Field observation data were collected on 440 respondents, 68% male, 32% female. The majority of respondents ranged in age from 26 to 50 years old. Seventy-five percent (75%) of respondents visited the c-store unaccompanied. Most of the c-store visitors observed reported visiting the c-store 1 to 2 times a week. However, there were a substantial number of daily visitors (24%) and those who visited 3 to 4 times a week (22%). Respondents' transactions at the c-stores included gas only, in-store products only, and gas plus in-store products at similar rates.

The average c-store trip recorded lasted 3.96 minutes (median = 3.38 minutes). Due to insights gained from the focus group research, time recordings were divided into <u>Customer time segments</u>, comprised of the time the customer enters the premises of the c-store to the time they make their item selection, <u>C-store time segments</u>, comprised of the time a customer waits in line before paying to the time at the end of the payment transaction, and <u>Pumping time</u>, comprised of the time it takes to fuel a vehicle. The average <u>customer time</u> recorded was 3.67 minutes, while the average <u>c-store time</u> recorded was 1.03 minutes. Clearly, the bulk of the time spent on a c-store visit is under the control of the c-store and its employees. The following are the mean times recorded for each time observation with medians reported in parentheses:

Time to park	15 seconds	(12 seconds)
Time to park and begin fueling	37 seconds	(25 seconds)
Time to pay at the pump	28 seconds	(21 seconds)
Time to pump gas	117 seconds	(112 seconds)
Time to walk from vehicle to c-store or repark	35 seconds	(18 seconds)
Time to select item(s)	60 seconds	(31 seconds)
Time to wait in line before paying	42 seconds	(30 seconds)
Time to pay	20 seconds	(11 seconds)
Time to leave store	44 seconds	(35 seconds)

Perception of Speed

Customers' perception of speed was assessed in a number of questions focusing on comparison between current visit and previous visits to the same store, comparison between c-stores and other vendors of gas, as well as a comparison between estimated time and ideal time.

Forty-six percent (46%) of respondents reported that the current trip had taken less time than previous trips to the same store, while 42% reported the current trip took about the same time as previous trips, and very few respondents rated their current trip taking longer than on previous visits.

When asked to rate c-store speed in comparison to other retail venues that sell gas, such as grocery stores, buying clubs, and hypermarkets, 62% rated the c-store as faster than the c-store competitors. Only 8% of respondents rated the c-store as slower than other vendors of gas.

Estimated time of visit was evenly dispersed among answer choices with 30% estimating 1-2 minutes, 31% 3-4 minutes, and 31% 5-7 minutes. Furthermore, customers generally seemed to have an accurate perception of the time they had spent at the c-store, as seen in the high correlation between the actual time recorded by the research assistants and the time estimated by the customers.

The majority of respondents (37%) believe the ideal c-store trip should take between 3 and 4 minutes. Thirty-one percent (31%) believe it should take even less, and 27% believe it could take between 5 and 7 minutes. A correlational analysis revealed no statistically significant relation between the actual trip time recorded and the time customers find ideal for a c-store visit. It seems that customers have a set standard in their mind regardless of how long the trip actually takes, and it is this standard they resort to when evaluating their current customer experience.

Overall satisfaction with the speed of service of the current visit was also recorded. An overwhelming 89% of respondents reported having their speed expectations met by the c-store on their current visit. Another 8% reported being somewhat satisfied with the speed of service, and only 4% reported not having their speed expectations met.

DISCUSSION

C-store consumers interviewed perceive the c-store to be the speediest of gas vendors, and an overwhelming percent of our sample was very satisfied with the speed of

our test sites. Similarly to Hess et al.'s [8] findings on service recovery and customer satisfaction and Berry et al.'s [4] findings on understanding service convenience, customers with higher speed expectations were more understanding, and at times attributed blame to themselves, when they encountered longer waiting periods at the c-store. Furthermore, actual time does not seem to concern the consumer to a great extent. It is the perception of the time spent at the c-store that is more critical to them. Specifically, it is the distinction between "My Time" and "C-store Time" that is most important in the c-store consumer mindset. In the customers' minds, c-store trips should last under 7 minutes or 1-4 minutes ideally. Additionally, "C-store Time" is greatly influenced in their minds by customer service, store layout, and the presence or absence of distractions.

The current study has a number of implications that seep into different areas in the sphere of fast-paced retail settings. First, findings from this study suggest that customers use distinct mental time clocks to measure their behavior and retail personnel behavior. While they allow themselves the indulgence of perusing around a store for any desired amount of time, when they are ready to complete a transaction, the customer expects the quickest service available and uses a more conservative clock in measuring this time. Awareness of this mental distinction in the consumer mind is critical to good customer service.

Second, this study reveals that PDA documentation is an effective and efficient method of data collection that can be easily incorporated into field observation studies. The use of a PDA versus more traditional paper methods allows for greater standardization of data collection as well as more efficient data entry and management. While certain steps must be taken towards training and database setup, once the PDA program is in place, it provides a portable method of systematically recording data to an existing database.

Third, participants of this study expressed an interest in the presence of distractions at the point of purchase to alleviate their perception of the passing time. Distractions they deemed to be more appealing included television sets that flashed local or national news, LCD screens that provided information on store promotions or advertisements, magazines and publications to be skimmed while in line, and gum or mints to enjoy while waiting. All of these suggestions present a great opportunity for marketing communications.

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APPENDIX

iPAQ Screen Views

Gender Male Female		Gas Category			Start Stop Time			
		Enter l	ot Par	k car	\checkmark	\checkmark	21	
Age range	Teen 16-19 College 20-25		Park c	ar Pur	np gas	\checkmark	~	21
Middle 26-50 Elder 65+		Pump gas Fuel done			\checkmark	~	21	
Automobile	Car		Fuel do	one Pay	ring	\checkmark	~	19
Automobile Car SUV Truck Other		Paying Enter car			\checkmark	✓	15	
		Enter car Leave lot			V V 11			
Status	Alone			То	tal Tim	e (mm:	ss)	1:48
	Accompanied							
User: 32			User: 3	2				
Demo Gas	Store Inter	Opinion	Demo	Gas	Store	Inte	r C	pinion
Store Category Start Stop Time								
Park car Ei	nter store 🔽 🛛	✓ 53						
Ent Store S	el item 🔽 🛛	✓ 10						
Sel item Pi	rep done 🛛 🔽 🛛	✓ 11						
Prep done Ir	n line 🔽 🛛	✓ 11						
In line Pa	aying 🔽 🛛	✓ 10						
Paying Le	eave store 🔽 🛛	✓ 10						
	Total Time (mm:s	s) 1:45						
It	ems Payme	ent						
User: 32 1	-3 CC-self							
Demo Gas	Store Inter	Opinion						

Number of visits per week3-4 5-6How often do you go into the storeAlways Half time NeverHow fast was this store tripFaster Slower SameCompare this store to other storesFaster Slower Slower Same	How long do you think this trip took1-2 min 3-4 min 5-7 min 7+ minHow long should the ideal c-store trip take1-2 min 3-4 min 5-7 min 7+ minDid this store meet your speed exceptationsYes No Sorta
User: 32DemoGasStoreInterOpinionHow long do you think this trip took1-2 min 3-4 min3-4 min 7+ minHow long should the ideal c-store trip take1-2 min 3-4 min 5-7 min 7+ min3-4 min 5-7 min 7+ minDid this store meet your speed exceptationsYes No SortaNo Sorta	User: 32 Next User Demo Gas Store Inter Opinion Store Location: Research Assistant: Clickin Research Speed Project
User: 32 Next User Demo Gas Store Inter <mark>Opinion</mark>	Click to begin