From 'just browsing' to 'buying'

How to make shoppers stop and buy your brand? The secret lies in studying how people behave at the store

Anand Narasimha

BRANDWAGON

With the growth of modern retail, brand marketers and retailers have to now start grappling with a new animal (over and above their consumers). This new breed is called the shopper.

Shoppers are different from consumers in that, with consumers the focus is on how the brand is consumed; with shoppers it is all about how the brand is purchased.

While organisations have acquired, analysed and applied consumer knowledge and insights to influence brand consumption, relatively little has been done to learn about shopper behaviour and how to influence brand purchase at the store. Here are some learnings on how shoppers shop and their implications for brands and retailers, based on my experience on working with shoppers, both globally and in India.

Shoppers are driven by need-states

For profiling shoppers we need to go beyond demographic and psychographic definitions and identify need-states. This means understanding why and how shopping trips happen. There is always a mission or reason behind any shopping trip.

Is the shopping trip for replenishment of a daily food item; a special ingredient for a recipe for the weekend party; with a shopping list for weekly top-up; or just to check out what's new in health food? Need-states help us figure out whether the purchase is planned or impulse; grab 'n' go or browsed, and develop in-store strategies to target shoppers accordingly.

For example, in a category like biscuits, Marie is a grab 'n' go, planned purchase; cookies are planned and browsed for; cream is largely impulse. Therefore, the strategy for shoppers of Marie is to create reminders for replenishment, for cookies it's to enhance category interaction and for cream to drive impulse purchase.

Shoppers don't buy products, they seek solutions

When you're buying a hair-gel, a shampoo or a conditioner, you are in effect not buying these products, but a solution for being well-groomed.

At the store, categories and assortments within, are more often arranged by manufacturer/retailer groupings than by shopper solutions. Such a presentation has little relevance to the way shoppers actually buy. A shopper solution-driven approach not only makes the display shopper-friendly, but also stimulates add-on buying to increase the size of the basket.

This is even more relevant because shoppers tend to de-select amongst all the options available in the store, before they select what they eventually buy. A solutions approach helps simplify this process for them and gives them new ideas and suggestions.

In a European supermarket, a skincare brand's range of products targeted at teens was typically presented as separate entities, spread across and scattered in the category aisle. This led to low sales due to shopper confusion and irrelevance. The entire presentation was then re-aligned to a solutions approach, in the form of a 'Teen Skin Care Center' gondola with products classified as 'Cleansing, Preventing and Treating'. Result: sales went up by 200% with 60% incidence of multiple products being bought from the range.

So, would it be more relevant to present ready-to-eat foods conventionally as 'chips, chocolates, biscuits, candies' or for 'tea-time, snacking, kids, health, special treats'? Think about it.

Adjacencies influence purchase

'What's kept next to what' in the store, influences shoppers to buy. This grouping, known as 'adjacency' in retail language, helps trigger purchase, especially on impulse.

Logical adjacencies have a proven and established affect on increasing purchase: chips next to soft drinks; skincare next to cosmetics; biscuits next to tea/coffee. However, the trick is to get innovative with adjacencies.

For a potato chips brand in the US, an out-of-the-box adjacency idea had dramatic results. In addition to its usual placement, the brand was stacked alongside movie DVDs. The insight: shoppers who pick up DVDs, tend to snack while watching the movie. Sales of the brand went up 30% by this adjacency alone.

Planning adjacencies imaginatively can turn logic into magic.

Sensory stimulation turns-on shoppers

Shopping is a highly sensorial activity. That's the reason why on-line shopping can never replace the real thing.

It is simple: a shopper first emotionally owns a product and only then physically buys it. When you've selected an office-wear shirt, you've started imagining with which trouser and tie you'll match it, when will you first wear it and the compliments it'll get you. In short, you have already owned it! The act of swiping your credit card to pay for it becomes only a physical transaction. How does one experience emotion? Through the senses, which are the portals to our emotions.

Shopping needs to be turbo-charged for the senses. It must go beyond the mundane and deliver 'the 5-d shopping experience'—an experience that leverages as many senses of the shopper as possible: touch, sight, taste, smell and sound. A luxury car interior has a characteristic smell; that laptop looks good enough to eat; you want to feel the grains of an exquisite leather chair; taste the new lip gloss and the sound of a sizzling kebab makes you drool.

When it comes to sensory engagement of your shoppers, it pays to go the extra mile. Like, Levis giving chocolates in their stores to make shoppers get another flavour of the brand. If only most chocolate brands allowed you to taste their flavours, imagine the impact on purchase.

I recently observed an agitated lady shopper walk away, when a sales girl of a leading cosmetic brand wouldn't let her try varied shades of nail enamel and popped her a shade card instead. How myopic. Believe you me, if the sales girl had let the lady try patiently, she would have walked away alright, but with a basket full of nail enamel.

For a potato chips brand in the US, an out-of-the-box adjacency idea had dramatic results. In addition to its usual placement, the brand was stacked alongside movie DVDs. The insight: shoppers who pick up DVDs, tend to snack while watching the movie. Sales of the brand went up 30%

Small things make a big difference

Enticing shoppers doesn't mean breaking down your store and starting from ground-zero. Observing small, little things about shopper behaviour can pay rich dividends.

It has been learnt that when men try a garment, they end up buying it 80% of the time, (unlike women who may try out a dozen pieces and reject all). So, trial rooms for men's apparel must be accessible and inviting.

While shopping, kids exercise pester power by popping their favourite eats into shopping carts. Make sure such products are within their reach.

Women don't like bending down in an aisle as they feel awkward. This was discovered in the US and named the 'Butt-brush factor'. Simply by making sure that all items that women pick up were placed at a comfortable height, sales grew exponentially.

Closer home in India, I found that back-ache remedies were being placed in a store at the bottom most shelf. Not a very sensible idea, one must admit.

Keep your antennae up and start observing these little signals from your shoppers. Remember that with shoppers the obvious is not always the most apparent. Like, colour blocking of brands on the shelf; ways in which shoppers navigate through a store; how they use sign-post brands to find categories; how disruption helps in attracting attention; the fact that men buy and women shop and so on.

In the end, shopping is the last marketing mile and those who don't start investing serious resources in understanding and influencing the shopper will do so at their own peril. Happy shopping!

THE SOLUTIONS APPROACH: Selling special treats, not just cookies

The author is a senior marketing professional with MASH-Madison Shopper Marketing. He can be contacted on anand.1963@indiatimes.com