

Interaction Orientation, Retail Selling and Shopper Culture Characteristics: A Proposed Model

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Abstract

Interacting with customers has been widely advocated as a strategy to better understand the needs and preferences of individual customers. This paper synthesizes the literature on strategy implementation, retail services, and selling strategy and explores the relationships among interaction orientation, culture characteristics, shopping situation, and shopping experience. It posits that the influence of a retail salesperson's interaction orientation on an individual's shopping experience is contingent upon the shopper's cultural characteristics of individualism and power distance and also by the shopping situation task in terms of level of involvement and pre-purchase behaviors. Based on a literature review, a conceptual model is proposed. A discussion of the paper's contribution and directions for future research are also presented.

Introduction

In order to survive and be successful in interactive market environments, firms need to develop an appropriate orientation (Ramani and Kumar, 2008). Through successive interactions, firms are able to interact with their customers individually and obtain information to achieve profitable customer relationships. A firm can achieve several competitive advantages and enjoy benefits of being an interaction oriented firm. Through interactions with customers, firms can acquire knowledge about customer tastes and preferences and through effective and efficient interaction management, long-term competitive advantage can be achieved. While an interaction orientation can take place at different levels within a firm, salespeople play a critical role in implementing an interaction orientation in many types of firms, such as industrial, professional services, and retail.

The services literature has long recognized the importance of personal interaction and the service encounter in creating satisfied customers. As customers become more demanding and increasingly expect customized products and services from firms, marketers are required to focus their marketing strategies and activities on their individual customers as a continuous process. The nature of such communication involves individuals with individuals and face-to-face interpersonal relationships found in interaction marketing (Coviello, Brodie & Munro, 2000). One such important interaction interface is that of the salesperson and the customer (Wikström, 1996).

To cope with increased competition, retailers often utilize their salespeople as a key attribute for differentiation. Retail salespeople provide information and service that assist customers during the purchase process and such interactions with customers are useful to instill buyer's confidence in shopping, lower buyer's perceived risk, and increase shopping convenience. Retail salespeople who can cater to the specific needs of shoppers may be able to develop profitable relationships with customers (Ellis & Beatty, 1995). To achieve these

benefits, salespeople must be able to recognize and understand each customer's particular shopping styles, behaviors, and preferences. It also includes understanding consumer's culture and macroeconomic conditions as well as the influences exerted by the consumer's peers and family (Blackwell, Miniard, and Engel, 2006).

The interaction situation involves two-way communication and reciprocity between the salesperson and the shopper. The quality of this shopper-salesperson interaction often depends upon the salesperson's skill in expressing socially desirable behaviors and emotions in a manner that is considered credible to customers. The credibility and acceptance of service personnel's behaviors may differ across different customer groups, such as those based on age, sex (McKechnie, Grant & Bagaria 2007) and income (Sojka & Giese, 2003), as well as and culture. For instance, cross-cultural studies of service quality reveal that responsiveness of the salesperson is one of the most important determinants of service quality among Americans but of much less influence among Germans (Witkowski & Wolfinbarger, 2002). Thus, an interaction orientation that entails salesperson behaviors such as welcoming customers, shadowing customers as they shop through the aisles, and probing for the customer's needs could have detrimental affects, such as perceptions of invasion of privacy, insincerity of the salesperson, and disrespect in certain cultural contexts. As such, in some cultural contexts, an interaction orientation may mitigate the customer's overall shopping experience and reduce purchase as well as repatronage intentions (Kueh & Voon, 2007).

Why is an understanding of culture in shopper-salesperson interaction necessary? First, the entry of foreign retailers into new markets raised greater awareness of the need to understand cultural differences in shopping behaviors. For example, Wal-Mart took great caution in introducing its usual friendly American-style greeters in its newly acquired German stores because German customers are accustomed to confronting service employees who often appear indifferent (Stern, 1996). At the same time, foreign competition has prompted local firms to adopt new ways of selling to compete with equivalent fervor. For instance, in response to the entry of leading discount retailers of Europe such as Tesco and Carrefour, Thailand's largest retailer, Central Group, had improved its services, became more responsive to customer complaints, adopted return policies, installed customer service centers, and established call centers similar to those commonly found in many retail stores of North America and Europe. Second, these points might also suggest that better relationships with shoppers could potentially be developed with a greater understanding of culture on relational abilities and perceptions. Third, such understandings would also provide a significant contribution to the scant stream of cross-cultural selling strategy literature that places emphasis on personal interactions. Finally, this perspective is necessary in order to develop a more sophisticated conception of culture in retail selling strategies.

In retailing, interaction orientation may involve salespeople's initiation of interpersonal and socialization processes with shoppers. This process may be demonstrated by a retail salesperson initiating the approach to a customer, offering assistance, inviting questions and probing for more information would appear to be quite effective among shoppers who are more receptive to such social behaviors. Some cross cultural service research shows that shoppers of different cultures respond differently to a firm's service provisions, particularly those initiated by service employees (e.g. Patterson & Smith, 2001; Winsted, 2001). Thus, higher customer interaction may not always enhance the shopper's experience nor induce high purchase intention. The issues addressed in this paper are built around how an interaction orientation of a retail salesperson influences an individual's shopping experience and whether the effect is contingent upon the shopper's cultural characteristics and shopping situation.

The purpose of this paper is to synthesize the literature on strategy implementation, retail services, and selling strategy and investigate the relationships among salesperson

interaction orientation, shopper culture characteristics, shopping situation, and shopping experience. A model is developed to describe the relationships among salesperson's interaction orientation, cultural characteristics, shopping situation, and shopping experience. The model also depicts the proposed effects on shopping experience that result from differences between cultural characteristics and interaction orientation.

Literature Review and Proposed Relationships

Creating a favorable shopping experience is crucial to retailers. A favorable shopping experience is more likely to lead to greater customer satisfaction, longer duration in the store, increased unplanned purchases, and greater repatronage intention and store loyalty (Hart, Farrell, Stachow, Reed, & Cadogan, 2007). Factors affecting shopping experience include store image, personal interaction, merchandise value, merchandise variety and assortment, store environment and complaint handling. Personal interaction with service employees has been found to be one of the most significant factors influencing a shopper's in-store experience (Terblanche & Boshoff, 2006).

Interaction Orientation

Interaction orientation is not a new concept in marketing. It is a concept that has been used to describe a particular type of buyer (Williams & Spiro, 1985), a communication style of salespeople (Dion & Notarantonio, 1992), and more recently, as a business level strategy. Interaction orientation of the salesperson as a communication style refers to an individual's particular pattern of communication. As a personality trait or a communication style, the interaction orientated salesperson is more personal and social to the extent of ignoring the transaction task at hand. This communication view of the salesperson's interaction orientation is limited in the sense that salesperson behaviors are independent of the business orientation adopted by the firm.

Interaction orientation as a business strategy is defined as a firm's ability to interact with its individual customers and to take advantage of information obtained from the successive interactions to achieve profitable customer relationships. While they describe interaction orientation at the firm level, salespeople play a critical role in implementing the firm's interaction orientation for many types of firms, such as industrial, professional services, and retail. For this reason, retail salespeople in particular, have become even more important despite the advent of ecommerce and online retailing. This is because retail salespeople, as being available at the point of purchase, still provide the essential service of immediate information exchange that is often necessary for customers to make a final purchase decision.

Interaction orientation, as implemented, by salespeople refers to the salesperson's ability to efficiently interact with individual customers for the purpose of acquiring knowledge about his/her specific preferences and generating customer value for the firm. At the business level, interaction orientation has four elements: 1) customer concept, 2) interaction response capacity, 3) customer empowerment, and 4) customer value management. The four elements are described in table 1 for both the business level and the functional level of the salesperson. A firm can instill an interaction oriented philosophy and provide the training, resources, and incentive system necessary to support and motivate a highly interaction oriented sales force. Thus, our conceptualization of interaction orientation as implemented by retail salespeople can be considered a mid-level construct whereby an 'interaction' with the customer may take place in a brief, one-time incident.

Table 1 Retailer Interaction Orientation and Implementation Dimensions

Interaction Orientation Dimensions	Business Strategy Beliefs	Definition	Example of Retail Salesperson Interaction Implementation
Customer Concept	There is a need to move away from a market segment to an individual customer approach when analyzing the effect of marketing actions	The belief that prescribes the unit of analysis of every marketing action and reaction to the individual customer	Personalized greeting of individual customers
Interaction Response Capacity	Managing individual customers entails using sophisticated database systems; customer-facing employees need to adapt to individual customer needs	The degree to which the firm offers successive products, services, and relationship experiences to each customer by dynamically incorporating feedback from previous behavioral responses of that specific customer and of other customers collectively.	Salespeople tailoring their assistance and service, and providing appropriate solutions to the individual customers based on previous experiences and newly acquired shopper responses experiences with the implementation of probing, customer relationship tactics.
Customer Empowerment	Individual customers should be allowed a greater say in setting the terms of interactions with the firm and with each other	The extent to which a firm provides its customers avenues to (1) connect with the firm and actively shape the nature of transactions and (2) connect and collaborate with each other by sharing information; praise, criticism; suggestions; and ideas about its products, services, and policies	Salespeople refraining from showing their inner feeling/state of mind when customers complain, and instead, listen carefully for future improvement and continuing interaction to develop a relationship.
Customer Value Management	The firm has the right to treat individual customers differently according to their value to the firm	The extent to which the firm can define and dynamically measure individual customer value and use it as its guiding metric for marketing resource allocation decisions.	Salespeople providing customized services and solutions to each individual customer by inserting different levels of effort and time according to different customer value.

Retail Salesperson's Interaction with Shoppers

Retailers are required to understand the importance of providing various aspects of customer service by salespersons. According to Reynolds and Arnold (2000), some consumers seek assistance from salespeople for the reason of social interaction and personal enjoyment. For some lonely individuals, retail services have been used for social communication and fulfilling needs, and when they perceive a special relationship with the salesperson had developed, they experienced social interactions as rewards (Lee & Dubinsky, 2003). Moreover, there was a customer reliance on person-to-person encounters even in a predominantly self-service environment (Harris, Baron & Ratcliffe, 1995).

Darian, Tucci and Wiman (2001) found among consumer electronics shoppers that the most important attributes of retail salespersons are respect to the customer, knowledge, and responsiveness. Empathy of the salesperson has also been shown to be an important factor of customer loyalty to the retailer (Klemz, Boshoff & Mazibuko, 2006).

Bettencourt and Gwinner (1996) suggested that the key to customer satisfaction is to deliver customized services by the frontline employees. Retail salespeople provide information and service that assist customers during the purchase process and such interactions with customers are useful to instill buyer's confidence in shopping lower buyer's perceived risk, and increase shopping. Therefore, the first proposed relationship is:

P1: A salesperson's interaction orientation influences the customer's shopping experience.

The Role of Shopper Cultural Characteristics

Individual behaviors are deeply rooted in a person's cultural values and norms (Oyewole, 1998). The needs of the consumers are considerably different due to the differences among socio-economic and cultural differences among consumer markets (Kim, Forsythe, Gu, & Moon, 2002). Several empirical studies have supported the notion that individuals of different cultural backgrounds differ in their shopping behavior (e.g. Ackerman & Tellis, 2001). Some recent studies have shown that culture influences how consumers perceive service quality.

Hofstede's framework of cultural dimensions has most often been adopted in cross-cultural studies. Hofstede (1984) identified five cultural dimensions. Gorman (2006) confirmed found four of these dimensions including power distance, individualism, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity based on his research findings from 72 countries around the world during 1967 to 1973. Long-term orientation, the fifth element was added in 1980s after Bond's Chinese Value Survey.

Cultural Dimensions and Shopping Behaviors

Individualism-Collectivism. Individualism-collectivism refers to the extent to which members of a culture tend to have an independent versus interdependent construal of the self. Key individualist concepts include independence, self-orientation, idiocentricism, freedom, and self-confidence, whereas key collectivist concepts pertain to interdependence, other-orientation, allocentrism, harmony, and conformity (Lu, Rose & Blodgett, 2004).

Individualism has been defined as a dimension describing the relationship with an individual's collectivity which allows a large degree of freedom, and everyone is expected to take care of themselves and their nuclear family. A market system where emphasis is given to attaining individualistic goals is how individuals from individualistic societies fulfill their own needs. In many Western cultures, independent self-construction has been found in the belief of distinct individuals being separate inherently (Wong & Ahuvia, 1998). People who are from and lived in an individualistic society tended to think of themselves as "I" and are different from other people's I's and used individual characteristics to classify themselves and others instead of group membership.

Many research studies have been conducted focusing on cultural influences in terms of individualism/collectivism on consumers' purchase behaviors. Among them, for example, are studies of Inglehart and Welzel (2005), which revealed a remarkable difference on the individualism index in the U.S. (at the high end) and Korea (close to the bottom) and of Patterson and Smith (2001), who investigated the antecedents of relationship commitment among consumers in an Eastern cultural context (i.e. Thailand), and found that the nature of the relationship was impacted by the collectivist cultural norms. Moreover, less tolerance of

poor service was found among individualistic customers and they tended to place emphasis on reliable and responsive service (Furrer, Liu & Sudharshan, 2000).

Western cultures have been largely described as individualistic and low-context cultures but Asian (i.e. oriental) cultures have been mostly described as collectivist and high-context cultures. Context refers to the framework, background, and surrounding circumstances in which communication or an event takes place. In high-context cultures, greater emphasis is placed on interpersonal relationships and developing trust and communication is typically more indirect and more formal. On the other hand, low-context cultures are described as being more individualistic and action-oriented and communication is expected to be straightforward, concise, and efficient.

Collectivism. In a collectivist society, such as that found in Thailand, relationship building and maintenance is one of society's cornerstones (Holmes & Tantongtavy, 1995). Although quality and price of products are very important for Thai consumers, a comfortable feeling with the salesperson was identified as producing sales (Patterson & Smith, 2001). Because of the collectivist nature of Thais, loyalty with regular dealings with a store and feelings of goodwill can be established once relationships with shoppers have been developed and maintained. This Thai core culture value of collectivism is claimed to have had an influence on the relationships between the customers and service-provider (Patterson & Smith, 2001). Individual consumers made their own decision while collective customers shared common interests, information, and constrain. Therefore, it can be assumed that if consumers are influenced by collectivist cultures their purchase behaviors might be easily influenced by others including salespersons.

According to the review of previous literature on the interaction between consumers and the store salesperson, Holmes and Tantongtavy (1995) found that relationship building and maintenance was one of the cornerstones of Thai society. Comfortable feeling with the salesperson was one of the concerns and would produced sales if the salesperson was their kind of person (Patterson & Smith, 2001). As mentioned earlier, due to the collectivist nature of Thais, the loyalty with regular dealings had established and a store of goodwill was established once relationships were developed and maintained. From the cultural point of view, consumers with different ethnic backgrounds made their consumption choices through interactions and experiences with marketers of different ethnic background.

Power Distance. Gorman (2006) defined power distance as "the degree of equality, or inequality, between people in a society. It is the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions (for example, the family) accept that power is distributed unequally" (p.337). According to Kueh and Voon (2007), hierarchy and inequality among people were expected and desired in large power distance societies. While status symbols and privileges were found in the powerful societies, the less powerful (Generation Y consumers with low power distance) depended on more powerful society. Donthu and Yoo (1998) reported that some degree of power was found over the customers by the service providers. In Eastern countries, a high power distance was found in Singapore (Noordhoff, Pauwels & Schroder, 2004), in Thailand (Witkowski & Wolfinbarger, 2001) and in India (Dash, Bruning, & Guin, 2006). On the other hand, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Scandinavian countries, The Netherlands, U.S.A, United Kingdom and Germany were reported as having low power distance (e.g. Witkowski & Wolfinbarger, 2001; Noordhoff et al., 2004)). Some countries lie somewhere between the two, such as Italy, while others such as France have very high scores.

Retail salespeople, as service providers, provide information and service that assist customers during the purchase process (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995), and most service providers have the power over their consumers in some particular service activities due to their expertise, professional knowledge, or skills (Donthu & Yoo, 1998). In Eastern societies

with low power distance cultures, consultative and participative decision-making and relationship building has been found to be more common between powerful and weak parties (Dash, Bruning & Guin, 2006). However, a low symmetric interdependence relationship is expected by customers in high power distance cultures. Menon and Bansal (2007) found that the majority of high power experiences are found in retail store settings due to consumer knowledge, a cause of high power; attention of the service provider to the core service was expected by high power consumers but the attention to the interpersonal components of service was expected by the low power consumers.

Patterson and Smith (2001) found results consistent with those of Hofstede's (1984) power distance. Due to differences in social status in Thai society with the hierarchical stratification, there may not be social bonds between service provider and client (Patterson & Smith, 2001). In addition, they indicated that there was a superior-subordinate aspect in most of the social relationships in Thai society, having a status hierarchy system of Thailand. Based on the above discussion, the following proposition is developed in this study.

P2: Shopper cultural characteristics moderate the relationship between salesperson interaction orientation and shopping experience.

The Role of Shopper's Shopping Situation

There are several approaches to classify shopping situations and the focus in this paper is that of considering the shopping task. Shopping situation refers to two aspects of the individual's shopping task: level of involvement and (i.e. based on the product sought and purpose of shopping) and pre-purchase behaviors. Various previous studies have investigated the differences of consumers' shopping task.

From the level of involvement point of view, some situations are simple, such as shopping for convenient, frequently purchased low involvement goods, and the assistance of store salespeople is not usually required. On the other hand, some situations are more complex, such as shopping for specialty, infrequently purchased high involvement goods, and shoppers often require help from salespersons to make the purchase decision. For instance, for purchases of low involvement packaged goods, price, packaging technology and convenience were most important in the purchase decision and greater when the shopper was rushed due to a time constraint, whereas, for the purchase of technological goods (e.g. computers), complexity of the technology was the major source of consumer confusion and the most common source of information used to reduce confusion was word of mouth due to its credibility and reliability (Leek & Kun, 2006).

Another similar classification of shopping task can be based on degree of consumer involvement (Wikström, 1996). A wide variety of produces and services are now being customized, particularly in retail settings, for the purpose of meeting individual needs, wants and requirements. Higher consumer involvement is needed when shopping for complex, higher-priced products. For instance, in shopping for furniture, consumers may request a specially trained salesperson to develop unique computer-aided interior design solutions, or in shopping for cosmetics, consumers may request a sales 'consultant' to help put together a set of items into a unique beauty package.

Another relevant classification of shopping task is based on the consumers' pre-purchase behaviors and in particular, their perceived benefits of the shopping task itself. When the perceived benefits are relatively higher, shoppers are more willing to patron busier shopping malls and pay higher prices for products and in return, stores at such malls provide shoppers with special services, social interaction, and an enjoyable store environment (Dholakia, 2002). Therefore, when consumers compare the benefits provided by various retailers and find that one store provides more or better perceived benefits than others, they

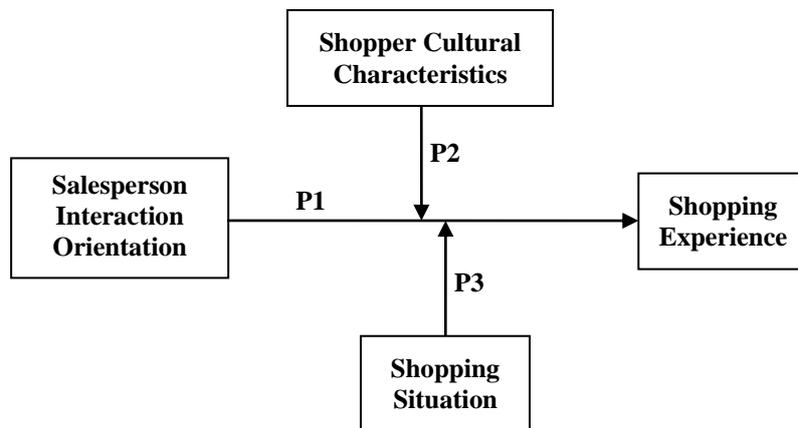
may choose that particular store without any concern about interaction with the salesperson. Based on this review, the following proposition is given.

P3: Shopping situations moderate the relationship between salesperson interaction orientation and shopping experience.

Conceptual Framework

Based on the review of the previous literature, the following conceptual framework is proposed (see figure 1).

Figure 1 Proposed Conceptual Model



Conclusion

This paper attempts to describe the influence of the salesperson’s interaction orientation on a customer’s shopping experience and the moderating roles of shopper cultural characteristics (individualism/collectivism and power distance) and shopping situations (involvement and pre-purchase behaviors). Since salespeople are the primary communication tool in retail settings and retailers make substantial investments in sales training. Thus, the salesperson’s efficient interaction with customers is of utmost importance to study their role in and influence on customer’s shopping experience.

In an academic sense, this paper makes several contributions conceptually and theoretically. Interaction orientation, initially conjured as a business level strategy, has been conceptualized in terms of strategy implementation in terms of customer interaction made by salespeople (i.e. frontline employees closest to the customer). In addition, the incorporation of shopper cultural characteristics and shopping situations as potential moderators of the interaction orientation-shopping experience relationships further expands to the issues to an international context. Also, it is hoped that this paper contributes to the theoretical developing in marketing strategy, retail marketing, and international consumer behavior by synthesizing the constructs from different disciplines into one conceptual framework.

In a practical sense, retailers need to be aware of how culture influences customers’ shopping experiences and the importance of store salesperson’s interaction with the customers. Managers may benefit from understanding the relationships among these factors that influence a shopper’s experience, and develop and implement suitable strategies and training investments appropriately. The significance of a salesperson’s interaction with customers in making shopper’s feel welcome, comfortable, special, and empowered has been

stated. This encourages managers to give greater consideration to the development and implementation of appropriate retail strategies by considering the effects of differences in customers' culture and shopping situations.

In order to be competitive and respond quickly to the expansion of foreign giant retail chain stores, it is necessary for local retailers to learn their customers shopping behaviors and the influential factors. Managers should also consider recruiting and providing extensive training to store salespeople. Witkowski and Wolfinbarger (2001) pointed out that in Thailand, which is a typical 'middle-income' developing country, service providers were poorly educated which affected the quality of customer service in the country. Furthermore, Thais in general have a tendency to smile to both positive and negative messages, and showed consideration for others' needs and feelings. In addition, Thais avoid conflict and in most retail settings are required to dress extremely neat and formal. Based on these findings in Thai retail settings, more attention should be given to recruitment and selection of salespeople based on personality and physical appearances. Customers would be willing to interact more with the salesperson who has pleasant personality with a polite smile, in a neat, clean and proper uniform rather than a sloppily dressed salesperson.

The last important implication would be the use of Customer Relationship Management (CRM) for the future operation. By discovering and analyzing customers' preferences, expectations, and behaviors with the implementation of CRM, store managers might be able to serve their targeted customers' needs and provide favorable shopping experiences.

Future Research Directions

The conceptual model provides an opportunity to pursue future research. Empirical research could be conducted to test the relationships among the constructs. Scales have been developed for several of the constructs (i.e. Hofstede's cultural dimensions) and some effort must be given to the development of new scales and evaluation of their reliability and validity.

In this study, only two cultural dimensions (Individualism/Collectivism and Power Distance) were reviewed. Other dimensions such as masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation could be included in future research. Likewise, customers' shopping situations have been limited to two categories, involvement and the pre-purchase behaviors. Therefore, other factors, such as store physical environment, location or competitors' promotional activities could be considered as potential moderators of the relationship between salesperson's interaction orientation and the customers' shopping experience. Based on this study, more variables could be added in the future research as well. It might be useful for reviewers if the future research could include mediating variables since they are excluded in this present paper.

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