INTRODUCTION

Evolution and Challenges Facing Retail Atmospherics: 
The Apprentice Sorcerer Is Dying

Jean-Charles Chebat
ÉCOLE DES HEC
Laurette Dubé
McGILL UNIVERSITY

This special issue of Journal of Business Research gathers a series of articles originally presented in a seminar on Retail Atmospherics held in Montreal in October 1997. This selection emerged from a competitive call for papers that aimed at fostering scientific research on behavioral and strategic issues pertaining to retail atmospherics design and management. The urgent need for research and practice development in this area is exemplified by a caricature in the Wall Street Journal featuring a bank executive asking a customer whether he liked the background music, proudly claiming that he had made the selection himself. As this suggests, complex decisions on the design and management of retail atmospherics are frequently made on the basis of a dearth of information that in other domains would be unimaginable. Yet, music or other atmospheric components liked by managers but disliked by the clientele—or by segments of customers—may have deleterious effects on critical consumers' responses such as perceptions of service quality, purchase, and consumption behavior.

In a recent Harvard Business Review article, Pine and Gilmore (1998) argued that as goods and services become more of a commodity, the customer experiences that companies create will matter most. Thus, managers in industries such as retailing need to develop a better understanding of the interface between the resources they manipulate in atmospherics and the experience they want to create for the customer. Fortunately, the last decade has seen a growing interest in the area of retail atmospherics research. The studies exposed in this special issue show that “the apprentice sorcerer is dying.” A burgeoning pool of knowledge is developing to better map the relationships that exist between variation in atmospherics parameters and the various aspects of consumer responses. Most importantly, successful attempts recently have been made to specify on the one hand, the underlying psychological mechanisms of customer responses and, on the other hand, the operational and strategic decisions and actions necessary, at the firm level, to create the target customer experiences. The articles presented in this special issue provide a finer grained account of both consumer and managerial issues, and they epitomize innovative ways to face the conceptual, methodological, and analytical challenges involved in developing retail atmospheric research.

A first challenge is to develop valid and reliable measurement tools for the various responses to atmospherics at the individual-customer level. In this regard, Babin and Attaway’s1 and Machleit and Eroglu’s papers are particularly insightful. The former article introduces a new measure of behavioral consequences of variations in a store atmospherics—customer share, which is a multi-item scale that captures the extent of temporal and economic resources devoted by a customer to a given store, in proportion to those resources devoted to the store category as a whole. Babin and Attaway find that “customer share” is directly influenced by a store’s ability to create hedonic and utilitarian values (Babin, Darden, and Griffin, 1994), which, in turn, are both sensitive to the customer’s positive and negative responses to the store environment. Machleit and Eroglu empirically compare the three measures most frequently used in consumer research on emotional experience in retail environments, specifically, Izard’s (Izard, 1977) differential emotion scale, Plutchick’s (Plutchick, 1980) basic emotion scale, and Mehrabian and Russell’s (Mehrabian and

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1 This paper was awarded the Omer DeSerres Best Paper Award of the seminar.
Russell, 1974) tridimensional scale of pleasure, arousal, and dominance (PAD). Their results show that the two emotion-specific scales outperform the dimensional PAD scale in capturing the richness of customer emotional experience of shopping.

A second challenge in researching atmospherics’ effects on consumer response is to develop a comprehensive understanding of the diversity of customer responses unfolding over the course of a shopping experience. Specifically, in-process customer responses in retail environments entail, in addition to the emotional responses already mentioned, various cognitive responses that also have to be assessed for understanding atmospherics’ effects. Larocque, Saad, Kim, and Browne trace various in-store information-search behavioral patterns and observe cross-cultural differences between French and English customers in this pattern. Sirgy, Grewal, and Mangleburg propose that that degree of congruity between the image created by a store and the self of its customers may be important determinant of retail patronage. Turning to temporal cognitive responses, Yalch and Spangenberg show that the presence of familiar background music made consumers actually shop longer, and the consumers perceived that episode as being shorter than under control conditions.

A third challenge to be faced in atmospherics research is to link more clearly variations in specific parameters of the environment to their unique impact on various customer responses, while delineating the mechanisms under which each parameter operates. In this regard, qualitative field study by D’Astous is particularly informative on the specific aspects of retail environments that can induce irritation and other aversive experiences for the customer. In a laboratory experiment, Morrin and Rameshwar study the effect of ambiant odor on customer evaluation and trace the precise affective and cognitive mechanisms underlying this effect. It appears that the presence of valenced ambient odor in a store, be the scent pleasant or unpleasant, influences favorably brand evaluation, in particular for unfamiliar brands. Surprisingly, the kind of mechanisms underlying the positive effects of odor on brand evaluation relates more to information processing and memory than to affective responses.

A fourth extension necessary to broaden the knowledge basis in retail atmospherics is the development of research by using stores as units of analysis. Not only store-level studies may be more effective in capturing the holistic effects of a store environment but also purchase behavior data (e.g., sales and sales per square foot) may be more easily accessible and more reliable than consumer-level measures in certain contexts. Kumar and Karande’s article is particularly innovative in this regard. Using Market Metric geodemographic data provided by A.C. Neilson for a large sample of grocery stores, they estimated the impact of variations on a series of in-store environment parameters, observing interesting differences in the strength of these relationships across trade areas varying in their socioeconomic characteristics.

A last, but not the least, challenge for atmospheric researchers is to investigate possible interactive effects between atmospheric parameters and other dimensions of the service offering (e.g., sales personnel) on outcome responses, such as service quality, satisfaction, and retail patronage. For instance, the laboratory study reported by Sharma and Stafford shows that variations in the holistic image of store atmospherics (i.e., prestigious vs. discount-type image) moderate the effects that decreasing the availability of salespeople in the store may have on purchase intent. Specifically, a lesser availability of salespeople was less detrimental in a store with a prestigious ambiance than in a discount type of environment. Such findings suggest the intriguing possibility that retail managers can profitably shift some of the demand imposed by customer expectations for interpersonal service component from the actual salespeople to atmospherics and design characteristics. For instance, in a recent article in the New York Times (Pollack, 1997), the author discussed the challenges faced by Las Vegas hotel developers who are planning luxury, mega-hotels. The author raised the possibility that atmospherics could be profitably designed to combine a given level of service personnel to maximize its impact on service quality. As suggested by Sharma and Stafford’s results, fascinating research avenues are opened if one wants to investigate more precisely how physical environment and personnel parameters may be combined in designing and managing retail stores for optimal customer satisfaction and profitability for the firm. Turley and Milliman offer an outstanding synthesis of the existing literature on store atmospherics. They review an incredible amount of studies and structure this gigantic knowledge in two ways: first they compare and contrast the different pieces of this literature; second: they identify methodologies, major findings and gaps in the literature. The avenues of future research they show are undoubtedly extremely useful for pushing this knowledge forward.

References


