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Article in *Journal of Applied Business Research* · August 2014

DOI: 10.19030/jabr.v30i5.8790

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Exploring Shopper Marketing Approach Implications On Brand Communication At The Point-Of-Purchase: An Expert's Opinion Qualitative Study


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ABSTRACT

Shopper marketing is a recent approach to marketing. Since shopper marketing is in the early stages of development, it is also an emerging research field and, consequently, questions and challenges to this approach are emerging across all the marketing-mix variables. This paper addresses the implications of adopting a shopper marketing view on the communication variable. Specifically, the purpose of the research is to study the implications of the shopper marketing approach on brand management, focusing on communication strategies and actions at the point-of-purchase. In order to address that goal, an expert's opinion qualitative study was conducted, gathering primary data from thirteen shopper marketing experts, using a two-stage sampling – judgmental and snowball techniques. The results are consistent with the literature review and complement it, providing explanations and adding elements that might help towards a more effective marketing communications management, particularly at the point-of-purchase.

Keywords: Shopper Marketing; Brand Communication; Point-of-Purchase; Point-of-Sale; In-Store Marketing

INTRODUCTION

 hopper marketing is a recent concept and has been gaining attention sustainably (Shankar et al., 2011; Harris, 2010). Flint et al. (2012) argue that, being an emerging issue, can lead to evolutions in the marketing field. Shopper marketing has been already the theme on papers published in reputed academic journals – two papers in the *Journal of Marketing* (Bell et al., 2011; Guissoni et al., 2013) and one in the *Journal of Retailing* (Guissoni et al., 2013).

The shopper marketing approach is based on the assumption and recognition that marketing should address and satisfy other needs besides those of the end-user/consumer. It aims to provide a more gratifying shopping experience, treating customers in a holistic manner. The shopper marketing approach goes beyond the end-use, focusing on the shopper needs and integrating them with the consumer needs. Since it is an approach in the early stages of development, there are several issues yet to be explored by research (Flint et al., 2012). As such, it can be expected that shopper marketing poses new and different challenges to brands to communicate more effectively, particularly at the point-of-purchase (POP).

This study aims to explore that issue, trying to understand what the main challenges and implications of the shopper marketing approach on brand communication at the POP are, and how effectively brands and retailers are addressing them. The paper begins with a conceptualization of the shopper marketing approach, after which the empirical study is presented, reporting the methodology and major findings. In the last section some major conclusions and future research are discussed.

SHOPPER MARKETING CONCEPTUALIZATION

The modification of the technological, social, and business landscape of the last decade induced profound changes in shoppers’ behavior, such as the emergence of new shopping tools that enable potential buyers - e.g., ability to search for product and price information at any time, outside or inside the store (Wyner, 2011; Marketing Science Institute, 2010). Other relevant changes with direct effects on shoppers are the decline of traditional media, the decline of brand loyalty and the emergence of more and better ways to interact with the customer at the POP (Harris, 2010). Among other factors, those changes led to an increasing importance of the POP on marketing management (Gilbride et al., 2013).

That new market environment raised questions on how to approach customers more effectively. The shopper marketing approach emerged as a new way of answering those questions, recognizing the need to include the shopper and the shopping process as elements that might have significant implications on buying and consumption decisions. Even though shopper marketing is a relatively novel concept (Shankar et al., 2011), some definitions can already be found in the literature, both academic and industry-oriented. Table 1 presents those definitions that, essentially, vary in its range and in the subjects included in the concept (i.e., some definitions are narrower than others).

Table 1: Shopper Marketing Definitions

Authors	Definition
GMA/Deloitte (2007)	The employment of any marketing stimuli, developed based on a deep understanding of shopper behavior, designed to build brand equity, engage the shopper, and lead him/her to make a purchase.
In-Store Marketing Institute (2009)	The use of strategic insights into the shopper mindset to drive effective marketing and merchandising activity in a specific store environment.
Retail Commission on Shopper Marketing (2010)	The use of insights-driven marketing and merchandising initiatives to satisfy the needs of targeted shoppers, enhance the shopping experience, and improve business results and brand equity for retailers and manufacturers.
Shankar (2011)	The planning and execution of all marketing activities that influence a shopper along, and beyond, the entire path-to-purchase, from the point at which the motivation to shop first emerges through to purchase, consumption, repurchase, and recommendation.

From Table 1 it can be stated that the existing definitions of shopper marketing are structurally coherent, with a shared view that shoppers have specific needs beyond consumption that might turn into marketing opportunities. The analysis of those definitions also indicates that the shopper marketing approach does not conflict with traditional marketing. In fact, traditional marketing principles do often apply, or are the basis of shopper marketing. Nevertheless, there are some key differences between the two approaches (summarized in Table 2), since shopper marketing has some specific traits. Namely:

- The focus on the specific needs of the shopper and its thorough understanding, assuming that consumers and shoppers are not always the same and, even if they are the same, the shopper is in a different mode while shopping (Pincott, 2010; Sorensen, 2008, 2009);
- Effective collaboration between retailer and producer/brand;
- Marketing action at the POP, but not limited to in-store activities, since it is important to influence the behavior of targeted shoppers during all the phases of the path-to-purchase;
- A broad scope, including activities commonly falling under category management, trade marketing, merchandising, POP advertising and in-store presence.

Table 2: Key differences between Shopper Marketing and Traditional Marketing

Dimension	Shopper Marketing	Traditional Marketing
Aim	Create awareness and influence triggers in the shopping cycle	Create awareness and use push and pull strategies
Target	Shopper and shopper-consumer link	Consumer
Mode of individual	Shopping	Consuming
Breadth of perspective	All the path-to-purchase shopping cycle, 360° view of the shopper	Brand and category
Category focus	Multiple	Single
Promotions	Shopper-directed	Trade and consumer-directed

Source: adapted from Shankar et al. (2011)

Recognizing the complementarities and differences between shopper marketing and traditional marketing, it is possible to consider that the emergence and adoption of a shopper marketing approach may lead to new ways of thinking about brand interaction and communication with the targets. In fact, the shopper marketing activities may have advantages for shoppers, retailers, and producers, such as more satisfying shopping experiences and improved sales (ECR Europe, 2011; Shankar, 2011; GMA/Deloitte, 2007, 2008). However, some barriers and problems might also appear when trying to implement those activities, such as the need for factual data about the shopper and its behavior (Shankar, 2011; GMA/Deloitte, 2007, 2008; Sommer, 2010; Dellaert et al., 2008).

Thus, being a component of the traditional marketing-mix, marketing communications and advertising strategies and actions might be influenced by the shopper marketing approach. However, no published research on that topic was found. Therefore, the present research aims to give an incremental contribution to narrow that knowledge gap.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Based on the literature review, the goal of this research is to contribute to a deeper understanding of the impacts and challenges that shopper marketing might bring to marketing and brand communication, specifically at the POP. Since this aim implies the gathering of deep, technical, and specialized knowledge on those subjects under study, a qualitative exploratory research was conducted in order to gather experts' opinions. The expert interviews method main purpose is to learn which issues are of central importance to develop a better understanding of emergent phenomena, and it is a method in which the researcher purposely chooses well-informed respondents to understand an emergent phenomenon in depth (Patton, 2009).

According to the subjects under study and information needed, the data was collected among experts on retailing and category management. Regarding the sampling strategy, this study aimed to obtain a sample with technical knowledge and diverse skills, in order to obtain a broad perspective on the researched theme. The first step was to establish the criteria to define the experts to be selected (Larrece & Moinpour, 1983). According to Schneckenberg (2014, p. 67), the "Experts should have deep insights into the area of interest, so that they are able to present a comprehensive and precise account of emerging practices in the concrete field of action." According to that, the criteria used established that an expert should have significant research or management work on shopper marketing, POP advertising, retailing, or trade marketing. In fact, De Chernatony and Riley (1998, p. 430) state that "In view of their considerable branding expertise and knowledge, it is appropriate to understand how leading-edge brand consultants, whose daily activity is shaping the future agenda for brands, interpret them (...) their knowledge of brands is broad and their thinking reflects best brand management practices." The criteria used also included academic and practitioners, to obtain a diversity of opinions.

The second stage of the sampling process combined two sampling techniques – judgmental sampling technique and snowball technique. The judgmental technique was used to identify the first experts to be contacted. For such, POPAI – the Portuguese business association which deals with the issues more related to shopper marketing – was contacted and lists of speakers on conferences and published books/reports were also analyzed. The identified experts were contacted and a request to participate in the study was made. A snowball sampling technique was also used to select the experts, since at the end of each interview we asked for contacts of other experts on the field. The snowball technique was used because it is appropriate for small and specialized populations (Aaker et al., 2003), like the one in study. Thirteen interviews were conducted with shopper marketing experts in Portugal, covering consultants, service providers, researchers, industry associations, retailers, and producers of fast moving consumer goods. The criteria used to determine the sample size was the data saturation, which is appropriate for qualitative exploratory studies (Guest et al., 2006; Carson et al., 2001). The narrowing of the contact network was also used, since some contacts of experts were being repeated at the end of each interview.

The data was gathered with qualitative interviews, since they serve as reality-constructing and interactional events during which the interviewer and the interviewee construct knowledge together (Spena et al., 2012). Therefore, the data was collected through semi-structured face-to-face interviews. Based on the literature review, the interview covered the following subjects: shopper marketing concept; shopper marketing benefits, barriers, drivers, and stage of development; critical elements and specificities on the relation between shopper marketing and

communication. Due to its adequacy to qualitative text data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) the information collected during the interviews was analyzed with thematic content analysis. The content analysis procedures used followed Bardin (1988) indications, transcribing the interviews, coding and categorizing the key patterns of the contents. With this analysis some major themes emerged from the interviews. These themes matched the main topics included in the interview guide and were further coded and divided into categories and subcategories, enabling consistent findings across the interviews.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first major theme that emerged from the content analysis was labeled “shopper marketing traces.” The recognition by the interviewees that shopper marketing is not a fad and is a recent approach with specific challenges is consistent with the literature (e.g., Shankar et al., 2011; Flint et al., 2012). Moreover, both the strategic and tactical role of shopper marketing was referred to by the experts. Coherently with Flint et al. (2014), shopper marketing is seen by the experts as more than an operational tool to improve sales. The strategic function of shopper marketing is related with its potential to influence the individual shopper on the “moment of truth,” which is, according to the respondents, one of the most important benefits of the shopper marketing approach. Selected transcripts that illustrate these main points are:

- "Not a fad. It will gain even more attention."
- "Crisp growth"
- "The trend is more shopper and less consumer"
- "Pragmatic (...) Immediacy and speed (...) effectiveness of the relationship between action and reaction."

Inside this major theme of shopper marketing core traces, another two categories emerged. One was the focus on the specific needs of the shopper and on its thorough understanding. Such knowledge and understanding should be carried out along all the phases of the path-to-purchase. This was referred to by the experts as an important issue, since all touch points are possible opportunities for the brand to influence the behavior of targeted shoppers. The factual data driven analysis and understanding of in-store decision making was also noted as a crucial element in shopper marketing, evidencing coherence with Inman et al. (2009). The other category that emerged is related to the recognition that consumers/end-users and shoppers are not always the same individual and, even if they are the same person, the shopper is in a different mode while shopping. Again, this result is supported by the literature, specifically by Sorensen (2009) and Pincott (2010). Expert quotes that demonstrate these two categories are:

- "Shopper insights, path to purchase, category role at the store."
- "All the shopping journey"
- "On a shopping mode"
- "Technical skills to gather shopper data, generate insights, formulate strategies and actions. This is a shock toward the typical 'I think/believe' common sense."
- "Point of sale shopping behavior ethnographic observation"

The second major theme that emerged from the content analysis was labeled “communication at the POP.” It was clear that respondents perceive that shopper marketing has a strong potential to call to action at the POP, expressing the relevance of in-store marketing communications and stimulus to act at a moment of truth. A possible explanation for that emphasis is that shopper marketing activities at the POP might provide an opportunity for in-store stimulus to activate and influence the impulse and less planned purchases. Integrating those facts with the literature, several studies confirm that a significant proportion of purchase decisions are made in store (Hui et al., 2013a, 2013b; Knox et al., 2011; Ashley et al., 2011; Chandon et al., 2009; Inman et al., 2009; Bucklin & Lattin, 1991), meaning that the influence of POP stimuli and environment can be a very important factor, particularly in impulse and unplanned purchases (Mohan et al., 2013). Besides that role on purchasing, some experts also mentioned that POP communication might play a role on brand awareness, image, and shopping experience. It was also validated that shopper marketing is not limited to in-store activities, since it encompasses a broad scope, including activities commonly falling under category management, merchandising, POP advertising, and in-store brand salience. In fact, the experts referred the need of integration between brand strategy and trade-marketing

actions at the distribution channel and at the POP. This fact emphasizes the need for producers and retailers to be consistent in their brand positioning strategy and for a highly integrated communication activity inside and outside the POP, as Sommer (2010) noted. Citations chosen to demonstrate this category are:

- "Last opportunity for the product to ‘speak’ what it states for.”
- "Act as a differentiation, reminder, or desire”
- "It should not be divorced from marketing and brand (...) is the marketing arm at the point of sale, oriented to the shopper."
- "Balance between sell out and brand positioning"
- "Improve awareness and top of mind presence at the store”
- “Strengthen the brand image and familiarity"
- "Focused on the shopping process (...) but not limited to in-store."

It was also found that brand communications at the POP can still be strongly explored. Some respondents pointed out that, in business practice, those activities are still too tactical and oriented to sales promotions, lacking on strategic thought and drive. This means that, frequently, in-store communications actions are “me-too” urgent responses, solely oriented to sales objectives, and are not tailored for retailer strategy and operations. The experts also indicated that several decisions of in-store brand communication are left to operational collaborators, which many times lack shopper marketing skills and data, leaving too much space for the decisions to be based on habit and common sense. All these facts are not yet identified on literature and are reflected by the declarations:

- "It is still too reactive (...) a more strategic attitude for the management of the channel will unleash benefits."
- “The in store brand communications are still too focused on the tactical side of the call to action and should start on the strategic thinking: What effect do we want to provoke on the shopper."
- "Still many ‘me too’ actions, reacting to competitors and ‘copy-paste’ from last year plan. But it is changing."
- "Too much in-store communication and clutter"
- "Several in-store marketing decisions are left to store employees, without knowledge and technical skills."
- "Too many brands going for the same solutions, essentially sales promotions."

Another fact that was not previously found on literature was that some experts stated that is frequent to observe a dissonance between out-of store brand communication and in-store actions. The explanation provided was that this alignment is difficult to attain since, many times, the in-store and out-of-store communications are managed by different marketing areas. Moreover, there is the need for articulation between different departments and operators, which is a difficult task. It was also mentioned that a long-term brand perspective is essential to create, on the shopper, strong subconscious associations between in-store and out-of-store communication.

Also on the implementation/action level of shopper marketing, the importance of the brand key-visual elements/cues was mentioned as playing a very important role on the alignment between out-of-store and in-store brand communications. This result shows adherence with Philips (2008) affirmations about the role of visual marketing at the POP. Additionally, the unconscious effect of brand key-visual elements on shoppers was also noted as an important element that can make a difference at the POP. In fact, a significant part of the human behavior is based on automaticity (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999). Consequently, the shopper behavior may also have a significant part of automaticity and unconscious drives (Martin & Morich, 2011; Fitzimons et al., 2002). Concerning this issue, one expert pointed out the contribution that new high-tech research tools (neurosensory devices and eye-tracking devices) can bring to a better understanding of the shopper unconscious and emotional behaviors and reactions. Those tools are referred in literature by Inman and Lev-Glick (2012) as a trend in shopper marketing. Besides that, some brands were referred by the experts as being case studies of key visuals management. The experts pointed out separate graphic elements for some of those brands. After analysis, those elements were categorized into different groups – colors, logotype shape, packaging shape, product shape, icons and texts - exemplified in Figure 1. Demonstrative transcripts that illustrate this category are:

- “Invest a lot on mass media and the product cannot be found at the store. It is a dissonance to be worked out.”
- “Must be an extension of the brand, at the store.”
- “Automatic, unconscious behavior reactions to the in-store stimulus.”
- “When the marketing manager is changed, the key visual must not change. It should not be a matter of personal taste.”
- “The brand key visuals are mandatory.”
- “The Nike swoosh” “eternal phrase Just do it” “The Facebook like” “Coca-Cola is red” “Toblerone’s unique shape” “George Clooney is always there” “M&M’s two characters” “Milka’s violet cow” “Ferrari color must be red” “McDonalds arch and Ronald.”

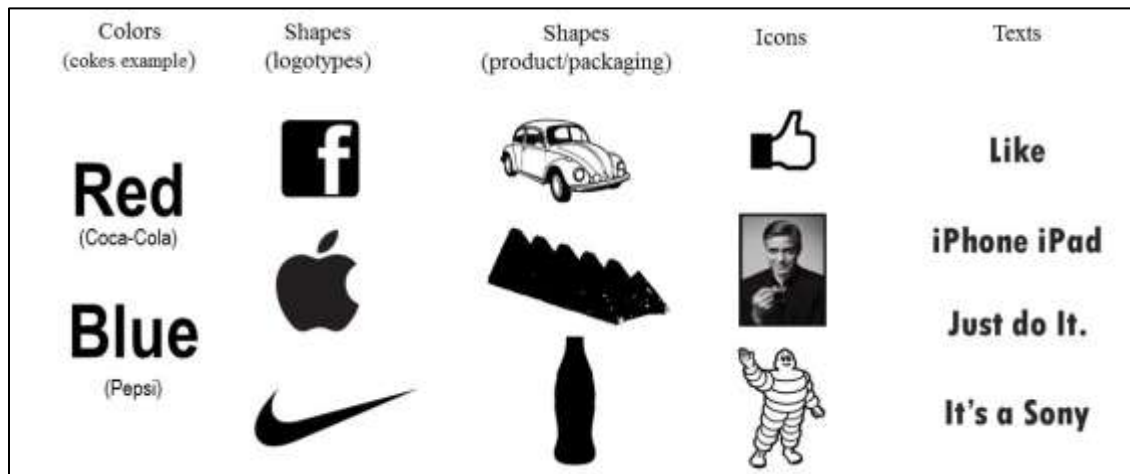


Figure 1: Brand Key Visual Elements

Finally, it was pointed out that a new challenge and opportunity is rising, associated with the use of mobile and information technology. This is consistent with Hui et al. findings (2013a, 2013b) and Shankar et al. (2011), considering that technology might bring new forms to better articulate out-of-store with in-store brand communication and also drive and remember unplanned needs and purchases. Furthermore, those technologies might enrich the shopping experience and better fulfill the needs of the shopper.

Table 3: Summary of Results

Major Themes	Categories/Subcategories	Conclusions	
Shopper marketing traces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recent and relevant approach • Strategic and tactical role • Potential to influence the shopper on the “moment of truth” • Focus on the needs of the shopper and on its thorough understanding, along all the path to purchase 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Found in literature • Found in literature • Found in literature • Found in literature 	

	Communication at the POP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difference between shoppers/consumers and shopping/consuming • Communication at the POP potential to act as a call to action • Need of highly integrated communication activity inside and outside the POP • Communication at the POP role on brand awareness, image and shopping experience • In-store communications “me-too” urgent responses, oriented to sales and not tailored towards the retailer • Lack of shopper marketing skills and data on several in-store actions • Frequent dissonance between out-of store and in-store brand communication • Importance of the brand key-visual elements/cues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Found in literature • Found in literature • Found in literature • Not found in literature • Not found in literature • Not found in literature • Not found in literature
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenges and opportunities associated with mobile and information technology 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Referred to in literature, with less detail • Referred to in literature, with less detail

Reflecting on the results obtained, summarized in Table 3, it is pointed out that all the categories and subcategories on the theme “shopper marketing traces” were found on the literature review. On the theme “communication at the POP,” some categories and subcategories were not present on the literature analyzed, possibly raising managerial and research implications.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This explorative study was developed to provide theoretical and empirical insights on the implications of the shopper marketing approach on brand management, focusing on communication strategies and actions at the POP. Our findings support several elements from the literature review on shopper marketing conceptualization, particularly its complementarity to traditional marketing, potential benefits and relevance. Regarding managerial implications, it was confirmed the need and advantage in adopting a more strategic perspective to the activities of shopper marketing, which involves the development of specific skills and generation of shopper insights driven from factual data. It was also identified the need to achieve a better integration among in-store and out-of-store communication, which was recognized to be a difficult task in practice. In this field, the importance of coherence and consistency of the brand key visual elements were pointed out as cues that can activate the automaticity of memories and associations that may highlight the brand at the POP, to eyes of the shoppers.

This research is exploratory, which is a limitation for generalizations. Another main limitation is the fact that the study was conducted with a limited sample of experts with diverse work experiences. Thus, the results might be influenced by geographical, cultural, and personal factors. Because of those limitations, replications of the study are suggested, in order to compare the state of the art findings. New studies with the same aim but with other unit of analysis might be useful in providing further insights on shopper marketing implications on brand communication. However, the study is a step forward in making incremental contributions to a deeper academic knowledge body on shopper marketing.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Authors are grateful and would like to acknowledge the cooperation of the experts interviewed. A special acknowledgment is directed to the association POPAI Portugal, for the help on establishing the link with the experts.

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NOTES