

The effects of sensory marketing on the implementation of fast-food marketing campaigns

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ABSTRACT

Mass marketing strategies are failing in the way they connect to customers. Current strategies tend to focus on mass appeal to a general population, and in doing so fail to appeal to individual tastes and preferences of their desired customer base. The need to identify new marketing strategies to reach the target market, and to remain in the customers' minds as their first choice, is of high importance. Sensory marketing is an emerging technique that integrates the five human senses in order to create a total experience that the customer remembers. An investigation of sensory marketing is undertaken in this research, using Au Bon Pain stores in Thailand as a case study in order to demonstrate its effectiveness in the fast-food industry.

Au Bon Pain stores in Thailand were investigated using the qualitative approach of triangulation, which consisted of secondary data provided by the company, an interview with Au Bon Pain management and direct observation of Au bon Pain stores by the researcher. These sources were then compared and used in complementation to provide evidence for this study.

The results of this study show the effectiveness of the use of sensory marketing in Au Bon Pain stores in Thailand, through a reported increase in sales and the expansion of the company through new products offered and the opening of new stores. The company has adapted to the local Thai environment and has proven to be a successful brand recognized through the country as a result of the implementation of sensory marketing.

Keywords: Sensory marketing, fast-food marketing, human senses, Au Bon Pain, Customer's emotions, brand loyalty.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional marketing strategies, for example, advertising, focus on attracting the customer by auditory and visual communication alone. It is here where a deficiency occurs, and companies are lacking in their brand performance. Traditional marketing styles need to reinvent, and instead target customers in a more personal and individualized way, where long-lasting relationships between customer and brand are created with the use of creative advertising and distinctive marketing communications. (Barwise, 2004)

Here a rising new method of gaining the consumer's attention is presented; the targeting and evocation of the customer's five senses. This is based on the theory that by engaging the consumer's senses, it will affect their behavior, which at the end will affect their emotions, perceptions, memories, preferences and the purchase decision. (Krishna, 2009)

Termed sensorial marketing, this is a revolutionary new trend in the field of marketing. It functions by attributing a wave of emotions towards to the brand, where the consumer holds a value that is not be attributed to the benefits of the product or its service but to the brand to which it belongs.

The foundation of this wave is to exceed expectations and experiences, where the unconscious is constantly fed and manipulated by a dosage of creativity and appropriate experiences. Feelings and emotions that resulted from the external stimulation will travel to the memory and will register an event that will later on be turned into a desire to act upon it completely, and with this it will produce an original, pleasant, and positive experience.

Therefore, as suggested by Bernd Schmitt, (Schmitt, 1999) "Marketing will completely change. The client will not choose the product or the service based on the equation cost-benefit, but for the experience that will be offered before the purchase and during its consumption. If the commercialization and the product or service offer a pleasant experience and satisfy your need then greatness will be archived."

The service will feel different, not one more that belongs to the crowd, and will allow the client to become surprised through relevant experiences where they can identify how the brand smells, tastes, feels, looks and sounds. The purpose is to direct the efforts of the company towards the conception as to how they wish to be perceived by their consumer base, creating moments in which the clients will become emotionally attached to the brand because of their gratifying experiences. What is occurring is the emotional immersion of the consumer with the product, and as a result their decisions are based on their personal emotions and not on reality.

This research will analyze the case of Au Bon Pain, a successful company in Thailand that is implementing strategies of sensory marketing. This study will develop a link between the strategies proposed by sensory marketing theory and their real world application.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sensations produce emotions

It is important to examine the impact that sensations have in the emotions, and in turn their impact on memory. According to the degree of intensity of the experience, a memory will be created that will evoke past experience. Emotions are intense, stimulus-specific states that can be of two types: basic emotions and complex emotions. The first refers to basic components of human beings' lives that can be found throughout the world, an example of which is the

similarity of facial expressions for emotions such as sadness or joy. The second type evokes a combination of basic emotions, like nostalgia. Most of the emotions that marketing generates are complex emotions. (Schmitt, 1999, pp. 123-125)

“Emotion gets our attention through our senses - which then influence our decision making processes. Brands that create an emotional connection to consumers are much stronger than those that don't – it's as simple (and complicated) as that.” (Lindstrom, 2010a, p. 4)

Emotions are uncontrolled feelings triggered by environmental events, which could be internal or external events. Even though emotions are associated with human behavior, the situation and perceptions across different individuals and cultures determines the intensity of the emotion and the degree to which behavior will be affected. (Hawkins, 2000)

In this matter, it is important to make a clear differentiation between feelings, emotions and moods; feelings are described as specific sensations, for example, anger or joy; emotions are the responses to these feelings, generally short-term. Meanwhile, moods are longer-term collections of feelings. (Freemantle, 2004)

With regards to memory, this is being referred to as the storage of learned information that human beings keep throughout their lives. There are two types of memory, the first being short-term memory that works as a snapshot, meaning that this type of memory is responsible for storing the information for a specified period of time. The second type is the long-term or eternal memory, which starts building since childhood, holding events for long periods of time. The way that the information is encrypted when it is perceived determines how it is stored in memory. (Solomon, 2007.)

“The memory influences the information humans are exposed to, attend to and the assignment of interpretations. At the same time, memory itself is being shaped by the information it is receiving”. (Hawkins, 2000, p. 285)

Therefore, it is said that human beings behave according to the encodings that are stored in their memory. What is not stored in the memory will not create an experience, and without an experience it is not possible to generate a behavior. It is important to state the appeal of sensory marketing in the industry, which is to develop an experience between the brand and the consumer; the result of this behavior will be translated into sales. What is pursued by sensory marketing is to tattoo the brand in the consumers' minds by stimulating continuous repetition of an experience that will determine future involuntary responses. (Vieria, 2009)

“Experiences create learning, and what is new is attractive. What has been learned or experienced does not arouse people's attention. That is why reinventing the brand with unique experiences is a need based on the customers' requests to feel special and not like a number.” (Montalvo, 2009, p. 4)

The products work also as marketers of the memory, where consumers can employ them to evoke memories from past experiences, either good or bad. (Solomon, 2007.)

Sensory marketing

Bernd Schmitt was the first to formulate marketing outside its traditional outlines. He was also the first to discuss the impact of emotions in the purchase decision, and the first to see the need to replace marketing strategies based on the features and benefits of the products or services, for new strategies where emotions and experiences are involved.

Customers are exposed and bombarded with advertising that seeks to persuade and influence them to choose their products instead of the competition. Companies have the need to

encourage customers to like them and buy their products and services; providing positive experiences where they can relate with the brand and where an emotional bond is the key to making a permanent relationship between company and customer. (Freemantle, 2004)

Marketing needs to reinvent itself and adhere towards a vision where it is essential that the customer feels comfortable with the products, services and location where the purchase is made. This is how this new trend termed sensory marketing or experience marketing functions; it provides added value to the brand, and makes the customer fall in love with the brand through unforgettable experiences that encourage the customer to transmit them with their relatives and making the purchase decision a habit.

As Schmitt states: "Marketing takes a new turn. The customer no longer chooses a product or service only for the cost-benefit equation, but the experience offered before purchase and during the consumption. If the product or service provides an enjoyable experience and satisfies the customer's needs, success is assured". Thus we witness the role played by the five senses in the relational world, where feelings and emotions should develop rewarding experiences that affect the purchase decision and customer loyalty.

Marketers have come to realize that emotions sell and the importance of creating emotional strategies in their marketing campaigns is a must; for this reason, companies need to develop a strong bond between their brands and their customers, where a relationship between emotions and the motivation to buy must be present. Emotional appeal and differentiation are important factors; "the emotional motivation does not only create a purchase decision, but takes the customer right through the buying action, from perception of need to post-purchase justification". (Alder, 2001, p. 164)

Brands that practice sensory marketing put in their products a special charisma that will speak to the way of life of their customers, while seeking to identify with their needs. These strategies must show the perfect combination of sensorial stimuli, where the five human senses are involved to trigger the right emotional response. (Clegg, 2003, p. 72)

Objectives of sensory marketing campaigns

Before mentioning the three basic objectives of this theory, it is necessary to mention the five principles that describe sensory marketing theory, in order to give a better understanding of what defines sensory marketing.

First, this theory sees customers as an emotional being, and therefore argues that their decisions are more emotional and sentimental than rational, which will lead to passionate decisions.

The second principle states that the customers' emotions are responsible for developing the purchase decision, generated by positive or negative feelings for the product or service. At the end this will create a special link between customer and product, termed loyalty.

The third principle suggests the need to understand the emotions, values, beliefs, feelings and culture of customers, in order to achieve a better knowledge in benefit of the brand. The need exists here to develop qualitative research methods, which are aimed above meeting the needs, problems and expectations of customers as stated in traditional marketing.

The fourth principle states the importance of the persuasion strategies in the relationship between brand and customer are, and drives toward for a specific behavior using emotional communication.

The last principle of this theory describes how to achieve loyalty, developing a pleasant moment with the product or service and generating a positive impact through memorable moments of interaction with the brand. (Lindstrom, 2010b).

The guidelines for sensory marketing are:

Achieve to be identified from the competition, being at the top of the consumers mind, and standing out by offering unique experiences with the brand.

Penetrate the heart, skin and veins of consumers, in order to trace and conquer their minds by emotional experiences.

Create intense and lasting relationships with customers.

These are the desires that underlie sensory marketing framework, which are measured by an increase in sales, the level of recruitment and the interaction between customers and products or services. "Word of mouth" is also important as it reveals the experiences between brand and customers, which at the end will be transformed into loyalty, developing a sense of belonging and recognition. (Valdés, 2009)

The goal of sensorial brands is to discover how to relate with customers, in less expected way, to surprise them with the offered experience and to make them fall in love with the brand. The use of these marketing strategies will bring to the company a more effective way to communicated with and reach customers, because they will remember the sensorial experience they had with the brand and will seek and come back for more. (Clegg, 2003)

Sensory marketing vs. traditional marketing

It is important to highlight the differences between traditional marketing and sensory marketing, in order to understand the benefits that this new wave could bring to any brand and how its implementation will help to capture and retain customers.

Traditional marketing focuses on the features and benefits in the functionality and performance of products or services; it considers customers as rational decision makers, who act as a response to the industrial economy. It aims to attract customers when they are doing the product selection on the shelf, where it generates the most emotional moment, since the product is in contact with the customer. It also states the importance of persuading individuals during the pre-sale and sale stages.

A fundamental theory of traditional marketing is the marketing mix, which describes the four P's of marketing: Product, Price, Place, and Promotion. These are the tools that an organization has to communicate with the customer, and are vital considerations of a successful marketing campaign. (McCarthy, 1993)

The service industry has increased significantly over the past century; therefore, the study of the marketing of these services is relevant to keep up with a changing time. Services are generally defined as deeds, processes, and performances. However, there is much overlap between the sale of goods and services. Relevant to this study, the fast food industry, while classified as a service, has many concrete attributes such as the food and how it is packaged. Therefore, a diversified approach is necessary to address the unique challenge of marketing to this type of service. (Zeithaml, 1996)

An additional consideration for the marketing of services is that they are intangible and based on experience, rather than just the final product consumption, as traditional marketing dictates. To achieve a successful experience for the customer, marketing must evoke appropriate emotions, where the customer's senses are involved. (Lovelock, 1996)

To this end, marketing techniques have evolved into the practice of sensory marketing. Sensory marketing is based on the creation of brand concept, and brand image, building a perfect synergy between product or service and customer, and generating a higher consumption. This kind of marketing designs strategies from the customer perspective, which is considered more emotional than rational, and which focuses on providing solutions and results instead of only products; it is based on customer and company collaboration in order to create emotional value. (Lindstrom 2011).

Sensory marketing incorporates the desire to provide and transmit holistic experiences, and aims to create links with the customer, creating loyalty as it focuses on the post-selling experience. This new wave of marketing is full of sensations, and relies on different ways to transmit the message, using an effective response to the information, brand management and communications. It proposes the consumption or use of a product or service as the most important moment in which a brand can influence a customer, creating a long-term relationship.

Sensory marketing looks to create positive experience through the five human senses, making consumers fall in love before, during and after the purchase decision; what is important is brand awareness and how this wave can help solve new marketing challenges. (Hulten, 2009) The fundamental strategy of sensory marketing is to trigger emotional depth beyond the tangible characteristics of the product, where the brand will improve its awareness and strengthen customer loyalty. (Lindstrom 2007)

Marketing in the fast food industry

Traditional marketing of fast food restaurants focuses on selling the final product, rather than the overall dining experience. The result is a limitation of the eating choices to what the customer sees, rather than what he feels. How the customer feels will impact the eating out decision, so traditional marketing ignores a large part of the fast-food dining experience. (Kwansa, 2004)

Previous literature including a survey of US fast food customers indicates that some of the factors that most influence their choices are speed of service, quality and price. (Kara, 1995) (Copeland, 1985) Seating capacity and ambience were notably not listed as high priorities for frequent US customers, indicating a cultural trend of “serious eaters” more interested in the final product than the atmosphere before and after the sale. (Salhani, 2013)

However, Asian cultures tend to consider eating as a more social or entertaining experience, and this was noted in the study as South Korean customers valuing other service dimensions such as reliability and empathy over price. Individual attention and customer pampering were noted to be more significant than saving time in their restaurant experience. Marketing managers in a global environment must consider these cultural factors to target their desired customer base. (Lee, 1997)

As stated through this literature review, traditional marketing strategies need to make a change, coming from the use of visual advertising to developing more creative and innovative marketing communications. The importance lies in building long-term relationships between brands and customers, integrating the use of the five human senses with multi-sensory experiences and culturally sensitive strategies, that will bring the customer closer to the brand. (Gobe, 2006)

METHODOLOGY

In this study the analysis of a case study was used, which is defined by Yin as “an empirical inquiry about a contemporary phenomenon (e.g. “case”) set within its real-world context especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2008, p. 18) This case study research is an investigation that emphasizes on describing and understanding an organization, their managerial processes and their characteristics of real life events. (Woodside, 2010).

In this qualitative study, triangulation was used for collecting the data, which was later analyzed and presented. Triangulation is a multi-method, which uses different methods of observation in order to improve accuracy and allow investigators to be more confident of their findings.(Jick, 1979) The different triangulating methods used for this research under the case study methodology are: secondary data, interview and direct observation. The implementation of these triangulating methods will allow a better understanding of the phenomenon; establishing a different set of tools, which will help to capture the complexity of social behavior.(Gerring, 2006)

Secondary data

The secondary data that was used for this study was provided by the management and marketing team of Au Bon Pain Company, with the purpose of analyzing how successful was the implementation of sensory marketing campaigns in this company. It was presented to the researcher in the form of a PowerPoint presentation on the usage of sensory marketing and provided the basis of the company’s theory of targeting and evoking the five human senses.

Interview

This study undertook interviews with the management team of Au Bon Pain, with the purpose of creating new knowledge about their implementation of sensory marketing in their marketing campaigns. The interviews were conducted at the Au Bon Pain headquarters at 209/1 K Tower (B), 25th flr. Sukhumvit Road 21 (Asoke), Klongtoey Nua, Wattana in Bangkok, using a qualitative interview approach, where the interview was a conversation between the interviewer and the respondent; in this case, the staff of the marketing department of Au Bon Pain. These interviews were conducted face-to-face, with duration of approximately one hour and were recorded to provide a better interpretation of the general inquiry. (Babbie, 2010) The reason for using interview as a sub-method in this research is “to obtain[first-hand] information and understanding of issues relevant to the general aims and specific questions of a research project.” (Gillham, 2000b).

Direct observation

“The overpowering validity of observation is that it is the most directly way of obtaining data. It is not what people have written. It is not what they say they do. It is what they actually do.” (Gillham, 2000a, p. 46)

For the direct observation of this case study, investigator used a participant approach, where the researcher observed what customers and staff did, listened to what they said and asked

them clarifying questions when required. The specific qualities observed were the food, seating, ambience, staff, customers, in store advertising and additional observations. This procedure took place at the shopping mall Siam Paragon, the shopping mall Emporium Tower and the shopping mall Siam Center; these locations were chosen at the recommendation of the management team of the company.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Secondary data

The secondary data provided the basis of the company's theory of targeting the five human senses. The sense of sight was addressed with elaborate store decoration and providing a pleasant ambience through its color theme, soft seating and warm lighting. They strived to make it a comfortable and inviting experience for the customer. The menu was presented with appetizing pictures, and accompanied abundant product displays. Elaborate packaging was also used in the form of holiday promotions, gift packs and seasonal products such as Christmas cookies.

The sense of sound was evoked by the implementation of jazz music in the stores, which appealed to the tastes of Thai customers, and conveyed a relaxing, pleasant, "feel good" lifestyle that the customer relates to with their experiences with the Au Bon Pain stores.

The sense of smell was targeted with fresh baking in certain stores, such as Bumrungrad Hospital in Bangkok, as well making sandwiches fresh to order, with the pleasant smell of freshly toasted bread. Coffee is also brewed fresh for the customer, which further evokes the sense of smell.

The sense of touch was addressed with elaborate packing of products that the customer can hold and examine before making their purchase. Gift sets and cookies in particular were designed to be appealing to the sense of touch in the customer.

The sense of taste was evoked through tasty and inventive product choices introduced by the stores. Fresh ingredients are used, and new menu items were introduced to target the tastes of the Thai customers. Product innovation is an important part of the Au Bon Pain marketing strategy, introducing such products as BBQ chicken sandwiches, iced espressos, and cultural-inspired products such as Chu cream and salmon wasabi bagels.

Interview with au bon pain management

The interview addressed the motivation behind the implementation of their current marketing campaign, the analysis of their Thai and foreign customer base, and detailed the elements of sensory marketing their campaign has included in their stores in Thailand (Salhani, 2013).

During the interview, Mr. Salhani, Chief executive officer of Au Bon Pain, detailed the original marketing strategies of Au Bon Pain in Thailand, before the introduction of sensory marketing. This model was very similar to that which was used in the US at the time, focusing heavily on merchandising and the final product sale. This appealed largely to the foreign customer base, and this was indicated with a ratio of 30:70 Thai to foreign customers. The management felt that to continue in this direction would result in a dilution of the brand, and that lifestyle is an important issue that must be considered in Thailand. In order to address this issue,

new leadership under Mr. Salhani drew upon experience at Starbucks to integrate sensory marketing into Au Bon Pain in Thailand.

Mr. Salhani described the specific changes that were made during the implementation of sensory marketing, including an increase in in-store advertising, a more appropriate choice of music in the stores, elaborate packaging and an open store concept with comfortable seating. Also, he described the intensive personalization training of staff in order to provide the customer with a better overall service experience.

These changes have been very successful, as sales began to rise and both the average customer count and the average spending per customer per day were noted to have increased. Interestingly, the ratio of Thai to foreign customers increased to 50:50, noting a further integration with the local customer base. New stores were also being opened, attesting to the success of these changes and the implementation of sensory marketing.

Direct observations

In order for a first-hand representation of the sensory marketing used in Au Bon Pain stores, the researcher visited three stores in Bangkok area, which were recommended by Au Bon Pain management to be representative of their current marketing strategies. Stores were analyzed for sensory marketing qualities such as the food, seating, ambience, staff, customers and in-store advertising.

The Au Bon Pain stores in Siam Paragon, Siam Centre and Emporium were analyzed. Seating was arranged in a very open concept in all the stores amenable for “people watching”. Chairs were plush and comfortable, engaging the sense of touch, and were well suited to long stays by customers. Indeed, many customers stayed long after their beverages or meals were finished, to chat with their accompanying friends or colleagues. While smooth jazz was played in the Siam Centre store, no music was played in the Siam Paragon or Emporium stores. In-store advertising was abundant, engaging the visible senses with bright colors and appetizing looking food. The food was arranged in a way that was appealing to the eyes, with elaborate displays of food such as bagels and breads. Once served, the food was presented on branded dishes, with close attention to detail engaging the visual senses.

Overall, the Au Bon Pain stores visited offered an experience that, through sensory marketing techniques, engaged the senses before, during and after the purchase decision.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Sensory marketing aims to provide the customer with positive experiences which they can relate with the brand, and where an emotional bond will be formed, resulting in a permanent relationship between the company and customer (Freemantle, 2004). As this study investigates a successful example of the implementation of sensory marketing in the fast-food industry, the results of this analysis will be useful to marketing managers looking to expand the scope of their current marketing strategies in the effort to target and retain customers in this manner. The data collected also highlights the importance of considering the local customs and culture in implementing sensory marketing, as the local preferences should guide the specific elements of its integration in order to tailor it to the customer base. (Hofstede, 1980) Communication with the customer in regards to their desires has been vital for Au Bon Pain in Thailand, to gain a greater understanding of their priorities and lifestyle.

In regards to future research, this can include directly sampling the customer themselves to indicate their priorities and expectations as fast-food consumers. This can involve a questionnaire to investigate customer perceptions and preferences in fast-food customers in Bangkok, or as a cross-cultural comparison with another region; this information would be useful to a multi-national corporation such as Au Bon Pain with business in these locations. This quantitative study would complement the qualitative findings of the current study, and allow a greater understanding of the customers' perception of current marketing techniques and where to focus additional resources into marketing.

CONCLUSION

These data taken together demonstrate the effectiveness of the implementation of sensory marketing in the fast-food industry. Through multiple sources using the triangulation method it was shown that sensory marketing increased customer purchases and increased profit, allowing the expansion of the Au Bon Pain brand in Thailand. This was achieved mainly as a result of a change in senior management and company vision, and through an awareness of the global stage and local customers as well as the ability to "think globally and act locally", tailoring the marketing strategies of a large multi-national corporation into successful integration of local markets. This is a must in today's market, as marketing managers must be more aware of the distinct customer expectations and perceptions in each country that they enter. Sensory marketing is a valuable tool in order for them to accomplish this, a tool which has been proven to be effective in the global stage.

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