

Web site customer orientations, Web site quality, and purchase intentions: The role of Web site personality

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Abstract

This research extends the concept of salesperson customer orientation to Internet marketing by conceptualizing and studying the effects of Web site customer orientation on perceived Web site quality and consumer behavior. This research also adapts the concept of brand/store personality to Internet marketing by investigating the effects of Web site personality on perceived Web site quality and consumer purchase intention. The model is tested on apparel Web sites using data from multiple sources. Implications of managing Web site personality and Web site customer orientation are discussed.

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The Internet has had a profound impact on marketing. Most consumers are now comfortable buying goods online. To attract customers to visit and revisit their sites, online retailers attempt to build Web sites that meet customers' needs according to the customer's perspective. A wide variety of studies work to identify factors that could affect customers' purchase behavior on the Web (Schlosser et al., 2006; Yoo and Donthu, 2001).

This study uses the sales orientation–customer orientation framework and brand/store personality concepts to examine the potential effects of Web sites' customer orientation, quality, and personality on customers' behavioral intentions. Previous research reveals that the customer orientation of a salesperson (e.g., O'Hara et al., 1991) and the personality of brands and stores (e.g., Fournier, 1998) affect consumer behavior in traditional channels such as personal selling and retailing.

This research attempts to extend the concept of customer orientation to Internet marketing by investigating the effects of Web site customer orientation on perceived Web site quality and

consumer behavior. The impact of Web site customer orientation on purchase intentions likely is complementary with perceived Web site quality and personality. While prior research regarding brand personality focuses primarily on the dimensions of the brand personalities of consumer goods and services; this research extends the conceptualization and measurement of brand personality to an online context.

Through modification, the store personality scale (D'Astous and Levesque, 2003) is applied to the online environment and thus forms a scale of Web site personality. Similarly, the proposed online version of the SOCO scale (Saxe and Weitz, 1982) modifies the customer orientation part of the scale for use in an online context.

1. Background information

1.1. Web site personality

The concept of Web site personality employed herein relies on work by Aaker (1997), who proposes that brands possess well-defined personalities, and by D'Astous and Levesque (2003), who develop the concept of store personality, which applies the brand personality scale to a store/service environment.

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Aaker (1997) popularized the concept of brand personality in the marketing literature and defined brand personality as the “set of human characteristics associated with the brand” (pg 347). She deems this concept important because previous researchers have suggested that greater congruity between a consumer’s actual and ideal self and the characteristics that describe the brand creates greater preference for that brand (Malhotra, 1988; Sirgy, 1982). Previous research also argues that brand personality increases brand usage (Sirgy, 1982), evokes emotions in consumers (Biel, 1993), and increases levels of trust and loyalty (Fournier, 1998).

Aaker (1997) specifically defines brand personality in terms of five dimensions—*sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness*—that she further subdivides into 15 facets, each with three traits. Aaker (1997) also suggests that brand personality forms through two distinct routes: direct and indirect. Depending on the circumstances and the product characteristic, one route dominates, even though the other remains present. If a product is very personal in nature, the indirect route dominates, whereas a product or service consumed or enjoyed in the presence of others makes the direct method dominant.

In the direct route, brand personality reflects the user imagery associated with the brand; in other words, it is the “set of human characteristics associated with the typical user of the brand” (Aaker, 1997, pg 348). For example, if users recognize that sophisticated (looking) people often use a particular product, the product develops a sophisticated brand personality. For Web sites, for which consumers cannot see or have any idea about the “typical user,” the direct route is unlikely to take a lead role in terms of forming brand personality. However, the increasing popularity of blogs may make this route more important if consumers start sharing their Web site preferences with friends and family.

With the indirect method, brand personality forms through product-related attributes, category associations, advertising styles, symbols and logos, and price and distribution outlets. The sponsoring company determines the personality associated with the brand and tries to form that personality association by investing in ad campaigns that reinforce it. For Web site personality formation, the indirect route appears likely to be dominant.

In contrast, human personality perceptions form on the basis of behavior, physical characteristics, demographic characteristics, and attitudes and beliefs (Aaker, 1997; Azoulay and Kapferer, 2003; Park, 1986). Human personality also entails a different definition. According to Sullivan (1953) personality could be defined only in terms of the reactions of an individual towards other people in recurrent interpersonal situations in life. The key differentiator seems to be that whereas an individual’s behavior determines perceptions of human personality, behavior plays no role in conceptualizations of brand personality.

The concept of a store personality, as distinct from brand personality, appears initially in work by D’Astous and Levesque (2003), who argue that the brand personality concept does not apply fully to a store/service environment. They instead define store personality as “the mental representation of a store on dimensions that typically capture an individuals’ personality” (pg 457).

While brand personality emerges from either observations of typical users of the brand or inferred from sources such as advertising, product category associations, symbols, logos, prices, and distribution channels; in contrast, store personality also depends on customer interaction with salespersons. For example, if a store hires all sophisticated-looking employees or employees who act in a sophisticated manner, the store can develop a sophisticated personality.

Whereas brand personality tends to be conceptualized as positive in nature, a store environment is considered more complex. D’Astous and Levesque (2003) suggest that store personality also has a negative dimension that requires separate attention from the overall brand personality construct. If a store has rude and/or unhelpful staff, they can promote a negative store personality, even if all the other personality determinants are positive. Their research reveals five dimensions of store personality: *enthusiasm, sophistication, unpleasantness, genuineness, and solidity* that turned out to be different from brand personality dimensions.

A commercial Web site is much like a store and fulfills all the functions of a store. A well-developed Web site interacts with consumers and provides recommendations, offers grievance handling mechanisms that help consumers when something goes wrong, and provides various payment mechanisms that mimic the live experience of physical stores. Some Web stores also enable consumers to chat or even talk to a live salesperson during the purchase process. Because of the similarities between a Web store and an offline store, the Web site personality construct likely is more similar to store personality than to brand personality. Therefore, this study adapts the store personality scale (Table 1) to the Internet context. Web site personality refers to the mental representation of a Web site store on dimensions that are similar to and reflect the dimensions of human personality. Because the Web site personality construct derives from the store personality construct, the dimensions of store personality, namely, enthusiasm, sophistication, genuineness, solidity, and unpleasantness, may be applicable in the online environment as well.

These dimensions underscore the personality perceived by ultimate consumers. A Web site has an enthusiastic personality if consumers think that it exudes a friendly, lively, and generally welcoming atmosphere, possibly resulting from the way the Web site is structured, the color scheme, or even the overall layout. Similarly, the overall layout and color scheme could portray the Web personality as sophisticated. Consumers consider a Web site sophisticated when it comes across as elegant, high class, or upscale.

The Web site appears to have a genuine personality when its interface implies reliability. Many times, Web sites use third-party endorsements (e.g., secure marks provided by bizrate.com or Verisign) or money-back guarantees to build a reliable, truthful, and trustworthy personality. Secure marks are prevalent in Web stores that maintain only an online presence, because they ensure buyers that the Web site is a genuine store and not a fly-by-night operator. A solid personality demonstrates that the Web site is capable of conducting its business in a professional manner. The depth of the selection, ease of the purchase process,

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