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Customer satisfaction's key factors in Spanish grocery stores: Evidence from hypermarkets and supermarkets

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ABSTRACT

The marketing literature has shown how certain attributes of the store are key for grocery retailers to differentiate themselves in the final markets. From this preliminary consideration the present work proposes a step forward by ascertaining the main factors that underlie the attributes of the store which have already been identified in the literature. All of this is taken into account with the object to examine which of these factors presents a greater influence on customer satisfaction. To test the proposed analysis, a sample of 358 Spanish customers that had carried out their purchase in different types of grocery stores (in particular, hypermarkets and supermarkets) has been analyzed considering a key variable of retail patronage behavior: the store format in which the purchase had been carried out. This study has enabled us to obtain interesting conclusions about the variables that have the most influence on customer satisfaction, providing useful managerial recommendations for decision-making in grocery retailing.

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1. Introduction

Nowadays grocery retailers are conscious of the importance of customer satisfaction on the success of their commercial strategies (e.g., Gómez et al., 2004; Betancourt et al., 2007). In fact, several studies have shown the existence of a positive relation between store attribute perceptions and customer satisfaction (e.g., Bernhardt et al., 2000; Szymanski and Henard, 2001). For this reason, the grocery retail manager has to try to know as far as possible: (1) which are the elements and factors that can indicate a difference with respect to the competitors; (2) how their clients perceive and value these elements and (3) what relationship exists between store attribute perceptions and customer satisfaction. Only like this can the grocery retailer design suitable commercial strategies that allow achieving the competitiveness and survival in the long term.

The marketing literature has identified diverse attributes that contribute to differentiate the store from the rest of the competing stores. In this respect, several studies have shown a positive influence on client satisfaction from the valuation the client makes of them. However, it is not usual neither the

identification of attributes nor the analysis of its influence on the achieved degree of satisfaction, considering different aspects key to retail patronage behavior. This line of investigation is of great interest to the management of retail stores considering that a large number of previous works have detected the existence of relationships between the perception of some of the variables of the establishment (i.e., store attribute perceptions) and the choice of the store (e.g., Woodside and Trappey, 1992; Finn and Louviere, 1996; Baker et al., 2002; Grewal et al., 2003) or the choice of commercial format (Baker et al., 1994; Donovan et al., 1994; Sparks, 1995; Arnold, 1997).

Several key attributes of the establishment identified in the literature are relevant so that food retailers manage to differentiate themselves from their competitors in the final markets. With reference to this, this work aims to identify what are the underlying factors to these attributes; analyzing the relationship that exists between the perception of the consumer on the previous factors and his/her satisfaction after shopping. In Section 2, characteristic attributes of grocery stores identified in the relevant literature are revised. In Section 3, we look at data obtained from a sample of 358 customers gathered in retail grocery stores operating under the self-service regime (in particular, hypermarkets and supermarkets) in a Spanish city whose size is representative of most Spanish cities (La Caixa, 2008). Factors underlying these attributes are established – factors that are similar to those previously found in past works. This has enabled us to raise a series of hypotheses relative to the

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influence of these factors on customer satisfaction with the purchase experience. With the objective to test the proposed hypotheses, in Section 4 a regression analysis is carried out, which allows knowing which of the identified factors present greater influence on customer satisfaction. However, considering that numerous previous studies have identified the remarkable influence that the perception of some of these factors exerts on diverse elements that conform to the concept of retail patronage behavior; the empirical analysis has been made taking into account the format of the chosen store. In this way, aside from formulating a general model on the effects of the diverse variables on customer satisfaction (Model 1), also an alternative model has considered different sub-samples from consumers based on a key element of retail patronage such as the choice of the commercial format (Model 2). The accomplishment of this study has allowed us to obtain interesting conclusions and recommendations relative to the commercial management of this type of establishment (Section 5), mainly in relation to the factors of the store that customer's value to a greater extent, the same underlying factors and the sources of differentiation of these distributors.

In the following section, a revision of the establishment's attributes will be carried out that the relevant literature contemplates as influences on consumer satisfaction.

2. Attributes characteristic to the grocery store identified in the literature

Nowadays the differentiation of the establishment constitutes a key element in the success of the retailer who operates in the food industry. If retailers can get the client to perceive the establishment and its offer as superior to the competition, it will be probable that satisfaction is increased when making the purchase. And this is why from gathering the relation between the perceptions of the attributes and customer satisfaction, it is necessary to identify previously: (1) which are the attributes of the store that allow the retailer to mark the difference with respect to the competition; (2) the factors that underlie these attributes considering customers perceptions and (3) what relation exists between the valuation of the factors the client makes and the satisfaction obtained with the purchase made in the establishment. Only in this way the retailer will be able to design suitable commercial strategies that allow him/her to achieve competitiveness and survival in the long term.

The researches of Berné (2006), Gómez et al. (2004) and Ganesh et al. (2007) attempt to answer to the first two previously raised questions. In this way, it is possible to identify a series of attributes of the retail establishment (e.g., assortment, personnel, etc.) that, used properly by retail distributors to establish their strategies of differentiation, are valued in a positive way by the client and are susceptible to influencing the degree of satisfaction. For example, Pan and Zinkhan (2006) indicate how the service, the quality or product selection are factors that contribute to determine the choice of establishment that the consumer makes, while other factors such as the attitude towards the establishment or the perceived image, contribute to determine the frequency of purchase. In this way, it is observed how factors related to the establishment and its supply condition patronage behavior to great extent (Moore and Carpenter, 2006).

Among the attributes that the relevant literature has identified on this matter, it is possible to mention those referred to the price and the sales promotion in general. In a traditional way, price has been considered in literature as an important element at the moment for determining the perception that the consumers have on a store. Thus, frequently, retail distributors use price as a key aspect to their commercial policy with the purpose of obtaining a

certain image in the markets. For this reason, they design and they carry out price strategies oriented generally to obtain a positioning of discount prices. With the purpose of achieving this objective, sometimes fixed prices are specially reduced on those products and product categories (*loss leaders*) that are important to the consumers. This practice is carried out consciously by retail managers in the industry to attract price-sensitive customers (e.g., Dunne and Kahn, 1997).

In spite of the importance given to price, the marketing literature does not establish a clear position in relation to the perception that the client has on price. Authors such as Linchtenstein et al. (1993) show that price is perceived as a positive cue, due to it signals quality, prestige or status to the consumer. On the other hand, Dodds (1995) considers that consumers perceive price in a negative way. In this sense price is perceived purely as an economic sacrifice. Nevertheless, in both positive and negative respects, perceptions of price operate as marketplace cues that aid the consumer in their decision making process within increasingly complex market situations (Dodds, 1995).

On the other hand, the development of a policy on discounted prices – whether in the form of general levels of specials or sales promotions – can give rise to certain beneficial effects to the retail distributor. Among them it is possible to mention: increase the sales in the product category, to accelerate the purchases in the retail store or to create client traffic towards the establishment (e.g., Tigert, 1983; Walters and Rinne, 1986; Blattberg et al., 1995; Martínez-Ruiz et al., 2006). In spite of this, they have also had to take into consideration other effects of an adverse nature that are susceptible to appear. For example, some investigations have observed the existence of a positive relation between the monetary price paid and the perception of product quality (e.g., Dodds et al., 1991; Rao and Monroe, 1989). Especially, those consumers with limited resources of diagnosis of the information tend to make a higher use of the price as an indicator (Rao and Monroe, 1989). Following this logic, some consumers can decide to make their purchase in a retail establishment that offers products with elevated prices to reinforce the expectations of quality in conditions of uncertainty (Tellis and Gaeth, 1990).

The revision of the specialized literature also shows certain attributes related to the perceived quality of the products offered, criterion that is widely used by retail distributors as a differentiating element of its establishment (Binninger, 2007; Pan and Zinkhan, 2006). In relation to the quality, it is possible to indicate that numerous works have demonstrated how the quality of merchandise sold influences towards the value perceived by the client. Thus, constituting in this way an essential component of the way consumers make an evaluation of the establishment (e.g., Grewal et al., 2003). Without any doubt, the merchandise that the establishment offers influences the retail distributor's reputation and the purchases of the consumer. In fact, some works have observed how consumers perceive the quality of the product in a different way based on the type of establishment in which the purchase was made (Darden and Schinghammer, 1985; Pan and Zinkhan, 2006).

Likewise, a large range and assortment – understood as the variety of products and the number of different items that are offered by a retail distributor (Levy and Weitz, 1995) – constitute a key descriptor for the strategy of the retail establishment that helps the retail distributors to serve the different tastes and preferences of its clients (Dhar et al., 2001). Certainly, a greater variety not only helps the retail distributors attract more consumers, but can also stimulate them to make more purchases while they are in the establishment. An ample product selection can also diminish the perceived costs (e.g., travel time, effort) associated with each act of purchase and can in addition facilitate the task of buying (e.g., through fortification of the comparison

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