Sensory Marketing: A Review and Introduction

Shima Farhadi¹, Alireza Slambolchi², Seyed Erfan Alhossein³

1. Department of Management, Faculty of Humanities, Hamedan Branch, Islamic Azad University, Hamedan, Iran
2. Faculty member of Management and Accounting, Hamedan Branch, Islamic Azad University, Hamedan, Iran.
3. Faculty Lecturer of Management and Accounting, Hamedan Branch, Islamic Azad University, Hamedan, Iran.

Abstract: From a research perspective, sensory marketing implies an understanding of sensation and perception as it applies to consumer behavior. Sensory marketing is an application of the understanding of sensation and perception to the field of marketing to consumer perception, cognition, emotion, learning, preference, choice, or evaluation. Sensation and perception are stages of processing of the senses. Sensation is when the stimulus impinges upon the receptor cells of a sensory organ it is biochemical (and neurological) in nature. Perception is the awareness or understanding of sensory information. This article is a brief review of sensory marketing studies. Based on the above perspective, this review presents an overview of research on sensory perception role in branding and marketing. The review also points out areas where little research has been done. Keywords: Sensory marketing, Sensation, Perception, Marketing, five senses

Introduction

For years, marketers have included instructions for consumers to imagine using their product. Krishna (2010) define sensory marketing as “marketing that engages the consumers' senses and affects their behaviors.” This could even be broadened so that sensory marketing implies “marketing that engages the consumers' senses and affects their perception, judgment and behavior.”

The arena of sensory marketing offers many questions to explore for managers and for researchers. According to Peck and Childers (2008), out of the 81 sensory studies in consumer behavior focusing on taste, touch, smell, and hearing, over one-third have been published within the last 5 years. Clearly, sensory perception and sensory marketing is a growing field and there is much research yet to be done. The focus of this review is to summarize some of the research that has been done on the senses while pointing out gaps in the literature where more work is needed (Peck and Childers, 2008).

In traditional consumer decision-making processes, reasonable decisions and inferences are made based on the process of learn-feel-act. However, a new sensory branding model based on intuitive and unconscious information processing proposes that consumers sense firstly, then feel or think, and act last. The understanding of how our senses work is especially important in branding. Making a sensory, emotional, and rational connection with consumers can stimulate their senses and appeal to them, thereby rendering marketing plans far more effective (Hill, 2003).

Theoretical Background

The past century has seen many shifts in business techniques. Analyzing a recent history of product marketing, one can identify the main changes. The 1940s to 1960s, i.e. the post-depression period, was “a no-non senses era in terms of products” (Krishna, 2010). The marketing literature has received a marked increase in scholarly attention devoted to the impact of sensory perception on consumer behavior (Peck & Childers, 2008).

Much of this exploration has focused on the effects of single senses on consumer behavior, that is, in isolation from the other senses. Research on the impact of smell on memory (Morrin and Ratneshwar, 2003), music on shopping behavior (Yalch and Spangenberg, 2000), and touch on feelings of ownership (Peck & Shu, 2009) highlights some of the fascinating results from this primary focus.

Some recent studies within consumer behavior have also explored cross-modal interactions across various sensory perceptions. These studies include the effects of smell and sound (Mattila & Wirtz, 2001), sound and vision (Russell, 2002), sound and smell (Spangenberg, Grohmann, & Sprott,2005), sound and perceived taste (Yorkston & Menon, 2004), touch and taste (Krishna & Morrin, 2008), vision and taste (Hoegg & Alba, 2007), as well as multisensory cognitions and taste (Elder & Krishna, 2010).

The purpose of inventing this technique was to affect consumers’ emotions, perceptions, memories, preferences, choices and consumption by offering a sensual product or selling it in a pleasant atmosphere (Krishna, 2010). For decades, marketers used sensory marketing techniques without even knowing it or doing it on purpose. Indeed, could you imagine a washing powder without perfume or strawberry-flavored toothpaste? Products have always been settled on cultural archetypes and psychological beliefs. An experiment testing two dishwashing detergents, one with lemon, the other one without, shown that the lemon scent is, in people’s mind, associated to a feeling of cleanliness (Krishna, 2010).
Beyond the intrinsic attributes of the product, sensory marketing suggests to explore all the facets of our five senses to use it for marketing purpose. This type of marketing includes several objectives, which are the as follow (Ministère, 2010). Sensory marketing strategies are specifically proposed by product categories: ordinary/common, complex/technological, hedonist/identity where tested methodologies are readily available (Giboreau & Body, 2007). Consumers’ judgments are needed to exploit new markets based on preference understanding (Ruan & Zeng, 2004) While sensory experts are a useful tool for category appraisals and competitive surveys regarding the sensory offer of the market (Giboreau, Garrel, & Nicod, 2004). Once the marketing concept is defined, consumers can be used as the final product choice. For instance, Lee and O’Mahony (2005) studied the fit to concept of commercial toothpastes according to their appearance linked to freshness using a simple ranking task with consumers.

The tactile sense:

Touching products has been shown to exert a positive impact on shopper attitudes and behaviour, as well as on purchase intentions (Citrin et al., 2003; Peck and Wiggins, 2006) and is associated with effective product placement in stores. Moreover, research has demonstrated that for some people, the effects of touch are stronger than for others (Peck and Childers, 2003).

The perception of haptics (i.e., touch with the hands) has received sparse attention both within the psychology and consumer behavior literatures, although this attention is increasing (Peck & Childers, 2008). The tactile sense (or the sense of touch) is the first of our human senses to develop and the largest sensory organ (Gallace and Spence, 2010). Moreover, the tactile sense is regarded as one of our most intimate senses, involving physical contact with the skin, with the hands playing a major role as our “principal source of input to the touch perceptual system” (Peck and Childers, 2003).

In addition, recent research shows that merely imagining the touch experience can increase perceptions of ownership of the item (Peck & Shu, 2009). By using touch, a positive affective response might result in more positive attitudes toward a product (Peck and Wiggins, 2006).

Need for touch (NFT):

Peck and Childers discovered that individuals differ in their “need for touch” (NFT), which is “preference and motivation for gleaning information through touch”. The authors presented NFT as a mixture of two underlying dimensions: instrumental and auto-telic. Instrumental characteristics could be explained as the belief that only through the tactile inspection we may know if the product is good enough to be bought, therefore it is motivation driven. On the other hand, the auto-telic dimension of the NFT expresses the idea of touching the object for fun, arousal, sensory stimulation and enjoyment, therefore is hedonic driven (Peck and Childers, 2006).

Peck and Childers discovered that NFT had an influence on the impulse purchasing behavior, customers’ inclination to purchase in the spontaneous and unexplained manner in such a way that individuals with higher NFT results purchased more impulsively than the respondents with low NFT results. When customers of the supermarket were encouraged to touch the products through the presence of the sign telling “feel the freshness”, both high and low auto-telic shoppers bought more impulsively than when no sign was displayed. The study conducted by Peck and Childers proved that the accessibility of the tactile investigation of the object may affect customers’ confidence about the product evaluation (Peck and Childers, 2006). For many products, haptic perceptions are the dominant input to determining product quality. Indeed, touching products can lead to increased confidence in purchasing behavior, as well as heightened product quality beliefs (Peck & Childers, 2003) Peck and Wiggins (2006) also point out that touch has potentially significant implications for store atmospheres, in the form of in-store and point-of-purchase displays. Researchers claim that displays can encourage touch and result in an interaction with products that customers would otherwise have ignored. This could increase impulse and unplanned purchases (Peck and Childers, 2010).

The sight sense:

Norman (2004) has suggested that a visually pleasing design can impact on mood, increasing creativity in problem solving, with the process overriding small details or problems. On the other hand, an unattractive design might depress mood and lead people to focus more on analyzing details, expecting and detecting problems (Norman, 2004).

According to Creusen and Schoormans (2005), the way the product looks like first of all serves as the communication of an aesthetic product value. If there are many products with similar properties and price, consumers will choose the one that aesthetically appeal to them most. This aspect of the object was mentioned to be especially important for durable goods that are going to remain in customer’s home for many years (Creusen & Schoormans, 2005). Vision is the most powerful sense since the connection between brain and eyes is really fast: it takes 45 milliseconds for humans to detect a visual object (Herz & Engen, 1996).

The smell sense:

The sense of smell has been described by many researchers as one of the “chemical” senses, as it implies the response to the gaseous molecules that, when perceived, are assimilated into the body (Morrin & Ratneshwar, 2000).
You can close your eyes, cover your ears, refrain from touch, and reject taste, but smell is a part of the air we breathe. As Lindström emphasized, smell is certainly one of the most important and sensitive sense s, especially concerning cosmetics. 75% of our emotions are generated by this sense, which has a strong impact on human memory (Lindström, 2005).

Recent and continuing research in the basic sciences suggests that there are aspects of the memory consolidation process that are uniquely associated with the sense of smell (Gerber & Menzel, 2000).

Increase the amount of money spent in a shop? Research has shown that it could have a positive impact on sales depending on the condition and on the people. Expenditures are rising among contemplative shoppers who did not make unplanned purchase. For the most impulsive shoppers, the music played has a greater impact. Surprisingly, in the study, customers spent the least when both music and scent were present (Morrin & Chebat, 2005). This proves that marketers have to be careful not to over stimulate consumers with too many stimuli that can confuse consumers and finally make a rather unpleasant experience.

Ambient scent can also have an influence on the time duration and perception. Indeed, Spangenberg, Crowley and Henderson (1996) found out that the presence of an enjoyable ambient smell does not affect the actual time spent in a store, but does reduce the perception of the time elapsed. It drops from 11.0 minutes when no scent is diffused to 9.6 minutes when there is one. This assessment comes from the fact that ambient scent can reduce consumers’ cognitive processing efforts, which results in a shorter perceived time. The perception of distance travelled decreases as well. Concerning time duration, some previous studies highlighted that age (Yalch & Spangenberg, 1990) and gender (Kellaris & Mantel, 1994) mutually influence perceived duration.

Taste

The first image that comes up to people’s mind when talking about taste is the mouth. It is indeed the organ detecting and identifying what we eat, thanks to the many taste receptors (called taste buds) we have on the tongue. These buds are spread over the entire surface of the tongue and count 500 to 1000 taste cells each (Krishna & Elder, 2010). The sense of taste is considered one of the most distinctly emotional, due to its capacity to facilitate social exchanges among people, its inner connections to other senses and high degree of interaction between firms and customers at a personal level. Research shows that a taste experience persuades customers to stay longer in a shop, which in turn leads to higher consumption. Firms can apply tastes to flavor a brand and give it new hedonic dimensions expressed by multiple sense expressions (Hultén et al., 2009).

In addition to expectations, the ability to identify a taste, as measured by perceptual threshold, differs among hues (Maga, 1974). The task of identifying which of two samples is sweeter requires lower concentrations when the color of the substance is green than when it is red or yellow. Sour sensitivities were also reduced when the substance was green or yellow. These differences in sensitivity allow us to use color as a means of discriminating from among samples (Hoegg & Alba, 2007). Whether these threshold changes occur as a result of associations is unclear.

Audition

In general, music does not only influence the pace of shopping. It also has a considerable effect on time perception: in the presence of liked music, the perceived time durations increase (Kellaris & Kent, 1992).

Areni and Kim (1993) in their study on shopping comportment in a wine store discovered that classical music produced a higher level of sales than “top-forty” music. Classical music led customers to buy more expensive items. It also provides support for Yalch and Spangenberg’s suggestion that classical music evokes perceptions of higher priced store merchandise, in contrary to “top-forty” that could be paired with more common, less refined environment. Milliman in his study concerning the behavior of restaurant discovered that slow music led customers to stay longer in the establishment and spend more money on drinks that contributed to 15% higher gross margin of the restaurant than in the fast music condition. More recently, the study by Herrington and Capella also considered the effects of music on money spent in a supermarket. Although they did not find any significant influence for manipulations of tempo or volume, their analysis revealed a significant effect for musical preference. Similar were results for the time spent in the establishment (Areni & Kim, 1993).

Concluding remarks

In this review article, we have tried to present an overview of research on sensory perception that I feel can spark additional research on the subject.

Sensory Marketing studies, delivers a new track for accepting how human senses construct an individual’s experience; equally, it advises strategies on how a firm distinguishes and develops its own identity and unique product and branding through the involvement of human senses. Unlike typical marketing study, this work put the five senses in the front and center, emphasizing the importance of appealing each sense when marketing to customers. The five senses, smell, touch, taste, sight, and sound have a tremendous impact on how consumers purchase and experience products, services, brands; nevertheless, academics and practitioners have long unnoticed their importance in marketing. Creatively, Sensory Marketing validates how the five human senses contribute to a firm's strategic marketing. Likewise, it suggests that a firm should consider the five human senses as a starting point in practice, consequently offering customers an absolute and unique experience.
Krishna (2010), defined sensory marketing as “marketing that engages the consumers’ senses and affects their behaviors.” This could even be broadened so that sensory marketing implies “marketing that engages the consumers’ senses and affects their perception, judgment and behavior.” From a managerial perspective, sensory marketing can be used to create subconscious triggers that define consumer perceptions of abstract notions of the product (e.g., its sophistication, quality, elegance, innovativeness, modernity, interactivity) the brand’s personality. It can also be used to affect the perceived quality of an abstract attribute like its color, taste, smell, or shape.

In the past two decades, some consumer behavior researchers have incorporated elements of vision, touch, audition, smell and taste in their research. Some of this research has explicitly focused on the antecedents and consequences of sensory perception, for example, the effect of verbal and visual ads on ad processing (Houston, Childers, & Heckler, 1987) or the effect of spoken versus written ads on ad recall (Unnava, Agarwal, & Haugtvedt, 1996). Some of this research also used sensory perception for mood manipulation; e.g., food tastes (Kahn & Isen, 1993) or certain types of music (Gardner, 1985). However, despite the focus on sensory perceptions within consumer behavior there lacked cohesiveness within this research stream. In summer2008, a group of researchers who had been working on individual senses got together and created the umbrella of sensory marketing for their research (Krishna, 2010).

We still do not have other sensory scales; e.g., a need-for-smell scale, need-to-speak (versus hear), sensory overload, etcetera. There are also many concepts waiting to be discussed for the first time, for instance, how does one person’s sensor umbrella of sensory perception etcetera. There are also many concepts waiting to be discussed for the first time, for instance, how does one person’s sensor.

References:


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