# **Delighting The Customers' Senses-Key To Store Differentiation**

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#### INTRODUCTION

The world of retail merchandising has come a long way since the days when general stores, that stocked everything from groceries to stationery, and small shops that sold limited varieties of products, reigned supreme. There is a movement now from the unorganized to the organized sector. There are now more modern retail formats such as supermarkets and malls. The whole concept of shopping has altered in terms of format and consumer buying behavior, ushering in a revolution in shopping in India.

The Indian retail market, which is now the fifth largest retail destination globally (www.ibef.org, 2008), is estimated to grow from the US\$ 330 billion in 2007 to US\$ 427 billion by 2010 and US\$ 637 billion by 2015. Simultaneously, modern retail is likely to increase its share in the total retail market to 22 per cent by 2010 (Bhatnagar, 2008).

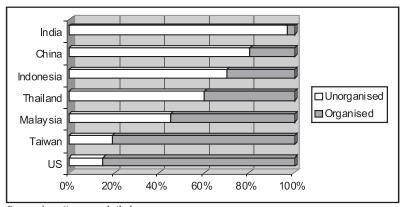
The traditional Indian consumer, who was initially restrained by the new look and used to equate plush with expensive, and refrained from entering the store, has evolved and is reflecting a "*Desire to Acquire*" - newer consumer segments, including single women, collegians with allowances and working couples who have more spending power, better education, and most importantly, who are exposed to brands and products are enthusiastically acclimatizing to the new concept.

After the opening up of the Indian economy, organized retail formats are making their presence felt in India too. In the developed countries, the retail industry has developed into a full-fledged industry with more than three- fourths of the total retail trade being handled by the organized sector. But the share of organized retailing is less than 3% in India, as compared to 85% in USA and 20% in China (see table 1) which indicates that the organized retailing will have to face tough competition from unorganized sector which is too well established in India to be wiped out.

Table 1: Percentage of Organized Retail Across The World

	US	Taiwan	Malaysia	Thailand	Indonesia	China	India
Unorganised	15%	19%	45%	60%	70%	80%	97%
Organised	85%	81%	55%	40%	30%	20%	3%

Figure 1: Percentage Of Organised Retail Across The World



Source: http://www.naukrihub.com

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Today, the organized retail segment is growing at a blistering pace, exceeding all previous estimates. According to a study by Deloitte Haskins and Sells, organized retail has increased its share from 5 per cent of total retail sales in 2006 to 8 per cent in 2007. The fastest growing segments have been the wholesale cash and carry stores (150 per cent) followed by supermarkets (100 per cent) and hypermarkets (75-80 per cent). Further, the study has estimated that the organized segment will account for 25 per cent of the total sales by 2011 (http://www.ibef.org, 2008).

Success in retailing will depend on selecting the right location, distinct store positioning, focus on efficient merchandise management in terms of selection of suppliers, quality of goods, pricing strategy and effective inventory management to ensure the availability of "right" product and brand mix.

In this highly competitive free market economy, a cut-throat competition exists between products/brands and there is a fight for survival. Companies invest huge sums of money into the brand building exercises in order to create a distinct *identity* and *image* of their products. It's an era of functional parity, where similar products having same features and pricing compete for the consumers' attention- while some come and go within a very short duration, others stay forever! This is because non-cognitive processes are equally - and sometimes more important than cognitive dimensions in determining the consumer's choice of the product and his involvement and loyalty towards it. The most intriguing fact is that buying decisions are directly linked to sensory stimuli triggered off at the moment of purchase.

## LACK OF STORE DIFFERENTIATION IN INDIA

In India, the pioneering move of Shoppers' Stop was followed in quick succession by Ebony, then Globus, then Piramyd. All these stores offer common brands, similar ambience, and a commitment to improved service. Even Pantaloons, which started with a distinctly unique value offer featuring only its own label, has fallen prey to the lure of manufacturers' brands and today shares shelf space with a number of premium national brands including Pringle and Indigo Nation.

Lifestyle, on the other hand, is taking advantage of its global sourcing experience and has managed to create islands of difference (in terms of product and display) while retaining what works in the Indian retail offer.

There is a need to constantly innovate and change before the environment forces change. Success for Indian retailers will depend on differentiating the overall experience to the consumer rather than in the individual elements of the service. There is little doubt that a number of existing players either have to reinvent or retire in the not-too-distant future.

Marketers need to realize that shopping is not just acquisition of goods and services but it goes beyond that. Shopping is an activity that can be performed for either utilitarian (functional or tangible) or hedonic (pleasurable or intangible) reasons (Babin, Darden & Griffin, 1994). It gives the shoppers a sensual pleasure, a sense of involvement, a romance with the items and the surroundings, and a "feel good factor". Kotler (1973) suggests that one of the most significant features of the 'total product' is the place where it is bought or consumed. He also argues that store interiors and exteriors can be designed to create specific feelings in shoppers that can have an important signaling or reinforcing effect on a purchase.

The science of shopping has taken a serious turn and retailers are running from pillar to post to ensure that the ambience, the colour, the aisle, the shelving, the music, lighting, texture et al are just right for the shoppers. Retail store interiors are being designed to create specific feelings in shoppers that can have an important cuing or reinforcing effect on purchase (Hawkins et al. 2001). The fixtures, furnishings, and colors- all reflect an overall mood of style, flair, and newness. Enclosed shopping malls offer clear advantages in providing a safe, comfortable area for leisurely strolls. The sights and sounds of a variety of stores and individuals also provide a high degree of sensory stimulation. Both these factors play an important role in the overall success of shopping centers and other shopping areas

# IMPACT OF SERVICESCAPE ON BUYER BEHAVIOUR: LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous academic studies are carried out to find out how consumers are affected by their environments, and the apparent influence these settings have on their consumption. What we do know from prior research is that the servicescape is mediated by cognitive (Bitner, 1992) and affective (Donovan and Rossiter, 1982; Mehrabian and Russell, 1974; Wakefield and Blodgett, 1999) responses. The importance of facility layout is particularly apparent in retail settings where research shows it can influence customer satisfaction, store performance, and consumer search

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behavior (Titus and Everett, 1996), the degree of spatial freedom can influence an individual's capacity to carry out various tasks (or priorities). Seemingly, the scale of spatial density eases or restricts the amount of "personal space" (Harrell, Hutt and Anderson, 1980) that can evoke a sense of roominess or compactness within a setting. Surroundings may be characterized by sociopetal or sociofrugal qualities, or the degree to which the layout of the setting impinges on users' "life space". Hence, in some situations, spatial factors can play a decisive role in influencing shopper behaviour. It is widely accepted that the images created by the physical surroundings and environmental stimulants communicate essential cues to users about the meaning of a place (regardless of its conceptual purpose), and the (social) norms and expectations for behaviour. Environmental psychology approaches have been used with some success (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982; and Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), to determine the environmental factors affecting consumer behaviour. While factors such as orienting properties, and crowding, assist with plans and purposes, the most remembered features of consumption settings tend to be lighting, colour, and texture. These design elements play an important part in a user's overall evaluation of the setting. Similarly, the performance of task-related activities may be impeded (or assisted) by the composition or gestalt of the physical setting (Tauber, 1972).

Baker (1986) developed a physical environment framework that classified environmental variables into ambient, design, and social factors. Perhaps, the most widely cited study relative to the conceptualization of the physical environment is Bitner's (1992) analysis. In coining the servicescape term, Bitner (1992) develops a framework similar to Baker's typology, where the servicescape is considered to consist of ambient conditions, spatial layout and functionality, and signs, symbols, and artifacts.

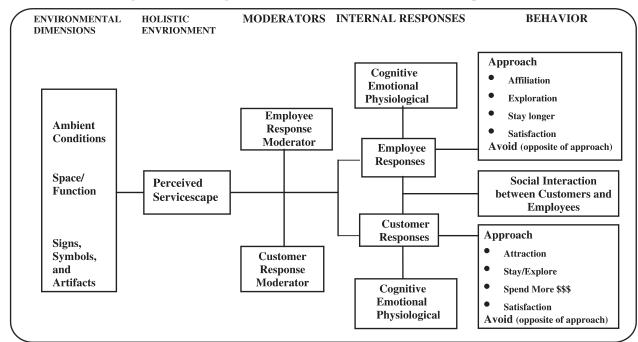


Figure 2. An Integrative Framework: Bitner's Servicescape Model

Source: Bitner (1992). Servicescapes: The Impact of Physical Surroundings on Customers and Employees. Journal of Marketing (56). 57-71.

Consumers process the servicescape stimuli (and signifiers) using the five basic human senses (Engel et.al, 1995). A more precise account was given by McGoldrick and Greenland (1994), who show how a distinct range of environmental elements, or attributes, can be linked to four biological channels. These consist of: Visual (sight), colour, brightness, size, and shapes; Aural (sound), volume, pitch, background noise, and music; Olfactory (smell), scent, and freshness; Tactile (touch), softness, smoothness, temperature. Taste is annexed to both Visual and Olfactory creating the fifth channel.

Even when faced with highly stimulating environments, a consumer's individuality can bias sensory stimulation. Past research (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974) has shown that dichotomous personality types (extroverts versus introverts) exhibit conflicting responses to a range of signifiers. Researchers (Gardner, 1985; Bruner, 1990; Mehrabian and

Russell, 1974) have found that mood states too can have an important influence on behaviour and can increase the chances that a purchase will be made.

The impact of servicescape cues is not limited to the brick-and-mortar world. Many writers and scholars have touted the unique capabilities of the online medium to provide interactivity, personalized experiences, community, content, and information. A "wired lifestyle," time spent online, degree of Internet usage to search for product information, strong technology readiness, technology optimism, perceived online skills, longer online experience, and possessing an internal rather than external locus of control-all predict an increased likelihood of online shopping (Bellman, Lohse and Johnson1999; Novak and Hoffman 2000). Thus, there is a need for a broad conceptual framework that will facilitate the unraveling of online retail experiences.

# EXPLORING THE SERVICESCAPE ELEMENTS THAT AFFECT SHOPPERS' SENSES

#### \* VISION

Vision comprises of three key phrases: light, color and product presentation. The first two are inextricably connected as the perception of color is governed by the type of lighting present and are effective at both psychological and behavioural levels, stimulating either agreeable or unpleasant sensations, depending on how they are used. For example, a sunny, light-filled environment will summon up feelings of joy and well-being, whereas shady atmospheres tend to bring on sorrow. Color has important sensory connotations. Consider the preponderance of red logos or names on packages in the supermarket aisle-Coca-Cola, Nabisco, Campbell's Soup, Colgate, jell-a, Kellogg's. Evidence suggests that red is regarded as warm, sensual and not intimidating. On a more basic level, red is the lifeblood (The Wall Street Journal, 1995). Warm colors (red, yellow and orange) are perceived as positive and stimulating, whereas cool colors (all blues and greens) favour relaxation and concentration; brown by contrast is reassuring and comfortable for its direct link with Nature. Such considerations must be taken into account not only when a premises is being fitted out but also when choosing flowers, tableware and staff uniforms, considering also that of late, there has been growing concern over the question of visual pollution, which should induce sales point owners to limit the use of excessive lighting and color in their premises. Finally, when it comes to visual stimuli, an important role is played by product presentation in premises' equipment. Order and clarity (so that customers are not overcome by a sense of confusion), rhythm and variety (to prevent boredom) are the key to good display techniques that are bound to arouse customers' curiosity and interest.

#### \* SMELL

Environment scenting has already entered the world of shopping. The reason is simple: smells remain imprinted in the human mind for very long periods, in the form of emotions linked to the circumstances in which they are experienced for the first time. So their effect is stronger and more incisive than almost any other sensory stimulus. According to Wilkie (1995), amongst the five senses, smell is considered to be the most closely attached to emotional reactions since the olfactory bulb is directly connected to the limbic system in the brain, which is the driver for immediate emotion in humans.

It has been shown for example that by injecting a fragrance into the air during events or occasions that are highly charged emotionally, it is possible to arouse favorable reactions in those present, which will automatically be triggered off the moment the same scent is smelt the second time round. So, it follows that scenting of premises is a very powerful technique that can be used efficiently to win over customers by carving out a niche that will stay in their minds for a long time. Thus, in the market, one can now find retailers making use of environmental fragrances with personalized scents (concocted to suit the objective to be achieved, whether to favour relaxation, fight smells that are thought to be unpleasant or simply to make a premises unmistakably recognisable, and so on) (Assael, 2001). Car dealers have been known to use a spray inside cars so they smell "new". Rolls Royce included scent strips in advertisements in *Architectural Digest* to convey the smell of its leather upholstery.

#### \* HEARING AND TOUCH

Sound too is a potent stimulus to trigger buying impulses. Songs can arouse strong, pleasing emotions and can be used to attract customers and win them over (Assael, 2001). In fact, supermarkets often play relaxing tunes (to make people

stay longer in sales points thus encouraging them to make greater numbers of purchases); whereas, fast food restaurants usually play fast music (to speed up consumption). Advertisers also frequently use music through jingles or as background themes to create positive associations with brands. Marketers must pretest such stimuli to ensure that they will create positive associations with a brand. Advertisers have traditionally used English accent voice-overs to convey status and authority.

Music communicates with our hearts and minds; it serves as a powerful connection into our emotions. Music is versatile, it has the ability to relax or invigorate. Music is memorable, it can transport us in an instant to places we want to be (Ortiz, 1997). Retailers can use specifically programmed music to create links to past experiences. Music can be a critical component of store atmosphere and plays a role in purchase decision making process (Areni and Kim, 1993; Donavan and Rossiter, 1982; Smith and Curnow, 1966). A personalized music strategy can support a retail brand and makes a powerful connection with specific target markets by incorporating customer demographics (such as age, gender mix and income levels) and psychographics (such as preferences, lifestyles, personality and attitudes).

By understanding the demographics and psychographics of its target market, retailers create an audio environment where their customers feel comfortable, relaxed and happy to spend time and money. The use of carefully selected music creates an immediate distinction for a retail brand by establishing the right mood. Music can motivate the subconscious and create a first and lasting impression. Studies indicated that store atmosphere can influence the perception of the uniqueness of products and service levels. Gardner's study (1985) found that mood states can have an important influence on behaviour. A given mood state within a retail environment can increase the chances that a purchase will be made (Bruner, 1990). Retailers are finding it more and more difficult to differentiate their stores based upon the traditional components of the retail mix. Retail stores need to be much more than just passive places that display merchandise for sale. Retail store elements such as color, lighting and visual merchandising have always been considered as having immediate effects on the buying decision making process (Morrison, 2004).

Finally, our sense of touch, the least developed of all five senses, can also be stimulated by opting for smooth surfaces. Furniture, curtains and uniforms should be in soft, caress-inducing fabrics, seating should be warm and welcoming; door handles should be ergonomic and menus preferably made of light paper that's pleasing to touch. Figure 2 represents a schematic framework of the impact of servicescape elements on the shopper's behaviour.

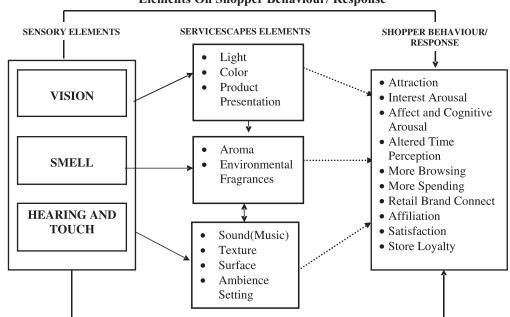


Figure 3: Schematic Representation Of Interplay Of Sensory and Service Scape Elements On Shopper Behaviour/ Response

# VISUAL MERCHANDISING (VM)-THE SILENT SALESMAN

The Visual Merchandising exercise goes beyond the general assortment of the merchandise and includes mannequin placement, the music, the lighting, environmental fragrances of the store and also the dress/uniform of the store

personnel which grabs the attention of the shopper in a very subtle but premeditated way. VM today combines the element of art and science, fusing creativity with the arithmetic of space utilization within retail space (Banerjee, 2003). In any retail format, display of the merchandise, arrangement and attire of the mannequins and the color of the facade representing the brand essence should be in sync with other mediums. Retail players, as they expand, are taking care to ensure there is consistency as far as the visual presentation is concerned. Retailers worldwide have started adopting servicescape based innovative strategies in order to differentiate their offerings and to attract the attention of the consumers and retaining them (See Table 2).

**Table 2: Servicescape Based Strategies of Select Retailers** 

GLOBAL SCENARIO				
Players	Initiatives	Remark		
Borders Book	Create a relaxing and soothing atmosphere. The instore music is designed to maximize customer visit time. The tempo of the music is slow and relaxed.	To alter customer perception of elapsed time in the store.		
FAO Schwarz	The store offers a shopping experience full of colour, magic, movement and music and is composed of specific themes, each with its own unique music. There are three floors fulfilling every child's dream.	To entice, excite and entertain the shoppers.		
Nike	Nike brand is everywhere, on door handles, elevator buttons, floor tiles, store fittings, video screens, interactive kiosks and even the music. Nike stores are multi-sensory retail environments that excite the senses with lighting effects, video monitors, interactive displays and powerful music.	At Nike Town, brand is everything and everything is focused at maximizing the brand's potential.		
Victoria's Secret	Play classical baroque music in their stores, Wood panelling, grand staircases, brocaded wallpaper, silks, satin and lace.			

Table 3: The Servicescape Based Initiatives By Indian Retailers

INDIAN SCENARIO				
Retailers	Initiatives	Remarks		
Tanishq	Concentrate on in-store promotions and incorporating the various elements of visual merchandising in the stores.	To create a mood and ambience which matches consumers' expectations.		
Shoppers' Stop	Maintains a consistency in the look and feel of all the outlets. Therefore, aspects like lighting, music and ambience at the focal point are understood and implemented.	To make the shoppers feel comfortable and "at home".		
Ebony	Visual merchandising forms a critical element of all retail stores. Besides the facade and windows, which are clearly done up with an objective to attract passer-bys and induce walk-ins, the instore decor is designed to enhance the customer's comfort and convenience while shopping.	To offer a superior 'shopping experience' across all Ebony stores.		

The Book Mark	Fully air conditioned, Large front-display window, effective lighting, soothing music (mostly instrumental) "Customized" racks for children which display all books on lower level i.e. eye level of children.	To preserve the books and browsers from the ravages of city life and to entice them to come in and have a look around.
Mc Donald's	The whole ambience is kept bright, vibrant and full of colours. The place always carries a theme usually taken from some cartoon series, Despensers beautifully display the cartoon character toys, usually there's a small place for the children to play in most of the outlets and soft popular numbers are played.	The aim is to attract the children and keep them busy while the adults enjoy their meals in a very pleasant environment.
Globus	Light yellow, white and green color is used in the store. Music played in the store is mainly instrumental, jazz, hiphop, bollywood songs.	

## **MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS**

Retail is India's largest industry, largest source of employment after agriculture, has the deepest penetration in rural India, and generates about 12 % of the GDP, and is likely to reach 22 per cent by 2010. The rural retail market in 2008 has grown at 25 per cent compared to the 710 per cent growth rate of the urban consumer retail market (ibef, 2008). It is one of the most promising industries having huge potential, but it remains one of India's least developed industries, although now the shift from unorganized to the organized sector has gained momentum but still there's a long way to go. An in-depth analysis of the Indian Consumers Psyche is what is needed today.

- The extrinsic or the non-functional aspects should be given due importance and retailers should take proper care of the store design, ambience, colors and the music played at the store. The retailing industry needs to be innovative and responsive to the needs of the consumer. The store experience is what will bring the customer back. The layout should make browsing convenient, product display should encourage customers to try, and the billing interaction should be quick.
- ❖ Shopping in India is a family event and is seen as a kind of entertainment when entire families shop together. Making the shopping experience more pleasurable by combining it with food and entertainment should be the driving force in the retail industry.
- Adequate research should be undertaken to understand consumer buying behaviour patterns, and consumers' perception as far as visual merchandising is concerned to understand and analyze what the consumers have liked about the store. Visual merchandising is seen in organized retail players, especially in lifestyle and apparels but there is still a long way to go. VM has the potential to evolve as an industry by itself, provided adequate infrastructure in terms of education and training is spent on it.

## CONCLUSION

It's an era of functional parity where products possessing similar features and identical prices compete for the consumer's attention. Today, the consumer has evolved-he is a complex-multifaceted entity who is affected not only by the functional but also the extrinsic-intangible aspects of the product. This explains the reason why non-cognitive processes are equally - and sometimes more important than cognitive dimensions. Physical cues play a critical role in enhancing the shoppers' experience. They stimulate the shoppers' mood, thus affecting the consumers' decision-making purchase. The cumulative effect of design, color, texture and lighting influences the emotional response and ultimately behaviour of the shopper.

Researchers as well as marketers/retailers need to undertake empirical studies to develop an insight into consumer's

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perception and reactions towards intangible cues and incorporate them in their marketing and retail mix.

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