

Subliminal influence on purchasing behavior in the retail market

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Abstract: *In this paper we are considering the main theoretical and practical issues regarding the subliminal messages existing in supermarkets in Romania in order to report on the meaning of the concept of subliminal message and establish its influence on consumers. It also shows two studies aimed, on the one hand to present opinions, attitudes and behaviour of the population of Brasov when exposed to subliminal techniques used by retailers and, on the other hand, to explore the opinions, attitudes and assimilation possibility of subliminal techniques of small traders. This research aim to clarify the concept of subliminal messages and their role to enrich the aesthetic and functional values in sales.*

Key-words: *subliminal message, buying behavior, hypermarket*

1. Introduction

To buy is more than just an action of entering into a public space where goods are displayed and redeem them in exchange for cash and certainly is more than the purchase of goods absolutely necessary for life. To buy is the kind of activity that involves contact and contact with the world totally dedicated to sales, using the senses (sight, smell, taste, touch, hearing) as starting points for the final decision to buy or reject a particular product. The sensory aspect of the decision to buy is the most amazing and interesting aspects since almost all unplanned purchases - and some even planned - are the result of vision, touch, taste because the customer orients towards products that promise pleasure and satisfaction. Few buyers think about how much they influence their purchasing behavior, from the moment they step inside a supermarket. Almost everyone has shopped in a supermarket, but few buyers have ever thought about the extent to which their behavior is influenced when they do step inside. Normally, however, studies show that every part of a supermarket is designed to achieve the ultimate goal, namely to compel consumers to spend more money. They take advantage of the suggestibility of the subconscious mind of the customer, using a psychological technique called subliminal influence more likely to determine people to buy things that had not previously been

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considered. Every detail of a supermarket is meticulously planned and organized to induce customers to spend more money. Generally speaking, subliminal messages are defined as visual, auditory or other sensory messages that fall below our level of conscious perception and can be detected only subconsciously (Lindstrom, 2010).

Subliminal perception is the unconscious ownership of stimuli. From a technical standpoint "subliminal" means below the threshold of absolute consciousness. However, many subliminal messages are actually supraliminal, which means they fall above absolute thresholds, but are consciously repressed by the recipient. In other words, consumers do not consciously use these messages; they work at the subconscious level (Frank, 2010).

If we try to give a definition of the conventional subliminal message it would entail the exposure to a visual projection or audio message, to an idea, for a period of time which is short enough for the brain not to be aware of it. In other words, we receive such a message, but we realize that we have seen or heard it. The human brain stores unconscious information received in this way, causing a forced assimilation of its own natural filtration without arguments, beliefs and reasons. Basically, the mind of an individual being bombarded with subliminal messages accepts them as valid, irrespective of their beliefs or experience. They settle into the subconscious, making the person more likely to adopt a certain attitude, dictated by subtle subliminal message, in a certain contextual aspect. Put simply, the phenomenon is reduced to mind controlling external processes acting on our consciousness substrata. (http://www.inventatori.ro/view_article.php?id=328)

2. The influence of subliminal marketing techniques on purchasing behaviour

Despite studies that have been done by academics and researchers since 1950 it is not yet clear if subliminal techniques can persuade people to buy goods or services. The literature indicates that subliminal perception research is based on a theoretical approach. According to this theory, weak stimuli of very low repetition have an increased effect that allows these stimuli to strengthen the response after the presentations. But no studies have shown that each of these theoretical approaches had actually been used by marketers to increase sales. However, subliminal advertising can provide new opportunities for antisocial behavior modification through public promotional campaigns. Also subliminal methods can indirectly influence the attitudes and feelings towards certain brands. (Brătucu and Brătucu, 2007).

In order to study more in depth the influence that could be exerted by some subliminal techniques used by retailers in Brasov, the determination of consumer behavior was deemed necessary to achieve these two studies. The goal is to determine the extent to which subliminal techniques are perceived by consumers and

fail to influence their decision in the buying process or whether the techniques are similar for small traders as well.

2.1. Research Methodology

In the first phase, quantitative marketing research was conducted, which was aimed at examining the opinions, attitudes and behaviors of the population of Brasov on the subliminal techniques used by retailers.

The quantitative research was based on the marketing sample survey method based on face-to-face interviews, based on a complex questionnaire. It had a total of 22 questions chosen as representative for the topic. Out of the population surveyed, a representative sample of 1006 inhabitants of Brasov was extracted. The sample is a set of selected individuals in the population studied, which has a considerably smaller extent than the size of the population. The sampling need arises from the fact that the intended target audience is large. Thus it resorted to a representative sample of the entire population. The data will be processed in the sample and the results will be extended to the entire population. Representativeness is ensured in the case of this research, by the sampling method chosen. Random sampling method chosen was staged which was considered the most appropriate for testing.

In the second phase we considered conducting a qualitative marketing research based on depth interviews to answer to the following questions: "What influence would have the use of subliminal techniques for the small retailer?", "Using subliminal techniques would increase the sales potential in the convenience stores?", "Would be possible to implement such techniques in these stores and could this be a way to relaunch them on Brasov market?"

The qualitative research theme was meant to identify, clarify and define what is relevant and significant in the attitude of small retailers from Brasov regarding the need for such techniques and regarding the process of their implementation (the viability of such an approach). The target audience for this research included small retailers from Brasov.

To obtain relevant results, the participants in the depth interview were selected based on a set of well defined criteria: all respondents fall into the category of small retailers, store owners for at least 4 years which can give information related to sales and marketing activities. The interviews were conducted based on a guide consisting of 13 questions. Twelve managers were interviewed, managers of small retail businesses in Brasov.

2.2. Results from the quantitative marketing research

The research showed that most respondents choose to buy from hypermarkets like Auchan (47.17%) and Carrefour (32.08%), due to the wide range of products offered

by these big stores (45.3%), but also because of the proximity to their home (28.3%).

The statistical processing of the responses shows that most subjects are unconsciously influenced by subliminal messages within the existing hypermarkets. Purchase frequency in supermarkets is generally quite small, most of those surveyed saying they purchase once a week, and do not plan to stay more than 30 minutes in the store. Also, the majority of participants said they spend for shopping between 100-150 lei.

Interesting is the fact that although the subjects have preset time and budget, 71.7% of them admit they spend more time in the store, and 52.8% of them say that exceed the preset time with 30 minutes. Regarding the budget, 84.9% of participant exceeds it and 60.4% of them go over the imposed limit by amounts between 50-100 lei.

From these results we can say that most people who visit the supermarket, exceed both time and budget originally allocated. So, the store influences the customers in a subconscious way.

The research also showed that people who do not shop based on a list are more liable to leave the store with more products than planned (94.3%). Beside that, 45.3% of participants do not use a shopping list, so a large percentage of people can be easily influenced to buy more. The reason why people buy more than the plan (73.6% of respondents) is that they have found a very good unexpected offer.

The majority of respondents admit that they are influenced by the following factors: the store rearrangement, the background music, the lights, the air temperature, the smell inside the store, the merchandising, the crowding, the free samples offered. Another conclusion is that more than 85% of Brasov consumers choose to buy from hypermarkets, and at least 65% of them exceed the time allotted for shopping. It was also found that more than 70% of consumers exceed the initial purchases budget.

The statistical hypothesis showed that there are differences between the respondents' gender on the frequency of exceeding the time initially allocated to stay in the store.

2.3. Results from the qualitative marketing research

The research participants were selected from several areas. They are representatives of small companies with few employees. Each participant works in the field for at least 4 years. All the interviewed persons expressed their agreement and interest to participate in this research.

The respondents have different opinions on the influence of subliminal techniques and their role in the business recovery inside the economic environment from Brasov. On one side are those who believe this technique of subliminal messages is positive and well developed as a subconscious communication method.

On the other side are those who believe that communication is not very good at technical, administrative and economic level.

The subliminal communication between super/hypermarkets and customers was considered also as positive. It can be noticed some skepticism concerning the applicability of subliminal techniques in stores owned by small retailers. For them, there is a need for improvements on several major levels and for adoption of successful business models from other countries. As well, there is a growing interest of small retailers for better cooperation and communication with the economic environment, particularly for research, development and innovation.

From the economic environment perspective, the weaknesses of the small retailers are the following:

- they do not have enough knowledge for performance on labor market in their field;
- they are unable to counter the supermarket expansion both administratively and technically;
- the lack of funds, identified by all the participants;
- no link between theory and practice;
- the lack of trust in maintaining the position on Brasov market.

The analysis revealed that the subjects appreciate the idea of implementing a system of subliminal techniques in stores. They admit the necessity of these techniques, which are seen as a bridge between customers - merchants - economic environment.

The implementation of subliminal techniques in stores is a solution for small retailers to face the competition. They can rearrange the products in order to be more noticeable to potential customers, or they can create a pleasant environment in order to determine the customers to spend more time inside the store. Other solutions are: the advertising in all media channels; analyzing customer requirements; promotional offers. A very interesting solution for small retailers is to form associations for having the possibility to order merchandise in large quantities at better prices. This way they could compete directly with major retailers, may even be able to have promotional offers and prices very close to those of hyper/supermarkets.

There is a difference of perception regarding the possible implementation of a system of subliminal techniques in a small store. Although the interview participants agreed on the adoption of these marketing subliminal practices in the store, some of them believe that these changes would make an invisible and insignificant difference in sales.

3. Conclusions

Given the fierce competition in the retail sector in Brasov, retailers try a multitude of methods to increase sales, including the introduction of subliminal messages in

stores aimed at influencing the subconscious of potential customers. Marketing strategies used by retailers to induce customers to buy have become more sophisticated. For example, marketers are using neural measurements to design product packaging.

Consumer experience of these days is not a matter of simply design because is designed based on research. There is no high-tech science, but there are some "tricks" used by retailers in Brasov. Big retailers make people feel nostalgic using an abundance of pictures and promotional campaigns with families, young animals or childhood memories using certain old products, but these are no more than simple tricks. Recent research shows that sense of nostalgia makes people to appreciate less the value of money and they feel willing to pay more for their purchases.

Another strategy adopted in supermarkets is to make visitors feel lost and confused. It is no accident that in food stores, the products position is often changed. Over time, people tend to get used to the goods position and at some point they will go directly to the desired departments ignoring the rest. By periodically changing the goods regular places, customers are forced to cross the store and this way, they are influenced to do additional shopping. Loss of concentration makes people spending more time inside the hypermarkets and therefore doing more impulse purchases (Lindstrom,2010).

Interrupting people during shopping also makes them less sensitive to price, because when they return to look at products they have the false impression that those products have already been checked. (Liu, 2008).

In conclusion, regardless of subliminal techniques chosen for each hypermarket or each small retailer, is particularly important to harmonize these messages between them. The subliminal technique compatibility can bring success to the store even if the competition is significant.

4. References

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