

PERCEPTION AND COMMUNICATION OF INNOVATION IN RETAIL TRADE (CASE STUDY APPLIED TO BRICOLAGE PRODUCTS)

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Starting from the specific features of bricolage retail trade (which is part of the ‘Do It Yourself’ – DIY commercial format), this study aims to clarify the concept and structure of innovation in this field, and to present how innovation is perceived and communicated by sellers to customers. The initial literature review is followed by the design of a three-stage research, which consists of a variety of methods, techniques and tools of selective market research. The objectives are to establish the main forms of innovation in DIY trade, the perception and communication of innovation to the customer, and the internal marketing techniques which could deliver higher marketing advantages to the seller. This paper covers only the results of a pilot research conducted via qualitative exploratory research among 13 managers of the bricolage stores in Bucharest. Five hypotheses were tested and confirmed through research. All premises are ready for the scientific construction of research tools for the second and third stages of the study.

Keywords: perception, retail trade of DIY products, qualitative exploratory research, in-depth interview.

JEL Classification: M31, O31.

Introduction

Innovation and knowledge have always been the engine of progress. Our present and future society relies more and more on these two progress factors, illustrated by bold projects of the scientists. Self-propelling islands, teleportation, cloning, nanobots, vaccines designed to stop the spread of diseases with high mortality, flying cars, interstellar travels, these are all products and services that marketing people have to bring to the market and ensure their success among consumers. Communication in general and marketing communication in particular have undergone significant changes. In trade marketing, changes were determined by modifications in the sales staff's behaviour (who becomes more empathetic and cultivated) as well as by modifications in the customers' behaviour (who become more informed, and consequently, more selective). These 'physiognomic' changes were also due to the new communication directions in the strategies of sales marketing, on the background of generalised electronic communication technologies. Non-verbal communication, for example, wins - in this context - more ground. As mutations undergone by the marketing communication mechanism, it is necessary to report that marketing communication has intensified its interactive character and has gained an integrative feature (Brătianu et al 2011:105-108), both triggered by the modification of the seller-buyer relationship. The latter exceeds his role of recipient of products and services, and rises to the position of partner in the process of valuing the goods which meet his demand.

What is innovation and how it reflects in retail trade

Innovation is defined, broadly, ‘... as the work of a specialist or a team and its result, which ensures the improvement of technology, a production process, products and services, organisational arrangements which get a new look’ (Florescu, Malcomete și Pop 2003: 309). The implementation of innovations leads to increased productivity, reduced costs, higher quality, safer working conditions in general, and economic development, it generates transformations at the micro level, modifies the character and nature of work, and is an important basis for competition; to narrow this definition down, innovation is reflected in all new solutions (design, technological, organisational solutions), usually perceived as improvements and without raising any claims of uniqueness or priority. Many definitions tried to capture the essence of the term ‘innovation’ over time: ‘... *the introduction of something new*’ (The American Heritage Dictionary), ‘... *a change which gives performance a new dimension*’ (Peter Drucker), ‘... *the introduction of new products (...), new methods of production (...), creation of new markets (...), discovery of new resources*’ (Joseph Schumpeter), ‘... *the ability to create increased value for customers*’ (Jose Campos) (<http://innovationzen.com/blog/2006/11/17/the-definition-of-innovation/>). Peter Drucker tackles the concept of innovation in terms of entrepreneurship, defining it as: specific instrument of entrepreneurs, ‘... their means of exploiting change as an opportunity for different business or services’ (Drucker 1993: 19). It can be considered a field of study or a specific activity. Entrepreneurs should identify with precision the sources of innovation, its changes, and manifestations, which indicate favourable conditions for its successful implementation [ibid]. Constant innovation (understood as a state of mind) is the defence ‘weapon’ of the leader against competition, through the development of new products/services meant to increase efficiency and reduce distribution costs, and thus to increase the leader’s competitive strength and his customer value (Kotler, Keller 2012: 611). Implementing the innovation becomes a mental process that buyers undertake, involving several stages, from learning about innovation to adopting it, which materialises in the practical use of innovation (Kotler, Armstrong, 2012: 180-182). In retail trade - defined as the sale of goods to final consumers (Nufer, Wurmer 2008: 7) – the dimensions of innovation include: *sale type* (store type), *brands* (especially privately held ones), which make up the product category, *process innovation*, *customer experience*, *information technology*, *new communication media*, *payment options* and *order fulfilment* (Reinartz et. al 2011: 54). Being a field where interaction with the customer is at the core of all activities, the degree of novelty of products, services, processes or business model depends on the extent to which they are considered innovative by consumers, on the first hand, and by company representatives, on the other hand (Hauser, Urban 1977: 614-616). As a consequence, many companies have acknowledged the need of involving consumers in the innovation process (Verhoef, Reinartz and Krafft 2010: 247-52) as well as their employees by assigning them (especially to those with operational positions) the role of introducing innovative products and services to potential customers and providing counselling for innovation adoption. Another dimension of innovation in retail trade is the form of the commercial area. If the arrival of the supermarket—in 1930 in the U.S. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Supermarket>) - was considered as the first novelty in this sector, today the sales form is a promising source for the development of innovations (Reinartz et. al 2011: 56). Ailawadi and Keller perceive the strategic decision to sell one or more proprietary brands, their positioning and differentiation in various media as another dimension of innovation in retail trade (Ailawadi, Keller 2004: 331-342). A relatively recent paper on innovation in ‘shopper marketing’ (Shankar et. al 2011: 32) brings into discussion the digital innovations, the atmosphere inside the store, merchandising, organisation of the marketing activity and the collaboration manufacturer-trader. Offer customisation was a major innovation. Nowadays the use of smartphones for product presentation is another major step. It is extremely interesting how technological breakthrough - smartphones, social networks,

etc. - can lead to innovative ways of approaching and delivering service to consumers. Baker's studies in 2002 revealed that innovations of the store atmosphere are a positive incentive for customers (Baker et. al 2002: 120–141). Among innovations at the sales point, with high impact on the purchase decision, the following are worth the attention: RFID (radio frequency identification), mobile technology, television networks, holograms (Kalyanam, Lal and Wolfram 2008). A regular opportunity to reflect on human creativity in the service of innovation is offered by the International Exhibition of Inventions in Geneva (held this year between 18-22 April). The event brought together more than 1,000 inventions and new products from 765 exhibitors. 'Paradoxically, affirms Jean-Luc Vincent - President of the Jury, economic and financial crises give rise to new ideas, determining investors to forget about the stock market problems and invest in products with high commercial potential' (<http://www.inventions-geneva.ch/cgi-bin/gb-visiteurs.php>).

The Internet plays an increasingly important role for the dissemination of innovations in retail trade because consumers use this medium to inform themselves before making purchase decisions. To influence the behaviour of potential customers, the innovation phenomenon must be also present in this environment. The retail expands rapidly, more and more companies being interested in becoming a global player, which implies new challenges. As a result, innovations are a must in order to seize opportunities and to successfully meet the requirements of an increasingly competitive market. On this background, the need arises to develop a study about the retail traders' behaviour towards innovation, as they play an important role in its dissemination inside the store.

Perception and communication in the service of innovation

A practical problem is the perception of innovation and its communication by the two parties involved in the act of exchange in retail trade: the seller and the buyer. If innovation is not perceived as such by one or both sides, it is no longer an essential element of discrimination in the act of choice of the common offer. Perception is understood as a psychological process through which objects, phenomena and processes from the objective world of human senses reflect themselves as a whole, with all their properties, in the human mind. A certain image of the surrounding reality emerges from this reflection, with subjective meanings which vary from one person to another [<http://dex.infoportal.rtv.net/~word-perceptie.htm>]. Perception has two important functions: informational and of regulatory adaptation. Man interacts with the environment via these two functions. Communication is essential as it

'sheds light' on innovation, both in the case of the sales staff's awareness and in 'spreading' it among customers. Marketing communication involves all the elements of the mix to convey messages between the organisation and its target audience (Popescu 2002: 20). The main role of any type of marketing communication is its ability to influence the customer's purchase decision as well as all other factors triggered by the purchase decision (manufacturers, retailers, civil society, groups of interest, etc.). The integrated character which defines marketing communication throughout the last decades - as mentioned - summarises all organisational efforts made to send and receive messages both to its external environment and its internal one. It is also part of the internal marketing of the organisation. Internal marketing requires managers to show empathy, to think and act towards their employees just as these ones are required to treat their customers. This way, employees become 'internal customers of the company' (Bruhn 2007: 231et seq.). The correct perception of innovation by all stakeholders, along with its communication methods, represents important leverages in any business which performs an innovative act (goods, services or ideas). Although often risky, new products and services give a major competitive advantage to companies trading them. The *determination of the seller* during the promotion of the merchandise is essential for its success to the public. The seller's attitude towards the extra effort required for promotion depends on how he perceives innovation himself.

A study on the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen 1991: 179-211) explains the crystallisation of the seller's intention to act by measuring how subjective standards imposed by the sales process are perceived as managerial, organisational and social pressure to sell the new product (Fu et. al 2010: 61-76). This approach favours the assessment of the relation between the behavioural control of the seller and his performance in selling new products.

Research objectives and methodology

This research has chosen as reference the large stores and sales areas from the bricolage (Do It Yourself) field. In scientific literature, this commercial concept (commercial format) falls under the specialised markets category (Dabija, Pop 2008: 43-60). Such a format option justifies itself through its characteristics and peculiarities, which ensures a higher degree of buyers' involvement in the purchase decision and thus a greater effort on their side to understand and appreciate innovation. Moreover, the selected commercial format is also called, in everyday language, 'Do It Yourself' (DIY) store. On the one hand, the variety of products and services for home and garden design, but also for other types of environments invites the customer to fulfil his needs at the highest degree (arrangement of his habitat, maintenance of his living space, development of DIY objects, etc.). This high level of involvement is a prerequisite for a broad field of innovation in the sale-purchase process. On the other hand, Romania is spread out with a large number of bricolage stores of important European retail chains, such as German brands (Praktiker, OBI, Hornbach), Austrian brands (bauMax), French brands (Bricostore, Mr. Bricolage, Leroy Merlin), Turkish brands (Tekzen) and even local brands (Dedeman - market leader, Ambient, Arabesque). This phenomenon emphasises competition as well as competitors' innovative requirements. The authors' option for the DIY network was also determined by the fact that, besides the final customer (natural or legal person), an important role is also played by an intermediary who 'prescribes' the final customer what goods to purchase. This major customer segment is the consultant craftsman, always engaged in repairs, renovation, expansion, etc. of all classes of property under the management of the final beneficiary of the goods offered by the DIY networks. A specialist in commodities, the craftsman can be an important factor in demand multiplication and marketing of new products and services, to the benefit of the commercial organisation and its turnover.

The *objectives of the research* focus on the following aspects:

- a) which are the main forms of innovation in DIY trade?
- b) how is innovation perceived and communicated in DIY retail by the seller, respectively by the buyer?
- c) what are the main forms of internal marketing, which should be 'activated' in order to empower the seller with even more effective innovation marketing techniques?

The research consists of several *steps* and uses various *methods, techniques* and *tools* of investigation.

It starts with a *pilot study* applied to senior managers of store networks from the DIY commercial format. This study - which is the *subject of this paper* - analyses how innovation is understood and evaluated by these decision-makers. The pilot study takes the form of a *qualitative exploratory research*, based on: 1) a *semi-conducted in-depth interview*, which uses a *conversation guide* for decision-makers, 2) a *screening test* based on words or image completion, applied to the operational management of the store. The *second stage* provides a *quantitative descriptive research*, whose object is to determine the views and perceptions [Cătoi (coord.) 2009: 78] of the managers from the DIY networks in Bucharest. The subject of this study is the *perception of innovation* in their business and how they communicate with their operational staff in order to raise 'innovation awareness' regarding the new products and services. The subjects of the *third stage* of the research are customers of DIY stores in Bucharest. Two different methods of investigation are applied at this stage: 1) *observation*, by monitoring their response to different

categories of innovations from the DIY stores, selected from the categories of innovations defined apriori (in the first stage of the research) and validated through the descriptive research among decision-makers, 2) organising a *marketing experiment* in one of the DIY networks for testing the optimal showcase position of new arrivals and signalling innovative products and services through different means (visual, acoustic, combined), 3) conducting a *qualitative causal research*, by means of a simulated market test [Cătoiu (coord.) 2009: 85-86], to determine experimentally the customers' reaction to a given number of innovative services, present for the first time on the Romanian market. In this paper, the authors refer exclusively to the *pilot research* carried out among *decision-makers at store network level*. 13 specialised managers from the bricolage stores in Bucharest were interviewed. Although such an approach does not provide representative results, it makes place to interesting conclusions based on which future research instruments can be built (questionnaires, projective tests, observation sheets, experimental schemes). The research based on the conversation guide was conducted during two weeks, from the end of March until early April 2012. Dialogue with each party lasted between 30 and 40 minutes, being recorded - with the interlocutor's consent - on electronic media. Efforts were made to ensure a relaxed atmosphere and a constructive dialogue, avoiding, as much as possible, the 'Yes/No' dichotomous answers. The interlocutors were head of service and marketing managers, trade managers or acquisition managers from leading bricolage companies present on the Bucharest market. Semi-conducted in-depth interview was chosen as investigation method because of its capacity to clarify the main concepts, which are next interpreted as *operational data* (transformed in measurable or evaluative indicators) in the following stages of this study. The *conversation guide* (Pop, Petrescu 2008: 190) is not a questionnaire with closed questions, but an arguable reference meant to guide the discussion in case the interlocutor does not take the lead in tackling the proposed topics.

The five hypotheses formulated for the pilot research were:

H1 Interlocutors are able to make the difference between innovation of new products and other forms of innovation;

H2 The interlocutors' perception of innovation in bricolage (DIY) retail is *diffuse* in the absence of a well-structured definition of the types of innovation, depending on *involvement, responsibility and control*;

H3 Exploratory research based on semi-conducted interview may lead to a classification of the innovation sources by *types, technological criteria, responsibility and involvement*;

H4 *Local initiative* as source of innovation is poorly represented in all possibilities of innovation;

H5 *Customer as source of innovative proposals* is considered a secondary solution in marketing novelties.

Results of the research

Interlocutors' availability to dialogue was an essential factor of the pilot research. Asked to formulate their own opinion on the concept of innovation in their field of activity, interlocutors have formulated a wide range of solutions. The most frequently mentioned solution was *new product* launch, which was treated separately. The discussion on product innovation went further, answers varying widely - from brand new products on the global market (e.g. roof elements including a solar energy recovery system) to new products for the retail company. The main sources of product innovation also proved themselves diverse (from brand new materials for the construction industry up to pricing variations – either 'prestige' pricing or 'popularity' pricing in relation to pricing of similar products sold by competitors). As the subject of this research was not the innovation of product offers, the authors concluded that interlocutors succeeded to clearly set it apart from other forms of innovation and thus **H1 is confirmed**. Interlocutors mostly focused on the technological side of innovation (from discussions resulting ideas such as: '... based on the display from the flooring showroom, the customer calculates his necessary of

parquet and accessories with a few clicks.’), two thirds of them also reported innovations related to the sale process (‘... recently, our company opened a store in Transylvania, which has a testing centre for new electric tools, the customer having the possibility to try the equipment before purchasing it - something which has a positive impact on his buying decision and also brings something new which attracts the buyer’). A small number of interlocutors tried to classify innovation based on certain criteria, such as in-store presentation, additional customer services, product range and price configuration, loyalty programs, construction type of the store, without specifying exactly the persons responsible for such initiatives (store management, bidders - producers, stores network management, third parties). Although an important number of innovative services were registered, a direct connection could not be identified between these services and customers’ requirements, including their desire to receive an optimal service quality-price report. These facts, along with some aspects which will be reported by the other hypotheses, prove that there was no clear customer-orientation among the interlocutors. All these factors have led the authors to the conclusion that hypothesis **H2 is confirmed**. Through dialogue, the authors could establish a typological structure of innovations in DIY retail criteria based on *involvement*, *responsibility* and *control*. Table no. 1 brings these aspects together and serve as a basis for designing other techniques and tools for the second and third stages of the general research on innovation perception and communication in bricolage trade.

Innovation type	Concrete forms of innovation
a. Genesis of innovation in triangle: <i>manufacturer - distributor - customer</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - manufacturer – innovative products; - distributor – sales of innovative products and innovative trade methods; - consumer – provides the best innovative solutions (mostly conveyed by needs), but these can be unrealistic in terms of development costs.
b. Innovations at the point of sales (store)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - constructive; - functional; - esthetical.
c. Innovations in presentation/display and offer ‘activation’ at the point of sales	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - merchandising aspects of the sales process; - informing customers (smartphone applications, information terminals); - special in-store attractions (new arrivals, ‘premium’ products, etc.).
d. Innovations in the selling process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - mobile shopping assistant (on various gadgets); - testing and creativity room; - innovative payment and settlement systems; - buy-back and customer incentives to recycling.
e. Complex customer loyalty programs - to the store brand and its offer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - addressing intermediaries with a role in products and services prescription, (craftsmen who performs various works at the customer’s location); - addressing organizational customers (construction companies); - addressing the end consumer.
f. Innovations along the supply chain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - in the supply process - in the transport process - in the storage process - in the inventory management at the store

Table no. 1 – Typology of innovations in bricolage trading

Source: realised by the authors of this research

Interlocutors have expressed their availability to classify innovations by categories they considered related to the applied field of the research (DIY retail trade). This approach presents applicative valences not only for the other investigations of this research, but also for delimiting responsibilities in *promoting* and *communicating* innovation in this context. Consequently, hypothesis **H3 is validated**. The authors observed the interlocutors’ focus on innovative aspects generated at the ‘mother’ company level, as a result of the influence exercised in the commercial concept by the ‘centre’. Paradoxically, in Romanian companies (Dedeman, Ambient, Arabesque) availability to innovation was less declarative and more strongly emphasised in practice. All interlocutors are open to specific training activities that involve customers directly in various practical activities, using products purchased from the store (e.g. cultivation of garden or indoor plants, installing tiles at home, painting the domestic environment, planning the bathroom in 3D,

etc.). DIY store chains with foreign capital are more likely to invest in innovation because, on the one hand, access to the latest technology is easier on the developed markets and, on the other hand, financial power of international groups is higher than that of the local ones. In addition, employees can be trained in stores abroad - where the brand is already present – this making possible the accumulation of knowledge that may lead to the creation of innovative solutions on the local market. Moreover, the concern of the vast majority of the interlocutors to highlight the innovative character of the brand they represent was highly appreciated. These considerations led the authors to **accept hypothesis H4**. Interlocutors noticed a change of conduct in the act of purchase. The customer first searches for the product on the Internet and then visits the store to purchase the product. Interlocutors state that it would be useful to place fast-speed Internet access points in the store, allowing quick visualisation of the entire product range. Customised treatment becomes also necessary - including customer loyalty programs - for intermediaries represented by craftsmen from different areas, who purchase goods for their customers. Interesting statements stood out, like: ‘... earlier this year we started a pilot project to test craftsmen’s reaction to a new loyalty program - if the craftsman makes a purchase for himself, he receives a direct discount on the products value; in exchange, if he brings his own customer in, he is rewarded with a percentage from the value of his customer’s purchase, the cash bonus being transferred directly to his account. The pilot program has been successful, which encouraged us to extend it to country level,’ declared a DIY store manager; ‘... I have recently visited a retailer, where I saw a very useful customer loyalty device. It scans the customer’s access card and discounts are then offered based on the information stored in the database about that customer’s purchase history,’ said a marketing director of one of the analysed networks. It could be observed that the DIY market is characterised by a minor concern for customer loyalty. Loyalty initiatives via the card are more punctual measures than a coherent plan to increase customer attachment to the products. The discussions showed quite clearly the *lack of a systematic approach* of the brand attachment process. Such a system would start from a *customer database* (based on classification criteria such as the nature and destination of the purchases, the average purchase amount, etc.), which is a prerequisite to *strategies of personalised customer treatment*, in terms of attachment/loyalty. Such a concept would be complete through a permanent marketing-controlling frame (Pelău 2009: 43-50). Buyers are more informed and, as a result, when they visit a store, especially a DIY one, they expect to find a wide range of products, of a high novelty level. One of the interlocutors stated: ‘... We had cases of customers who came and asked us if we had product X or Y, about which they had read in a specialised magazine. We often expanded our range of products and services based on customers’ proposals’. However, the research showed that there was no systematic concern for the registration of innovative proposals coming from customers, and even much less for their consistent processing. All these elements lead to the **validation of hypothesis H5**.

Conclusions

The exploratory pilot research proved itself very useful for the authors, in terms of assessing the situation in the bricolage networks from Bucharest, but also for the subjects of the investigation, in terms of a series of conceptual clarifications, with operational implications. The study will be followed, at this stage, by a *projective test* conducted on operational store managers. This form of non-verbal communication is recommended in situations where people want to discover ‘hidden’ motivational elements, that verbal communication could not accurately stress (e.g. the attitudes of operational staff towards an extra effort required ‘to highlight innovation’ or to learn new marketing and customer guidance techniques). We strongly believe that the second and third stages of the planned research will allow a much clearer delineation of how innovation is perceived and communicated by all company stakeholders in the retail trade of bricolage products.

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