

INNOVATION, CUSTOMER ATTACHMENT SOURCE IN RETAIL SERVICES EMPIRICAL RESEARCH IN DIY RETAIL

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Abstract: *The topic of the present study is innovation of services in the retail trade of bricolage (Do-It-Yourself, DIY) products and the influence that innovation has on the increase of customer attachment to companies in this field. The Romanian bricolage market brings together representatives of large specialised retail chains in Europe along with large domestic operators, which led us to the choice of this trade as a research field. Innovation is considered an important factor that brings a significant contribution to the success of a business (O'Cass, Song and Yuan, 2012), and services are a priority for economic development. Despite all these, innovation in services is still insufficiently exploited both theoretically and empirically. The object of this study is to apply a qualitative research through semi-conducted interviews with managers from the DIY retail field in order to validate the conceptual model whose inputs, innovation along with the availability and professionalism of the sales staff, act as generators of customer attachment to the company, leading to increased turnover, a permanent fund of customers and loyalty to the store. As a second stage, the proposed model will be tested through a quantitative research, by making use of the customer's points of view. The three hypotheses of this research (H1: Innovation in services is determined by: the customer's involvement in the implementation of the service, the use of gadgets in the store to facilitate access to information to the customer, the extension of the in-store services to the virtual environment and customer experience; H2: Innovation together with the availability and knowledge of the sales staff are sources of the customer's attachment; H3: Attachment acts as a catalyst for the turnover, the permanent fund of customers and the loyalty to the store) have been accepted, the study revealing that in the retail trade of bricolage products, the staff's availability and professionalism are key elements for the definition of customers' attachment, along with innovation, which is an extra advantage to customers.*

Keywords: *Innovation in services, attachment, retail trade, semi-conducted in-depth interviews*

JEL classification: L81, M31

Introduction

Contemporary social and economic development is determined by the evolution of the services sector, which is an important component of the global economy.

Diachronic and synchronic analysis of the dimension of the services sector shows the strong tendency of the economic systems in the developed countries towards 'globalisation', as well as a correlation between the level of development of services and the level of development of national economies. Thus, in the more developed countries, the share of services goes beyond 60 and even 70% in relation to the employed population. Even so, there are still some differences even in the case of these countries, which are determined by the particular patterns of economic growth, different from the point of view of traditions, customs, etc. .(*Ionciã, accessed online 20.03.2013*).

On the operation of the services sector depends the economic development of a nation because this sector triggers the performance and the economic development - producers and exporters cannot become competitive without services such as banking, insurance, accounting, telecoms, retail or transport, thus leading to an increased rate of innovation and technology transfer, and supporting long-term investments (*Enescu and Enescu, 2012*). According to a report published by Eurostat in October 2012, 43% of the employed population in Romania was working in the services sector in 2011 (*Eurostat, accessed online 20.03.2013*). Nevertheless, economic development in Romania is conditioned by an even more active and daring enterprise in the services sector, by encouraging innovation in this area.

At the microeconomic level, companies admit the need of being innovative in their offer of services in order to be well prepared to face the growing competition. The Director of the Research in Services Department of IBM emphasises that 'people have a certain idea about what technological innovation means, but innovation in services is rather unknown' (Yen, Wang, Wei, Hsu and Chiu, 2012).

With this study we want on the one hand to explain the concept of innovation in services and on the other hand to determine, through a qualitative research, the existence of a relationship between innovation and the degree of attachment to service companies, with a practical application in the DIY retail from Bucharest.

Innovation in Services

Paradoxically, innovation in services is still underused both theoretically and empirically despite the fact that services represent a priority for economic development and innovation is regarded as an important factor contributing to the success of a business (O'Cass, Song and Yuan, 2012). At the same time, innovation in services is described as 'the Next Big Thing!' (Jana 2007 in O'Cass, Song and Yuan, 2012). The aforementioned situation is the reason behind this research. In a paper from 2010, Ostrom et al. define innovation in services as activities that 'create value for customers, employees, owners, partners and the community through offers and processes of services, but also new and/or improved business models' (Ostrom 2010 in Yen, Wang, Wei, Hsu and Chiu, 2012). In light of this definition, innovation in services reveals itself as a continuous process that consists of a series of incremental changes in the products and processes (OSLO Manual, 2005: 38).

Innovation in services is not limited to the uniqueness or novelty of a service only, but also to innovations in other areas of the system, such as the service delivery processes, the interface with the consumer and the buyer-seller relationship. Even

more, if compared to innovation in products, innovation in services often arises from a need or problem that consumers are facing (Kindström, D., et al., 2012).

According to previous studies of Carman & Langeard (1980), Edvardson & Olsson (1996), and Larsson & Bowen (1989), innovation in services is composed of 'interactive innovation' and 'supportive innovation'.

- Interactive innovation refers to the value created through changes initiated by the service company and is designed to determine the consumers who interact with the new service concept to express themselves in relation to this new concept in cognitive, affective and behavioural ways. Interactive innovation consists of three elements that the customer experiences: changes in image or offer (new or improved offers of services), changes in the service delivery mode and changes relating to service personalisation based on the consumer's needs.
- Supportive innovation refers to the changes that help create value for the new service and includes three types of changes: changes related to the implementation of the service (i.e. the identification of new or improved resources used for the development of the service), changes in the supply chain (new or improved supply chain methods) and changes in the quality of service (initiatives that lead to increased quality of service) (Carman&Langeard,1980, Edvardson&Olsson, 1996, Larsson&Bowen 1989 in Salunke, S., et al., 2012).

Particularly in the services sector, consumers are considered to be co-producers and therefore, according to Gummesson, they should be treated as members of the service company, as part-time employees (Gummesson, 2002:69). The consumers' needs and ideas lead to innovations that will finally increase the consumers' attachment to the service company.

The services field being so vast, we focus our research on retail trade in general and on bricolage (DIY) retail trade in particular. Our approach is based on one hand on the fact that in most South-European countries there is a consistent increase in the traditional service sector such as retail trade, transport and tourism (*Enescu and Enescu, 2012*), and on the other hand on the fact that, through its specific properties, the retail trade of bricolage products get the buyers involved in purchasing decisions at a higher degree and therefore triggers more effort into evaluating innovation on the buyers' side (Pop, Săniuță and Roman, 2012). In addition, this type of trade developed significantly over the last decade on the Romanian market, currently over 135 bricolage (DIY) stores being active across the country.

Innovation in retail trade reflects on: *sales form* (type store), *brands* (especially privately-owned ones) that make up the product range, *process innovation*, *customers' experience*, *information technology*, *new communication media employed*, *methods of payment and of order fulfilment* (Reinartz et. al, 2011). Even more, being an area in which interaction with the customer is the main focus of all activities, the degree of novelty of products, services, processes or business models depends on whether they are perceived as innovative by consumers mainly, and by company representatives secondarily (Hauser and Urban,1977).As a consequence, we can say that innovation is vital to the future of producers and traders, the novelty of products and services that are significantly different from what already exists on the market ensuring the competitive success of a company (Omar: 1995, in Pop and Săniuță, 2012).

Obtaining Customer Loyalty through the Attachment Process

In today's hyper-competitive business environment, marked by globalisation, customer loyalty is critical for the evolution and intensive development of a business (by obtaining loyalty from the existing customer base) and is a major competitive advantage (Smith and Taylor, 2004). Extensive development (through acquisition of new customers) is more difficult to achieve. The economic crisis that we undergo adds even more difficulty to this task by forcing more and more companies into finding new ways to achieve customer satisfaction and loyalty. Today's consumer is more informed and educated, with easy access to information, and therefore more demanding and more difficult to retain in a market saturated with numerous offers from various players. The financial element is no longer sufficient or decisive when it comes to the choices that the customer makes. Most often, the choice is made based on prior information and, especially, based on the relationship built over time with the organisation.

Customer attachment to the organisation, product or brand is built over time, in several steps: first purchase, repurchase, fidelity, loyalty. The mandatory condition for the transition to the next stage is satisfaction. In case dissatisfaction occurs during one of these stages, the customer will abandon the product or service of that organisation and will switch to a competitor's offer. If, after repeated purchases and after the loyalty phase has been reached, the customer is excited about the value obtained, then he will reach the exclusivity phase when he totally ignores other competing products or services on the market (Pop, 2005). In addition, Oliver (1999) sustains that cumulative satisfaction will influence loyalty, not just satisfaction after a single purchase.

Satisfaction is the customer's answer showing the extent to which his expectations have been met. It is a statement that certain features or the entire purchased product or service provides a satisfactory level of consumption-related fulfilment (Oliver, 1997). In the retail sector, customer satisfaction can be defined as the 'post-consumption evaluation of how well the store or product managed to meet or exceed the customer's expectations' (Levy and Weitz, 2009).

In the Romanian retail system, and not only, loyalty programs typically provide some points that are calculated in report to the sum of money spent on every transaction. In most cases, these points are recorded on a membership card, which is presented at the point of sale.

Loyalty programs provide monetary and non-monetary benefits based on the amount of money spent on purchasing goods and/or services (Stauss et al., 2005). But customer loyalty is about building a long-term relationship with the customer. Therefore, as stated by many researchers in their work (Fournier and Yao, 1997; Pritchard et al., 1999; Bowen and Chen, 2001; Rundle-Thiele and Mackay, 2001; Koo, 2003; Kumar and Shah, 2004; Wong and Sohal, 2003, Rundle-Thiele, 2005), the conceptualisation of loyalty should also take into consideration other emotional factors, such as resistance to the competitors' offerings, tendency towards loyalty, statements of disagreement and complaints, etc.

The definition of loyalty in retail can be phrased as follows: 'the attitudinal and behavioural preference for a retailer as compared to the alternatives available at the competitors' (Wallace et al., 2004: 251 in Vesel, Zabkar, 2009). Research shows that 'polygamous loyalty' (consumers' tendency to divide their loyalty among several

brands) closely describes the consumer's behaviour in retail (Dowling and Uncles, 1997 in Davis-Sramek, Mentzer and Stank, 2008). Long-term loyalty remains an ambitious goal to achieve, an 'elusive dream' for many organisations, indicating that there is still much to learn and understand on this topic (Karjaluoto et. al., 2012).

Methodology

The proposed conceptual model involves the previously developed concepts: innovation and sales staff's availability and knowledge in order to provide quality services. The two constructs are the input of this model and together determine the attachment. In its turn, attachment generates an increased turnover, a permanent fund of customers and loyalty to the store.

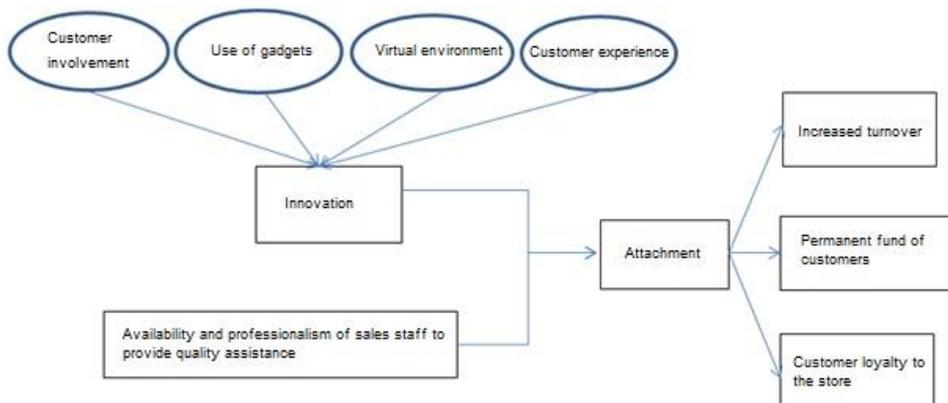


Figure 1: – The conceptual model of research
Source: realized by the authors of this research

According to Churchill (1979: 67), when conceptualizing constructs, it is imperative to analyze the existing literature. To measure innovation in services, four dimensions have been taken into account:

- Customer involvement in achieving the service
Services emerged in response to customers' (or the market's) needs, so that customers, as main beneficiaries, act as co-producers of services. Co-creation is a key concept in service innovation because innovation depends on a good knowledge of the customer, on his network of acquaintances and on his skills (Chae, 2012). Also, in a recent study conducted by IBM on 26,000 subjects in 14 countries, 89% of participants declared their availability to spend 20 minutes of their time to help a retailer better understand their needs, in order to conceive an offer that meets these needs (IBM Institute for Business Value, 2013).
- The use of gadgets inside the store to facilitate customers' access to information

In a survey conducted in 2012 on 'Perception and communication of innovation in retail', the taxonomy of innovation types in the DIY retail trade has been developed. One type of innovation is 'Innovations in the act of selling itself', with the following concrete forms of expression: mobile assistant (on various gadgets) for shopping, room for testing and creativity, innovative payment and settlement systems, buy-back and customer incentives to recycle materials, electronic information points, displays providing discounts based on the information held about customers (Pop, Săniuță and Roman, 2012).

- Extension of the in-store services to the virtual environment

Today's technologies have changed the way consumers make their purchases. Although for 84% of consumers (IBM Institute for Business Value, 2013), stores are the first choice when it comes to purchases, we should not ignore that consumers gather information in advance in the virtual world. As a result, the weak connection between the two environments, real and virtual, must be improved so that the experience from an environment extends to the other environment.

- Customer experience

Consumers' experience in retail can be expressed as the sum of all the experiences that they have when they make purchases in a store. To use this concept in service innovation, retailers need to understand this phenomenon and to rethink processes so that each visit in the store is an enjoyable experience for the customer (Ostrom et. Al, 2010).

The introduction of the variable 'Availability and professionalism of sales staff to provide quality assistance' is based on the following arguments: Jackson and Shaw (in Kent and Omar, 2003: 172) noted that the most valuable element of the extended marketing mix is the people because of their role in customer service and customer relationship management.

Retail means working and serving customers in a direct and personal way, so, in a rapidly changing and highly competitive environment, well trained and motivated employees are essential to the long-term success of retail companies (Merkel, Jackson and Pick, 2010). In bricolage (DIY) retail, the need of well trained and informed employees is even greater than in other fields because in this sector customers need additional advice and especially because, beyond the material satisfaction of needs, emotional needs are also involved – customer's involvement in creating his own home or entertainment area.

According to Gummesson, employees are motivated to demonstrate their skills and customer orientation if they are well informed (Gummesson, 2002: 202). Additionally, a qualitative research conducted among employees of a bricolage (DIY) retailer in Bucharest showed that employees feel the need for communication training, which will help them establish an empathic connection with the customer. Even more, a new perception is required, that leads to perceiving the customer as a partner in the sales process and not just as a beneficiary of the sale (Pop and Săniuță, 2012).

The high number of competitors on the retail market of bricolage products, which results in a 'war of the offers' having as prize consumers' 'wallet', determined consumers to direct their preferences towards multiple retailers instead of only one. Retailers who succeed to attract consumers on their side and to develop long-term relationships with them will benefit, according to the model to be tested, from:

- Increased turnover
- Permanent fund of customers
- Customer loyalty to the store. According to a survey conducted by the company G.F.K. Nürnberg from Germany, brand loyalty is higher than store loyalty, which motivated us to search for factors that may contribute to the balance between brand loyalty and store loyalty (Mălcomete, 2010).

The following hypotheses are illustrated in our model:

H1: Innovation in services is determined by the customer's involvement in the development of the service, in-store use of gadgets to facilitate customer's access to information, extension of services from the store to the virtual environment and customer experience.

H2: Innovation together with the availability and knowledge of sales staff are sources for customer attachment.

H3: Attachment acts as a catalyst on turnover, permanent fund of customers and loyalty to the store.

To validate the model, the first phase consists of a qualitative research in the form of semi-conducted in-depth interviews with managers from Romanian bricolage (DIY) companies. Since the main purpose of this research is to clarify and better understand the coordinates of the bricolage market, we can qualify this approach as an exploratory one, which represents a preliminary step for further studies (Cătoi, 2009: 74). The semi-conducted interview brings a set of topics in discussion, usually five to six, and uses as a tool the interview guide (Zikmund in Brătucu and Brătucu, 2006: 49). The interview guide contained the four parts recommended by Jolibert and Jourdan (2011:23), part 1: The introductory phrase where we explained the purpose of our approach and asked for the manager's permission to record the interview; part 2: the beginning of the interview where a general question was asked in order to establish the main subject; part 3: the interview's themes were freely discussed; part 4: the conclusion allowed us to see if there were any circumstances that could bias the validity of the information – such confidential issues – and also, obtain a feedback from each respondent.

The duration of the interviews ranged between 45 minutes and one hour, during which respondents were asked to talk about the aforementioned constructs and about possible connections among them. No preset order was imposed according to the rules of the semi-conducted interview (Cătoi, 2009: 220), and the views expressed by participants were recorded and analysed at a later time.

The content analysis is usually performed by using the rough material obtained during the interviews (Jolibert and Jourdan: 2011, 52). Therefore, the recorded interviews were transcribed, separately read by the authors and each one build an individual interpretative framework. For this purpose, the lexical analysis allowed identifying redundant words, whereas the textual analysis emphasized phrases that were dealing with the same theme. Once the data was categorized in several themes, a relational analysis (Jolibert and Jourdan: 2011, 55) was performed in order to quantify the associations between concepts, the proximity of their connection or

interference. At the end of the stage, the four resulted analysis were confronted and discussed by the authors.

Results

Conducted throughout a week, the stage of gathering information for this research revealed interesting results that confirm or contradict the preset hypotheses, as shown below. The gathered data can be applied in the process of customer relationship management and is a basis for starting a customer loyalty program through innovation.

The availability of interlocutors to answer questions, and especially their willingness to share their topic-related experience with us led to the following results. Most subjects gave a positive response with regard to innovation in customer's involvement in the development of the service. The use of technological innovations (e.g. software permitting customers to simulate the design of their bathroom or the look of their favourite room with their choice of parquet) was on the same place as the previously mentioned dimension in terms of the number of responses. The other two dimensions were brought into discussion to a smaller extent, despite the fact that the literature places the customer's buying experience at the core of the process (authors like Vargo and Lusch, 2004; 2010, Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004, dedicated a lot of studies to this concept). As early as 1955, Abbott (in Holbrook; 2006) declared that 'what people really want are not products, but products that offer them experiences, they use products with the hope of getting the experience they need.' A part of our interlocutors have mentioned about the change of conduct in the purchasing act and they pointed out that many customers research first for the product in the virtual environment and then come into the store to purchase the item. Although only two of the dimensions were validated by the most of interlocutors, we accept the *hypothesis H1* so we can test it in the quantitative phase of the study.

Subjects agreed unanimously that on how the sales staff treats the customers depends the latter's attachment to the company. Subjects also agreed that innovation as a novelty factor attracts customers, the role of the sales force being to help customers understand the benefits of innovations. One interlocutor said that he was working together with the human resources department on a training program for staff directly involved with customers so that they acquire the ability to empathise with customers and provide them with the best experience possible. 'I have studied this at our main competitor and it seems that, besides the range of products and services, the staff is an important reason that determined customers to turn to our competitor's stores.' Based on the aforementioned information, we accept the *hypothesis H2*.

People who participated in the study say either that they do not have a coherent customer loyalty program or that the existing program (with the cards on which customer accumulate points for their purchases) does not give the expected results. Interlocutors answered affirmatively to the questions meant to test the third hypothesis, and could not provide figures and real cases. One of them said that he understands the necessity of adoption of a holistic perspective of loyalty – not only a system of accumulating points and receiving something in place of this, but a system which transform the customer into a partner of the business.

From a theoretical point of view, *hypothesis H3* can be accepted with reserve, the quantitative research, which will take into account the perspective of customers, being able to validate the proposed conceptual model.

The qualitative approach gave us valuable inputs in order to design the further research that aims to investigate the customer perspective regarding innovation in services and the relationship between it and attachment.

Conclusions

Innovation in the DIY retail requires a strong focus on services which complement the products. This way, customers can make the best choice judging by the triad: price-quality-the extent to which their needs were satisfied. To be able to provide customers with an enjoyable shopping experience, retail employees must have the technical knowledge to provide complete information to customers and must acquire the skills to empathise with them in order to offer the best solutions for home construction or optimisation. As we mentioned in the conceptual clarification, long-term loyalty remains an ambitious objective (Karjaluoto et al., 2012), requiring sustainable organisational change which shifts from the transactional view to the relational view.

Although the conceptual model needs to be tested as well through a quantitative research, our findings suggest a couple of implications for companies acting on the DIY market to maximize the value they offer to customer through services. Adopt a culture of innovation by involving the customer in achieving the service, creating a positive customer experience and take advantage of technology and virtual environment will have a favorable impact on the business. Managers who want successfully create a culture of innovation need to understand the necessity of well-trained sales staff – an efficacious workforce is built through selection and training, goal setting and on-the-job coaching (Bandura, 1997; Jex and Bliese, 1999 in Yim, Chan and Lam, 2012).

The main limitation that should be considered when interpreting the results is the qualitative nature of the research. In order to overcome this limitation further research should test the model through a quantitative method to contribute to a fuller understanding of the role of innovation in services from a customer perspective.

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