

dad se ganaría si se pudiera entrar en un *shopping centre* virtual y encontrar a otras personas, tenerlas presentes al menos de forma virtual. En Compuserve ya se están haciendo experimentos de este tipo mediante una aplicación *chat*.

En conclusión, ir más allá del comercio debe significar crear una nueva lógica dual del comercio bajo semblanzas físicas y virtuales, permitiendo recrear un puente ideal entre las dos principales categorías de consumidores: los que minimizan el tiempo dedicado a las compras y los que, por el contrario, perciben el tiempo de la compra como ocio, a fin de ampliar el espectro de usuarios ofreciendo una gama de servicios casi total.

Beyond the display window. The non-existent shop

A new stage

Evolving behaviour and attitudes to consumption, together with a greater consumer maturity, are causing profound changes in the distribution world.

The shop/show window is no longer the only advance point for communicating with the outside: its logic has been transferred to inside the sales point and has entered the home of the consumer, who does not necessarily move to shop only but also to participate in the collective spectacle of a stimulating cultural landscape. The consumer wants to be a part of this landscape and interact there.

One of the main elements of this evolution which must be carefully considered, because of the repercussions it will probably have on the way we sell products, is *on line* commerce which, thanks to the increasing presence of the PC at home and the development and evolution of Internet, is growing very rapidly.

The fact that in the last few years more PC's than televisions are being sold makes us think that we are faced with a revolution of enormous scope. Changes in communication media have always been followed by great commercial revolutions. We need only think of the postindustrial revolution that took place when television took the place of the radio.

Internet, which was a vehicle for information, promotion, and marketing, is inexorably becoming a true sales channel. The first idealistic elite has given way to a throng of consumers. Web pages have become shelves for exhibiting books, T-shirts, computers, baby clothes, and even cars and fresh food such as fruit and vegetables.

Before the Internet boom this was already happening regularly, in more modest proportions and without the graphic possibilities of the World Wide Web, thanks to the great American infoproviders such as CIS, Genie, and AOL. And before that, there were sales by mail.

The data are surprising, and growing clearly: according to an estimate made by Nielsen/Commerce Net, Internet users in the USA are nearly 24 million,

and approximately 10% of these use Internet above all for shopping at an estimated 5,000 sales points, with sales of 200 million dollars only in the USA. Best-selling products in this system are computer programmes and accessories, books, CD's, and plane tickets, besides the inevitable porno industry. But there are also fruit sellers who manage to provide fresh products to 1,500 users a week, such as Kroger provisions in Columbus, Ohio.

All these points show what the sales point offers, but also, and above all, the synthesis of cultural models present in the collective imagination linked to them, and which create not only sensual implications.

The physical/virtual sales point dualism

The web allows the recreation of all the emotions we feel in a shop, producing virtual proposals which can mobilise people a lot and which can receive feedback from the customer in the form of suggestions, ideas, debate, on arguments linked to the commercial sector; they can send information on products, on the sales point, on productive establishments; they allow the possibility of repeating or buying at any time without having to go to the shop; they can communicate at 360°.

But the fact that the best-selling articles are those that need no physical elaboration of the product such as touching or trying, evidences that commerce in the real world must continue to exist, especially for other commercial categories. There will be an *alter ego* on Internet which will give us all that complementary information not available at the sales point, such as the origin of material, inspiration, addresses and opening hours, novelties, and telephone numbers for information. And, above all, it will offer interaction with the sales point, or sales of merchandising products linked to themes close to the shop.

Virtuality, telematics, non-store shopping, need not be an alarm signal of the extinction of traditional retail sales, as was feared when they appeared. Quite the contrary; they will create a very interesting dualism which will integrate into the sales point and make it appear under a new light.

This is all about creating sales points which will generate happenings, culture, and expectations and which will turn into their physical placing, a space for testing, participating, meeting, and feeling; in their vir-

tual and immaterial part manifest in the webs, they will be a moment for looking-up, information, economic transactions, and communication.

Some examples

Internet has, as we have said, more than 5,000 points for selling and buying, such as the Internet Shopping Network, the Cybershop, Shops Net, the Awsome Mall of Internet, E-Shop Plaza, or Net City.

They are true virtual shopping centres, with cafés for on-line chats, cinemas for seeing the latest film trailers, conference halls for debating. But, above all, they are places where we can buy 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, where we can ask for information, leave messages, and visit the shop through images freely chosen by the user.

The system is simple: once connected by any computer with a modem, we can visit the sales point we are interested in by introducing the name or consulting the index of commercial categories. Going through the product catalogue, we can obtain all the information about them, their images and surroundings. We can even hear background music or voices to guide us, besides seeing interactive films or rotating objects as we like. Once we enter our credit card number, the product will be delivered to us at home.

Some final evaluations

It is interesting to note that in all these examples we create situations which are very similar to those happening in the real world: a concentration of shops with different commercial categories in great centres, which harms the small retailer and is favoured by the web itself which allows sending from one point to another and offers the possibility of transporting our business where we want to, with just one line of text. But it is even more interesting to be present at the birth of commercialisation linked to happenings or important brands, such as Sony or the main car brands.

All that we have seen brings about different observations which I would like to condense in an evaluation of the pros and cons which on-line commerce provokes.

The pros

The advantages inevitably created by a system of this kind are being able to buy products all over the world without leaving home, 24 hours a day and 365 days a year.

Given the 90's consumers' greater consciousness and knowledge related to shopping, and their search for information before buying, the system's advantages are noteworthy:

– *The possibility of comparing prices and, thus, a clearer market.* Paradoxically enough, we can discover, for example, that it is cheaper to buy a product in the United States and have it sent than buying it at the corner shop. This can create a whole series of problems which can have an enormous repercussion on on-line sales points and even beyond. There is an increasingly frequent use on the web of small software known as intelligent agents which search the intricate world of the web for the user, as if they were true hunters, looking for prices given by different sellers to specific articles, sometimes showing up enormous disparities in prices. The reach of these instruments is such that many shops have even created software barriers to impede access by intelligent agents—which they consider a sort of virus—to their pages. The possibility of price comparison is, in fact, the hub of on-line sales, and one of the elements which make it most different from the traditional retail seller. The arrival of this search system will doubtless bring about a general lowering of prices and will force companies to differentiate supply and compete on bases other than those of price.

– *The possibility of interacting with the company or seller.*

– *Complete access to products and information in real time.*

The cons

– *Interaction still too similar to mail-sales catalogues.* This can be overcome in time, thanks to the use of cable fibre optics, which will allow the development of the use of VRML 3D (Virtual Reality Modelling Language) which is linked to the future of Internet. This allows adding a third dimension to web pages and will allow virtual navigation within spaces. Thus, true physical spaces can be created where it will be possible to separate objects, touch them and, if we connect to

the web with a suit and visor, we can even stroll about in a virtual shop.

– *Safety and validity in economic transactions.* This is one of the most sensitive problems, and because of this, syndicated societies which issue credit cards are moving to solve a problem which probably affects the issuing societies more than the customer. Nowadays, we give our credit card to perfect strangers without even thinking about it, at hotels or petrol stations. Visa and Mastercard, for example, are developing cryptographic methods called RSA-SET (Secure Electronic Transition) which they would like to set as a universal standard. What is not clear in many laws is whether, in case of fraud, a purchase made without a customer's signature or identification number can be offered as proof against him.

– *The possibility of access only for those who know how to use a computer.* This is also a problem which has almost been solved by the introduction on the market of what are known as dumb-terminals or network computers, that is, plain, cheap computers (about 500 dollars), specifically for Internet navigation and access to its mail services, information, and electronic sales. The more developed version of this terminal will be connected to the television at home and will turn the PC into an easy-use domestic appliance.

– *On-line visibility and socializing during shopping.* Another negative element is the feeling, during our visits to on-line shops, of being the only survivors of a catastrophe, the fact of being faced by thousands of articles placed on shelves amidst the most desolate of solitudes. Another decisive step forward will be made by the web when it allows navigators to digitalise and become visible by means of representations on software. Let us imagine how credible and comforting it could be to enter a virtual shopping centre and meet other people or, at least, see them present in virtual form. On CompuServe, experiments of this sort are already being carried out by means of a chat application.

In conclusion, going beyond the shop must mean creating a new dual logic of commerce, with physical or virtual appearance, which allows creating an ideal bridge between the two main categories of consumers, those who minimise time spent on shopping and those who, on the contrary, perceive shopping time as fun; thus, the offer of an almost total range of services, the spectrum of users will be enlarged.