

Cuando un establecimiento y su fórmula comercial sean percibidos como útiles por el público al que se dirige, esta tienda puede considerarse, con todo merecimiento, ideal... para dicho público, aquí y ahora.

Marketing strategies and design requisites for sales points

The sales point: a commercial instrument in a turbulent environment

Business has changed substantially and will probably continue suffering profound changes in the following years.

New technology is constantly appearing which are rapidly introduced into the environment; life-styles and relationships are changing; the permeability of social and economic trends is increasingly greater. Quite definitely, the current environment is increasingly turbulent and thus, logically, profound changes are taking place in the culture of our society, culture meaning, in this sense, what UNESCO calls «the way we live together».

We could even say that a new culture of distribution is being born.

The dictionary defines 'distribute' as «divide and give out in shares; deal out; allot, according to certain rules».

When we apply this definition to business, we can see that these rules still exist, but that the regulations have changed and the rules which were basic a few years ago are currently just one more aspect.

Now, the stress must be placed more than on the «thing» distributed—that is to say, the product—on the way of doing so, how the customer is served, quite definitely, how to be useful to the customer (we should remember that to serve is to be useful to someone for something).

From this point of view, the design of space and the surroundings where products are placed is of vital importance. Space becomes an important actor and, as in any play, actors have to stick to the script of the proposed play if they want to carry out their part correctly. This specific script will quite definitely make up the distributing company's marketing strategy.

Interrelating the design of a company's sales point and its marketing strategy is an obvious necessity, as the sales point has currently become a basic instrument that any distribution company needs to communicate its marketing strategy and, thus, achieve its commercial objectives.

Incidence of marketing strategy on sales point briefing

To elaborate a briefing from which the specialist has to design a sales point, we ought to have a series of variables very clear.

The product

In the first place, we must take into account the nature of the product, depending on a series of factors which determine or condition the marketing strategy formula, such as:

Its implication. Buying a sweet is not the same, for example, as buying a car. In the latter case, people feel much more involved than in the former, as the risk that making a mistake supposes is much greater and could add many more later consequences.

In shops where involving products are sold, there should be a serene atmosphere.

Its attraction for the buyer. There are «leader» products (the public looks for them, and they pull in demand to the shop), and «follower» products (customers can buy them, although they hadn't thought of it before entering the shop).

The placement on the floor or layout should take existing leader and follower products into account.

Its own capacity of expression. There are «live» products which are interesting and attractive, but there are also «dead» ones, that is to say, «normal» products which are too well-known, such as the typical crisp. This does not imply that the latter aren't sold.

The way to present them has to be different for each type of product.

Buying frequency. There are needs which customers need to fill regularly and periodically (food...), while others are filled more sporadically (trips...) and some others that can only be considered every so often (changing the car, for example).

Thus, frequency of shopping is very uneven, according to the type of product. This should logically be taken into account before designing the sales point.

Way of buying. There are three quite different ways of buying: impulse buying—the product is seen and bought on impulse—, reflection buying—the buying process tends to be relatively slower than in the former case—, and specialty buying—applied to unmassified customer types.

The designer should know the range of products to be sold in the shop so as to be able to design the most adequate environment for each buying process.

Orientation. There are some products which are very much oriented towards the functional, that is to say, «correct function» and which give the use required of them (computers, a kilo of salt, etc.).

Others are more oriented towards symbolic aspects, with all the content and evocative charge a symbol contains (home appliances of a certain brand, for example).

Finally, others enter more into the field of predominantly sensual aspects (the world of aesthetics, senses, comfort, etc.).

The orientation dominant in the range of products should influence the sales point design.

Stage of the product's life-cycle. A few years ago, monovolume vehicles were only just being introduced in the market. Now they are quite accepted.

This process is the same as that followed by other products, such as mobile phones, modems to connect with Internet, etc.

Given the turbulence in the environment and the strong reaction from the competition, product life-cycles are increasingly shorter. However, the designer should take into account what design supposes for a shop selling products in a specific phase of their life-cycle. For example, a shop selling products very concentrated in a saturation and pre-decline phase should be designed seeking a low investment and low functioning costs, as the company will foreseeably have difficulties in keeping up high gross margins.

Buying habits. There are products which tend to be bought in a certain kind of shop, or at specific moments of the day, week, or month...

Design should facilitate the shop's flexibility so it can adjust both to moments of maximum volume, serving many visitors, and so as not to seem «dead» of little customer flow.

Physical characteristics. The designer has to consider the physical characteristics of the product sold in the shop (volume, weight, height, etc.) so as to avoid restrictions, on the one hand, as much as possible, and on the other, take advantage of available space (not only the surface, but also the volume).

It is also important to know the technical necessities inherent to the product, the degree to which the product is known, the mental processes customers follow when they buy, systems of information management which should exist (bar-code readers, electronic signs, etc.) and, finally, the productivity the company wishes to achieve (sales per square metre, sales per employee hour, etc.).

The company

We should know the distribution company's record and specific characteristics (relevant data of its history, its corporate values, its organizational culture...).

We cannot design the same shop for two companies competing in the same sector, especially if both of them have a specific, distinct personality.

The surroundings

We must know and consider restrictions presented by the surroundings (legal or urbanistic limits, etc.).

We should also know very well the competition's sales techniques, carefully analyse its strong and weak points, and the repercussions its policies could have on this new shop.

Whatever the case, we should look for maximum differentiation... although there are distributors who feel more secure in imitation.

Commercial formulae to develop in the shop

The commercial formula or «commercial package» a company wishes to develop in sales points will be specified in the following aspects:

- The profile of the public to which its priorities are directed.
- The Concept it wishes to transmit. By Concept,

we understand the main utility, solution, or profit the distribution company wishes to offer its public.

- The Identity it wishes to assume. The identity is the shop's personality, what gives it a differentiated character and style.

- The position proposal wanted. That is, features of the image we want the public to have in relation to the commercial formula.

- The most adequate commercial policies for carrying out the Concept (stock, price, service, promotion/animation, contact personnel, merchandising, publicity, etc.).

The sales point itself

Physical data of the shop (placing, size, etc.).

Merchandising

Designers should have some knowledge of merchandising techniques, as this will contribute to the design's efficiency and profit.

What we understand by merchandising. A set of techniques applied to the sales point, with which we can set up a differentiated language, where product and surroundings relate attractively and effectively, so as to stimulate the shop's productivity.

Consequences of this concept of merchandising. There is no unique merchandising for a commercial sector; for example, there is no sense in talking of clothes shop merchandising. Each shop-owner should make his shop speak a differentiated language, easily understood by the public to which it is directed.

Each kind of customer needs a different kind of merchandising.

There is no shop apt for all publics.

Main techniques used in merchandising

- Layout or plant distribution.
- Plastic language: shapes, volumes, colours, rythm, etc.
- Sales technique, that is, the way of selling, be it personal sales, self-service, assisted sales, etc.

Each sales technique has certain needs to be considered in the design process. For example, if we decide to use assisted sales (half-way between personal and self-service), we should take into account needs such as:

- a) The shop should have self-expression, making clear that it is accessible to the public.
- b) The plant distribution should be easily understood.
- c) Stock should be classified by consecutive criteria, according to the order followed by buyer's minds.
- d) There should be «information» to understand the product, its usefulness, its price, etc. This information can be written, photographed, etc.
- e) The cash desk placement should be studied so as not to interfere in customer use of the shop.

- Sales space assigned to each section.
- Placement and presentation of products.
- Ways of promoting visitor circulation in the shop.
- VCP's (visual communication points) or show-windows, be they outside or inside.

There are two ways of understanding VCP's:

- a) As mere product warehouses, but prettier and with more light.
- b) As publicity media, to be treated as strictly as an advertisement. Obviously, the latter option should be the one considered.

For this...

...They should be a piece of life, that is, a stage where the star is the product, not the decoration.

...They should awake sensations and feelings, and suggest, evoke. Creativity and imagination are, thus, important components.

...Sales prices should be clearly exposed.

- Lighting. This is an essential factor as it can be an element to differentiate.
- Music.

Some frequent problems to avoid

Not noticing that «people» doesn't exist. There are groups, or customer segments, each with different needs.

Not proposing a marketing strategy, that is, not

defining adequately the objective to be aimed at and the way to reach it.

Sometimes, the difficult part has been done, that is, a marketing strategy has been really carried out, but at the crucial moment it is not sufficiently considered or followed.

The design of the «container» is very important (structure, shelving, etc.), but this should serve the product, and not the other way around. Wanting the «container» to have more importance than the product is another frequent problem which we should try to avoid.

Aesthetics should not be more important than function. We have to have good knowledge of merchandising techniques and their correct application, with the aid of aesthetic criteria, but without being a slave to them. The shop ought to be a sales machine, not an art gallery.

Not taking the risk of being creative enough, and wanting to develop strategies already used by others. In any merchandising strategy, there is a lot of lifestyle, ideology, know-how, and knowing how to be. Outsides can easily be copied, but the «air» given by the commercial formula is something very difficult to imitate. Even if we take the road to imitation, sometimes seemingly less risky, in practice it will be even more so. We must not forget that commerce is a reflection of a collective culture. Because of this, a commercial formula which has proved successful in a North-European country can be unsuccessful in La Mancha.

Finally, there is a point which it is very convenient to take into account and which is often forgotten: the shop is a communication medium and, thus, we must know the adequate communication mechanisms (for example, shop-windows) and apply them well.

Is there, definitely, an ideal sales point which will reach the customer better?

Is there a marketing strategy and an ideal establishment which will reach the customer better, whatever the commercial format, its placement, or the product sold there?

An establishment cannot be «ideal» for everyone, always.

A few years ago, however, this question was given an answer which, although not unique, was at least homogeneous and lasting, as if it were a recipe.

Today this is not possible.

As we commented at the beginning, the change in taste and life-style is as constant and continuous as subtle and surprising. We must know not only how to look, but also, and much more important, «see». Seeing and distinguishing what are known as the signs of the times, and trying to interpret them adequately.

It will not contradict all we have said before, however, if we indicate that there do seem to be some common traits in most shopping sectors in our societies, which could shed some light on this question.

Thus, although each company has to reach its own objectives, if we generalise, each distributor should necessarily aim at three basic achievements:

Going down well and creating preference

Achieving an adequate empathy between establishment and potential customers. Achieving a good «feeling». In this sense, when designing the shop, we must take into account the following aims:

- Seeking differentiation according to marketing strategy.
- Easing the entry to the shop.
- Achieving the maximum sense of freedom and non-commitment.
- Making visitors circulate through the most places.
- Achieving maximum active visitor stays.
- Easing flexibility to avoid routine.
- Promoting productivity.

Being able to create enthusiastic customers.

In spite of growing discrepancy in other questions, there is a growing coincidence on one point: consumers are increasingly demanding.

The «ideal» establishment, in the present, and even more in the future, will be one that «is completely useful» to ITS consumers and will be capable of «creating enthusiastic customers».

Thus, the ideal establishment will be the one which takes into account all these elements, the more the better, which will ease its customers' buying work and allow them to identify with the establishment. Some of these elements are:

- A strict care of necessary —but not sufficient— aspects for each type of activity (for example, hygiene is vital in food sales).

- Maximum care of technical needs inherent to the product (for example, the state of the freezer for frozen products).

- Making sure that everything is clean and tidy, odourless, or at least with no strong or penetrating smells. The volume of the music should not block conversation with sales personnel or other people in the establishment.

- Allowing the finding and discovery of new things, without sales pressure, with extremely amiable and patient sales personnel. The customer should have, while he is in the store, a feeling of freedom and non-commitment.

- Keeping up a coherence among the different languages used in the establishment (plastic, oral, written, gestual, auditive), so as to ease understanding.

- The establishment should be cozy, attractive, and above all, have «a life of its own».

«Selling the shop»

Commercial offer is increasingly complex and products sold are often identical, but... they are not sold in the same way.

If we achieve that a customer needing a product or service remembers and takes into account a specific establishment, we will have managed to «sell the shop» and, as well, the possibility of carrying out a specific sale.

A sales point is a place where the commercial formula is made visible, where we offer a «package» of uses and solutions.

The shop is the moment of truth, when customers buy or, on the contrary, leave empty-handed.

Thus, the shop must not be simply understood as an agreeable place. The sales point should be seen as a sales machine.

The sale should be achieved with a minimum of resources assigned to the shop (sales surface, needed stock, personnel in contact with the customer, installment and machinery, surroundings and decoration...).

The «ideal» shop is thus the one that «says something», not just one more, and has its own personality.

A clear personality, sure of itself, but not arrogant; standing out, but not petulant.

An establishment should be a place where can meet:

- The buyer, with worries, tastes, needs, desires, etc.
- The seller, with answers, solutions, satisfactions, etc.

When an establishment and its commercial formula are seen by its public as useful, this shop can deservedly be considered as ideal... *for this public, here and now.*