

The Primacy of the Shopping Trip

Uwins, S. (2010). Tesco Fresh & Easy, USA. In Markus Stahlberg and Ville Mai, *Shopper Marketing* (pages 205-209). Great Britain and United States: Kogan Page Limited.

Working for a major food retailer, I find the recent rise in popularity of shopper marketing a little strange. Why? Because the shopping trip has always been so central to our business. After all, what people think about our brand is almost exclusively based on their experience of their local store.

If you accept that a brand is simply an associative network of emotional, sensory and rational experiences in our memory, all these elements come together day in, day out in a shopping trip. And as we are a food retailer, people shop with us frequently.

We focus on ensuring that our shopping trip creates value for customers everyday, so that they want to shop with us again and again. And we try to bring together all the shopping trips elements coherently, so that it communicates what the brand is about. Fresh & Easy Neighborhood Market, the business we've established in the south west USA was built on these principles.

Creating Value for Customers

Our initial step was to find out what would create enough value for customers, so that they would want to shop with us. We had an idea. Across many markets we were seeing the development of smaller food stores, which fit better into people's busy lives. But we noticed in the USA, it didn't seem to be happening. So we set out to understand whether or not it was of value to people there.

We used a variety of techniques (I've always found the most reliable insights come from triangulating results from several sources). Focus groups were a start, but we needed to confront people with the reality of their behavior, to get richer and more accurate insights. We went into peoples homes, interviewed them around their attitude to food, food preparation and their food shopping habits. We had a look in their refrigerators, freezers, pantries and anywhere else they stored food – including in many cases, the garage! This served to remind people of other stores they had shopped in, and the kinds of foods they were really eating.

Of course, to really understand how people shop, there's no substitute for going shopping with them, so we did. Sometimes just observing them as shoppers, sometimes talking to them about how they approach a particular area. For example, we asked people to buy the worst meat and the best meat on display in a number of different retailers, and then explain why they choose what they chose.

Although we were talking to people from all types of backgrounds, we found a remarkable consistency among them:

- They wanted the convenience of shopping locally, but they felt they had to shop in many different stores in order to get everything they wanted.
- They had a feeling that something wasn't quite right about the food they were being offered, so they were going in search of fresher, more wholesome, authentic food if they could afford it.
- They felt their local supermarkets were generally expensive, so they were visiting a variety of stores to stretch their budget, often buying just on deal.
- And the shopping trips themselves were not particularly easy. They often found it difficult to find what they wanted, as there were so many similar products on display, often in multiple locations. Prices at the shelf edge could be quite confusing, and they resented having to carry so many loyalty cards to get lower prices. They felt they often had to wait in line, even when a store wasn't busy. They also found stores, with some notable exceptions, unfriendly places.

To understand what kind of shopping trip might fit them better, we did a series of exercises both group and individual, where we got people to describe their ideal shopping trip. Again, what we heard was remarkably consistent:

- A store that sold fresh, wholesome food but where you could also get all your regular products.
- A store that was affordable, with honest low prices for everybody.
- A store that was quick to get in and out of.
- A store that was friendly and treated you as a person.

So we designed a store to deliver this. It would be relatively small, about 10,000 square feet, laid out in a logical sequence to make it easy to shop. It would carry only 3,500 products but by careful editing still enable people to get everything they wanted, with a strong emphasis on fresh, wholesome and convenient food. It would have a new type of assisted checkout operation; so that every checkout would be open all the time. And it would be simple to operate, so that prices could be kept low.

Of course, we had to make sure that we interpreted all this insight correctly, so that it would create enough value for people to want to shop with us. We built a full-scale prototype inside a warehouse, stocked it with representative products and invited people to come and shop it.

We found we'd got it more right than wrong – Fresh & Easy Neighborhood Market was born.

Communicating through the shopping trip

As I noted earlier, a shopping trip is a living, breathing entity that communicates what the brand is about in sensory and emotional, as well as rational ways. Indeed it's no different to the way we communicate with each other: a bit is what we say, a bit is how we say it, but mostly it's our body language.

So in developing the Fresh & Easy shopping trip, we paid a lot of attention to ensuring it communicates what people told us they valued.

As far as what we say is concerned, we set out to make clear the principles behind the shopping trip, and then, to provide information around the store that demonstrated we were delivering against them. For example, written large on one of the walls of our stores is our belief that everyone deserves quality food they can trust. Around the store you'll find information pointing out that all of our Fresh & Easy brand products contain no artificial colors or flavors, no added transfats, and except where absolutely necessary no artificial preservatives – factual evidence of our belief in action.

In terms of how we say it, our tone is honest, straightforward and conversational, as if we're talking face to face. We're just people after all, so why not talk that way?

Getting your body language right is by far the most difficult. As a start, we went through every element of the shopping trip, to bring it into line. For example, since we are offering fresher, more wholesome food, our packaging simply lets you see the product, where it's technically possible, so you can judge for yourself – why cover the product up, put a photograph on the front, and then try and convince people how fresh and wholesome the product is? To ensure it's quick and easy to shop, we make sure the aisles are wide and uncluttered; the shelf heights lower so you can see across the store, and the only hanging signage we use simply points out where things are.

And since our prices are low, at the shelf-edge the price of a product is extremely clear, and our fixturation simple.

Being a store that's friendly is the hardest of all. Your tone of written communication around the store can be conversational, and you can stick a neighborhood notice board on the wall. But it's really all about the people who work in it, and how they interact with each other and their customers.

One of the best insights we got was around this. We found people were very clear about which stores gave great service. They weren't the ones with the most service counters or employees on the shop floor. They were the stores where the employees are friendly, treating their customers as real people.

What made the difference? It was obvious to them – these were stores where people enjoyed working.

So, we've gone to great lengths to create a workplace that people can enjoy. We used the same approach as in developing the shopping trip – talking to people in a variety of ways, this time about what makes a great place to work, and then setting out to deliver it.

An organizational endeavor

The fact that you need to create a great place to work in order to have friendly stores underlines a fundamental point: shopper marketing from a retailer's point of view is not something that can simply be grafted on at the end.

Once you've worked out what shopping trip will create enough value for people to want to shop with you, and how to reinforce that value through coherent communication, you need to build the organizational capability to deliver it. In other words, you need to work backwards from the shelf edge.

Take the example of providing fresher, more wholesome food. This isn't just a clever piece of marketing. You need to be able to deliver it. Based upon what we heard, we put in place a policy that no Fresh & Easy brand product should contain artificial colors or flavors, no added trans fats, and they should use preservatives only where absolutely necessary. This meant that our buyers and food technologists had to find suppliers capable of doing this, and work with them to achieve it. Indeed, in the case of fresh prepared meals, we ended up building our own kitchen facility, to exacting standards.

Or take the example of low prices. To enable them to be surprisingly low in our customers eyes, we had to make our operating model extremely simple, to keep costs low. From day one, for example, all our products were delivered in display ready packaging, to save time putting them on the shelf.

Of course, a shopping trip is a living, breathing entity involving many, many interactions everyday, in multiple locations. You can't hope to control it. So, we've tried to embed it into the organization's DNA, by building the values of the organization around it. These describe the kinds of shopping trip we're trying to offer, and the kind of business we're trying to be. We've made them central to everybody's job description, so it's a joint endeavour.

Quite how successful Fresh & Easy will become is far too early to judge. What is certain is that it's inspiring a degree of customer satisfaction and recommendation that's highly unusual in the food retailing arena. For a retail marketer, shopper marketing is not about influencing purchase decisions close to the product in the store. It's about ensuring that your customers want to shop with you today, tomorrow, next week, and next year. And that, in my view, is how it should be.