

Designing the Shopping Experience

By Robert A. Richardson, President & CEO, Associates Interactive, LLC

Price matters; so do availability, signage, and advertising. But the feature that contributes most to a successful sale is the consumer's shopping experience. When it's done well, the shopping experience trumps all other factors. Consumers will accept less selection, travel a greater distance, and even pay more, if the experience they have is better. It's understandable, then, why every retailer is striving to master and offer, and with good reason in this difficult economy, a compelling experience.

So, how do you sculpt the shopper experience to create an engaging, memorable, and unique interaction specifically appropriate for your customers? What are the required raw materials and tools?

At Associates Interactive, we help retailers and manufacturers to define and create a successful sales experience through a five-step design process. The process first articulates the shopper's expectations and identifies and catalogs the "Experience Assets," that is, the specific objective and unique features that can be used to shape the shopping experience. These, in turn, allow us to define what that specific experience should be. Finally, we can assess our list of assets to determine if they are, indeed, appropriate to the successful shopping experience we wish to create.

1. **Understand the Shopper's Expectations** – The first step in crafting the shopping experience is to consider the primary benefactor of the program, namely, the shopper, and to understand their expectations. There is no one-size-fits-all shopping experience, so the experience design must fit the individual shopper and continually exceed their expectations, even if by only a small margin.

In the shopping experience, the retailer must not only meet, but exceed customer needs enough to make him aware that the experience has surpassed expectations. While the experience should certainly exceed customer needs, it should not distract shoppers. Imagine a tuxedoed waiter at a fast food drive-through window: he may exceed shopper needs, but he certainly wouldn't contribute positively to the experience and might even cause the customer some uneasiness and suspicion as well.

2. **Inventory the “Pre-Sale Experience Assets”** – Of the many features of the retail environment that contribute to the shopping experience, some have an impact long before the customer even enters the store. Advertising, brand messages, competitor positioning, store locations, and exterior signage are among the important pre-sale assets that shape consumer expectations and experience previous to the actual in-store sale. Inside the store, features like merchandising strategies, the interior signage, the price/fact tags, the availability of associates, the employee dress code, and the checkout process further contribute to a successful shopping experience.

Retailers need to catalog these assets since they are potentially important contributors to the sales experience. They should evaluate how and how much each asset actually contributes. Moreover, they need to ask how consistent these assets are with the company’s business model. For example, appending a proactive sales process to a self-service retail environment may exceed your customer’s expectations, but it is not likely to appropriately fit the business model.

3. **Recognize the Gatekeepers** – While the pre-sale assets in Step 2 are static, inanimate objects, the most powerful and versatile asset that can shape the consumer’s experience is the store’s staff. Of all the “Experience Assets,” what the staff members do, how they dress, what they say, and even when they say it have the greatest impact on the shopping experience.

Consequently, retailers must not only evaluate employees’ current contributions to the shopping experience, but discover how to increase their motivation, reinforce behavior that contributes positively to the experience, and discourage behavior that doesn’t.

4. **Define the Experience** – The essence of defining the shopper experience lies in taking steps that will increase the trust that consumers feel for the store and the engagement they have in it by establishing a relationship that transcends a single shopping event or item. The overall theme that we choose for a store must have substance and be credible and demonstrable. It should leverage the “Experience Assets”—the specific features that contribute to the successful shopping experience-- and have distinct, memorable features that embody the message we want to convey.

The easiest way to define the shopping experience for an individual retailer is to use a broad metaphor that represents the nature of the customer

experience and then to tailor it to leverage the “Experience Assets.” Examples of such common metaphors include “concierge service,” “deli service,” “consultation,” or “personal shopper.” Using these metaphors can help jump-start the experience design.

5. **Bind the Assets Together** – Once we’ve identified, catalogued, and evaluated our “Experience Assets,” we need to ensure that each element on our list is in complete alignment with our desired shopping experience. We specifically ask of each element, “How does this asset contribute to the customer’s expectation and experience?”

This final inquiry will then enable the elimination of inconsistencies with the message being communicated through the experience. A single inconsistency can be serious enough to undermine the consumer trust and credibility the experience should create.

Designing a consumer experience requires a thoughtful assessment of customer needs and expectations and the retailer’s “Experience Assets.” Such careful assessment enables us to then define and create a fitting experience. A thorough evaluation of the current environment and a clear vision make a significant difference in the subsequent performance of the retailer and in the clarity of the message which each sign, advertisement, and associate communicates to the consumer.