

Multichannel Retailing:

How a company's website modifies the role of the in-store salesperson

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Marketing Trends in Multichannel Retailing:

How a company's website modifies the role of the in-store salesperson

Internet marketing has allowed retailers to interact with and engage customers via more channels than in the past. Effective multichannel marketing has therefore become a valuable source of competitive advantage for retailers. However, evolving into multichannel marketing requires careful integration of the customer service experience, instead of limited management of single channels/silos, as was done in the past. For companies adopting a multichannel retail strategy, the quality of the interaction between the various channels has become essential. Offering the customer a high-quality "cross-channel" experience constitutes an opportunity to serve the customer better. By enhancing the fluidity between the channels and minimizing the appearance of uncomfortable "seams" within the experience reinforces the ease and freedom for a consumer who navigates among the channels.

At the store, the salesperson can play a key role in determining the quality of the relationship between channels. As the main person in terms of customer relations, his work helps to smooth over any uncomfortable connections when a customer switches from one channel to another throughout the buying experience. Thus, the quality of his participation influences a harmonious cross-channel experience. However, the salesman may not always be inclined to facilitate the movement of customers from one channel to another.

The objective of this paper is to take a new look at how, according to the salesperson, the website of a "click-and-mortar" company changes the way he practices his profession. The goal is to analyze the way in which the website changes the nature of his relationship with his customers, his commercial approach and the content of his job. The article thus intends to analyze how and why a company's website changes the commercial relationship between its salespeople and its customers and to understand how and why some of them have successfully adopted this tool in the execution of their day-to-day tasks and responsibilities.

1. Research objectives

For companies adopting a multichannel retail strategy, the quality of the interaction between the various channels has become essential. Offering the customer a high-quality "cross-channel"¹ experience constitutes an opportunity to serve the customer better. Enhancing the fluidity between the channels and minimizing the uncomfortable "seams" within the experience reinforce the impression of ease and

(1) The term "cross-channel" has appeared in the literature, probably because "multichannel" does not adequately describe the close ties between channels now advocated by researchers and practitioners. While "multichannel" indicates the use by one business of several channels without any particular connection between them, the term "cross" suggests the idea of "intersection," or "mixing." Thus, we wish to propose the following definition of "cross-channel strategy:" "A strategy that consists in the elimination of all interruptions (physical, emotional, economic, cognitive . . .) that could occur when a customer changes from one channel to another over the course of a single experience with a company."

freedom for a consumer who does not hesitate to navigate among the channels, according to his mood, and the limitations and needs of the moment.

The multichannel literature has shown a growing tendency of shoppers to use several channels. Multichannel shoppers are recognized as the most valuable customers (Stone and al, 2002, Shankar and Winer, 2005 ; Kumar and Venkatesen, 2005). Over 60 % of retailers claim that their multichannel shoppers are more profitable than customers who use only one channel (Shankar and Winer, 2005). Customers who shop across multiple channels provide more revenue and a higher share of wallet than those who shop in one channel only. Multichannel shoppers do not only spend more through the company than single channel shoppers but they are also more loyal. Through a longitudinal analysis, Venkatesan, Kumar and Ravishanker (2007) provide evidence that multichannel shopping is associated with higher profitability. Their analysis implies that managers have the opportunity to grow profit by encouraging customers to shop in multiple channels. Numerous managers and researchers agree to say that multichannel shoppers are more valuable than single shoppers.

However, there appears to be little research on the impact on the buying situation between the Internet-literate customer and salespersons. The in-store salesperson could play a key role in determining the quality of the relationship between the channels. He could be the key person in terms of customer relations. The salesperson's work could help smooth out any uncomfortable connections that arise when a customer switches from one channel to another throughout the buying experience.

When the customer has studied the offerings on-line, is the salesman always inclined to encourage the customers' research prior to visiting the store? One could surmise how the salesperson perceives the customers' on-line search behavior. The salesperson who perceives a risk of "cannibalization" might resist. The company's website could deprive him of part of his customer base, and, if he is paid on commission, his income. Also, by raising alternative expectations, the Internet may change the nature of the salesman's relationship with them (Vanheems, 2009). The salesman could evince a strong resistance to what threatens his income, modifies his function, and alters his relationship with his clientele. Indeed, he can perceive his company's website as an intruder that disturbs his relationships with his customers, and threatens his profession.

The objective of this article is to analyze how, according to the salesperson, the website of a "click-and-mortar" company changes the way he practices his profession. The goal is to analyze how the website changes the nature of the salesman's relationship with his customers, commercial approach and the content of his job. The article thus intends to analyze how and why a company's website changes the commercial relationship between its salespeople and its customers and to understand how and why some of them have adopted this tool in the execution of their day-to-day tasks and responsibilities. After a review of the literature focusing on the few studies that enable us to understand why the introduction of a website changes salespeople's work environment, this article presents the results of a qualitative study conducted among 35 salespeople from two large French home-improvement companies.

2. A Review of the impact of the Internet on shopper visits to retail stores.

The introduction of a new website by a “brick-and-mortar” company, far from simply adding another avenue for marketing its products, fundamentally transforms the customer’s relationship with the company. Not only does the site give rise to new behaviors in the store as well as new expectations on the part of the customer; it also plays a role in developing his expertise and in enriching the experience that the customer has in a “cross-channel” context. This process of change inevitably transforms the relationship between the customer and the salesperson in the store. This transformation can occur for better or for worse from the point of view of the salesperson, whose scope of operations and entire profession are considerably altered. The following are some observations that may have impact on the salesperson/customer relationship:

A disillusioned salesperson?

The transformation of the in-store salesperson’s scope of operations can be explained in the first place by the fact that the consumer who visits the company’s website behaves differently in the store than the “classic” consumer. Insofar as the customer has visited the company’s website, he is better prepared when he visits the actual store. He therefore spends less time making his selection while there (Belvaux, 2005). The process of gathering and analyzing information is thus limited to locating a product that he has already chosen on-line. The customer is faster in the store and shows greater determination in the choices he makes. This initialization of the decision-making process on-line is likely to reduce salespeople’s ability to influence that customer’s in-store buying behavior. This narrowing of their sphere of influence can feel like a loss of power and a devaluation of their profession. The greater aggressiveness and the reduced sense of belonging, as observed by Munos (2003, 2006), among customers who use the Internet and then return to the traditional one, are not likely to allay the salesperson’s fears regarding his relationship with these “hybrid” customers.

“Myopic” salesman and “enlightened” customers

Visiting the store can be the continuation of a playful, self-indulgent, or cognitive experience that began on the Internet. The customer’s accelerated learning process, which translates to a greater knowledge of the products (cognitive sphere), is capable of reversing the power structure between salesperson and shopper. The salesperson no longer is the sole keeper of knowledge and runs the risk of being shown up by a customer eager to demonstrate his expertise or even to challenge him on his own turf. This transformation of the power relationship can engender an uncomfortable feeling in the salesperson.

The discrepancy between customers who navigate between a company’s website and the store and a salesperson who is centered exclusively on the store can heighten the latter’s anxiety. This “myopia” (Vanheems, 2009) of the salesperson who is centered exclusively on the off-line part of the company may cause him to lose credibility in the eyes of an “enlightened customer” (Bergadaa and Coraux, 2008) who knows how to use the Internet before interacting with him and who has a broader knowledge of the company and its offerings. The salesperson’s usefulness, and even his perceived competence, can be put in a bad light by a customer who wishes to compare an on-line offer with an off-

line one or who asks for help with an offer that is available only on the company's website. This is all the more serious because, in some cases, movement between channels can be a significant source of additional sales (Vanheems, 2007, Vanheems and Kelly, 2009). However, the salesperson's motivation to accompany the customer outside of his usual channel may be very weak if management has not built incentives and training to encourage and value such actions. In particular, compensation plays a crucial role in this ability to promote "cross-channelism." For example, a customer who has found a product that is available exclusively on-line but who comes to the store for more information about it may be received coolly by a salesperson who works on commission and who knows that, in the end, the actual transaction will take place on the company's website.

Piling on tasks in a cross-channel context

Shifting to a multichannel retailing system is not without impact on salespeople and their functions. The Internet sales channel may broaden the scope of their jobs and be the cause of additional tasks. By way of illustration, the completion of an on-line transaction and of the off-line withdrawal or return of a product can change the role of the salesperson by obliging him to take on new retailing tasks. In-store salespeople must deliver a product that has been ordered on the company's website or accept the return of a product that was purchased on-line but doesn't meet the customer's needs. Taking on these new tasks (often not remunerated due to the absence of traceability) necessarily eats into the time that they would otherwise devote to their in-store customers and, therefore, if they are paid on commission, eats into their income as well. Their reluctance to reserve time for a purely distributive, non-remunerated function is thus quite understandable. Of course, this reluctance, once it is noticed by the customers, has a negative effect on the company. Beyond remuneration, all of the traditional pillars of sales management (training, motivation, etc.) need to be revisited to encourage salespeople to best assist their customers in an inter-channel experience.

Perceived Influence of the Website on the Profession of In-Store Salespeople

Some salespersons could be disillusioned because they perceive their profession to be devalued: the "myopic" salesperson confronted with an "enlightened" customer; the salesperson chafing under a mounting pileup of tasks - tasks never anticipated by management and therefore not accorded any value. Some in-store sales staff appear to be suffering from the new conditions brought about by the store's website. Many retailers created these sites without input from or training of the sales staff. Academics and professionals have ignored the impact on the salesperson's world. As a liaison between the company and its customers, and as a potential link between channels, the role of the salesperson in a multichannel context has largely been neglected.

These are the fundamental questions that now take shape: How does the salesperson experience, from within, this change in his work environment? How does he adapt, how does he attempt to appropriate this new tool called the Internet in the framework of his professional functions? This is the object of the following section, which presents the results of research conducted for this purpose.

3 A study of the salesperson's new position in the multichannel retail scene.

A qualitative study, based on in-depth interviews, was completed during the third quarter of 2008 in France. Thirty-five salespeople from two large home-improvement retailers were the subjects of the

study. The 35 interviews were conducted at 11 stores (six in the provinces and five in the Paris area). Over the course of these interviews, which lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, the subjects were asked to speak about their reaction to their company's website. As to the cohort profile, the subjects were chosen on the basis of the product line for which they were responsible. Salespeople were chosen who worked with product lines about which customers were more likely to ask for advice. In addition, two distinct profiles were chosen: "Classic" salespeople and "Internet-savvy" salespeople –the latter group recognized as such because they were intensive users of the Internet at home. Subjects were selected within each store by managers (generally the store manager or the human resources manager). The interviews were systematically recorded and then transcribed in their entirety. Analysis of the content has made it possible to discern the consistencies, resemblances, and patterns among the interviews.

The Salespeople and his company's websites

The company's website: from total negation to a supporting role

Various terms that come to the salespeople's minds when asked about their company's website, and to examine how he views this new place of exchange between the company and its customers. From total denial ("Nobody looks at it") to seeing it as a helpful tool in doing one's job ("facilitator," "silent seller," "assistant," "tool") with source of annoyance in between ("It can be annoying"), analysis of the terms shows that perceptions of the company's website are multiple and complex, and depend on context.

Perceived Influence of the Website on the Store and the Product Line

How does the website influence the store and the product line? Many sales advisors indicate that the website gives the company visibility and raises its profile. According to some of them, it is a very effective advertising tool in that it helps the company to make itself known. The website is also a means of showing the customer the company's range of product lines, particularly the least common ones. This is clearly true in the case of the "kitchens" product line, for which a customer does not automatically think to visit in a home-improvement company. It enables the company to convey a new image and to reposition itself in the direction of "design." According to some sales advisors, it also helps to reinforce the company's credibility and expertise, and, consequently, the credibility and expertise of the salespeople themselves. Many salespeople have a completely positive attitude toward their company's website, since it creates business for the store as a whole, it also brings business to their respective departments. The website is also perceived as a driving force in the growth of demand within the store. By putting "Do-it-yourself (DIY) within everyone's reach," the Internet participates in the democratization of products that are more or less technically sophisticated. The virtual channel helps create a "new" consumer who might never have been tempted by DIY.

The website as a force of change in commercial relations

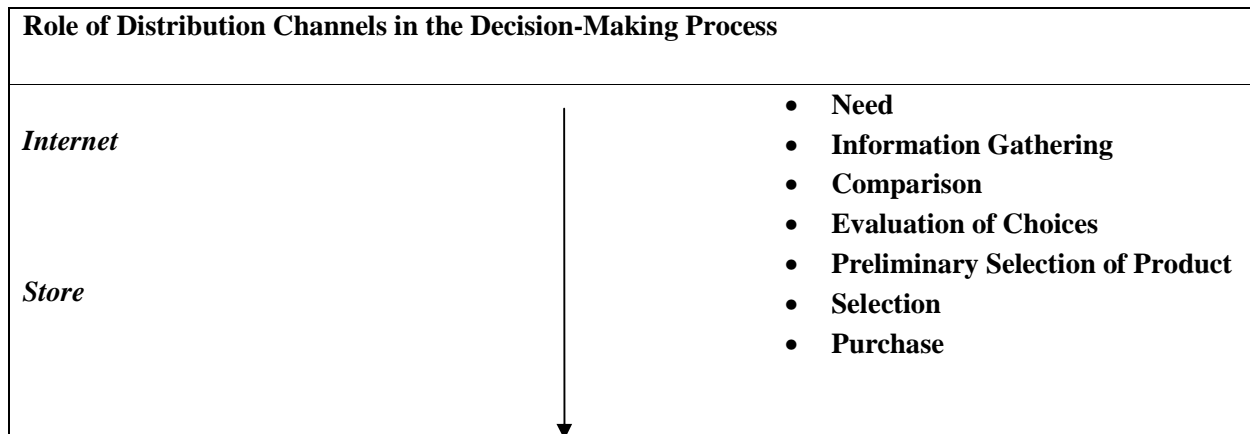
In addition to perceiving the website as a creator of business or an agent of democratization, many advisors contend that initializing a purchase on-line changes customers' in-store behavior and,

indeed, the nature of salespeople’s interactions with them. Insofar as these in-store interactions are not the same as before, the salespeople talk about their products is radically transformed.

The selling process transformed

Most salespeople agree that customers who have gone online before coming into the store “are more and more knowledgeable.” These informed customers are familiar both with the products and the market. They are fully cognizant of the products available and of the competition. They also have greater knowledge of the company, that is to say its services, offers, and procedures, regardless of the channel in question. This transformation of the customer, who is also more immune to sales pitches, means less of a need for advice, information, or assistance in the store. Indeed, one respondent emphasized that “an Internet consumer has already figured out what he needs. He has already made the sale himself, so to speak, and the only thing left to do is to close the sale, assuming that we’ve got the item in stock.”

The fact that the buying process was initialized online means that certain steps of the decision-making process have already taken place on the Web. The customer has taken charge of part of the decision-making process: He has identified what he needs, researched information on offers that are likely to satisfy that need, compared different products, and sometimes even made an initial selection (see chart). When the customer arrives in the store, his decision process is already thoroughly engaged and well advanced.



Facilitating the act of selling

According to salespeople, this advancement in the decision-making process is far from inconsequential, and also the process of persuasion that is part of selling. The customer is much less likely to want any advice or information. Salespeople become more involved “downstream” from the bulk of the customer’s decision-making process. The selling process appears to be considerably reduced, as the salesperson no longer needs to identify the customer’s needs or to show him any products that might respond to those needs. The part of sales devoted to discussion and to dealing with objections can also be greatly reduced. A quote which notes this: “For a customer who hasn’t visited the website, all the work still needs to be done. That means making contact with the customer, discussing the product he’s looking for, finding the product that suits him the best. There’s all of that preliminary work to do before

concluding the sale (which, sometimes, isn't always conclusive.)" "Before, they were more focused on asking questions. They had to see the whole product line."

In fact, by "getting to work" during the uphill phase of the purchasing process, the customer frees the salesperson from the tasks that had traditionally been expected of him when they meet at the point of sale: Identification of need, presentation of choices in response to that need, discussion about the different products, dealing with objections, and conclusion. This taking charge covers certain steps of the decision-making-process, with the rest of that process occurring in the store. This presupposes that the salesperson is capable of adapting to this new retail situation and of accompanying the customer for the rest of the way while remaining aware of where the customer has already traveled.

A sale that is already almost finished, done with very little assistance

Having visited the website prior to setting foot in the store, the customer is more determined and ready to make a purchase. The sale takes place with very little assistance (including major purchases), and is practically complete. This is the view of Denis, whose opinion is shared by the majority of the salespeople interviewed: "The sale is as good as complete, you just have to conclude it." Thus, "I think the customer who takes the step of visiting the website and then coming into the store is really ready to buy, yes, it's that he's ready to buy, he's worked out a budget for the project, which will be done in the near future." "It's great for us, because we're in the right place at the right time." Many salespeople therefore consider these customers quite easy - and quicker - to deal with. Irrelevant information has already been cleared away, and the store's offerings have already been studied and understood, at least partially, online. The sale therefore requires very little assistance and can even turn out to be a real "pleasure," to use Denis's word. "It's a sale that's done with very little assistance, the customer manages all by himself, he comes to the store with his product sheet . . . But, in general, it happens like this. They come to the store with the products that they've found on the Internet (with the code numbers), and then they go right to the shelf and get the products directly. And after that, they ask your advice: if this is good, if that's good, is this worth it?"

A need for confirmation and a difficulty in influencing the direction of a sale

They know where they are going; they know what they are going to buy. To some extent, they have already informed themselves online. What they expect of the salesperson is a confirmation of their choices, as the following quote indicates: "Before, they asked for advice and you had to guide them towards a product. Now, they might still come to you for advice, but only about the product they've already chosen. You could say it facilitates things between the salesperson and the customer." Customers come to the store to have their choices reinforced, while the salesperson's role is to offer reassurance. Furthermore, Vincent asserts that he "[tends] to help people to be more focused on their plans." "In general, they come to me after the fact to get a second opinion, to find out if the product is good and if it's worth buying for what they want to do."

Inversely, and as a corollary with the above, this determination on the part of customers means that it can be very difficult to change their minds. In a sense, this might appear surprising in the context of a purchase. Indeed, once a customer goes to the trouble of asking the salesperson for advice about a product he considers important, one might think that he wishes to subject his ideas to the scrutiny of an expert and is prepared to change course if necessary.

However, salespeople agree on the difficulty of changing a customer's mind. A very large majority shares this view and emphasizes how ineffective their arguments can be on a possible sales drift, as Léa emphasizes: "After you've given them all the information, they've still got a certain product line in their heads, you can tell." Thus, although the salesperson can supply additional information about the product or suggest accessory or complementary items, his ability to influence the direction of the sale appears to be very limited, as the customer's mind, in the vast majority of cases, is fixed on the product selected previously online.

Increased mistrust and aggressiveness in the store

Customers who have been online are less aggressive at the point of sale. This is surprising, in view of earlier findings (Munos, 2003, 2006). According to some salespeople, the "customer who has been online is less aggressive: he finds the product more easily, he knows what section to go to, he wastes less time." "He's smiling and he's less bothered." In addition, the customer who has been brought up to speed by the Internet is better able to understand the salesperson's technical language, which further facilitates the interaction.

However, this view is not shared by all salespeople. Aside from the tendency to be more curious, more finicky, and more demanding in their requests for information, some salespeople feel that these customers can exhibit an increased mistrust towards them. Certainly, they are very attentive listeners at the time of the interaction, but they decode the salesperson's words on the basis of the knowledge they have acquired online, as Bernard indicates: "They are, maybe, a bit more . . . maybe, mistrustful towards us. Because they listen to us, of course, they listen to us, maybe, more than other customers do, and in a way, you really don't want to take a firm stand on anything, because they know a little bit about the product. So, they know a little about the products, the services, really everything. So they are, I'll go ahead and put it this way, a bit more mistrustful." They will not be influenced by the salesperson's "patter."

The need for consistency between website and sales staff

If the salesperson's information is not consistent with that on the website, this mistrust can lead to the former's competence being called into question, as the following quote reveals: "There are a lot of customers who get information online beforehand, so when they come into the store and you don't necessarily tell them the same thing that they've read online, they start wondering if you're any good." In this regard, the information on the website is usually considered "true," even if, as one salesperson puts it, "mistakes can sneak onto the site as well."

Generally, the customer places a special value on a strong consistency between the website's and the salesperson's information, a consistency that can lead to a sale in that product line."They like it when we repeat the same thing, when it all agrees; when there's a good osmosis between the store, the salespeople, and the site." "They come afterwards to see if there's any difference between what we say and what it says on the website, to get a second opinion." This consistency appears to reassure them in the choices they have made.

Aside from this mistrust, some salespeople's words suggest that certain customers might look for information online in order to avoid speaking with them in the store: "Sometimes, you get the feeling that

they don't want to be disturbed, they're looking for their stuff, they pay any attention to you, not even a glance, so you let them go on with what they're doing. And don't bother them, either – that will just make them run away! They tend to pounce on the product they've seen online, and then they turn around.”

When the website enhances the customer's self-confidence

The notion of “pride” was put forward several times during the interviews with salespeople. In addition to the distrust mentioned in the literature, the acquisition of knowledge online seems, in some cases, to stem from a desire on the part of customers to gain a measure of self-confidence before meeting the salesperson in the field. This need is particularly true of men rather than women in a field, DIY, that is traditionally within their domain. The acquisition of this knowledge especially helps the customer to understand the salesperson's technical language and enables the neophyte to be on the same wavelength as the salesperson. In this sense, interactions are facilitated by this newly-acquired knowledge. The customer is thus more confident, as Vincent underscores: “In the completion of their projects, they are much more confident, they spend less time in the store, they ask us only for information on how to use what they're buying, etc.” It is interesting to note that this notion of pride has appeared mainly in stores located in highly affluent areas (la Défense), as if white-collar men couldn't bear the thought of showing their ignorance about a subject that is probably quite far removed from the problems that they typically confront in their day-to-day lives. Not only does the Internet place DIY within their reach, but it also enables these customers, who are used to seeing themselves as capable, to gain the knowledge necessary for them to converse with specialists without feeling awkward. In contrast to the distrustful attitude suggested in the literature, this newly-acquired parity of knowledge both softens the interaction and facilitates it, since a feeling of inferiority on the part of the customer does not bode well for a calm situation.

Towards an accompaniment in reverse: when the customer accompanies the salesperson

Some salespeople have revealed the existence of a selling situation in which the roles are reversed. The classic process of finding a product in response to a need is reversed so that it is the customer who reveals the product and its location to the salesperson. This is a paradoxical situation in which the customer has a bit of expertise and shares it with the salesperson, to the latter's benefit. Does this situation - which some, but not all, salespeople accept without any difficulties - cause the salesperson to lose credibility, or does it valorize the customer – not necessarily to the detriment of the salesperson? A new type of relationship is established, the interaction based on mutual sharing of information. The relationship proves different, with the acquisition and exchange of knowledge even translating to a certain complicity. The words of Vincent and Isabelle, respectively, underscore these new aspects of interacting: “It's true that it can seem bizarre, but people are sometimes a bit lost. But the ones who surf the Internet can lead us through the department.” (Vincent) “They can teach us about things we haven't seen . . . They are better-informed about installation, etc. For example, a customer said, ‘I want this item, it's a type of glue-on flooring,’ they're already informed. Although some salespeople fear this kind of situation and do whatever they can to avoid it (strategy of avoidance), it causes no problem for others, who see in it a way to broaden their knowledge and to deepen their interaction with their customers.

The website, a kind of “relief” for the salesperson

The company's website represents a kind of "relief" for some salespeople, as the following quote illustrates: "You end up handling more customers, because if you only had customers who didn't know what they wanted to do, and you had to give them the tour of the store, you'd waste a huge amount of time." "On the other hand, customers who visit the website take five minutes flat." Indeed, thanks to the existence of the Internet, salespeople are able to satisfy more customers.

The Web, a new partner in the commercial relationship

"Going through it together": When the salesperson visits the site with his customer

Some salespeople – although it is important to point out that others avoid this – are glad to visit their company's website with their customers. In this way, they accompany those customers who have found a product on the site and have printed out the information or know the product's code number. In those cases in which the customer has neither the printout nor the code number, the salespeople accompany him through the length of the process, as the following quote makes clear: "Otherwise, we go through it again together." This is particularly appreciated by the customer, who is very pleased that the salesperson is taking this step with him: "The customers like it when you guide them on the Internet; you turn the screen; they are glad that you're helping them and not just sending them home." Sharing the screen, which the salesperson turns and shows to the customer, is highly symbolic, saying, in effect: We are going to go through this process together. This takes the relationship to a dimension beyond that of a simple transaction, and it changes the status of the salesperson.

The scenario is no longer simply two interlocutors, face to face, with a "screen" (in both senses of the word) lowering the quality of their interaction while access to it is reserved for the salesperson, sole keeper of knowledge and power. Instead, the screen is shared, it is looked at together, and thus, it facilitates the interaction and the dialogue and enriches the relationship.

From accompanying the customer to giving customized service

In addition to simply accompanying, the salesperson can also take on the role of teacher or even trainer on the company's website. According to those salespeople who practice it, this type of accompanying is particularly well-appreciated by customers. Beyond this interaction and the sharing mentioned above, consulting the website presents the salesperson with the opportunity to offer new services to his customer. For example, he and the customer can visualize those items that are not in stock and, similarly, offer "long-tail" items in-store just as the website does. Some salespeople visit the site in order to print out the floor plans of other stores for their customers when an item is not available at their own location. When the salesperson has access, not just to the company's site, but to the entire Web, he can also visit a manufacturer's website, which allows him to give information much more quickly than he could by paging laboriously through a catalog.

New zones of fellowship and sources of collaboration

In addition, web access enriches the content of the dialogue between salesperson and customer. In the area of house decoration, for example, he can offer him advice about decoration websites, suggest interior decoration ideas or tips culled from such a site, and give him information about the latest trends, all by connecting to websites that specialize in decoration. In this way, it is possible for him to change the content of the conversation and to move beyond the purely transactional. When it goes beyond the

immediate product, the salesperson's advice seems more disinterested and changes the nature of the salesperson's relationship with the customer. The possibility of staying continuously informed via the Web and to exchange ideas with the customer about different sites strengthens the salesperson's expertise, his interest in his product line, and, indeed, the nature of his relationship with his customers! Maintaining one's expertise in an area that interests the customer opens the door to new commonalities and is the basis for possible collaborations between people who share a common interest. The salesman's role expands from selling to decorating, providing ideas, and being a coach for the project. In fact, it is not uncommon in this kind of situation for the relationship to continue, and for the customer to return to the store after the project has been completed to show his "coach" a photograph of the room that has been transformed thanks to his invaluable advice. The Internet gives the relationship substance, which invites the customer back to continue the conversation with his interlocutor. The relationship can even continue online, with the customer and the salesperson staying in contact and exchanging emails, even after the transaction is done.

When the website becomes part of the sales pitch

Some salespeople send their customers to their company's website. This strategy can be subtle and a part of an overall sales effort. By prodding the customer toward a "mortar-and-click" mode of information gathering, particularly in the case of a major purchase, the salesperson is, by definition, using the website as an element of argumentation, and he integrates it into his selling process. This strategy is used especially when the salesperson wishes to convince the customer of the veracity of his claims. Some salespeople will direct their customers to the website when they know that it reinforces what they have told the customer in the store. This strategy, according to some salespeople, has proven to be particularly effective. Indeed, when the website's content agrees with what they have said to the customer, their perceived expertise and credibility are greatly enhanced. It is not uncommon for the customer, following a website visit encouraged by the salesperson, to return to the store to finalize his purchase. Rather than insisting on the advantages of his products, which can appear suspicious, the salesperson directs the customer to an online source that confirms his arguments. By encouraging this "mortar-and-click" behavior, he prolongs the decision-making process. Nonetheless, it seems preferable that the customer visit the website immediately instead of a competitor's store, where the salespeople, making the same pitch but at a more propitious moment, could close the sale. This invitation to use the virtual sales channel thus appears to be a strategy that can, in some cases, increase the probability of a transaction.

Similarly, when the product in question is complicated, a major purchase, or the object of a long decision-making process, the salesperson will sometimes advise the customer to visit the website. Thus, he can invite the customer to visit the website in order to assimilate or recall technical data that they discussed in the store, but that are difficult to "digest" completely on the spot. This can be reassuring to a customer who is concerned about being able to manage and take into consideration all of the complex information necessary to his decision-making process. The salesperson may also suggest that the customer visit the website if the project is of a long-term nature with the customer's final decision reserved for a later date. The customer finds it reassuring to know that, later on, he will be able to find the information given him by the salesperson and apply it when the need arises. Furthermore, when the

product or project is the object of a collective decision-making process, the salesperson can suggest that the customer to visit the website with his wife or children to visualize the product that interests them.

Finally, the salesperson sometimes directs the customer to the website in order to compensate for the absence of other supporting information about the product. For example, if there is no catalogue for that specific product, or if the catalogue has not yet been released, or if the store is simply out of catalogues. In general, the Internet enables the salesperson to prolong a relationship online that began in the store, or to follow up on a discussion initiated there by offering supplementary information, expert advice, estimates . . .

Can a salesperson make “long tail” even longer in the store than online?

One competitive advantage traditionally ascribed to websites is the phenomenon known as “long tail,” the opportunity for a company to market a number of unusual items owing to unlimited warehouse capacity. This infinite variety of choices available to the consumer online often contrasts with the necessarily smaller range of choices in a store, due to its limited amount of space for displaying products. However, it must be noticed that, thanks to the salesperson and the Web, the store can become decidedly more infinite, even than the company’s website.

The company’s website can enable the salesperson, at the customer’s request, to order products that appear on the site but that are not sold in the store or would not be ordered under normal circumstances. The “long tail” phenomenon can thus extend to stores thanks to the salesperson, who acts as interface. Thanks to the salesperson, the store can even become the home of a much more infinite range of choices than the company’s website. For particularly major purchases, the salesperson, thanks to broader Internet access, is able to offer his customer a much wider range of choices than the company’s website!

By way of illustration, consulting manufacturers’ websites gives the salesperson the opportunity to order for his customer – or sometimes *with* his customer – items that are available neither in the store nor through the company’s website. This generalized consultation of the Web enables the salesperson to expand his range of options to an extraordinary degree while adapting to the expectations of individual customers. This is reflected in the following quotes: “In this way, via the manufacturers’ websites, we can research other products, and, if you work with the manufacturers, ask them for the product in question.” “Allibert is one of our suppliers, so if a customer comes in and says, ‘you don’t carry all of their products in your store,’ or if a customer has found a product on the manufacturer’s website . . .”

This personalized service constitutes an added value for the customer. The salesperson responds in an individualized way to the needs of his informed customers, who visit manufacturers’ websites as well as other websites aimed at professionals in the field. The salesperson thus sets himself apart by looking for solutions that do not normally come within the scope of his usual duties.

Appropriation of the Internet outside of the Relationship with the Customer

Beyond their relationship with their customers, some salespeople have appropriated the Internet for use in the practice of their profession. Turning the site away from its primary function as a virtual display window, they use it for their own purposes and adapt it to help them manage their activities in the store. Thanks to the analysis, we can identify the new roles that the Internet plays within the department

and we can understand why and how some salespeople have adopted it within the framework of their duties. The company's website is used to stay informed and to make up for the deficiencies of the system, and to create added value in the relationship with the customer. It is also a source of marketing ideas within the salesperson's product line.

In-service self-training (taking charge of one's own training)

Some salespeople use the website, a real self-training tool, to stay informed on the range of products and their technical characteristics, to keep abreast of the latest innovations, to inform themselves about how to install the product, or so that they can answer customer questions.

This self-training, initiated by the salesperson, is carried out when the salesperson is new or when he changes departments. The company's website thus benefits the salesperson by enabling him to learn about the department at an accelerated pace before joining it. This self-training also makes up for certain organizational deficiencies, for example, when the official training occurs too late relative to the salesperson's first day on the job. More generally, however, some salespeople use the company's website during their entire in-store careers.

Self-training can happen in situ, with or without the customer, during work hours. Sometimes, however, it is done outside the store. Although this happens infrequently, some salespeople, genuinely interested in their products, visit their company's website while at home in order to stay informed or so that they will be able to meet their customers' expectations with accuracy.

However, in other cases, this on-line connection from the salesperson's home is of a more "guilty" or "hidden" nature, whereby a salesperson looks for an answer to a question which he was unable to answer during the day. A connection at home enables the user to find the solution to a question without revealing his ignorance on the subject to his colleagues.

The Internet as an effective substitute for other sources of information and avenues of communication

Some salespeople turn to the Internet in lieu of other sources of information such as catalogues, because they consider it a faster, easier, and more convenient way to search for information. Information on suppliers, for example, appears easier to find on the Web than in the suppliers' catalogues. This saves time, as the following quote attests: "It's easier and more convenient to look for information online than in a catalogue." Some salespeople also favor email over the telephone when communicating with suppliers. More convenient than the telephone, email enables them, for instance, to ask for information outside of the manufacturers' business hours.

The website as a source of ideas for marketing the product line

An Internet connection also gives salespeople the chance to see all of the products sold on the company's website. This visibility enables some of them to spot products sold on the site that would "work" in their respective departments, based on the particularities of each department and the clientele within the store's market radius. This identification, according to the local "terrain," of items likely to generate sales constitutes a way to revisit the organization of purchases. The visibility of the whole product range on the website allows salespeople to notice very quickly those new products that correspond to consumer trends, to the salespeople's knowledge of the local market, and to discern future

commercial successes within their respective zones. Thanks to this broader overview of the possible offers, they are able to reclaim one of the merchant's essential functions, and they will certainly be highly motivated to do whatever they can to sell a product that they themselves have chosen.

A source of merchandising ideas

Aside from the selection of stock, the website can truly be a source of merchandising inspiration. The "virtual" store is a shop window that invites salespeople to rethink the best ways to display products in the store, to arrange them and to show them off to the best advantage. Beyond the traditional merchandising plan, on-line presentation is a source of ideas on trends and possibilities for in-store display.

Competitive and commercial watchfulness

Some salespeople use the Web – and not just the company's website – to keep an eye on the competition. Knowing the competition's products and prices, as well as the commercial conditions they observe, helps the salesperson to focus the dialogue with the customer. This broader vision of the market, thanks to the Internet, is probably a very effective means of reducing the salesperson's myopia, particularly when faced with a customer who is familiar with all of the players within the market radius and each one's commercial conditions. This phenomenon of the expert customer with knowledge of all the opportunities in the vicinity will only become more prevalent thanks to mobile Internet access and I-phone applications. Without a doubt, the salesperson's enhanced knowledge will become vitally important when dealing with customers who can quickly and easily find the most attractive offers with a simple click on their mobile phones!

4. Results and discussion

From a management standpoint, the results of this research enable us to formulate recommendations regarding the management of sales staff in a multichannel business context. Recruitment, training, motivation, remuneration: The analysis shows that the traditional pillars of sales staff management must be revisited in order to adapt to the new constraints and opportunities that the company website creates for the in-store salesperson. It further reveals that the classic sales process is out of date and that the relationship with the customer must be reinvented in a multichannel context. Various implications for management can be deduced from this qualitative analysis. A few of them can be presented here.

In the first place, the analysis points toward revisiting the sales process and the new conditions of interaction in light of the transformation of the interaction brought about by the company's website. It invites practitioners to consider the salesperson's role in a multichannel context and his place in an interaction that has shifted.

Accompanying the customer in a decision-making process that is already well under way does not call for the same actions as a classic sales process. Listening to the customer in order to identify the decision-making path he has already taken reflects a decidedly different approach from the classic one of identifying the customer's needs in a context of negotiation. Reinforcing the customer's decision and directing him in that choice when it seems to make sense, reassuring the customer at the time of the transaction: these are the new skills required of the sales staff when dealing with a multichannel customer.

The “responding to objections” phase has probably become less important in the case of a customer who has already convinced himself of the chosen product’s superiority. On the other hand, if the customer seems headed towards a purchase that will not meet his needs, the salesperson is able successfully and tactfully bring the process back to square one, this represents a real added value for the customer.

Thanks to the analysis, we can also discern some of the Internet-based strategies employed by salespeople to create harmonious conditions for interaction. By way of illustration, understanding why some salespeople manage to change the tone of the interaction from one of defiance to one of collaboration constitutes an opportunity to build new relations between a company’s representatives and its customers. This understanding is all the more important because it has to do with the satisfaction, and hence, loyalty, of all concerned. Numerous examples of original practices are given in this paper to show how some clever salespeople use the website to improve the conditions of interaction, and sometimes even integrate the site into the sales negotiation. The identification of the practices of some salespeople who have adapted the Internet for use in their everyday tasks, apart from their relationship with the customer, constitutes a new vein of ideas for the implementation of new practices for managing a department within a store. The content of the training provided could change considerably when a company grows to include a multichannel approach. This new work context affects other elements of sales-staff management as well. Recruitment, motivation, and, above all, remuneration will need to be reconsidered in order to adapt to the new constraints that are essential in a multichannel context. Fournier (2009) has already pointed out the need to revisit the remuneration of salespeople in service-sector businesses. The author also suggests solutions in terms of remuneration to rekindle the motivation of a salesperson who sometimes considers himself to be in competition with other retail channels. Similarly, some new thinking is called for in the realm of “click-and-mortar” retail, while keeping its specific characteristics in mind.

5. Limits, need for further research and managerial implications of results

This study is qualitative and based on a small sample of practicing salespersons. Of course it can’t speak for the situation for all retail salespeople in all merchandise situations. It is a preliminary analysis of how the in-store sales staff was affected by the website their company had recently introduced. The literature ably demonstrates how websites have transformed retailer marketing success. What this work focuses on is how that transformation may affect the work and training of the salesperson. Confronted with an “enlightened” customer, the salesperson could feel devalued, disillusioned, facing non-remunerated tasks and may be less inclined to come to terms with the source of this transformation.

However, in view of the results of this research, if salespeople agree that the Internet has transformed the relationship with the customer, changed their area of expertise and altered the sales process, it also constitutes a positive tool that they can incorporate, in unprecedented ways, into the practice of their profession. For example, the website is a carrier of the company’s image which can help to generate store traffic. Some do not hesitate to use the site for the pursuit of their own goals. Adapting themselves very well to the new conditions of interaction, they use the site to build a high-quality relationship with their customers, giving the relationship more substance and offering their customers more grounds for loyalty. They can use the tool to underpin their sales pitches, so that it becomes a kind of “silent partner.” Of course, this capacity for adapting to the new circumstances of interaction, brought

about by multichannelization, is not shared by all salespeople, and some still appear to be suffering at the hands of an “intruder” who erodes their relationship with and discredits them in the eyes of a customer who is more and more expert. These salespeople employ a strategy of avoiding or bypassing the Internet, sometimes even denying its existence in the store. Management’s challenge is to give appropriate training to remove it as a perceived obstacle. Finding the best techniques implemented by “enlightened” salespeople constitutes a source of improvement that can help to reestablish quality relations with customers and restore the value of the “less-enlightened” salespeople within the company.

From a managerial point of view, the classic sales process no longer appears suited to the new context of relations between the salesperson and his customer. For example, the analysis reveals that certain steps of the process become secondary, or even needless (such as the treatment of objections), while others become indispensable to the conclusion of the transaction. The analysis also reveals that the salesperson’s ability to create a connection between certain steps of the decision-making process and to reduce cognitive interruptions between channels is becoming a powerful element of commercial negotiation. These findings invite managers to thoroughly revisit their hiring criteria (qualities, abilities of salespeople) and the content of their training, as the traditional modes of negotiation now seem rather obsolete. Following the customer through the prospect of a rewarding cross-channel experience also invites us to rethink the motivation and compensation of salespeople so that they do not feel as if they are in competition with the business’s other channels.

From a management point of view, the identification of best managerial practices offers an attractive opportunity to understand, given the retailer’s typical customer search behavior, to integrate them into the training of future in-store salespeople. It can become possible to understand how some salespeople are able to change the character of the playing field from one of distrust to one of cooperation, and thus to forge a new relationship between the company’s representatives and its customers.

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