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HOW TO RECONCILE BUYING LOCAL PRODUCTS THROUGH VENDING MACHINES? THE CLASH OF CULTURES

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THE CLASH OF CULTURES

Abstract

The consumption of local products has become "trendy" in postmodern societies, in responseto consumer expectations that express a need for reappropriation, authenticity and traceability of products. Retail formats that were previously stranger to local products are seeking to takeadvantage of such an evolution. Thus, a new generation of vending machines has recentlybecome the ally of French peasants, farmers and producers, a retail format that is far removed from the usual purchasing experience (markets, greengrocers, AMAPs), and morerecommended for standardized products. The communication takes the form of a work-in progress that questions the contrast between the "cold", "standardized" and "practical" retail format of the vending machine, based on a dominant view of convenience, and local productsfrom short circuits, based primarily on an experiential view. A cross between "*extraordinary*" and "*infra-ordinary*" makes it possible to lead the reflection and to explore in an original way the perspectives opened by this discordant offer.

Keywords

Vending machines, customer experience, retail format, positioning, local products

Introduction

The vending market has been growing strongly in recent years and, for many observers andanalysts, the trend is set to accelerate over the next few years (Xerfi, 2022). This sales format, somewhat neglected in the past, is making a strong comeback to sell local products, no doubt because it responds to consumers' increasingly fast-paced lifestyles, and also allows for more "responsible" consumption. Gone are the days of snacking or industrial products within easy reach, whose damaging effects on health are often reported (Rosi *et al.*, 2017), as new generation vending machines make it possible to enhance the value of short circuits with an original offering, namely that of local food products, sometimes referred to as "farm produce". Moreover, other countries, such as Greece, Spain and Italy, have been experiencing similar developments for several years (Tudisca *et al.*, 2014; Pereira *et al.*, 2018; Henke and Sardone, 2020; Koutsou and Sergaki, 2020). The obvious success of the sales format can be largely explained by the return to local and seasonal consumption (accentuated by the Covid- 19 crisis), and the gradual disappearance of local shops in the countryside. Ville (2022, pp. 5-6) notes that connected lockers, "*positioned in the countryside, beside a busy road or in a village without a grocery store (...), provide a service to the inhabitants of villages without shops, while offering quality products and ensuring a better margin for farmers*".

In response to highly segmented customer expectations, the vending offer has undergone a profound renewal, becoming a new sales tool for craftsmen and farmers. Bread, meat, fruit & vegetables, dairy products, oysters - almost anything is possible in a new generation vending machine, which is being installed more and more frequently in France, notably under the impetus of Casier Français, manufacturer of equipment specifically dedicated to short distribution channels (the company has installed 600 vending machines by 2022, representing 12,000 crates). According to the Fédération Nationale de Vente et Services Automatiques, there are almost 600,000 vending machines in France, and for over six years now, vending machines have been playing an increasingly important role in the distribution of agricultural and craft products. Like traditional vending machines, this new generation offers consumers a truly local access service, as they can be located in front of train stations, shops, or in larger spaces such as traffic circles. Vending machines are no longer just about satisfying the need for "snacks" but, on the contrary, about promoting healthy, local products. In short, we can speak of a discordant offer for vending machines, and a consumption experience far removed from that experienced in the usual stores for this type of product (markets, primeurs, AMAPs).

Local products are indeed experiential, whereas vending machines convey an image of convenience (Hehle and Schnedlitz, 2011). This raises the question of the future of new generation vending: a technology traditionally reserved for standardized products with a dominant logic of convenience, can offer a memorable customer experience for products from short circuits, with a dominant experiential logic? The aim of this communication is to provide some initial food for thought in this direction, highlighting the topicality of the "*extra-ordinary*" / "*infra-ordinary*" dichotomy.

1. Vending machines: a promise of convenience

As early as the XIXe century, the first vending machines appeared in the United States to sell candy and chewing gum, before expanding in the early XXe century to include sweeteneddrinks and cigarettes (Segrave, 2002; Huppatz, 2021). Clarence Sanders, the inventor of the self-service supermarket, even opened Keedoozle stores in 1937, in fact spaces equipped exclusively with vending machines, which were finally abandoned in 1949 due to recurring technical malfunctions (Le Texier, 2022). In practice, the vending machine relies on "directed self-production of the service", leading the consumer to work in order to consume,as is the case for ordinary shopping (Barth and Antéblian, 2010). We refer here to Dujarier (2008/2014), for whom the co-production of the offer (product or service) implies that the consumer takes on the status of a "worker" intervening in the chain of operational activities, notably *via self-service technology* applications. A consumer producer bring into play a number of emotional, cognitive, physical, financial and cultural resources in the service of the activity to be carried out (Vargo and Lusch, 2008). By its very nature, the vending machine escapes the logic of proximity as synthesized by work in retail marketing, particularly for direct sales channels associated with local products.

1.1. Proximity in the context of direct sales channels

For the past fifteen years, the question of proximity has occupied the attention of numerous researchers in marketing and retail economics (Horvath, 2023), notably to better understand the link that can be built between the store and the customer by playing on different levers. Proximity is understood here as an overall feeling for the individual, resulting from the combination of complementary dimensions: making the store accessible, attractive, pleasant and endearing (Laut, 1998). With this in mind, Bergadaà and Del Bucchia (2009) have developed a framework for interpreting the proximity perceived by customers to a retail outlet, based on five dimensions: proximity of access, functional proximity, proximity of identity, relational proximity and process proximity. In practice, however, they cover only some of these five dimensions, particularly proximity of access and relational proximity, as is the case for Quebec convenience stores (Filser *et al.*, 2020).In their reference works devoted to direct sales channels, Hérault-Fournier *et al.* (2012, 2014) and Hérault-Fournier (2013), for their part, retain only four of the dimensions of proximity identified by Bergadaà and Del Bucchia (2009): proximities of access, identity, relationships and process. These authors eliminate the functional dimension of proximity because of its conceptual similarity to identity value. While their main conclusion relates to the discriminating power of perceived proximity over the three direct sales formats studied. Hérault-Fournier *et al.* (2012) are also the first researchers to have tested a model in which identity proximity, process proximity and relational proximity significantly influence perceived trust in a particular short circuit, namely the collective store, while access proximity has no influence on trust.

Hérault-Fournier *et al* (2014) subsequently proposed a second, much-enriched model in which the trust felt towards a direct sales channel is positively (and directly) influenced, in ascending order, by identity proximity, process proximity and, more weakly, by access proximity. Relational proximity, on the other hand, does not directly influence trust in the direct sales channel; its influence is indirect, as it only has a significant positive influence on identity and process proximity. Exploring the Belgian case, Vonthron and Devillet (2023) highlight the real dynamism of original distribution initiatives, in particular the presence of networks of depots run by citizens' groups and associations whose aim is to promote proximity of access. From these results, it is possible to draw the intermediate conclusion that the different variations of proximity have a greater or lesser impact on the confidence felt in a sales format. In this case a direct sales channel is therefore possible to infer the existence of differentiated purchasing behavior, and more broadly, in terms of loyalty to the sales format. This is of great importance in assessing the potential success of vending machines.

1.2 Self-directed participation

As mentioned above, the vending machine refers to a co-production of service involving a non-relational interface between a machine and a human being, and a large body of literature has been devoted to it (Stoyanov, 2021). The notion of service co-production is not new to retail marketing; it is in line with the work on servuction initiated by Eiglier and Langeard (1987). It explicitly states that the realization of a service requires the presence, and even the active participation, of the customer. At the outset, the servuction process was understood in terms of the staff in contact and the physical support linked to service provision, but since the advent of self-service retailing, consumers have not only played a predominant role in the servuction process, but also a more active one (Meuter *et al.*, 2000). From this point of view, the development of vending machines does not mark a break with the past, insofar as the work of the consumer is just as present as in the creation of a supermarket cart. On the other hand, unlike traditional marketing, the consumer interacts with a machine, and services are delivered without any human interaction, thus excluding any relational proximity. The key question is therefore to identify the motivation of consumers to participate in a "directed self production of service", and the resources required to achieve this.

With regard to motivation, we can draw on the theory of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Barczak *et al.*, 1997). Consumers choose to play an active role in the production of a service because they consider their participation to be intrinsically attractive (Bateson, 1985), and/or because they perceive extrinsic benefits. In extrinsic motivation, the consumer acts with the intention of obtaining a benefit outside the activity itself (receiving a reward, avoiding guilt, gaining the approval of others, etc.) (Deci and Ryan, 1985). Consumers may also be encouraged to participate in service production in order to save time or money, for example. In short, participation is not an end in itself, but a means to an end. In intrinsic motivation, on the other hand, behaviors are motivated solely by the interest, curiosity and pleasure the subject experiences in performing the activity, with no expectation of extrinsic reward. Curran and Meuter (2007) point out that pleasure, or the playfulness of the technology, influences the choice of a *self-service* technology to a greater extent than its direct usefulness.

With regard to the resources required to participate in "directed service self-production", the contribution by Meuter *et al.* (2005) highlights the importance for the consumer-producer not only of having the skills to appropriate and use the technology, but also of having sufficient confidence in his or her ability to perform the task. These two dimensions define a level of predisposition to participate. On the one hand, participation requires the consumer to have mastered a range of knowledge, know-how and interpersonal skills, as well as behaviors adapted to a given situation, which are part of a "double equipment" that he or she regularly draws on to collaborate. On the other hand, participation requires the consumer to master notional resources, specific knowledge about the product and service, since there is no human interaction to provide information when needed. In short, the vending machine is one of the emblematic illustrations of what Munos (2002) calls automated servuction, which conveys an image of standardization. Far removed from any logic of relational proximity, the promise made is that of convenient access to mass-market products.

In many respects, we find here characteristics that have been widely referenced in digital marketing in recent years, particularly with regard to the influence of the browsing experience - both physical and virtual - on web-user behavior (Badot and Lemoine, 2013).

2. Designing the vending machine experience

The concept of consumer experience first appeared in the field of consumer behavior in the early 1980s, with the contribution of Holbrook and Hirschman (1982), who emphasized the role of emotions in consumption and the constitutive value of experience. These authors highlight both the existence of hedonic consumption, whose purpose is the pursuit of pleasure,

and the main motives behind consumers' search for experience: the quest for novelty, theexperience of strong sensations, or access to knowledge. One of the major contributions of the experiential approach lies in the dissociation of purchase and consumption per se. This gives rise to the concept of the experiential process, which allows us to identify a series of possible points of contact between the brand and the consumer, and by extension, between the retailer and the consumer. Experiential registers in retailing are multi-faceted and can be reduced to two ideal-types: the *extra-ordinary* experience and the *infra-ordinary* experience, with which the new-generation vending machine is inevitably confronted.

2.1. Experiential registers in distribution

Since the seminal article by Tauber (1972), supplemented by the contribution of Babin *et al.* (1994), it has been understood that shopping activity, whatever the sales format, does not always boil down to a utilitarian dimension: purchases to satisfy a physiological need. Consumers are sensitive to the playful, emotional and social experience of shopping, and it is therefore a dual hedonic and symbolic dimension that must be taken into account in addition to the utilitarian one. As Filser *et al* (2020) point out, an extremely dynamic stream of research, synthesized under the generic name of "experiential retailing", has emerged over the past two decades to take account of the development of stores whose primary objective is to transform the purchase into a genuine experience, more or less memorable. Shopping is thus seen as the result of a quest for meaning on the part of individuals, and a sales format can embody singular places or moments in the construction of a personality (Holbrook, 1999).

Since the early 2000s, Rémy (2001) has rightly noted that the disintegration of traditional social ties in post-modern society seems to find a substitute, or even an artifact, in the form of retailing. Indeed, shopping offers new potential for socialization, while certain stores can become playful spaces for rediscovered bonds and conviviality. This undoubtedly explains why many retail chains are thinking about how to create different registers of memorable experience, whereas the image traditionally conveyed is that of a utilitarian point of sale. In contrast, Roederer and Filser (2015) emphasize the importance of thematizing and dramatizing the offer in the process of diffusing feelings that associate pleasure and emotion, with the store becoming a component of the *storytelling* implemented by the retailer to endow itself with mythical status... at least for a while.

While there are plenty of examples of retailers playing on the thematization and dramatization of their offer, the case of Lush, which specializes in the distribution of cosmetics based on essential oils derived from *organic* fruit and vegetables, is emblematic. The products, with their tangy colors and heady scent, are displayed in stores as part of a cutout sale on Provençal-style counters. This should not lead us to conclude that the only option for experiential retailing is to provide consumers with an *extra-ordinary* experience that heighten their senses, emotions and/or imagination. On the contrary, like Walmart in the U.S. (Badot, 2005), *hard discounters* seek to theme the *infra-ordinary* - in other words, the banal, the everyday, the habitual, the "background noise", to quote Perec (1989/1995) - by staging an asceticism synonymous with the consumer's quest for low prices. This asceticism is akin to an experience of frugality, the absence of music and animation, coupled with an atmosphere of virtual scarcity, the presence of recurring breaks, creates a setting that frees consumers from hyper-solicitation, and even helps them to control themselves in a period of guilt-inducing over-consumption. Between the *extra-ordinary* and the *infraordinary*, how do we position the new-generation vending machine selling local produce?

2.2. Neither extra-, nor infra-ordinary: the heart of the matter

As mentioned in the introduction, vending of agricultural and artisanal products, and more broadly of "local produce", has been making rapid progress in France in recent years. Appendix 1 presents some of the projects that are now up and running, and it has to be said that the movement is starting to attract a certain amount of media coverage. It is clearly essential to know whether the sale of local products in a sales format whose image is that of automatic servuction, based on "self-directed participation", is compatible with the image of proximity and terroir conveyed by local products. Indeed, more or less implicitly, the local product refers to a typical product, synonymous with true authenticity (Barrey and Teil, 2011), which the cold "modernism" of the vending machine may have trouble reflecting. What's more, the local product is often associated with a geographical origin conferring a certain organoleptic quality in the eyes of consumers. Admittedly, this is a mental representation, built up by word-of-mouth in particular, but its result is to contribute to the emergence and reinforcement of an imaginary world based on strong symbolic dimensions: ancestral know-how, strong territorial roots, respect for nature, etc. The local product is often associated with a geographical origin, giving it a certain organoleptic quality in the eyes of consumers. The question of where local products are marketed is obviously essential, as it conditions the alignment between the positioning intended by the companies behind local products and the positioning perceived by consumers, as Pontier (1988) emphasized in his analysis of the Ikea chain. Conventionally, the marketing of local products is often associated with direct sales channels, which rely on different facets of proximity corresponding to the symbolic dimensions mentioned above. Of course, supermarkets and hypermarkets do not shy away from showcasing local produce, including theatrical displays based on giant photographs of carrot grower “Smith” and tomato grower “Jones”, both of whom are regular suppliers, even though they are located less than ten kilometers from the store. The clever communication strategy is not lost on increasingly discerning consumers, especially when they discover kiwis from New Zealand and tomatoes from Morocco on the store shelves. On the other hand, there's no such contrast with markets, greengrocers and AMAPs, since local products are in line with the relational proximity and identity-based proximity of these sales formats, to use Bergadaà and Del Bucchia's terminology (2009).

The vending machine does not exclude the idea of proximity, but it tends to be reduced to proximity of access and proximity of process, insofar as the purchase of local products is more convenient, especially if the vending machine is organized on easy-to-reach points of passage for the consumer. On the other hand, the question is whether the experiential nature remains present in reference to the strong symbolic values of local products. Considering the presence of an *infra-ordinary* experience is clearly irrelevant, as frugality and a spirit of nearscarcity are not the order of the day. On the contrary, vending machines value the performance of goodwill, both organoleptically (product quality and freshness) and logistically (regularity and punctuality of supply). As Gasnier (2019, p. 15) points out, the case calls into question "*the capacity of urban planning (...) to use public transport to move goods in environments that are both densely urbanized and de-densified*". Similarly, none of the facets of an *extraordinary* experience seem to be associated with vending machines, either in terms of the emotion felt or the pleasure of experiencing a memorable immersion in a convivial, social bond-inducing commercial space. This uncomfortable position raises questions about the future of the sales format.

3. Discussion and conclusion

The craze for local products, rooted in a terroir, is an undeniable reality in France (Horvath,2023). These products send out a quality signal that attracts the attention of a growing numberof consumers, far beyond the "*bobo"* ghetto to which they are often reduced. One of the major problems is that this signal can be altered if the customer experience proves mediocre due to inappropriate marketing methods. As we have already pointed out, local products have traditionally relied on sales formats whose essential characteristic is to cultivate a direct link between producer and consumer, with a view to building a strong relational proximity. This proximity helps build a climate of trust, leading to a convergence between the image of the sales format and the image of the product. By seeking to capture the market for local products, the initiators of the new-generation vending machine model run the risk of seeing the desired positioning of local products disconnected from the positioning perceived by consumers, insofar as the vending machine is part of a logic of convenience. If a customer experience does exist, it remains of an *infra-ordinary* nature, which risks damaging the image of local products as supported by direct sales channels.

The position taken in this communication is that we believe it's relevant to contrast what we'd call the usual distribution of local produce, i.e. markets and AMAPs, with the *infra-ordinary* distribution by crate. Some may retort that, even before the arrival of these crates, local products were already being sold in supermarkets and on Internet sites, being delivered to homes or workplaces, raising the issue of perceived consumer ambivalence, alternating between sympathy and hostility towards these formats (Rogeon, 2022). *Infra-ordinary* experience is therefore not new to the retail sector, and it has been rubbing shoulders with *extra-ordinary* experience for years in the marketing of local products. Can we conclude, then, that customers feel a real sense of unease with the arrival of lockers, when distribution channels are already extremely varied and probably used by the majority of customers? This is a key issue for locker designers and distributors, and raises the question of the image of the locker in the consumer's mind. While many supermarket chains such as Intermarché, Leclerc, Système U and Lidl have succeeded over time in building up a "territory" positioning through clever communication (see Appendix 2), the locker undoubtedly remains attached to a vending machine whose image remains rooted in the marketing of industrial products. In this respect, it would be interesting to know whether the spread of vending machines in non-places in Augé's (1992) sense, those places of simple transit produced by supermodernity (train stations and airport terminals, freeway service areas, anonymous university lobbies, etc.), does not condemn the locker to an *infra-ordinary* destiny.

Beyond the singular question of the image of the locker mechanically associated with vending, it is urgent to reflect on the challenges of omnichannel insofar as the consumer now has a significant number of points of contact to access an offer. For example, it's easy to imagine a consumer moving from the *infra-ordinary* to the *extra-ordinary*, and *vice versa*, when buying local products, depending on situational factors to be defined. Channels that are predominantly *infra-ordinary*, such as the locker, could thus easily complement the richer (and more experiential) experience of frequenting an AMAP or a market, without necessarily having a negative impact on the image of proximity conveyed by the local product. If this is the case, then it would be interesting to analyze how the multiple channels, both *infra-ordinary* and *extra-ordinary*, fit together and influence each other. An innovative sales technology such as the locker should not be systematically equated with a major risk of altering the image of the local product and, more broadly, of farmers with a "terroir" positioning. While such a risk is not to be overlooked, it must be weighed against the benefit of increased product availability not afforded by other distribution channels (Muggenhuber *et al.*, 2023). These various questions are a plea for further investigation by exploring, in future research, several aspects of new-generation vending. Three avenues seem particularly relevant to us, following on from the questions raised above:

- On the one hand, it is essential to address the question of the intention to buy local products, which are then associated with a *convenience-type* sales format, which usually refers to snacking products whose impact on health is far from positive. The sales format also requires many consumers to learn know-how and interpersonal skills, making it necessary for the ergonomics of the sales outlet to go beyond mere functionality.
- On the other hand, insofar as the origin, and therefore the traceability, of local products cannot be "proven", or at least represented, by the physical presence of the producer/seller, as is the case for markets, collective stores or AMAPs, we may wonder how the consumer perceives the transparency of the information, for example when the marketing discourse is that of a guarantee of freshness.
- Finally, if it is the producer/seller who places the local product in the crate(s), this means that the logistics of the last few meters fall to him/her, with all the difficulties (known) at this level,

particularly in terms of urban delivery: don't recurrent supply disruptions or delays, or merchandise damaged during transport and handling, risk marginalizing the sales format?
In short, there's little doubt that new-generation vending is introducing a direct sales channel that is attracting the attention of many public and private players. Behind the media hype, however, there is a lack of robust knowledge about the singular experience of consumers, borrowing from both the *extra-ordinary* and the *infra-ordinary*, which needs to be filled if we are to grasp all its advantages and disadvantages. To do this, we need to take stock of current practices in the distribution of crates, particularly in France, in order to clarify the diversity of concrete approaches implemented in terms of location (proximity *vs.* distance from agricultural production), width and depth of assortment, systems adopted and "staged" (identification of local producers), players involved in the distribution channel, including logistics, etc. Such an assessment should make it possible to identify the key factors that influence the success of crates. Such an assessment should enable us to identify the relevant variables to be mobilized in future research work devoted in particular to the perceptions and specific behaviors of customers in a world where omnichannel has become the rule rather than the exception. The vending machine is fundamentally driven by a logic of convenience, and knowing whether the purchase of local products, for which short circuits infuse an experiential logic, can be easily integrated into it is essential for both knowledge and action.

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ANNEX 1

Examples of vending machines of new generation

Welcome to the Farm

Of the Plain Basket

Bin French

Direct from Our Farm

Shop

From the Producer to the Consumer

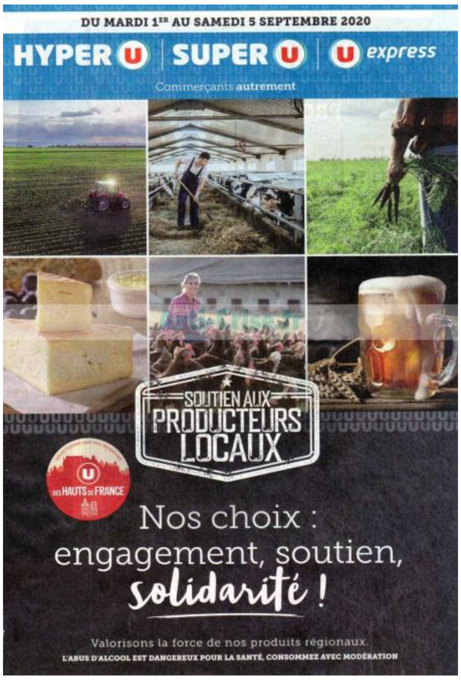
ANNEX 2

"Terroir" advertising of several brands of GMS in France

Intermarché

Leclerc

System U



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