

White Paper

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RETAILHOUSE

connecting shoppers & brands

Inledning

Denna uppsats publicerades hösten 2013 och är resultatet av ett samarbete mellan Handelshögskolan i Stockholm och Retail House. Studien genomfördes under december 2012 på uppdrag av en av Nordens ledande detaljhandelskedjor.

Retail House har i nära samarbete med både studenter och professorer vid såväl Lunds Universitet som Handelshögskolan i Stockholm genomfört ett 15-tal olika akademiska studier inom området Shopper Marketing.

Kunskapen om Shoppers i butik är mycket viktigt för att kunna skapa attraktiva och lönsamma lösningar i butik. Ett av Retail House övergripande syften är att kontinuerligt tillgodose branschen med ny kunskap som skall kunna omvandlas till praktisk nytta för såväl butikskedjor som varumärken.

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Abstract

Today, many firms encourage cross-selling attempts – that is, asking the customer to buy an additional item, given that s/he has already decided to buy one or several items. Some previous studies show that this can be a very cost-efficient marketing approach; one single question (e.g. “would you like to have French fries with your burger?”) can have a positive impact on sales. So far, however, researchers have not examined the effects of cross-selling attempts on customers’ evaluations of service encounters. Yet several conflicting speculations exist in the literature; some authors view cross-selling as a “service”, while others believe that it could have a detrimental effect on customers’ views of service. The lack of research (and the conflicting arguments), calls for an empirical examination, because most firms would like to develop long-term relations with customers (and the customer’s overall evaluation of the service encounter is typically assumed to affect the customer’s willingness to return).

In this study, then, we examine the impact of cross-selling attempts on customer satisfaction (and on sales). A field experiment was carried out in which customers (N = 200) were subject to either a cross-selling attempt or no cross-selling attempt in a retail setting. The context for this was also manipulated; the sales persons were engaging in either positive or no positive social behaviors. The results, thus in tune with existing research, show that the cross-selling attempt had a positive impact on sales. In addition, it also had a positive impact on customer satisfaction.

Cross-selling attempts in the service encounter and their effects on purchase behavior and customer satisfaction

Cross-selling, sometimes referred to as suggestive selling (i.e., offering an additional item to a customer, given that the customer has already decided to buy one or several items), is a practice encouraged by many firms (Aksin and Haker, 1999; Ebster et al., 2006; Jasmand et al., 2012; Kumar et al., 2008; Mundt et al., 2006; Shah et al., 2012; Sizoo et al., 2005). As a specific example, Office Depot employees are instructed to make an attempt to cross-sell at least two items or attachments in each customer encounter (Peters, 2011). Another example is Cititbank, which has “made cross-selling part of the corporate culture” (Jarrar and Neely, 2002). Previous research on the effects of cross-selling shows that it is a cost-efficient practice: one single question (e.g., “Would you like to have wine with your meal?”) can have a positive impact on sales in the service encounter in which the question is asked (Ebster et al., 2006; Martinko et al., 1989; Milligan and Hantula, 2005; Ralis and O’Brien, 1986).

However, today most firms want to develop long-term relations with customers. And many years of research show that the customer’s overall evaluation of the firm (e.g., in terms of perceived service quality and customer satisfaction) is positively associated with both intentions to repatronize and repatronize behavior. Moreover, many factors with a positive impact on overall evaluations have been identified. So far, however, cross-selling attempts have not been one of them. Nevertheless, some practitioners, such as McCarthy (2008), view cross-selling as a way of “enhancing” the consumer’s experience. A similar view exists among some researchers; Polonsky et al. (2000), for example, refer to cross-selling as “a type of personal customer service” and as a “customer-oriented selling practice”. This view, then, implies that cross-selling may have a positive impact on the customer’s overall evaluation. Other researchers, however, are skeptical. Ebster et al. (2006) claim that customers might not always appreciate when a sales clerk responds to an order by suggesting a related item, while Aksin and Haker (1999) believe that cross-selling can have detrimental effects on customers’ views of service. Given that research on the link between cross-selling attempts and the customer’s overall evaluation of the service encounter is in short supply, and given conflicting assumption regarding the link, it is high time to examine the link empirically.

Another overlooked issue in existing research on cross-selling is that the typical study examines the effects (on immediate sales) of cross-selling attempts versus no such attempts without considering other activities taking place within service encounters. Yet other activities do take place. Indeed, and as an even more dominant contemporary practice than cross-selling attempts, many firms encourage their employees to perform positive social behaviors (such as to greet the customer, to establish eye-contact, to smile, to show empathy, and to listen to the customer) in service encounters. This practice seems to be wise, because many researchers have shown that the employee's positive social behaviors have a positive impact on customers' evaluations (cf. Söderlund 2012 for an overview). However, the demand that employees should perform both selling activities and deliver positive social behaviors has resulted in tension for employees, because the two activities involve different and conflicting mindsets from the individual employee's point of a view (Jasmand et al., 2012; Leidner, 1993). The effects on the customers of interacting with an employee who performs both activities within the same service encounter have hitherto not been examined. Yet it may be speculated that an employee who first appears almost as a good friend, by performing various positive social behaviors, and then turns to a cross-selling attempt, may create uneasiness among customers. In any case, the absence of a context in existing cross-selling research – and given that the contemporary context is dominated by employees who perform positive social behaviors – calls for a contextualized examination of the effects of cross-selling attempts.

In this paper, then, the purpose is to examine the effects of cross-selling attempts in the service encounter on both (a) purchasing behavior (i.e., do cross-selling attempts result in customers purchasing the product subject to cross-selling attempts?) and (b) overall evaluations (customer satisfaction), and to do this so that the possible contribution of a context in which the employees' positive social behaviors can be assessed.

Conceptual framework and hypotheses

When a customer has decided to buy one or several items, a mere request by an employee that the customer should buy also an additional item (i.e., a cross-selling attempt), has been shown to result in a positive impact on customers buying the additional item (Ebster et al., 2006; Martinko et al., 1989; Milligan and Hantula, 2005; Ralis and O'Brien, 1986). The theoretical mechanisms behind this, however, remain unclear. Given that a cross-selling attempt resembles a “foot-in-the-door-technique”, a consistency mechanism may be at play (cf. Cialdini, 1988) – at least if the suggested item is somehow complementing the items already selected by the customer. More specifically, given a need to appear consistent, the act of already having selected some products may commit the customer to accept the suggested item if it would seem as an expression of consistency. It is also possible that the mere request is suggesting to the customer that the employee cares for the customer and understands the customer's needs. If this happens, it may add

to the customer's positive affect in the interaction with the employee and color the customer's view of the suggested item in a valence-congruent way (Forgas, 1995) and thereby enhancing the acceptance of this item. Again, a process of this type seems most likely if the customer views the suggested product as a complement to the items for which a purchase decision has already been made. In any event, and in the light of existing research on the effects of cross-selling attempts, we hypothesize the following:

H1: A cross-selling attempt has a positive impact on customers' buying of the item subject to cross-selling attempts

However, as already indicated, the effects of a cross-selling attempt on the customers' overall evaluation of the service encounter in which this request is made have not been studied. On the one hand, a request may have a positive effect, given that it is perceived by the customer as an expression of the employee's care for the customer. If so, we may again expect that the perceived care boosts the customer's positive affect and, in the next step, colors the view of the service encounter in a valence-congruent way. If this is indeed the case, a cross-selling attempt could be seen as one among several activities that constitutes positive social behaviors in the mind of the customer. Another possibility is that cross-selling attempt signals that the employee is "on" (i.e., cares for his/her job), which may enhance the customer's perceptions of the employee's competence (Sirdeshmukh et al., 2002). And perceived competence has been shown to be positively associated with customer satisfaction (Gabbot and Hogg, 2000).

On the other hand, however, a cross-selling attempt may have a negative impact on customers' evaluations of the service encounter, as suggested by some authors (Aksin and Harker, 1999; Ebster et al., 2006). Presumably, this would happen if the cross-selling attempt represents an unexpected and unwelcome element in the customer's scheme for employee behavior in service encounters. Given the strong, traditional emphasis in many firms on positive social behavior (and not on sales attempts embedded in positive behaviors), it seems as if a cross-selling attempt has the potential to introduce an alien and negatively charged element in the customer's scheme, and this is likely to result in a negative impact of the cross-selling attempt on the customer's overall evaluation of the service encounter.

These arguments, then, provide conflicting views of the effect of a cross-selling attempt on the customer's overall evaluation. Here, we are interested in such evaluations in terms of customer satisfaction, the perhaps most dominant evaluation variable in contemporary research, and we formulate our second hypotheses in a non-directional way:

H2: A cross-selling attempt has an impact on customer satisfaction following the service encounter in which the cross-selling attempt occurs.

As for the contextual variable in our study, the employees' positive social behaviors,

we assume here that it may have a moderating impact on the effects of a cross-selling attempt on both the customer's acceptance of the suggested item and on customer satisfaction. Consider, first, the condition of a low level of positive social behaviors from the employee who is making the cross-selling attempt. This is likely to reduce the customer's attitude towards the employee, and this negative state of mind is likely to color the customer's view of the suggested item negatively and thereby reduce the customer's willingness to accept the item. A negative attitude to the employee is also likely to have a negative impact on customer satisfaction.

In the condition of a high level of positive social behaviors from the employee, however, it can be expected that such behaviors enhances the customers' attitude towards the employee, something which is likely to spill-over in terms of a positive charge in the customer's view of the suggested item – which would make the acceptance of this item more likely. It is also likely that a high level of positive social behaviors builds rapport with the customer; this may lessen the customer's sense of an economic transaction taking place and thereby such behaviors could reduce customers' resistance to sale attempts. And a more positive attitude toward the employee is also likely to enhance customer satisfaction. Yet it is possible that positive social behaviors followed by a cross-selling attempt produce a contrast effect, so that the customer may begin to wonder if the positive behaviors were really authentic; the customer may think that the positive social behaviors were merely just another sales tactic and thus an attempt to conceal that the employee's main concern is selling rather than providing service. In other words, the contrast between positive social behaviors and a cross-selling attempt may activate the customer's persuasion knowledge and color subsequent reactions negatively. If such a contrast effect occurs, we expect both a reduced willingness to buy the suggested item and reduced customer satisfaction.

Thus, conflicting arguments exist with respect to the impact of a cross-selling attempt on the customer's acceptance of the suggested item and on customer satisfaction, given the conditions of low versus high positive social behaviors from the employee who is making the cross-selling attempt. Our moderation hypotheses below are therefore formulated in a non-specific way for both the customer's willingness to accept the suggested item and customer satisfaction:

H3: The impact of a cross-selling attempt on the customer's buying of the item subject to a cross-selling attempt is moderated by the employee's level of positive social behaviors

H4: The impact of a cross-selling attempt on customer satisfaction is moderated by the employee's level of positive social behaviors

Research method

General design

We employed a 2 X 2 between-subjects experiment in a field setting. The participants were customers who visited one particular retailer. They were exposed to either (a) no cross-selling attempt or (b) a cross-selling attempt under the conditions of (c) a low level of positive social behaviors or (d) a high level of positive social behaviors from an employee with whom they interacted in a service encounter.

Stimuli development

The experiment was carried out in one particular outlet in a chain of small convenience stores. Two service workers (at two different cash desks) in this store were instructed to perform one of four combinations of behaviors vis-à-vis customers who came to the cashier, so that the customers were exposed to either a cross-selling attempt or no cross-selling attempt under the conditions of either no positive social behaviors or positive social behaviors. Each of the four combinations was “on” for 1.5 hours.

The cross-selling attempt consisted of asking customers who came to the cashier (to pay for already selected products) if they also wanted to buy a packet of chewing gum. This product was exposed clearly at the cash desk; it was thus possible to buy this product also for customers who were not subject to a cross-selling attempt. The type of cross-selling here, then, was indiscriminate cross-selling: regardless of what the customers had already purchased, the same item (the chewing gum) was always suggested in the cross-selling conditions. With respect to the two conditions of a high level of positive social behaviors, the service workers were instructed to (a) greet the customer, (b) establish eye-contact, and (c) smile; in the two conditions of a low level of positive social behaviors, the service workers were instructed to avoid greetings, eye-contact, and smiles. Each of these three specific behaviors has been dealt with in the service literature as expressions of the employee’s positive social behaviors (cf. Söderlund 2012 for an overview).

Data collection and participants

Customers who exited from the store after having been exposed to one of the four conditions were asked to answer some questions regarding their visit, and those who agreed were included in the sample. They were asked a set of questions by an interviewer immediately outside the store, and the interviewer recorded the responses in a paper-based questionnaire. This collection process continued until 50 customers had been interviewed for each of the four conditions. In this study, then, N = 200.

Measures

With regard to customers' acceptance of the product subject to a cross-selling attempt, each customer who was included in the sample was asked if s/he bought the chewing gum package suggested by the employee. The response alternatives were "no" or "yes", and the response thus represents a dichotomous variable. In addition, each customer was asked how many other product that were purchased ($M = 1.31$) and the total amount of money spent during the visit ($M = 14.43$ euro). As for customer satisfaction, each customer was asked to rate the satisfaction of the visit on a 10-point scale ranging from 1 (dissatisfied) to 10 (satisfied).

In addition, each customer was asked if s/he paid with cash or with a card, and the interviewer recorded the customer's gender. These observations were used to assess the randomness of the distribution of customers with regard to the four conditions, and our analysis revealed that there were no significant difference between the four conditions with regard to payment method ($\chi^2 = 3.37, p = .39$) and customer gender ($\chi^2 = 4.92, p = .18$).

Analysis and results

Customers' acceptance of the product subject to cross-selling attempts

The number of customers in each of the four conditions ($n = 50$ for each condition) who purchased the cross-selling item is displayed in Table 1. It should be recalled that such purchases were possible also for customers who did not become exposed to a cross-selling attempt. Table 1 reveals that purchases of this product occurred only for a small number of customers, yet all these purchases occurred in the conditions with an explicit cross-selling attempt.

Table 1:

The number of customers who purchased the product to cross-selling attempts in the four conditions

	No cross-selling attempt	Cross-selling attempt
High level of positive social behaviors	0	4
Low level of positive social behaviors	0	2

To assess the impact of cross-selling attempt on customer's acceptance of the cross-

selling item we first created a dichotomous response variable taking on the values 0 (no) or 1 (yes) with respect to purchases of cross-selling product. Second, we used this variable as the dependent variable in a two-way ANOVA in which cross-selling attempt (present vs. not present) and the employee’s positive social behaviors (present vs. not present) were the two factors. This ANOVA produced a positive and significant main effect for cross-selling ($F = 6.25, p < .05$), a non-significant main effect for positive social behaviors ($F = 0.67, p = .41$), and a non-significant interaction effect ($F = 0.67, p = .41$). Given that a higher number of customers purchased the product when it was subject to cross-selling attempts (cf. Table 1), Hypothesis 1 thus received support. However, Hypothesis 3, stating that the impact of the cross-selling attempt would be conditioned by the employee’s level of positive social behaviors, was not supported.

Customer satisfaction

The customer satisfaction means for each of the four conditions are presented in Table 2. We used satisfaction as the dependent variable in a two-way ANOVA in which cross-selling attempt (present vs. not present) and the employee’s positive social behaviors (present vs. not present) were the two factors.

Table 2:

Customer satisfaction means for the four conditions

	No cross-selling attempt	Cross-selling attempt
High level of positive social behaviors	9.20	9.68
Low level of positive social behaviors	8.71	9.02

The ANOVA resulted in a significant main effect for cross-selling ($F = 3.07, p < .01$), so that cross-selling attempts produced higher levels of satisfaction versus no cross-selling attempts. Hypothesis 2 was thus supported. Moreover, there was a significant main effect of positive social behaviors ($F = 6.52, p < .05$) on customer satisfaction, mirroring the results in many previous studies. Finally, the interaction effect was not significant ($F = .15, p = .70$), which means that Hypothesis 4 was not supported.

Additional analyses

The success of a cross-selling attempt may be contingent on what the customer has already decided to purchase before being exposed to the attempt. Indeed, if we view acceptance of a product subject to a cross-selling attempt as an impulse purchase/an unplanned purchase, previous research (e.g., Kollat and Willett, 1967) has shown that the percentage of such purchases is positively associated with the number of other purchased products. In our case, we had observations on both the number of other items purchased and the total amount of money spent during the store visit. We used these two variables as covariates in an additional ANOVA, again with cross-selling attempt (present vs. not present) and the employee's positive social behaviors (present vs. not present) as the two factors. Yet the covariates did not have a significant impact on the acceptance of the cross-selling attempt.

Discussion

Summary of the main results

One of our main findings was that the mere suggestion from an employee that the customer should buy an additional item – given that the customer had already decided to buy another item or some other items – indeed encourages customers to actually purchase the suggested item. This finding is in tune with previous studies (Ebster et al., 2006; Martinko et al., 1989; Milligan and Hantula, 2005; Ralis and O'Brien, 1986). The impact in our case, however, in terms of the number of customers in the sample who accepted the suggestion, was relatively modest.

Another main finding was that the cross-selling attempt had an independent and positive impact on customer satisfaction – a link less-well researched in existing studies of cross-selling and customer satisfaction. It should be noted that some existing research has comprised both satisfaction and cross-buying, yet in those cases the causal assumption has been reversed in relation to what we examined here. That is to say, some studies have examined (accumulated) satisfaction and its impact on customers' cross-buying (Liu & Wu, 2008; Ngobo, 2004). In any event, and in the present study, the cross-selling attempt behaved similar to traditional positive social behaviors by employee (e.g., smiles, politeness, listening, empathy and honesty) for which a link to satisfaction has been demonstrated in previous research. This thus suggests that a cross-selling attempt may be viewed as “service”, despite the fact that the label per se implies a selling activity.

Moreover, we did not find evidence for a moderating effect of the employee's positive social behaviors with regard to the impact of cross-selling on the customers' acceptance of the suggested product and customer satisfaction. In our case, then, positive social behaviors by the employee and an explicit selling attempt, within the same service

encounter, appears to have produced no contrast effect. Indeed, our results show that both positive social behaviors and a cross-selling attempt had positive effects on customer satisfaction. The lack of a contrast effect may be due to the relative brief duration of the encounters in our case; there were little time for the employees in the positive social behavior conditions to engage in deep, friendly behavior. Another possible reason for the lack of a contrast effect is that the suggested item in our case (which thus was kept constant in all service encounters in which cross-selling attempts occurred) was cheap, and thereby the request to buy also this item may have appeared as innocent and unobtrusive.

Contributions and implications

The potential conflict between providing service and producing sales is becoming an increasing concern for many employees who interact with customers (Evans et al., 1999; Jasmand et al., 2012). Yet, to date, few studies have dealt with this conflict in terms of customers' reactions to employees' dual service and sale responsibilities. For example, the service literature has been silent with regards to the fact that selling in various forms is an increasingly important part of the employee's duties. And the literature on personal selling, dealing with the impact of various selling activities (e.g., Hawes et al., 2006), has mainly ignored the service content of many encounters in which selling occurs. In the light of our finding that cross-selling attempt appears to behave as positive social behaviors, in terms of having a positive impact on customer satisfaction, however, it seems as if these two fields of research would benefit from a higher level of mutual recognition – and that each of the two fields may enrich its own theories by acknowledging factors traditionally seen as belonging to the other field's sphere of interest.

As for managerial implications, our results suggest that cross-selling of the type covered by the present experiment (i.e., indiscriminate cross-selling attempts to sell a minor item) is indeed likely to be a cost-efficient method to increase sales within the frame of the service encounter in which the attempt is made. Admittedly, the number of customers who accepted the attempt was low in our sample, but it must be recognized that the chain-store that we cooperated with has approximately 300 000 customer visits every day – even a low proportion of accepting customers, given such volume of traffic, would thus have an impact on revenues. Moreover, our assumption that cross-selling within the frame of positive social behaviors could have a negative impact on customer satisfaction did not hold. In contrast, our results show that the cross-selling attempt boosted customer satisfaction. Given that a high level of customer satisfaction increases the customer's willingness to return, it thus seems as if cross-selling attempts would have an indirect and positive impact also on long-term revenues, and this is thus another reason why our results imply that cross-selling attempts of the type examined here should be encouraged.

Limitations and suggestion for further research

Our decision to examine cross-selling in a context of positive social behaviors from the employee was motivated by the strong emphasis on such behaviors in many firms. Yet our study involved relatively short service encounters. Although we found a significant main effect of positive social behaviors on customer satisfaction in such encounters, the duration may still have been too short for such behavior to be so salient that they would produce also a contrast effect vis-à-vis a selling attempt. A design allowing for a stronger manipulation of high levels of positive social behaviors would therefore be useful in further research.

Moreover, we included only one type of cross-selling: indiscriminate cross-selling of a minor item. Further studies would benefit if various types of cross-selling, and various items subject to cross-selling attempts, are systematically varied. A particularly relevant aspect is the extent to which the product subject to a cross-selling attempt is a complement to what the customer has already decided to buy. According to Guitinan (1987), such complementarities could be due to (a) search economies (purchasing the products together reduces the customer's time and effort), (b) customer satisfaction (one product enhances the customer's satisfaction with another product), and (c) total image aspects (purchasing the products together enhances the overall image of the firm). Future research may thus profit if it explicitly acknowledges such ways in which products can be related, because different types of complementarities are likely to moderate the response to the cross-selling attempt in different ways.

There is also a need to explore further the impact of other types of cross-selling approaches than the one at hand in the present study, because cross-selling must not take the form of an explicit question from the employee (as in the present study). More subtle forms also exist. For example, a folded linen napkin attractively placed in a pre-set wine glass on the restaurant table can make the glass easier to notice and thus serve purpose of "suggesting" that wine should be consumed (Krutson, 1988). Another example is fixed restaurant menus with food and drink pairings (Borchgrevink and Susskind, 2006). Cross-selling can also be practiced in a CRM way, such as when Tesco uses loyalty card data to identify male shoppers who buy diapers for the first time and sends coupons for beer to them – because they believe that new fathers are likely to buy more beer in supermarkets when they cannot spend as much time at the pub (Rust et al., 2010). In a catalog retailing context, it has also been shown that the number of direct mailings has a positive effect on customer's cross-buying (Kumar et al., 2008). The effectiveness of such forms versus explicit questions to the customer within the frame of a face-to-face interaction in a service encounter, however, remains to be examined.

An important task for further research is also to examine more closely why this or that cross-selling activity is likely to have an impact. In the present experiment, our suggested

explanations were mere assumptions, so further research needs to explicitly test theoretical mechanisms behind successful and non-successful cross-selling.

Finally, from the customer's point of view, the other side of the cross-selling coin is cross-buying. And as noted by Shah and Kumar (2012), not all cross-buying occurs in response to cross-selling; many customers cross-buy on their own. A challenging task for future research is therefore to incorporate factors that explain cross-buying behavior in studies of the effectiveness of cross-selling attempts.

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