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An Analysis of Consumer Behavior on Black Friday

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to observe and analyze the consumer behaviors and commentary of the Black Friday customer. An observational instrument documented consumer in-line behavior while waiting for the stores to open, store entry behavior, and individual behavior. Findings show that the majority of the shoppers demonstrated calmness, courteousness, and happiness during the shopping experience; however, a number of shoppers exhibited negative and potentially dangerous behaviors which pose a safety concern for store personnel and other shoppers. Implications for retailers, researchers, and family and consumer sciences educators are discussed.

Key words: Black Friday, retail, consumer behavior, frustration, aggression

1. Introduction

The purpose of this study was to observe and analyze the consumer behaviors of the Black Friday customer. Black Friday, the day after Thanksgiving, is a term used by the retail industry in the United States that signifies the start of the Christmas holiday shopping season. Thanksgiving Day is celebrated on the fourth Thursday of November; therefore, the holiday shopping season runs from the Friday after Thanksgiving Day and continues until December 24, the day before Christmas. Black Friday is not considered an official national holiday; however, many employees have Thanksgiving Day off along with the following day, which increases the number of potential shoppers on that Friday. The origin of Black Friday is based on an accounting term when records were kept in ink with red signifying a loss in profits and black signifying a profit. Retailers generally operate in the red (unprofitable) throughout the year and depend heavily on the holiday season sales to end the year in the black with a profit (Black Friday, n.d.).

With the "hype" of Black Friday, customers are exposed to a retail environment that can stimulate frustration and aggression. Black Friday is traditionally known for long lines with customers waiting outdoors in cold weather waiting for the store to open, confusion and chaos of customers once the retail doors are opened for business, heavily crowded stores, a limited amount of products available at a reduced price, long checkout lines, and the lack of availability of advertised sale products.

Previous literature suggests that changing the physical store environment will affect cognitive, emotional and behavioral reactions of customers (Donovan, Rossiter, Marcoolyn, & Nesdale, 1994; Eroglu & Machleit, 1990; Machleit & Eroglu, 2000; McGoldrick, Betts, & Keeling, 1999; Potter, 1984) and the environmental conditions are likely to have a detrimental effect on the nature of service interactions (Bellizzi & Hite, 1992; Bitner, 1992; Prus, 1986). The media has widely documented aggressive consumer behaviors in the Black Friday environment (Barbaro, 2006; Cline, 2005; Jones, 2006; Rozhon, 2004). The Frustration Aggression Theory developed by Dollard, Miller, Doob, Mowrer, and Sears (1939) served as the conceptual framework for this study. These researchers proposed that frustration and aggression have a cause and effect relationship, as frustration causes aggression and results from frustration. Frustration is a feeling of tension that occurs when efforts to reach certain goals are blocked. When this occurs, various aggressive behaviors can result. Black Friday shopping is a phenomenon where aggressive human behavior may surface as customers are frustrated by long lines, crowded stores, and limited product availability of sale items. Previous Black Friday research has focused on sales reports, however, the reports are not academically based and have not been published in the academic literature. The current study used observational methodology to analyze the shopping behavior of Black Friday consumers, providing a unique contribution to the literature. Observing shoppers' behavior on Black Friday allowed the researchers to measure actual behavior, as opposed to relying on self-reports from the media. In addition, observers recorded consumers' comments, which afforded some insight into the shoppers' state of mind.

2. Methodology

2.1 Design

A categorical instrument developed by the researchers was divided into three sections: in-line observations prior to the store opening, store entry observations, and individual customer observations. Each instrument also provided an open-ended item for observers to record general consumer comments heard in-line and in the store. Operational definitions were developed by the researchers by adapting previous research by Ekman (1992), Gottman, et al. (1995), and Lee and Dubinsky (2003). After receiving university approval for the instrument, a pilot test was conducted. Nine items were developed for the in-line observation and measured the approximate number of customers waiting for the doors to open, the overall emotions and behaviors exhibited by the customers, the presence and absence of shopping companions, and customer demographics. Cronbach's alpha, a coefficient of reliability, was computed for the in-line section items. Results revealed an alpha coefficient of .81, indicating that the section had good reliability.

Seventeen individual items measured the emotions and behaviors of customers as a group upon store entry. Observers circled the approximate percentage of customers that exhibited each behavior under question (e.g., courteous, punching, tripping, cart bumping). Percentages were presented to the observers as categories; each category represented 10% of the consumers (e.g., 0-10%, 11-20%, 21-30%). Other items in the "store entry" section of the instrument assessed the number of customers who fell down or were injured, the length of time the chaos upon store opening lasted, and the products sought by customers once inside the store. Products sought by consumers were measured in the same manner that behaviors were, that is, using categories of percentages. Cronbach's alpha was .73 for the store entry observations section. Individual consumer behavior instrument items included gender, age, and the emotions and behaviors exhibited by the individual shopper. Observers circled emotions and behaviors that individual shoppers displayed from a list of 15 potential emotions and 20 potential behaviors. Cronbach's alpha was .70 for the individual customer behavior items. Undergraduate and graduate students serving on the observation team attended two three-hour training sessions. Each observer selected her or his own retail store as an observation site. Upon arrival at the store, observers documented in-line customer behavior. When the doors to the retail store were opened, observers documented the emotions and behavior of consumers upon store entry. After the "rush" during store entry, the observers selected one consumer and documented her or his emotions and behavior. Observers continued recording until ten observations of individual consumer emotions and behavior were completed.

3. Results and Discussion

Overall, 22 observers completed 222 individual observations. Chronbach's alpha coefficient was computed to establish the reliability of the instrument. Cronbach's alpha coefficient values range from 0 to 1, with higher numbers indicating stronger reliability. Results revealed an alpha of .40, indicating low, but acceptable, reliability. The dimensionality of the individual behavior item measure was analyzed using an exploratory factor analysis with an orthogonal rotated factor solution (i.e., varimax) to maximize the variances of the factors. Findings indicated that the items accounted for 65% of the total variance within in-line behaviors and revealed 11 factors with eigen values greater than one.

However, quite a few of the items cross-loaded onto more than one factor so subsequent factor analyses were conducted, removing items that cross-loaded until the results revealed eight “clean” factors (without any cross-loadings). An eight factor solution accounted for 62% of the total variance, which is adequate for an instrument of this nature. However, behaviors were analyzed individually, as opposed to in categories, as the researchers were primarily interested in the frequencies of individual behaviors displayed on Black Friday.

3.1 Gender-Based Comparisons of Shoppers

Two way contingency table analyses with Chi-squares were conducted to determine whether males or females were more likely to exhibit any of the behaviors under consideration while shopping. As supported by previous literature (Omnitel, 2006), findings indicated that females were more likely than males to exhibit happiness $X^2(1, N = 221) = 7.09, p = .008, \Phi = .18$. (Note: Φ or “phi” can be computed much like a correlation coefficient. Traditionally, phis of .10, .30, and .50 represent small, medium, and large effect sizes, respectively). More specifically, 31% of females exhibited happiness compared to only 13.3% of males.

3.2 In-Line and Store Entry Customer Behaviors

Fourteen stores opened at 6am and seven opened at 5am. A majority (80%) of observers noted more than 50 customers in-line when the stores opened. When the doors to the stores opened, 52% of the observers reported that the ensuing chaos lasted up to 30 minutes, while only 14% noted chaos for more than 30 minutes. Nineteen-percent of the observers reported that some of the customers “fell down or appeared injured” when the store opened. Observers recorded customer comments as they waited in-line for stores to open. Customers discussed and reminisced about “how bad the last Black Friday was.” Conversations also related to the actual physical presence of the shoppers in-line, for example, “this line’s getting long,” or “how many people are in-line?” Observers noted confusion amongst the shoppers about which line was appropriate or what doors of the store to enter first. Observers noted frustration and aggravation amongst the customers and recorded statements such as “Idiots!” and “I’ve been here all night, I’m going home.” Other customers expressed thoughts and feelings such as, “Are we crazy our what?” and “This is an awfully strange way to spend a morning!” Other observations included in-line customers arguing with police officers, young children cursing at people in-line, and the people at the end of the line were mad and rude. Observers also indicated that news crews were at the scene reporting on a nearby car accident and the lack of parking availability.

3.3 Individual Customer Observations

Individual observations lasted up to 65 minutes with the average individual observation lasting 7.14 minutes ($SD = 5.52$). Of the shoppers observed, 73% were female and 27% were male. Observers most often reported calmness (47%), courteousness (32%), happiness (27%), and excitement (24%) among the shoppers. The most often observed negative customer behaviors or emotions included anxiety (25%), irritability (24%), and tiredness (23%) (See Table 1). Observers indicated that 60% of the shoppers appeared to have a specific product in mind, particularly electronic media items, such as DVDs, DVD players, televisions, digital cameras, digital photo frames, Wii, Playstation3, and X-box games. It appeared that 59% of the shoppers appeared to purchase an item because it was on sale, while 60% appeared to purchase a gift item. Just under one-third (29%) of the shoppers appeared to purchase items for themselves. It appeared that 18% of the shoppers examined product labels and 25% of the shoppers compared products and prices.

3.4 Customer Perceptions and Reactions Related to Employees and Store Environments

“No one knows nothing.” Despite the poor grammar, this statement reflected some of shoppers’ perceptions about the stores and staff during Black Friday sales. Other comments included “There’s no sign. That’s stupid!”, “Now I need to spend more to buy the bag?”, and “My coupon has expired and that’s not the rebate advertised.” Negative commentary about the prices, logistics, signage, and helpfulness of the stores and their employees were also observed emotions of some Black Friday shoppers. One frustrated shopper was angry as employees were bringing out more of the “sold out” items and placing these items in various locations throughout the store. Another customer negotiated with a salesperson for a substitute of an unavailable product. Later, the same frustrated shopper had to seek out the price checker for improperly labeled DVDs. Overall, the emotions and behavior of the Black Friday shopper appeared to be calm (47%), courteous (32%), happy (27%), yet observers also witnessed anxiety (25%) and irritability (24%). Unfortunately, these negative emotions could result in potentially dangerous behaviors which pose a safety concern for store personnel and other shoppers.

4. Implications and Summary

Based on these findings, increased education and training of store personnel prior to Black Friday would serve in the retailer’s best interest. Store management and personnel should be clear about merchandise location, coupon procedures, and expected customer emotions and behaviors upon store opening.

Retailers should also ensure correct product labeling and courteous and friendly approaches of customers on the part of store employees. While the results of the current study may not be generalized to all stores, the findings provide a clearer picture of the emotions and behaviors of the Black Friday shopper. Furthermore, the findings provide implications for safety and well being for consumers and employees and creating a customer service oriented philosophy and approach. Educators in the areas of consumer studies, retailing, and merchandising should take note of these findings and incorporate effective retailing and customer relation strategies in their curriculum. This could be achieved through role playing or having students visit local retail stores to evaluate the store personnel and product placement.

Previous Black Friday research has focused on numbers of consumers, types of purchases, shopping locations, average dollar amount spent, and online shopping behavior (National Retail Federation, 2008) and is focused from a business perspective. In addition, this research is not published in academic literature. . Our study provides merit for reaching beyond trend research to include a greater emphasis on human emotion and behavior. For instance, Luo (2005) found a relationship between the presence of shopping companions and the influence on a shopper's choice to purchase an item. Further examination of the influence of shopping companions, specifically on overall Black Friday customer behavior, could provide insight on other shopping behaviors, such as emotion and aggression. In addition, aggressive consumer behavior and consumer safety issues garners attention in media, and along with the current economic climate, could be areas targeted in research. Aggressive consumer behavior will continue to draw much attention and speculation; therefore, continued research will provide a formal, factual, and in-depth examination of the Black Friday consumer behavior phenomenon and provide valuable recommendations and implications for the retail industry and consumer experts.

Table 1 : Individual customer behavioral observations

Observed behavior when store opened	% of observers that reported seeing individual customers exhibit the behavior under consideration
Anger	8.6
Anxiety	25.2
Belligerence	2.7
Boredom	9.9
Calmness	47.3
Courteousness	32.0
Disgust	8.1
Distress	9.0
Excitement	24.3
Happiness	26.6
Irritability	24.3
Sadness	0.5
Tension	12.6
Tiredness	23.4
Whining	7.7
Aggression	6.8
Dominance	9.0
Fear	3.2
Irritable aggression	9.9
Territorial aggression	8.6
Maternal/paternal aggression	1.4
Cart bumping	8.1
Choking	0.0
Cursing	5.0
Grabbing products	22.1
Grabbing other customers	0.9
Holding other customers	0.0
Kicking	0.5
Name calling	0.9
Punching	0.5
Pushing	5.9
Shoving	3.2
Tripping	0.0
Used weapons	0.0
Yelling	10.4

*Note: Percentages indicate the percentage of observers that witnessed the individual they were observing exhibit the behavior/emotion under investigation.

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