

# SENSORY MARKETING

WHAT DOES THE CUSTOMER WANT,  
WITHOUT KNOWING IT?

2017

Appealing to consumers' sensory levels, often without them being aware of it, is becoming an important factor to marketing success and may become even more popular with marketers in the future as research continues to uncover additional evidence that can be used to nudge, in subconscious ways, customers toward a certain product.

Companies increasingly are resorting to sensory marketing not only to differentiate from the competition but also to influence customers subconsciously and to make a subliminal bonding. Sensory marketing refers to marketing that appeals to our senses (seeing, hearing, touching, smelling and tasting). An interesting aspect of sensory marketing is that it influences customers who are oblivious to its influence. Like these examples:

- Singapore Airlines is a pioneer in introducing a signature scent (Stefan Floridian Waters) that has an unconscious relaxing effect for airline passengers. Other airlines like Delta and United have more recently tried out similar ambient scent strategies.
- Dunkin' Donuts installed scent emitters in buses in South Korea that emitted the scent of Dunkin' Donuts coffee. Dunkin' Donuts near bus stops noticed a significant rise in sales to people getting off the buses at those stops.

- Grocery stores almost always place the milk and the eggs at the back so that customers have to walk through the entire store; research also shows that browsing through a store and spending more time in a store correlates with higher purchase likelihood.
- A study in a Stockholm, Sweden café observing the changing volume of the ambient music showed a changed pattern of sales. Specifically, low (versus high) volume ambient music enhanced relaxation levels of the café patrons, which in turn increased sales of healthy foods (such as salads and baked items) in comparison to unhealthy items (such as cakes and other desserts).

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While certain sensory elements attract some people, they will turn others away. Abercrombie & Fitch uses high volume music, intense scent and dim lighting in their stores. These sensory elements tend to attract pre-teen and teens but deter older adults. In fact, most adults find the ambient scent and music volume at Abercrombie & Fitch quite repulsive.

## TARGETING A MARKET IS KEY

The market landscape is complicated and its marketing, subtle. While sensory marketing lures customers, branding also plays a part in prying revenue from wallets.

But the branding landscape also is complex. The same product can mean different things to different people, especially in the global setting. While in the United States, McDonald's is perceived as a "cheap fast-food" brand, in many Asian countries, it has a more prestigious standing and is often perceived as an "American food" brand, which has more positive connotations than "cheap fast-food" positioning.

Sometimes these different perceptions provide different status orientations to brands from country to country. Eating dinner on Christmas at Kentucky Fried Chicken is a widespread phenomenon in Japan; so reservations for Christmas dinner at KFC are needed months in advance. Hence, a customer for KFC in Japan is different from a KFC customer in Louisville, Kentucky, home of the chicken chain.

Contextual factors, such as those related to geography or weather, require positioning the same brand differently for different customer groups. A Subaru customer in the Northeast places more of an emphasis on all-wheel drive while a Subaru customer in Florida would not care much about this feature.

So, not surprisingly, Subaru commercials in New England use the campaign tagline of "All Wheel Drive is All I'll Drive" while no such captions are used in Subaru commercials in Florida or Arizona.

When trying to think what the targeted customer looks like, marketers often must think like a political candidate. Political campaigns and candidates recognize the importance of focusing on their core constituencies while often ignoring (or even antagonizing) everyone else. In other words, no brand can be everything for everyone.

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In fact, many of the strongest and most loved brands are also the most hated (just like in politics). Apple and Starbucks have some of the most loyal customer bases and at the same time these brands are often the most despised by others consumers. In essence, the most loved brands are often the most polarizing.

So, identifying the customer is key to successful marketing. Loyal customers have similarities in terms of psychographic, behavioral, psychological and sometimes demographic profiles. In the past, customers often were targeted based on demographics, such as age, gender, race and education level. More recent trends point to psychographic and behavioral factors as being more accurate predictors of customers. Psychographic factors refer to a combination of psychological mindset and demographic factors.

For example, a person living in a certain zip code (e.g., 90210), and with the mindset of flaunting luxury is more likely to buy a Lamborghini than a Corolla.



## WHAT THE CUSTOMER WANTS DEPENDS ON WHO HE/SHE IS

The loyal customer is largely determined by what is offered. Again, going back to the political example, a politician promising free tuition, will appeal a certain group of people, while a politician promising a border wall might appeal to a different segment of the population. As in politics, for most types of brands, the customer segments often are mutually exclusive. There is a reason Axe and Dove are never portrayed together, even though they are manufactured by the same company (Unilever). This is because, with its “crude ads,” Axe targets young male customers while Dove, with its positioning on the “real beauty” campaign, appeals to females.

So, in trying to figure out who the customer might be, marketers need to focus hard on what they’re offering and whether the product offerings can be made appealing to a substantial segment of the market. It is noteworthy, though, that customers don’t always know what they want (or at least may not be able to articulate their wants). But, they are likely to want a new offering if it truly meets their needs. As Henry Ford is rumored to have said:

“If I had asked people what they want, they would have asked me to build faster horses.”

Identifying customer mindsets was important then, and even more so now and that’s where “big data” can be beneficial. Data captured on a person using certain search terms on Google and then clicking on a series of websites, reveals important insights into this person’s psychographic profile and what he or she is looking for. However, as several anecdotal incidents highlight, big data – or any data – should not be blindly relied upon. In many instances, acute judgments from successful managers should supplement raw data.

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Running experiments is another way to understand what the customer is seeking and what factors might influence those customers. A major casual dining chain recently undertook an experiment in which it changed the lighting level inside its restaurants. The results of this experiment showed that eateries with dim lights had higher degree of unhealthy food ordering. As this example highlights, customers’ preferences can often be influenced by subtle ambient factors.

## BUILDING COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE AND STAYING AHEAD OF THE CURVE/TREND

Given the wide variety of options customers have, why should they patronize one particular business over another? One common theme for all successful companies is that they offer their customers some unique benefits that help satisfy needs. Companies like Apple and Google have been immensely successful because the offerings from these companies are not only truly unique, they satisfy important consumer needs; moreover, the offered benefits are innovative and ahead of the curve.

For companies that are successful, it is important not to fall into the trap of the “incumbent’s curse” whereby the market leader develops the mindset of “if it’s not broken, don’t fix it.” Sony, once a market leader in consumer electronics and perceived to be unbeatable was subsequently toppled by Apple and Samsung mainly because Sony did not innovate



to the extent that Apple and Samsung did. Nokia, Kodak, Blockbuster, and Barnes & Noble are other prominent examples of one-time market leaders failing to innovate and foreseeing trends and subsequently falling behind.

## THE ROAD AHEAD

Going forward, there will be increasing trends towards obtaining physiological data inputs from customers without the customers being fully aware of it. For instance, eye tracking devices are becoming quite prevalent. These devices give objective data on what's attracting customer eyeballs; which advertisements, videos, photos or displays catch their attention, usually without the customer even aware their eyes are being tracked.

The public these days increasingly is relying on mobile technology to find businesses to patronize, opening up a new method of marketing.

As it always has been, companies that can foresee the future trends before the trends actually happen, are likely to be successful and live to market another day.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dipayan Biswas is a professor of marketing at the University of South Florida's Muma College of Business. He teaches an undergraduate-level course in basic marketing, graduate-level courses in brand management and a PhD-level course in sensory and experiential aspects of marketing. His key research interests include sensory marketing (with focus on retail atmospherics, healthful consumption related to foods/beverages, and sensory aspects of brands), behavioral judgment and decision-making, and digital marketing. Several of his research projects focus on consumption related to food, beverages (alcoholic and non-alcoholic) and scents. His research has been published/forthcoming in the Journal of Consumer Research, Journal of Marketing, and Journal of Marketing Research, among others. Biswas is associate editor of the Journal of Business Research.

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