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TOWARDS A NEW MODEL OF CONSUMER'S COMPETENCIES THROUGH THE APPLICATION OF THE SMELL WEB: THE "EXHALIA PROJECT"

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This communication reports on the progress of a research based on a conceptual analysis of consumer's competencies, as defined in marketing research and aims at proposing a new model of competencies for a better understanding of the value created by the consumer and the firm. The conceptual framework is illustrated by the use of the Smell Web (Exhalia Project). This illustration is elaborated from a secondary exploitation of a qualitative research. This communication takes into account the polysemy of the notion of competence and tries to contribute to the enrichment of current theoretical and managerial works on value co-creation.

Key words: Competence, consumer, marketing, management, smell web

Introduction

The Service Dominant dominant logic (S-D Logic) introduced by Vargo and Lusch (Vargo and Lush, 2004; Lusch and Vargo, 2006; Vargo and Lusch, 2008), by contrast with a product dominant logic (G-D Logic) centred on the maximization of the profit and the efficiency of the functions of production and marketing, offers a theoretical anchoring to current phenomena like co-conception, co-production, co-determination or co-innovation of services.

Indeed, for these authors, the consumer is always a co-creator of value (Vargo and Lusch, 2008a). Their opinions stand in contrast to views of conventional marketing, which targets and captures consumers. More exactly, the dominant logic of service suggests that the value creation is the result of a combined effect of "operant resources", defined as a set of knowledge, skills, expertise, ability, activated both by the company and the consumer (Vargo and Lusch, 2008b). However, for Brown (2007), S-D Logic suffers from the absence of empirical evidence which would permit to enrich the knowledge on the way the consumers engage themselves in a co-creation process.

Hilton and Hughes (2008) suggest that value co-creation is the output of a series of tasks realized partially by the consumer. Thus, an intermediate stage has to be considered by companies which try to manage better the process of value co-creation: the consumer task performance. The analysis of this preliminary stage is all the more crucial, in a context where the coproduction of service, component of value co-creation (Vargo and Lusch, 2008a) widespread via self-service technologies (eg. Forbes, Lukas, 2008; Cunningham et al., 2008; Reinders et al., 2008; Curran and Meuter, 2007). Indeed, consumers are playing such an increasingly active part in the production and delivery of goods and services that they sometimes, at least partly, stand in for distributors, booking and printing their plane tickets on the Internet, choosing and creating fragrances on the web...All those activities requiring some "operant resources". These new elements involve for companies the necessity to build frameworks to understand which knowledge, know-

how or abilities their consumers require and how these latter acquire them in order to build associated learning curves (Hilton and Hughes, 2008). However, the concept of "operant resources" does not seem relevant enough to report completely the dynamics of realization of these tasks from the point of view of the consumer. Indeed, it consists of some number of heterogeneous elements (abilities, knowledge, know-how, expertise) among which the structure, the contents, the links which they maintain remain relatively vague. The notion of competence seems to be more relevant to re-articulate the diverse elements composing the concept of "operant resources".

What does mean the fact that consumers bring into play competence in general way and, more specifically, in the context of sensorial marketing (Rieunier et al., 2006) ? In this framework, how can one understand a consumer experience or the activity that consists in choosing and consuming a product or service? This paper aims at clarifying the idea of consumer competence and enhancing current theories on the topic.

First, the focus will be on marketing research integrating the idea of competence and research in the management and education sciences in order to propose a lens through which the competencies consumers use can be read. Then, we propose to illustrate the analysis through the use of "Exhalia smell Web" which requires special customer competencies.

1. The consumer, a competent actor

1.1. Consumer competence: a poor conceptualisation in marketing research

Eight theoretical currents (lead users, meet of service, resistance of the consumer, experience of consumption, consumers' communities, consumer empowerment, consumer agency, working consumers) shaped the face of the consumer co-worker (Cova and Dalli, 2009). If each of these currents takes a different epistemological otherwise ontological point of view and distinguish themselves by the aspects of the activity of the consumer analyzed (generation of ideas, coproduction of the service, immaterial work, production of narrative, etc.), they form, however a rather complete and composite reading framework. Furthermore, beyond the heterogeneousness of these theories, the notion of competence seems to be the tacit common denominator.

The consumer empowerment movement (Denegri-Knott, Zwick and Schroeder, 2006) advocates rebalancing power in the relationship and urging consumers to take responsibility. In this scenario they have more control over their choices and the relationship by taking part in defining its terms. In the consumer agency current (Arnould and Thomson, 2005), consumers restructure the narrative of the theatre performance in which they participate. That performance requires them to create meaning for their consumption activity and for its movement in a given market world based on narrative resources they explain. The working consumer current (Zwick, Bonsu and Darmody, 2008) met underscores the deviant form of co-creation viewed as a two-pronged approach enticing consumers to implement their ability to re-appropriate the capital and means of production traditionally held by the company. The idea of the company and customers orchestrating competencies and resources lies at the core of those theories, but no sound conceptualisation of them exists yet (MacDonald and Uncles, 2007). After developing conceptual thoughts about competencies brought into play in consumption activities by

consumers, we will describe which competencies are required when firms implement sensorial marketing tools.

1.2. A proposed conceptual framework of consumption activities through the lens of competencies consumers bring into play

1.2.1. A dynamic view of competence or the “process-competence”

In the framework of consumption, we propose viewing process-competence as a set of known facts, know-how, practices and behaviours mobilised in a given situation that involves two sets of equipment (Le Boterf, 1994) consumers draw upon in order to collaborate. First comes the equipment incorporated in their person, defined in marketing mainly as their *cultural, physiological or individual resources* (Arnould, Price and Malshe, 2006; Baron and Harris, 2008), but also *social resources* defined as family relationships, consumer communities, commercial relationships (Mac Donald and Uncles, 2007). Works in the education sciences focusing in particular on technology training (Courtois, Thomas, 2003; Mottet, 2007) enable us to add *notional* and *communicational* resources to this classification. It underscores the idea of "notions" - ideas or thought patterns helping to open up questioning, orientate observation or understanding, direct analysis, organise space and time or guide action choices.

The communicational resources incorporated into consumer competence might include the ability to speak the same language as the supplier, seller or after-sales service department, make appropriate complaints, warn about dangerous products or consumer situations, give opinions, and vote or communicate on the product by relying on various media. Communicational resources can take the form of collaborative resources involving bilateral, interactive communication on, for example, the creation of personalised products. Finally, we can add, the *financial & material resources* (money and loans available for consumption).

Consumers also draw upon their environment, including family relationships, friendships and consumer communities (Arnould et al., 2006), in addition to the *commercial resources* (like communication channels, physical and technical materials, product and service offers), which they integrate into their own resources in order to co-create their experience.

1.2.2. A static vision or the “end competence”

Competence lies in consumers' ability to tap different resources, taking the form of various competent behaviours relating in particular to the consumption situation they are faced with, whether they are interacting with the company or not.

Those competent behaviours or “end competencies” include:

- *Cognitive competence* involving, in marketing, the ability to decode companies' messages and advertisements (Macdonald and Uncles, 2007) as well as the cognitive efforts made (Alba and Hutchinson, 1987; Passebois and Aurier, 2004) in the act of purchasing (search for information, creation of meaning, knowledge of rights and responsibilities). This type of competence can be found in the education sciences under

the term *cognitive* or *informational competence*¹, which are defined as the ability to identify the possible nature, scope and sources of information required; find the information effectively and efficiently; read, understand and memorise it; assess its usefulness, relevance and quality; effectively and efficiently organise it; and monitor it. The customer's *cognitive competencies* are the ability to read, interpret, memorise and organise product information.

- *Competence* that could be termed *instrumental*. It involves the consumer's ability to handle "physical" products before, during and after consumption; tools belonging to consumers (computers, peripherals, cables) available in their environment (Tricot, 2006); online computer tools; company-provided social media such as YouTube, Facebook or Twitter; interactive terminals; websites; tools letting people create their own personal products; and representation tools (labels, invoices, estimates, schedules of specifications, instructions, electronic meters, etc.). This definition is proposed by some marketing researchers who prefer taking a broader approach. To them, consumers' instrumental competencies echo the coordinated, masterful use of a technique, technology or know-how to perform another task, such as verbalising expectations understandable by the company (Lüthje, 2004). Bringing instrumental competence into play might also involve relying on a certain number of social resources, such as friendships, professional relationships or online networks (Macdonald and Uncles, 2007) in order to reach a given goal: use of the term *relational competencies* seems appropriate here.

- *Competence more directly connected to the use* of a product, service or media (Internet), which helps to open up access to a legitimate message about the product, service or media in question or even to propose other uses and functions. Von Hippel (1978, 1986, 1999, 2005; Béji-Bécheur and Gollety, 2007) and, more recently, Berthon et al. (2007), in particular, have done marketing research on those competencies. They are similar to the idea of *metacognitive competence* (Mottet, 2006), which involves implementing creative abilities: creating new representations, fresh knowledge and heuristic solutions to practical issues dealing with consumption and shifting meanings or creating new ones.

We have sought to classify customers' competence for a better understanding of consumer activities generated by purchasing, subscribing to, using and experiencing a product or service, but they are not implemented in isolation from one another. They are interdependent. For example, *instrumental competencies* depend on prior knowledge of the technical tools' functions (notional resources) and the ability to mobilise them (in other words accumulated *cognitive competencies*) depending on the market situations consumers live.

1.2.3. A conceptual framework

The resources mobilised must be identified in order to distinguish those competencies. They consist of knowledge, know-how, practices and behaviour patterns

¹By information we mean any form of explicit and tacit knowledge (oral, written, visual, sound, video, smell, etc.) from any source (human or media) transmitted by any means (print, electronic, local, networks, etc.).

used in a given situation, whereas competencies lie in individuals' ability to tap various resources in each of those areas. With regard to the dynamic and static visions of the competence and as we try to describe it in figure 1., consumption-related activities can be understood as bringing into play a certain number of instrumental, relational, cognitive, use or metacognitive 'end competencies' stemming from the consumer's own notional, cultural, communicational, collaborative and physiological resources available in his or her environment whether it is commercial (communication channels, technical tools for interacting with the company) or not (social resources, including online) and from which individuals draw in order to consume.

2. One illustration of our conceptual framework

We present in this paper the illustration associated with the resources integrated and the competencies activated by the customer in the framework of the Exhalia project implementation.

2.1. Research method

We choose to elaborate the illustration in order to show the multiple integrated resources mobilized by the consumer and competent behaviours he could activate in some situations of consumption and in particular to create value-in use around sensorial marketing tools.

The illustration was built from the project "Exhalia" launched by the R&D of France Telecom in 2003 in which we participated, which is re-analysed through our conceptual framework of the consumer competence. Thus, we proceeded to a secondary analysis of qualitative materials (Dargentas et al. 2009). Indeed, this type of analysis presents some interest to improve the qualitative research by allowing the accumulation of knowledge thanks to a new questioning of the set of data.

The Exhalia "Smell Web" project was elaborated with the researcher as both the designer of this project and producer of marketing knowledge. In this way, the researcher contributes to the emergence of new scientific representations and knowledge which are procedural and non-substantive, and which aim to provide a guide to "organisational engineers" and which can subsequently be used by other companies to solve complex problems. Thus, our experience in designing marketing and R&D projects, allows us to propose methodological reference in the framework of projects co-built with a firm (Curbatov, 2009). More precisely, two types of study were conducted:

- qualitative tests in 2003-2004 for the study of uses and perceptions, people's behaviour towards this innovation at France Telecom's R&D Department;
- an empirical study, conducted in 2005-2009 at the IUT in Saint-Denis-University Paris 13 to validate the conceptual aspects of *Knowledge Marketing*.

This research was carried out thanks to the scientific partnership between the City of Grasse and the France Telecom R&D division, based on research work.

2.2. Using the « Exhalia Smell Web »: project Exhalia

The *Exhalia* concept aims to:

- diffuse fragrances in synch with data, images and/or sound, transmitted by a telecommunications network;
- perfume the content of the Internet, television, web, DVD in real time, but more generally, all telecommunication and multimedia forms.



The www.exhalia.com portal, created and managed by France Telecom R&D in 2003 and transferred to Exhalia Corporate in 2004, federates olfactory sites and multimedia forms. Several professionals from the worlds of perfumery, gastronomy, education, relaxing video companies, project partners, wish to try it out on their respective sites by including a 'scented' dimension such as city of Grasse. In order to promote the image of the world capital of perfume and this tourist "product", the city of Grasse perfumed six web pages of www.ville-grasse.fr with the specific city fragrances (rose, jasmine, lavender, thyme-rosemary, etc.) associated to places of interest (fields of roses and lavenders, culinary recipes) or to the main events (the Jasminade Party or the 'Exporose' trade shows). Instrumental competencies are required on behalf of the consumer to use relevantly the equipment which diffuses fragrances and to be able to navigate through scented websites. The use of the site also implies the involvement of cognitive competencies (to read, to memorize information, to recognize perfumes, to create a knowledge on "usages" of the city) which beforehand require the mobilization of notional and social resources (main notions about perfumes, knowledge about the main tourist places and about the actors of the tourism in Grasse) and commercial ones (images, texts presented on the perfumed web site). The creation, the "composition" of his personal touristic road trip from the city of Grasse's smell website means finally the activation of metacognitive or use competencies (see table 1.)

Conclusion: originality and limits

Following Vargo and Lush (2004), we argue that value resides in consumer actions, interactions, projects (Schau et al., 2009) that acquired resources and brought into play competencies make possible or support. However, these resources and competencies have not been clearly linked and overall classified to highlight the different forms of value created. A theoretical model of consumption activities based on the concept of competence and the typology of resources and competencies which it implies enables to enrich the current marketing works. Thus, the main contribution of this conceptual analysis lies in proposing a detailed and dynamic model of consumer competence going beyond the cognitive expertise concept (Alba and Hutchinson, 1987). This conceptual framework shows that competence is a dynamic process rather than a static state. It stems from the mobilization of consumers' own various resources (notional, physiological, sensorial, individual or social, communicational, cultural, and financial) and of those the

company provides and their mobilization results in three main types of competencies: instrumental, cognitive, and use or metacognitive.

Table 1

Examples of resources and competencies brought into play by the Exhalia consumer

SmellWeb	Integrated resources	Competencies brought into play
City of Grasse	<p><i>Notional resources:</i> notions about perfumes and about specific associated touristic web sites (about areas, food, festivities...)</p> <p><i>Social resources:</i> knowledge about the main tourist places and about the main actors of the tourism in Grasse</p> <p><i>Cultural resources:</i> specific knowledge about the city of Grasse's perfumes</p> <p><i>Physiological, sensorial resources:</i> physical conditions linked with fragrances perception and sensorial emotions</p> <p><i>Commercial resources (channels of communication):</i> website and tourism offices, events created by the city</p> <p><i>Financial and material resources:</i> equipment to diffuse perfumes, diffuseur de parfums, driver, computer, Internet connexion</p>	<p><i>Instrumental competence:</i> Capacity to navigate through the website of the city (6 smell websites) using the required equipment</p> <p><i>Relational competence:</i> Capacity to contact tourism offices or the website administrator</p> <p><i>Cognitive competencies:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Informational competence:</i> Capacity to process information provided by the website simultaneously with fragrances diffusion • <i>Use competencies:</i> Capacity to download from the city website and from perfumed pages documents and to use them • <i>Metacognitive competence:</i> Capacity to create its own road trip in Grasse • <i>Metacognitive competence:</i> Capacity to make the link between fragrances and websites to be able to create its own road trip

The specific case of using the smell web shows that consumers have to mobilize more than in other consumption situations, intangible resources (physiological and sensorial ones) in order to be able to use it advisedly. It highlights the importance for marketers to involve consumers very early in the process of smell web conception and to develop new methodologies to benefit from this customer tacit knowledge (Curbatov, 2003). Thus, in our opinion, this conception of competence enable to understand more what the consumer "makes" in the activities bound to the consumption of a product or a service. This conceptual and operational framework of analysis could help organizations to combine better consumers' resources with their own resources to design multisensory applications like smell web or more generally, products, services, self-services technologies, etc...

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Боннемезон А. По направлению к новой модели компетентностей потребителя через применение Сети Запаха: “Проект Exhalia”/ А. Боннемезон, О. Курбатов, М.Л. Галише // Ученые записки ТНУ. Серия: Экономика и управление. – 2009. – Т. 22 (61), № 2. – С. 390-398.

В статье представлено продвижение исследования, основанного на концептуальном анализе компетентностей потребителя, как определено в маркетинговом исследовании, и ставится цель предложения новой модели компетентностей для лучшего понимания стоимости, созданной потребителем и фирмой. Концептуальная структура представлена посредством Сети Запаха (Проект Exhalia). Эта иллюстрация разработана вторичной эксплуатацией качественного исследования. Статья принимает во внимание многозначность понятия компетентности и пытается способствовать обогащению текущих теоретических и организаторских работ по созданию ценности.

Ключевые слова: компетентность, потребитель, маркетинг, управление, Сеть Запаха.

Боннемезон А. У напрямку до нової моделі компетентностей споживача через вживання Мережі Запаху: “Проект Exhalia”/ А. Боннемезон, О. Курбатов, М.Л. Галише // Вчені записки ТНУ. Серія: Економіка та управління. – 2009. – Т. 22 (61), № 2. – С. 390-398.

У статті представлено просування дослідження, заснованого на концептуальному аналізі компетентностей споживача, як визначено в маркетинговому дослідженні, і ставиться мета пропозиції нової моделі компетентностей для кращого розуміння вартості, створеної споживачем і фірмою. Концептуальна структура представлена за допомогою Мережі Запаху (Проект Exhalia). Ця ілюстрація розроблена вторинною експлуатацією якісного дослідження. Стаття бере до уваги багатозначність поняття компетентності і намагається сприяти збагаченню поточних теоретичних і організаторських робіт із створення цінності.

Ключові слова: компетентність, споживач, маркетинг, управління, Мережа Запаху.