



## ***Balancing clicks and bricks – strategies for multichannel retailers***

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper focuses on retailers who operate in the multichannel environment, and how they can compete to achieve business success. The synthesis of the primary data and the literature review was distilled down to five main themes of pricing, online strategy, new media, online transactional barriers and social commerce. It is recommended that multichannel retailers aim to achieve a seamless integration of their brand across the channels that they contest. They must get the right mix of bricks and clicks, which could include divesting traditional stores to achieve business advantage from an appropriate cost base. Consider the corporate website to be the ultimate retail flagship store, immersing the shopper in an experience utilising emergent new media. The compelling point of differentiation should be consistent with traditional retailing for those that operate across channels, with supreme customer service viewed as a qualifier. Absolute price leadership is not necessary if the differentiation of the offering is clearly communicated and accepted, but pricing must be competitive and reflect the value added by the retailer. Barriers to online transactions must be understood and countered to avoid losing customers before the purchasing decision has been finalised. The effects of social networking and shopping are as yet unknown, but there is a clear need for multichannel and pureplay retailers to have a strategy in place to take full advantage of these areas in the future.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

As we enter a new era with the Internet 2.0, or “Bubble 2.0” (The Economist 2005) the paradigm of a global customer base has shifted from a privilege to a right for all retailers if they so wish. Due to the development of the internet the whole value chain from manufacturer to end consumer has also radically changed. The customer has been empowered by the digital revolution (Chaston, 2001), allowing easy comparison of prices and products that diminishes the power held further up the value chain from traditional retailers in the form of information asymmetry. The internet has facilitated the compression of spatial distance, time and knowledge (Carnoy and Castells, 2001). The balance has been tipped in favour of the customer over the retailer, and profit margin percentage points are slipping lower and lower (Priluck, 2001). However, on a more positive note, looking at the opportunities of the internet, Pyle (1996) noted that the channel would “open up new avenues for business”, for those that saw it’s potential as an opportunity not a threat.

The aim of the research project was to explore the varying multi-channel strategies and tactics employed by online retailers in the fashion clothing and electronic good sectors to provide insights into some of the key factors for their business success.

### **FASHION AND CONSUMER ELECTRONIC GOODS SECTORS**

From a top level perspective, the consumer electronic goods market is converging towards a commoditised trading zone (Williams and Tilley, 1996). The fashion clothing sector is completely opposite as the products sold are highly individual and rely on a highly complex route to market along the supply chain (Tyler *et al.*, 2006). This stark contrast between the two sectors allows analysis of surprising commonalities as well as apparent differentials. According to a recent Forrester report by Mendelsohn (2007), consumer electronic goods have the highest amount of volume sales in the multichannel retail category. They have held this position for a number of years and are predicted to remain in this position for the next six years, and thus can be considered to be at least one of the most important and representative sector within retail. Using Mendelsohn’s statistics, the second sector of fashion clothing is ranked fifth in volume of sales. This is a massive leap from a small starting base outside the top ten ranking only five years ago. The early movers on the internet did not have significant success from marketing clothes on the internet and the perceived wisdom of the day was that fashion wouldn’t work online and was best left to the high street. Start-up entrants to the online fashion clothing



market such as [www.ASOS.com](http://www.ASOS.com) (As Seen On Screen) and [www.net-a-porter.com](http://www.net-a-porter.com) have dispelled this myth and reported double digit sales growth for the past three years since inception. With zero physical store presence they have led the web based challenge to market leading retailers, such as Topshop and Gap, to simultaneously provide the same market positioning they differentiate with on the high street (Strategic Direction, 2005) and translate it on the internet.

Although the two retail sectors appear to be completely different, it is apparent that they do share an initial barrier for immediate purchase by the consumer. Mendelsohn describes "tangible confirmation" as the primary reason behind a consumer viewing a product online and wishing to see the screen size or image clarity in person. Similarly with fashion clothing, consumers seek tangible confirmation that the size and fit of the clothing will be appropriate. If the largest online retail sector has high ticket, large consideration purchases driving it, then the contention that fashion clothing with lower ticket price and lower consideration purchases being ill suited to online shopping must be examined further. Retail strategy consultancy group OC&C (2004) produced an industry report, stating that apparel and groceries were not suited to online shopping and did not foresee any widespread success for retailers entering this field. Four years is a long time in the history of online shopping, and even the most ardent opposers to shopping online would seemingly have to admire the world class home grocery delivery service at the UK supermarket [www.tesco.com](http://www.tesco.com), now selling their proprietary knowledge across the globe in the form of consultancy (Wilson-Jeanselme and Reynolds, 2006).

### RETAIL SALES GROWTH

Finding a definitive set of data for the growth and market share of online shopping is problematic. The disagreement over which sales to include (inter alia Ebay items, service items, aeroplane tickets and catalogue sales) is apparent between Governments and private research companies such as Verdict and Forrester Research.

The US Census Bureau News (2007) view "E-commerce sales are sales of goods and services...negotiated over the internet...payment may or may not be made online". Using this definition we can see some interesting headline figures:

- ◆ E-commerce represents only 3% of total retail sales
- ◆ Total retail sales growth year-on-year is 4.6% growth
- ◆ E-commerce growth represents 24.6% year-on-year growth

The vertically integrated luxury goods retailer Gucci have reported similar like-for-like year end growth figures of 65 per cent for their online division, taking the majority share of their non-store based income (Arlidge, 2007). The US statistics show us that E-commerce is growing at nearly six times the rate of total retail growth (which it is helping to boost it as it is contained within this figure). When one considers an electrical retailer such as the DSGi group in the UK, we can see an amazing growth trend emerging. Dixons, their pureplay online retail brand, posted growth of 182 per cent last year accounting for over 10 per cent of overall group sales. The prediction that online trading will hit 30 per cent of group sales should be realised in the next two years (MacDonald, 2007).

Whilst online fashion clothing sales are in the growth stage of the product life cycle, consumer electronics are in the maturity phase (Grantham, 1997). A recent report by Mendelsohn (2007) predicts a Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of only 7.5 per cent for consumer electronics compared to Apparel (including *inter alios* the fashion clothing sector) of 27.6 per cent in total cross channel sales. It is salient to note that in traditional marketing theory terms, value pricing becomes more important as a life cycle matures, whilst differentiation and early mover advantage are more important in the introduction and growth stages.

### MULTI-CHANNEL STRATEGY – BRICKS AND/OR CLICKS

There appears to be a general consensus in the literature that retailers can ill afford to ignore the internet completely. According to a Microsoft survey (Computer Weekly, 2007) a staggering 5 per cent of major retailers do not have an operational website, even for informational purposes. Verdict Research has stated that those retailers without an online strategy have struggled versus their competitors (Financial Times, 2006).

A change in the strategic fundamentals of retailing strategy was advocated by Evans and Wurster (1997) in the face of an online revolution. A diametric shift away from a firm's



core competencies to satisfy a new and unproven channel is inherently risky. A landmark paper was produced by Porter (2001), concluding that companies do need to distinguish themselves, but must achieve this through an effective complementary strategy with their existing business. He does not offer a new slant on an “e-strategy”, moreover he eschews previous writer’s views such as Evan and Wurster in favour of “old school” strategy that will work in whichever channel the retailer chooses to compete in. He is directly opposed to Evans and Wursters’ “new world” theory that contributed in part to the much hyped boom and bust of the dot.com global stock market crash, fuelled by misguided and over optimistic business leaders and investment bankers.

The distinction made by Porter was that any novice retailer can enter the online marketplace and achieve some market share through price leadership. This is not sustainable unless the cost base reflects this strategy. Gulati and Garino (2000) offer a “Clicks and Mortar strategy”, a basic spectrum of choices that retailers have chosen to adopt. The agreement between the two articles is that to achieve competitive advantage, the same generic strategy used offline should be employed online. The integration/separation of the business unit is not an either or choice, but a complex array of function specific conundrums that are intrinsically hard to configure.

Innovation is an essential part of any online strategy, and specific examples of this are used to highlight this factor. The subject of differentiation through customer service and experience are then explored, with a brief review on the issues of internationalisation.

Research by Xing et al. (2004) has shown that on average, multichannel retailers in the consumer electronic market actually charge less than their pureplay competitors. This contradicts earlier previous findings by Carlton and Chevalier (2001) that have reported pureplay retailers to be built on lowest cost and thus lowest price strategies. Price is becoming apparently less important than was originally predicted by earlier research, the de facto strategy for innovative retailers is moving towards differentiation or focus.

The choice of fashion and electronic goods as a focus area for the study highlights the importance of the principal – agent perspective. Certainly there are commonalities that act as a barrier to any online purchasing, as defined recently by Pavlou (2007), such as opportunism

and concerns over information privacy and security. The concept of website quality and its relationship with transactions is a relatively unexplored area. The development of “e-trust” identified by Hwang and Kim (2007) applies to both electronic goods and fashion. The notion that store perception and shopping environment in fashion clothing can correlate with purchase decisions has been tentatively explored by Kim et al. (2007) with a positive outcome.

## INNOVATION IN THE VALUE CHAIN

In the US, the electronic goods market has seen pioneers use evolutionary techniques to capture sales. Radio Shack and Wal-Mart all offer “ship to store” or “in-store pickup”. The similar concepts allow customers to browse online, complete the transaction payment online and then have the goods delivered to their local store as opposed to a home address. The convenience factor is a differentiating tactic that distinguishes them from other pureplay online retailers who are simply competing on price alone. The combination of convenience and instant gratification is an alluring proposition for the sophisticated cross channel shopper. The fashion clothing sector is slower to catch on to this multichannel strategy, a comparable “in-store pickup” transaction tactic is not readily available anywhere. This seems surprising given the psychological and behavioural drivers of online clothing shopping identified by Goldsmith and Flynn (2004), including the need for instant gratification.

## COMMUNICATING WITH CUSTOMERS

A framework has been offered by Rajshekhar et al. (2005) that attempts to explain how Customer Relationship Management (CRM) can be incorporated into a retailer’s quest for ephemeral competitive advantage. The article’s limitation lies in the omission of what is commonly called “new media”, although it does highlight the future importance of “customization” of the customer experience. There is a huge evolution happening in the world of marketing as traditional forms of media are decreasing in effectiveness and are being replaced by new media. Recommendations from Berman et al. (2007) to companies who wish to transcend the gap and ensure they are at the forefront of new techniques include delivering experiences (not just content), include investing in interactive, measurable advertising services



and to move over to a new marketing model with new media.

Even traditional marketers such as Kotler and Prahalad (2007) agree that “communicating to customers” has changed to “communicating with customers”. They have urged business leaders to move from the one dimensional “product myopic” view of marketing to a relationship based solution that embraces heterogeneity and a rapid reconfiguration of resources across national borders.

The term Web 2.0 has many definitions, but the most common associated with it is that the information flow is both up and downstream in the communication channel, with virtual users becoming content co-developers uploading collective intelligence (Craig, 2007). This means the control over the media or brand image from retailer to consumer is now dispersed. When websites were originally developed in Web 1.0, content was designed by the retailer and pushed to the consumers. Now the consumers in Web 2.0 are actively participating, deciding whether to advocate or denigrate the official line. This can be viewed as an opportunity or a threat by a retailer as they grapple with the host of new media tools that are emerging.

Social networks are perhaps the largest and most reported part of new media. They pose a challenge for the uninitiated retailer to try to understand and ultimately exercise some control over. The evolution of social networking (e.g. Facebook, Myspace or Bebo) is upon us all around the world, which is significant as online retailers have a global reach. The growth of sites year on year is 47% and reach 45% of net users according to a recent Nielson//Netratings report (Bausch and Hann, 2006). Advertising through social sites is limited at the moment, as retailers have struggled to justify the outlay without a definitive measure for Return On Investment (ROI). The most favoured tactics now appear to be through other less obvious tactics such as video, blogs, RSS feeds, customer ratings/reviews and discussion boards and forums (E-consultancy, 2007).

The communication of a brand message involves getting potential and existing customers to talk about the product or service. The hype surrounding YouTube and many “fast second” websites has led to many retailers being confused as to how they can best use this portal. Should they produce a corporate video or release an advertisement or Podcast via YouTube?

When users upload complaint videos should they be stopped, or taken in the spirit of free speech? Knowledge sharing is undoubtedly valuable, but can you measure its effectiveness and actual ROI? (Patrick and Dotsika, 2007).

A feature of Web 2.0 is the ability for retailers to interact with their customers. The installment of help options like “click to call” and “click to chat” deliver cross-channel personalisation capabilities that allow companies to target and engage customers proactively based on their perceived needs. The benefits of this interaction are twofold, they allow customers to move seamlessly from one channel to the next, and they also allow the easy transfer of information (Federman, 2007).

Many retailers have adopted RSS for new product launches and daily news items for subscribers. An evolution of this is the “widget” which retailers such as Topshop and Ebay have applied in their marketing programmes. The interesting paradigm shift is that customers are gaining control and deciding their preference as to how they configure and interact with retailers. Unilateral marketing isn’t successful with users of Web 2.0., and this has important ramifications for all involved in e-commerce. If a retailer can understand how and where to speak to their customers, they have a better chance of maximizing the chances of exposing them to products and services that are suited to them.

The growth of the internet has led to customers valuing convenience, asynchronicity, near instantaneous communications, specificity and accessibility. Online forums thrive off of these factors, while also providing a virtual place for the communications that take place (Pitta and Fowler, 2005). This new social structure has ramifications for retailers who are having their message or product hijacked by individuals who have a strong positive or negative opinion about their product. Hosting a forum is a brave move for a retailer, but pureplay firms such as [www.ebuyer.com](http://www.ebuyer.com) and [www.microdirect.co.uk](http://www.microdirect.co.uk) have used this transparency to their advantage, gaining fast and free feedback directly from their customers and available to all.

## METHODOLOGY

The study undertook a deductive approach and involved interviewing Senior Managers from multinationals in the Fashion retail and



Consumer Electronics sectors. The ontological position of constructionism (Bryman and Bell, 2003) is most appropriate, as it is impossible to be definitive when one considers a retailer's multi-channel strategy, for example. Interpretivism was suited to this study, particularly when one considers the dynamic nature of the Internet and the entrepreneurial social actions of those involved in its development. The study is qualitative and as such is acknowledged as being difficult, but not impossible to replicate. The problems of generalisation are also flagged, but the views of the managers are meant to be representative of the generalisation to theory, not the population. Following piloting and pre-testing of the questions to be used, seven semi-structured interviews were conducted. The respondents were senior and highly experienced Director/Vice President level managers in large organisations. Due to confidentiality it is not possible to name the firms involved but the level of seniority of each of the respondents and level of experience validates the group as meaningful primary data to analyse.

A grounded approach to data analysis was taken which helped to mitigate any interpretation issues that arose from the authors' value systems and expectations. Transactions of all the interviews can be obtained by emailing [g.h.griffiths@aston.ac.uk](mailto:g.h.griffiths@aston.ac.uk)

## RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For online retailers the need to invest in the online experience as a point of difference is critical for business success, whether they are pureplay or multichannel, fashion or electronic led. The product detail required by consumers that are shopping online is more apparent than that of traditional shoppers. This must be communicated in a transparent, appropriate format that delights the shopper in the same way that can be achieved in traditional shopping environments. It must be a rich engaging experience, fully utilising the benefits of broadband speed connections, immersing the shopper in a world of interaction. Consider the website to be the most important flagship store of the company. Some mentioned that tangible confirmation or "tactility" is particular prevalent for some customers when they are buying consumer electronics such as televisions: "...some of our customers, particularly those from England for some unknown reason, really want to see the product before they buy. We try on the website to give them as much information

as possible, even encompassing multiple close-up shots of the rear connections for the more technically minded to pore over" reports one E-Commerce Director in consumer electronics.

A seamless integration of the brand offer presentation is important for multichannel retailers. The same foundations for success that are used in a traditional environment should be used online. One of the most basic is to have availability - as one Director in Consumer Electronics stated: "...it doesn't matter how great your marketing strategy is if all customers get when they search for an ipod or something similar is a great big dirty out of stock message when they try and order!".

If customer service is business critical in traditional stores, this then needs to be replicated online, possibly through the adoption of a number of new media tactics such as interactive help, RSS and video. If a customer buys a product online, they should have the choice to make a return via any channel that the brand operates in. The future shopper is predicted to cross channels with ease. The implication for retailers is that they need to be able to satisfy their demands, as switching costs are becoming less obvious.

The cost base sustained by any retailer must correlate to their espoused business strategy. If a multichannel retailer is not fully integrating their traditional store portfolio, particularly in the consumer electronic goods sector, they should consider divestment in whole or in part to increase their chance of maintaining price advantage. However, they should consider whether the cost incurred by being on the high street is justified as a marketing advantage over pureplay retailers. Many successful companies are adopting deliberate cross channel tactics (reserve online and collect at store) to ensure the traditional outlets are still viable. For multichannel retailers, a high street presence can mean that brand equity is transferred to the online arm, giving an advantage over pureplay retailers with less traditional exposure. Successful pureplay retailers in both sectors have capitalised by offering established brands that already have a high degree of recognition on the high street without incurring their marketing cost.

A separate but complementary strategy for online retailing is desirable, as the channel has many unique challenges. This was not carried out in practice by all the retailers in the study. One of the Fashion Retailers had traditional



locations through third parties and some company owned factory outlets. They do not believe that the internet should be integrated fully into the business at the moment. They simply do not have the resources, capabilities or desire to do so, commented the respondent "...even if we wanted to, we couldn't trade online by ourselves. At the moment we receive an order in thousands from one of our customers (our retailers) and we put that together in like a time period of maybe a month from our factory in Portugal. They then have it shipped by an agreed date and that's that. We don't want to get into a situation where we have to pick one pair of jeans for someone. For a start we just don't have the ability to do it with our logistics, and can you imagine what a nightmare it would be? Why bother?". That was a comment from the Global Sales and Marketing Director at a well known brand of US Jean manufacturer.

There are many barriers to online transactions and they underline the relative infancy that the industry is still in. With time these barriers will become less important as solutions are found and online and cross-channel shopping becomes widely adopted as predicted by other research. For example, the issue of delivery fulfilment could be countered by offering customers a two hour delivery slot, in the same vein as the successful grocery delivery model.

Social networking and shopping is a much hyped area, with little or no data for executives to base important ROI decisions on. One Director from a multinational Fashion Retail stated: "customers have always talked amongst themselves...this is the first time that we can eavesdrop on the conversation...this is hugely interesting. Most retailers have between one and a half-dozen folks who spend time 'listening' to the conversation about their brand". This really sums up the data collection on social networking, in that it is an incredibly interesting area, but nobody is quite sure how they will make money out of it – yet. There must be a corporate strategy in place to deal with this emerging channel, listening to customers on their own terms in their own space. Bold retailers will try to influence this channel, but there is little evidence of any great success in the early stages of this phenomenon. The emergence of new media has led to a downstream shift in the locus of control that a retailer holds over their marketing message in the value chain. Listening rather than telling

will be an important skill for marketing professionals dealing with Web 2.0. In future research it would be interesting to gather further primary qualitative data capture at the same senior executive level to increase the level of validity and representativeness of the population and to include more sectors within the retail industry (*inter alia* automotives, supermarkets) in a similar study to achieve a higher degree of population representation.

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