AN INVESTIGATION OF RETAILER PERCEPTIONS ON APPAREL SIZING ISSUES

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ABSTRACT

Research conducted among apparel manufacturers in New Zealand revealed that there were significant variations in the actual garment dimensions followed for the same size number. The consequence of this variation in dimensions could be significant for the customer in terms of selecting the right apparel size. This paper examines the perceptions of retailers on the role of sizing systems in the services provided to help the customer in selecting the right garment size. Empirical evidence shows that retail sales people perceive that providing advice to customers regarding fit of apparel is crucial to creating customer satisfaction as well as improving the chances of making a sale. Results also point to the need to include fit assessment skills as an important skill requirement for the apparel retail sales person

BACKGROUND
Sizing and its relevance in the apparel industry

This research flows from preliminary work done among apparel manufacturers in New Zealand to assess the state of sizing and whether there was a need for an updated sizing system. The main findings were: many manufacturers were considering an update to the sizing system based on their internal data, and would welcome an updated sizing standard; there were significant variations in the actual garment dimensions followed for the same size number, reflecting to some extent the intended look and positioning for the intended target market. The consequence of this variation in dimensions could be significant for the customer in terms of selecting the right apparel size. The role of the intermediary in this context needs investigation as there is not much work available in the literature in this regard. Hence it was decided to focus on the retailers to ascertain their perceptions on the role of sizing systems and in the services provided to help the customer in selecting the right garment size.

To ascertain the relevance of sizing and fit from a retailer's perspective, an exploratory qualitative study was conducted using semi- structured interviews. The main issues explored were: 1) Does variation in sizes affect the retail sales

person's ability to help the consumer in selecting the appropriate garment? 2) How important is knowledge of fit assessment for an apparel retail sales person? 3) Do retailers perceive customers getting upset if they are unable to find apparel that fits them? 4) How does the sales person help a consumer who may be upset due to size variations? Based on the exploratory research the following points emerged: Variations in sizes of garments is sometimes perceived by retailers as an opportunity to help the customers to select apparel, and is not perceived as a problem. Fit assessment skills were seen as less important than people skills. The retailers were not aware of any emotional issues faced by the consumers that may be associated with the inability to find the right size of the desired garment.

Since sizing systems and assessment of fit appear to have an important bearing on the retailers' ability to satisfy the shopping expectations, it was decided to check the extent of these perceptions through a quantitative study.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Apparel fit and Consumer's purchase decisions-implications for retail selling
As sizing and related issues were considered an important component of the research, its relevance to consumer decision making in the apparel context was investigated. Eckman, Damhorst and Kadolph (1990) modelled the criteria used by consumers in evaluating purchase of apparel by women. They proposed a three stage decision making process for apparel consisting of interest phase, trial phase and decision phase. It was found that the interest phase in a garment was influenced by factors such as colour, styling and fabric, but the trial phase was influenced by fit, styling and appearance. When the decision was positive about an apparel item, the reasons provided for purchase were fit and appearance; but when rejected the reasons provided were, fit, styling and appearance. As observed by the authors, "fit may be strongly related to aesthetic criteria in that fit affects perception of line, shape and appearance on the body". Thus fit and its appearance seem to play an important role in the decision making process of the consumer, implying that the retail sales person should possess the skills to help the consumers in this regard. Eckman et al (1990) recommend that sales personnel may require training to help them positively reinforce and service clients on these criteria and to provide influential product information at the appropriate stages of the purchase decision making process. This focus on the importance of fit in the consumers' selection process for garment recommended by Eckman et al (1990) was a major shift in focus compared to earlier studies on apparel selection that viewed fit as relatively unimportant, largely because research did not focus on the consumers' reaction to a garment after the actual process of trial in a retail environment.

Apparel shopping behaviour and emotions- relevance to retailing
The shopping experience of the consumer is not always considered an enjoyable experience, and could involve situations in which individuals could have emotional responses (Machleit and Eroglu, 2000). This likelihood of an emotional response from customers have led some researchers to propose that retail sales

personnel should be trained to recognise cues to emotion eliciting contexts, how these emotions are displayed and therefore be able to handle them effectively (Menon and Dube, 2000). Two factors point to the possible arousal of consumer's emotions in an apparel context — a fair degree of time investment in the process of selecting an apparel item that meets their requirement and considerations of social risks of a wrong choice.

Some of the mechanisms that customers may employ to reduce the associated social risk is to employ social strategies to shopping, such as shopping with friends or other known persons (Mangelburg, Doney and Bristol, 2004). The practice of shopping with other persons for assistance have led researchers to propose concepts such as Purchase Pals, who are individuals that accompany buyers in their shopping trips to assist with on- site purchase decisions (Hartman and Kiecker, 1991). One of the considerations influencing some consumers tending to shop in groups, is that sales personnel are seen as a less credible source of information. It would, therefore, be worthwhile to see if the sales person perceives the interaction with consumers' in a positive light with regard to influencing the decision making process, especially with regard to fit. Exploratory research indicated that retailer's perceive providing advice on fit is an important facet of their role and the consumers expect it from them. However, it may be mediated by the retailer's perception of the type of outlet, with those positioning themselves on the higher end of the fashion spectrum perceiving this as a vital component.

Considering the reported credibility gap of the retail sales person with regard to the ability to influence the final outcome, it would also be relevant to investigate if the sales persons believe that the consumers accept their advice in making the final decision. Exploratory research indicated that there could be a wide variation in this regard.

Selling skills and sales person performance
The relevance of skills in fit assessment needs to be examined in the context of skills identified in personal selling literature. Selling skills have been viewed as comprising of three distinct components: interpersonal skills such as knowing how to cope with and resolve conflicts, salesmanship skills such as how to make a presentation and close a sale and technical skills such as knowledge of product features and benefits and procedures required by the company (Ford, Walker, Churchill and Hartley, 1987; cited in Rentz et al, 2002). In an empirical study, Rentz et al (2002) found that self ranking on sales and quota performance were correlated with high levels of score on the three skill components. Highest factor loadings were reported for knowledge of product line (under technical knowledge), ability to present the message & close the sale (under salesmanship skills) and awareness & understanding of the nonverbal communication of others (under interpersonal skills). Extending this to the apparel context, it could be postulated that knowledge of fit assessment and product line could be one of the

key components of technical skills and salesmanship skills and could be expected to play a key role on the perceived performance by the retail sales person.

One of the lesser explored areas in sales literature is the emotional responses of customers in their interactions with retail sales people and how this impacts on sales performance. Lee and Dubinsky (2003) identified empathy as one of the key attributes of a sales person that can have a positive effect on perceived service quality and contribute to successful selling. Empathy refers to an internal emotional reaction that produces an understanding of another person's feelings (Davis et al 1999; cited in Lee and Dubinsky, 2003). The importance of developing an understanding of the emotional cues from a customer and the ability of the sales person to respond suitably have been highlighted by Menon and Dube (2000).

Bush, Ortinau and Hair (1990) investigated the behavioural aspects of the retail sales person to develop scales to measure performance. The authors used an earlier conceptualisation of job performance as comprising of behaviour, actual performance on the job, and effectiveness (Walker, Churchill and Ford, 1979; cited in Bush et al, 1990). Behaviour refers to what people do on the job. The antecedents to this behaviour include motivation, aptitude, skill level and role perception. While these antecedents are important, Bush et al contend that what the sales person actually does on the job is an important consideration for sales performance and this is an area that has been relatively unexplored in literature on sales performance, as the studies tend to focus on the antecedents/determinants. The activities identified for a fashion goods retailer covered the following aspects: Merchandising procedure, customer service ability, sales ability, product-merchandise knowledge and knowledge of store policy (Bush et al 1990). The product – merchandise knowledge included knowledge of fabric, color and co-ordination and this factor was seen to have a high loading with regard to sales performance. However, various aspects of fit and its relevance to selling and consequent impact on performance were not investigated.

Communications skills is another important contributor to the performance of a sales person which needs to be tailored depending on the selling context. Successful sales interactions with customers seems to have more requests for opinions and suggestions and less of disagreement (Schuster and Danes, 1986). Another important facet of communications appears to be asking questions, with a combination of closed questions and solidarity comments (ie supportive of customer's perceptions) appearing to be more successful than giving opinions (Schuster and Danes, 1986).

This study uses various forms of self reported measure of sales performance that has been adopted by other researchers such as Dwyer, Hill and Martin (2000) and Behrman and Perreault (1982). It should be borne in mind that using self reported measure of sales performance has the possible drawback of performance being reported on the higher side (Churchill et al 1985; cited in Dwyer et al, 2000).

However, since the primary purpose of this study was to assess the retail sales person's perception on the importance of fit related issues on their sales performance as against other accepted determinants, the authors consider this approach to be valid. Further, with an industry wide survey, more objective measures such as performance indicators based on sales or supervisor rating considerations would have raised implementation issues.

METHODOLOGY
Questionnaire Design

The review of relevant literature and a series of semi-structured interviews with 6 medium to small retailers of women's apparel in the Wellington region of New Zealand guided the development of the survey instrument of this study. The use of structured questions in the questionnaire helped to reduce any biases that could occur due to the influence of the interviewer and the respondent (Malhotra 1993; Zikmund 1996). Fixed alternative questions were largely used over open-ended questions because it is easier for the respondent to answer and it enables comparability of answers, facilitates coding, tabulating and interpretation of the data. Structured responses also provided a more time-efficient means for collecting, coding, processing and analysing the data obtained compared to unstructured questions.

Single-item measures are generally deficient both with respect to validity and reliability (Pedhazur and Schmelkin 1991); hence multi-item scales were used to measure retailer perceptions of sizing issues in this study. According to the literature higher order scales are more powerful than nominal scales. They are more useful since they allow stronger comparison and stronger conclusions to be made. Hence interval scales (a seven-point interval rating scale from 1 = Never to 7 = Almost Always; 1 = Irrelevant to 7 = Essential; or 1 = Yet to establish a track record to 7 = Very Successful) were used. The use of an interval scale was considered appropriate in order to facilitate ease of completion of the questionnaire by the respondents and also to facilitate data analysis. Demographic information collected included size and type of retail operation, number of employees (full time/ part time), age, gender, years of retail experience and qualifications.

After the questionnaire was developed it was pre-tested with a small group of experienced retails sales persons as suggested by Zikmund (1996). Personal interviews were conducted to administer this pre-test as it provided opportunities for verbal and written feedback. Further adjustments to the questionnaire content, format, wording and response alternatives were made based on the results of the pre-test. Every effort that was necessary to make the questionnaire more respondent friendly was undertaken and the final questionnaire was developed.

Sampling and Data Collection

The sampling frame was drawn from a list of all retail outlets in New Zealand which were listed in the retail database as retailers of women's apparel. The target population consisted of 1214 retail outlets listed in the database which provided a comprehensive listing of the target population. A census approach was feasible since the target population was not very large and it was decided to survey the entire population. The retailers were categorized according to the number of outlets in their business chain. Those outlets with 6 or more stores nationwide were classified as large retailers (308 outlets), and the remainder as small to medium retailers. Following pre-testing, the questionnaires were administered to all members of the target population through a mail-out survey.

Out of the 1214 questionnaires that were distributed, 112 were returned to the sender because the retail outlets were no longer operating in the addresses that the questionnaires were sent to. However, 191 questionnaires were fully completed and suitable for analysis, yielding a response rate of 15.7%. This response rate is considered adequate for a mail survey. Hence the sample size in this study is 191.

RESULTS

Results as shown by the mean values in Table 1 indicate that the retail sales people surveyed consider that advice on fit is highly relevant for customer satisfaction, and they feel that providing advice on fit 'almost always' leads to a greater chance of making a sale ($\bar{x} = 6.26$). The retail sales person's (RSPs) ratings on whether customers expect advice on fit of garments from them is lower at ($\bar{x} = 5.70$). It is also evident that customers often asked the RSPs whether a particular garment fits them ($\bar{x} = 5.02$).

The above ratings are also consistent with the frequencies and percentages which clearly show that more than 96% of RSPs have indicated that advice on fit is relevant for creating customer satisfaction and that providing advice on fit could lead to a greater chance of making a sale. A further 83.5% of the respondents think that customers expect advice on fit of garments from the retail sales person while 66.3% have stated that customers often ask the sales person whether a particular garment fits them.

Table 1: Retail sales person's experience with customers

	Mean Values	Almost Always	
		N*	%*
In your opinion, is advice on fit relevant for creating customer satisfaction?	6.52	183	97.3
Do you feel that providing advice on fit could lead to a greater chance of making a sale?	6.26	178	96.2
Do you think that customers expect advice on fit of garments from the retail sales person?	5.70	152	83.5
How often do customers ask the sales person whether a particular garment fits them?	5.02	120	66.3

*Number (N) of responses
*Percentage of valid responses
**Scale: 1= Never; 7 = Almost Always

The data pertaining to the perceived relevance of the different attributes that a successful sales person should have is given in Table 2. The RSPs have rated all the skills as essential with the top four having mean values greater than 6.5: Communication Skills ($\bar{x} = 6.89$), Product Knowledge ($\bar{x} = 6.75$), Empathy with Customers ($\bar{x} = 6.64$) and Selling Skills ($\bar{x} = 6.53$). These are closely followed by Assessment of Fit ($\bar{x} = 6.38$), Knowledge of Store Policies ($\bar{x} = 6.22$) and Fabric Knowledge ($\bar{x} = 5.98$).

Table 2: Attributes of a successful Sales Person

	Mean Values	Essential	
		N*	%*
Communication Skills	6.89	190	100.0
Product Knowledge	6.75	180	98.9
Empathy with Customers	6.64	183	98.9
Selling Skills	6.53	183	97.9
Assessment of Fit	6.38	183	98.4
Knowledge of Store Policies	6.22	170	92.9
Fabric Knowledge	5.98	168	92.8

*Number (N) of responses
*Percentage of valid responses
**Scale: 1= Irrelevant; 7 = Essential

A close examination of the frequencies for each attribute reported in Table 2 reveals similar results. 98% or more of the respondents indicated that Communication Skills, Product Knowledge, Empathy with Customers and Selling Skills are essential attributes of a successful sales person. Approximately 93% revealed that Knowledge of Store Policies and Fabric Knowledge are essential.

The self ratings of the RSPs across five dimensions was assessed using a seven point interval scale with 1 = Yet to establish a track record and 7 = Very Successful as anchor points. Respondents were asked to rate themselves on each of the following factors: Performance as a retail sales person, Meeting objectives set by the manager, Skills in advising customers about fit of garments, Handling customers who are emotionally upset and Pick up the right size of garment that fits the customer.

Table 3: Sales Persons' self ratings of successful attributes

	Mean Values	Essential	
		N*	%*
Skills in advising customers about fit of garments	6.49	185	99.5
Performance as a retail sales person	6.30	188	100.0
Meeting objectives set by the manager	6.30	161	99.4
Pick up the right size of garment that fits the customer	6.27	183	97.9
Handling customers who are emotionally upset	6.21	180	99.4

*Number (N) of responses
*Percentage of valid responses
**Scale: 1= Yet to establish a track record; 7 = Very Successful

As can be seen from Table 3, the RSPs have rated themselves as very successful across all dimensions: Skills in advising customers about fit of garments ($\bar{x}$ = 6.49), Performance as a retail sales person ($\bar{x}$ = 6.30), Meeting objectives set by the manager ($\bar{x}$ = 6.30), Pick up the right size of garment that fits the customer ($\bar{x}$ = 6.27) and Handling customers who are emotionally upset ($\bar{x}$ = 6.21). This is also supported by an analysis of the frequency responses presented in Table 3 which reveals that 98% of the respondents have rated themselves as very successful across all dimensions.

IMPLICATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

It is clear that retail sales people perceive that providing advice to customers regarding fit of apparel is crucial to creating customer satisfaction as well as improving chances of making a sale. The relevance of sizing as perceived by the retail sales person confirms the proposed consumer purchase decision model proposed by Eckman (1990). However, it appears that retail sales people are more realistic in their views on whether the prospective customer listens to the advice provided. While the importance of providing advice on fit appears to be relevant, it appears that the customers do not always ask the sales person for their opinion regarding fit. This may be due to lower levels of credibility attributed to sales persons (Hartman and Keiker, 1991).

Another important finding from this study is the relative importance placed on assessment of fit along with other skills such as communications, product knowledge etc. as reported in earlier studies. This points to the need to include fit assessment skills as an important skill requirement for the apparel retail sales person. The importance of this skill is also borne out in the ranking given by the sales person for this skill (Table 3).

The importance of sizing issues and advice on fit as perceived by retail sales person needs to be compared with the perceptions and expectations of consumers shopping for apparel. This would provide an important triangulation of the critical role of sizing as a crucial dimension in apparent garment industry as a whole that needs systematic examination and evaluation. A limitation of the study is the low response rate of 15.7% achieved in this study. Since this is an exploratory study, this response rate is considered adequate for a mail survey. However future researchers may need to look at ways of increasing the response rates.

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