Service Priority in Department Stores: The Effects of Customer Gender and Dress

Bette Ann Stead and George M. Zinkhan
University of Houston

Service priority refers to the condition when one customer is served before another and represents a dimension of customer service that is likely to affect customer satisfaction. Are men more likely to receive service priority than women? To investigate this question, a field experiment was conducted using a $2 \times 3 \times 2$ factorial design with sex of the clerk, gender of the department, and customer dress as the main effects. The results indicate that men do receive service priority, and this finding held constant across the variety of conditions studied.

One important aspect of personal selling is establishing rapport with customers. Along these same lines, an important aspect of sales management is training sales personnel so that customer rapport and customer satisfaction are maximized. In retailing, for example, there are several types of sales-related behaviors that can promote good customer service and customer satisfaction, including patience, sales technique, general attitudes, courtesy, product-related attributes, habits, and appearances (Burnett, Amason, & Hunt, 1981). The evaluation of sales behavior along all of these dimensions can be a difficult and time-consuming task. One aspect of customer service that cuts across several of these dimensions is the amount of time that a customer has to wait before receiving service. For example, a clerk’s sales technique, habits, and courtesy all should impact upon customer waiting time. Although customer service time is not equivalent to customer service, it does, nevertheless, capture quite a bit of the flavor of customer service.

Service priority is a useful concept for study by retail managers. It has been operationalized as “the order of service when two customers arrive at a counter simultaneously” (Zinkhan & Stoian, 1984, p. 691). Training sales personnel to recognize and correct their own prejudices in waiting on customers...
could lead to improved customer relations. The priority that sales personnel set up in waiting on their customers may lead to good rapport, or may weaken or destroy any chance of establishing rapport.

The purpose of this study is to examine customer characteristics that affect service priority. Specifically, the effects of customer gender and customer dress are examined. A priori, we expect that males will receive service priority over females and that customers in "business dress" will receive priority over those attired more casually.

SEX ROLE STEREOTYPING

Sex stereotypes have been defined by Ashmore and Del Boca (1979) as the structured sets of beliefs about the personal attributes of women and of men. Figure 1 presents a model of service priority, as affected by sex role stereotyping. Here, a clerk's perceptions about the customer lead to sex stereotyping, where the salesclerks make inferences based on customer gender. These inferences, in turn, lead to service priority for males. Evidence to support this model was found by Kutner and Levinson (1978), who studied the recommendations that sales personnel gave to student experimenters asking for help in selecting toys for a twin niece or nephew five years of age. These authors found that the majority of the salesclerks questioned (52.5%) made sex-stereotyped suggestions, while the remaining salespersons recommended neutral toys appropriate for either sex. The authors concluded that a salesperson represents one component in the larger process of sex role socialization in this society. Ungar (1982) repeated this experiment but, instead of asking for help to select a toy for a twin niece and nephew, used a factorial design that varied the sex of the child and the sex of the buyer. Under this altered replication and extension Ungar (1982) found that, of the 90 salespersons observed, 67.2% suggested sex-stereotyped toys. Thus evidence was found that salespersons do hold stereotyped conceptions of adult socialization patterns and channel interaction in ways that behaviorally determine these stereotypes. Ungar (1982) also found that male buyers receive significantly more sex-stereotyped responses than female buyers. In this particular instance, employees' sex stereotypes seemed to have an effect on the type of service that a person received and seemed to exert an important influence on the maintenance of traditional sex norms.

Additional evidence to support the model shown in Fig. 1 was found by Zinkhan and Stoiaen (1984), who studied service priority in department stores and found that 63% of the 162 salesclerks in their sample served male customers before female customers. In response to follow-up interviews, some