

The off-line retail experience: A suggested integrated framework

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ABSTRACT

Customer experiences are replacing commoditized products and services as organizational differentiators. However, providing superior customer experiences is hampered by two concerns. Firstly, the experience construct remains an elusive concept and secondly, scholars postulate that organizations cannot deliver experiences. Instead, for a memorable experience to result, organizations have to act as conduits in ensuring appropriate stimuli and conditions for customers to help create their own experiences. To this effect, the current study set out to explore the experience concept with the aim of providing a holistic definition of customer experience and the identification of its core elements. This in turn led to the proposal of an experience framework with three important building blocks: the experience-scape, personalization and co-creation. A stimulating experience environment that evokes desired customer emotions and responses paves the way for personalizing the experience in terms of entertainment, education, esthetics and escape. Personalization depends on the extent to which customers desire to passively observe, or become immersed in the experience. The combination of the experience-scape and the level of personalization sets the scene for collaboration between the organization and the customer in co-creating value. The value derived from such experiences far exceeds the value provided by products and services. The resulting integrated framework is of particular relevance to off-line retailers who not only have to compete with similar stores and with on-line retailers, but also face the reality that even the retail outlet has become standardized and commoditized.

Keywords: building blocks, co-creation, customer experience, experience environment, experience-scape, integrated framework, off-line retailer, personalization

Products and services have become homogenized and commoditized (Yang & He 2011; Petermans, Janssens & Van Cleempoel 2013). As a result they no longer serve to differentiate organizations (Radder & Han 2015; Jain, Aagja & Bagdare 2017), nor satisfy the needs and wants of customers who are more demanding (Chen, Raab & Chen 2017), better informed (Journée & Weber 2017) and are looking for value resulting from unique experiences (Breschi, Freundt, Orebäck & Vollhardt 2017). Valued experiences typically result from interactions between customers and the employees or other aspects of the organization (also referred to as touchpoints), which in turn, result in particular feelings and emotions on the part of the customer (Thomas 2017).

Experiences represent the most recent phase in economic advancement, following on from commodities, products and services. Each advancement represents the addition of value. A well-known illustration of this process is the example of the ordinary coffee bean. Consumers typically derive little value from a coffee bean in its raw, unprocessed form (commodity) when compared with a packet of roasted coffee beans (product) used to brew a cup of coffee at home, and even less value compared with ordering a cup of coffee at the local coffee shop (service). However, the

highest level of customer value results when the consumer sips coffee in Café Florian on the Piazza San Marco in Venice (experience). The value derived from such a memorable experience far exceeds the value provided by the mere coffee bean. A memorable experience is typically “very special, emotionally charged and potentially life altering” (Jefferies & Lepp 2012:38). It is also remembered and treasured (if positive) long after the event has occurred (Chandralal, Rindfleish & Valenzuela 2015). Because memorable experiences tend to invoke commitment and strong relationship ties between the organization and the customer (Stuart 2006), they also provide value to organizations in the form of differentiation (Azevedo 2009), higher levels of customer loyalty, repeat purchases and an increase in profitability (Stuart 2006).

Experts are therefore arguing that providing memorable consumer experiences have become the basis for exchange (Jain et al. 2017), the contemporary battleground (Linkner 2014), and a core organizational objective (Journée & Weber 2017). However, research into experiences is still in its infancy – particularly in a retail context. The lack of retail-specific research is a concern especially for off-line (brick-and-mortar) retailers, irrespective of whether they are selling clothing, books, foodstuffs or electronic equipment. In addition to competing with similar retailers, off-line retailers often also face competition from on-line stores and have to convince consumers that physical retail stores are not homogeneous, standardized entities (Weitzl & Zniva 2010, 122). Off-line retailers thus have to find ways to differentiate themselves from competition. Creating superior customer experiences might be an avenue for achieving this objective.

Dziewanowska (2015:5) holds that organizations “cannot deliver experiences. The only thing they can do is to ensure the presence of appropriate stimuli, which under the right conditions and with the cooperation on [the] consumers’ part will lead to [the] creation of memorable experiences”. This argument sparked the conception of the current article, resulting in the question: “How can off-line retailers ensure appropriate stimuli and conditions that, with the cooperation of customers, will lead to memorable experiences?” Thematic analysis, following the guidelines proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to help answer this question.

The purpose of the current research is to contribute to the description and interpretation of a complex phenomenon, namely, off-line retail experiences. It does not aim to verify earlier conclusions of theories, but rather to develop and revise understanding. The objectives associated with this article are therefore to:

- put experiences in context through a description, definition and identification of the elements of the construct; and
- propose a framework that can help off-line retailers ensure the presence of stimuli and conditions that will result in memorable experiences.

An analysis of extant literature on the topic of consumer experiences resulted in the identification of three building blocks, which, when integrated, might serve as enabling stimuli and conditions leading to memorable experiences. The proposed building blocks include the experience environment (experience-scape), personalization, and experience co-creation.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: first, we provide a brief overview of the methodology followed; then we introduce the experience concept and its core elements, aimed at putting the construct into context; thereafter, three experience building blocks serving as a framework for providing memorable experiences are put forward; and finally, we present some summarising conclusions.

METHODOLOGY

Given the background and objectives of the research, and being viewed as one of the most common forms of qualitative analysis (Guest & Namey 2012), thematic analysis was deemed the most suitable method to fit the needs of the current study. Thematic analysis is a simple, uncomplicated qualitative study which does not need various theoretical details and technical knowledge such as, for example, discourse analysis (Javadi & Zarea 2016). Whilst the analysis also involves searching across a data set to find repeated patterns of meaning (Braun & Clarke 2006), it differs from other analytic methods, such as interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and grounded theory (Guest & Namey 2012). Both these methods are theoretically bounded while thematic analysis is essentially

independent of theory and epistemology, and is compatible with both essentialist and constructionist paradigms (Braun & Clarke 2006).

The research question was broad rather than narrow, namely: “How can off-line retailers ensure appropriate stimuli and conditions that, with the cooperation of customers, will lead to memorable experiences?” The data analysis was of an inductive nature, which means that data coding was done without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame or into the researchers’ analytic preconceptions (Braun & Clarke 2006). Themes were identified that capture “something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represent[s] some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (Braun & Clarke 2006: 82). The prevalence of a theme was counted in terms of occurrence across the entire data set, rather than at data item level.

DESCRIPTION, DEFINITION AND ELEMENTS OF THE EXPERIENCE CONSTRUCT

No consensus exists with respect to the meaning, definition or elements of the experience construct (Jain et al. 2017). The use of the term experience as a noun, and as a verb, adds to the confusion about its delineation (Tynan & McKechnie 2009). Dictionary definitions (no date) suggest that, when used as a verb, an experience is a form of activity, or the action of going through, or lived through, something. When used as a noun, experience represents accumulated knowledge, some outcome, or an entity in its own right similar to products and services being entities. Schmitt (2010) observes that experience refers either to a past event, or to ongoing (present and/or future) perceptions, feelings and observations.

In a similar vein, no standard definition or description of the term customer experience exists. A customer experience generally refers to a set of interactions between a customer and a product, service or any part of an organization, provoking a reaction (Sheng & Teo 2012). The term is also defined as the “cognitive acknowledgment or perception that follows from stimulated motivation of a customer who observes or participates in an event” (Chen & Lin 2015:41). Jain et al. (2017:649) define a customer experience as the “aggregate of feelings, perceptions and attitudes formed during the entire process of decision making ... [throughout the] consumption chain [and] involving an integrated series of interaction[s] with people, objects, processes and environment, leading to cognitive, emotional, sensorial and behavioural responses”.

It thus seems that an experience is either the involvement in an action or activity embedded in numerous touchpoints and interactions, and/or the knowledge, perceptions and emotions resulting from the activity. For the purposes of the current study, it is argued that an experience comprises both an activity and an outcome, which together, will affect customers’ future expectations, perceptions and evaluations. The experience itself (activity) enabled by the organization should therefore be of such a nature that the experience (outcome) is satisfactory, valued, and memorable.

We analyzed numerous definitions and descriptions of an experience in an attempt to identify its elements. Table 1 contains a non-exhaustive list of definitions and descriptions drawn from compilations by a number of scholars (Ali, Hussain & Ragavan 2014; Chen & Lin 2015; Dziewanowska 2015; Fernandes & Neves 2014; Muthiah & Suja 2013). The third column lists the important elements identified from each definition/description.

FIRST BUILDING BLOCK: THE EXPERIENCE ENVIRONMENT

Most conventional off-line retail activities take place within interior and exterior spaces referred to as the experience-scape. These spaces comprise tangible and intangible elements that function as cues to the experience context and can be used by retailers in evoking desired customer emotions and responses (Zomerdijk & Voss 2010). The senses of sight, sound, smell, taste and touch are crucial in this regard because most people absorb information about the physical environment through their senses, which in turn, provide a direct route to customers’ emotions (Zomerdijk & Voss 2010; Jain et al. 2017). Bagdare and Jain (2013) note that immersive technology might be particularly useful when attempting to stimulate customers’ visual, auditory, olfactory and tactile faculties in a retail environment. This

**TABLE 1:
ELEMENTS OF AN EXPERIENCE/CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE**

Contributor(s)	Description	Core elements
Carbone & Haeckel 1994	take-away impression formed by people's encounter with products, services, and business – a perception produced when humans consolidate sensory information	Encounter, sensory, products, services, organisation
Pine & Gilmore 1999	experiences are events that engage individuals in a personal way	Engaging, personal
Gupta & Vajic 1999	occurs when a customer has a sensation or knowledge acquisition resulting from interaction with the different dimensions of a context created by a service provider, across multiple touchpoints	Customer, sensation, interaction, touchpoints, organisation
Carù & Cova 2003	something extremely significant and unforgettable for the consumer immersed into the experience	Significant, memorable, immersion
Poulsen & Kale 2004	an engaging act of co-creation between a provider and a consumer wherein the consumer perceives value in the encounter and in the subsequent memory of that encounter	Co-creation, organisation, customer, value, interaction, memorability
Oh et al. 2007	enjoyable, engaging, memorable encounters for those consuming these events	Sensorial, engagement, memorable, interaction, customer
Gentile, Spiller & Noci 2007	the customer experience originates from a set of interactions between a customer and a product, a company, or part of its organisation, which provoke a reaction. This experience is strictly individual and implies the customer's involvement at different levels (rational, emotional, sensorial, physical and spiritual)	Customer, interaction, organisation, products, services, personal, engagement, emotional, sensorial, physical, spiritual
Verhoef et al. 2009	the customer experience construct is holistic in nature and involves the customer's cognitive, affective, emotional, social and physical responses to the retailer. This experience is created not only by those elements which the retailer can control (e.g., service interface, retail atmosphere, assortment, price), but also by elements that are outside of the retailer's control (e.g., influence of others, purpose of shopping). Additionally, [...] the customer experience encompasses the total experience, including the search, purchase, consumption, and after-sale phases of the experience, and may involve multiple retail channels	Holistic, customer, organisation, cognitive, emotional, affective, social, physical, multi-stage, complex
Ismail et al. 2011	emotions provoked, sensations felt, knowledge gained and skills acquired through active involvement with the firm pre, during and post consumption	Emotions, sensations, involvement, multi-staged
Chen & Lin 2015	the cognitive acknowledgment or perception that follows from stimulated motivation of a customer who observes or participates in an event"	Perception, stimuli, participation

Source: Own construction based on the research of Ali, Hussain & Ragavan (2014); Chen & Lin (2015); Dziewanowska (2015); Fernandes & Neves (2014); Muthiah & Suja (2013)

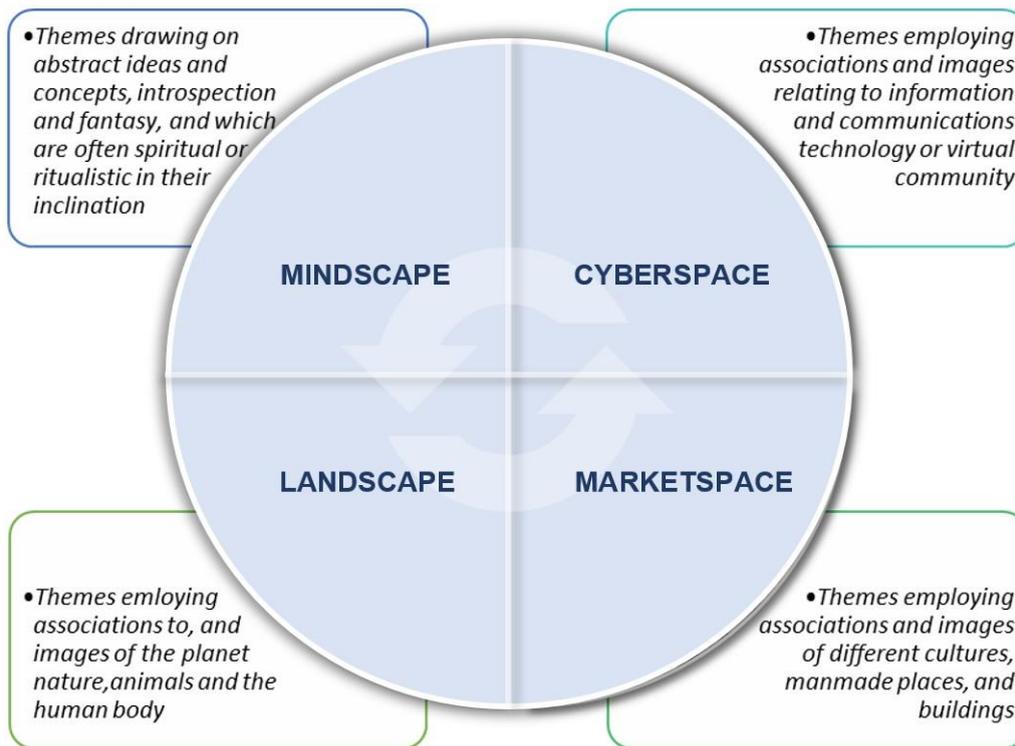
is important, as it has been shown that the more effectively an experience engages the senses, the more memorable it will (Pine & Gilmore 1998).

The retail experience-scape is enhanced by theming, which, according to Astrøm (2017) is one of the most powerful tools for creating an irresistible customer impression and differentiating the organization from competitors. A theme is a dominant idea or unifying principle that harmonizes a set of impressions (Astrøm 2017), characterizes the organization, appeals to its customers (Petermans & Van Cleempoel 2009) and provides context for the experience. The theme should therefore be well-defined, concise, captivating and uncluttered (Pine & Gilmore 1998) and ideally incorporate multiple tangible and intangible atmospheric cues (Ertekin, Bayraktaroglu & Gurkaynak 2014; Poon & Grohmann 2014). Designers of the retail store environment are advised that such cues should include both hedonic and utilitarian elements (Paridon, Carraher & Carraher 2006).

Figure 1 shows an example of four themes (by no means an exhaustive list of possibilities) that might be combined into a retail experience-scape. The focus on either a single, or on multiple themes, will depend on the type of retail organization and the desired environment.

The top, left-hand quadrant in Figure 1 describes the mindscape, characterized by abstract, fun and even ritual elements. The cyberspace, in the top right-hand quadrant describes an experience-scape with high levels of

**FIGURE 1:
EXAMPLES OF THEMES**



Source: Own construction based on the research of Kozinets, Sherry, DeBerry-Spence, Duhachek, Nuttavuthisit & Storm (2002)

information and communication technology, and ethereal/non-physical elements. The bottom quadrants describe the landscape and the marketspace. Associations with more physical and tangible elements related to nature, man and beast would typically form the landscape, while the marketspace might include elements and cultural associations with fabricated aspects. Differing degrees of natural and primordial versus fabricated elements, and different degrees of tangibility versus virtuality, can be used as part of the theming process. It is, however, important that these elements and atmospheric cues are complementary, form an integrated and holistic context and help heighten consistency and memorability of the theme.

SECOND BUILDING BLOCK: PERSONALIZING THE EXPERIENCE

Customers do not necessarily desire similar experiences (Kacprzak, Dziewanowska & Skorek 2015), and therefore retailers who aspire to ensure maximum value, satisfaction and memorability, should consider personalizing the experience on offer.

One way in which retailers can deal with personalization of experiences is to use Pine and Gilmore's (1999) concept of experience realms. Four experience realms are formed based on the consumer's level of activity and level of connection with the experience (Pine & Gilmore 1999). The activity continuum ranges from passive observation to active participation. When being more active, the customer becomes a prosumer, meaning that s/he helps produce, but also consumes, the experience. With passive participation, the customer has more of a mental presence in the experience. The connection continuum ranges from absorption (watching the experience from a distance) to immersion (being drawn into the experience) (Pine & Gilmore 1998; Mehmetoglu & Engen 2011). The concept of immersion describes a "psychological state, characterized by being connected with the world offered by the experiential context and disconnected from the real or ordinary world" (Cuny, Fornerino & Helme-Guizon 2015:1026).

Based on where the experience falls along the spectra of activity and connection, it is classified into four distinct, albeit permeable, realms (Pine & Gilmore 1999; Quadri-Felitti & Fiore 2012). These realms, referred to as the

four Es, denote entertaining, esthetic, educational and escapist experiences. Entertaining experiences entail more passive than active participation in the experience where the level of connection is more likely one of absorption than immersion. Consumers who want their retail experiences to be entertaining, typically tend to absorb the events through their senses without engaging in them, and desire fun that does not require too much activity and commitment (Kacprzak et al. 2015). Esthetic experiences allow consumers to become immersed in sensations, but also do not require their active participation in the experience (Kacprzak et al. 2015). These consumers simply want “to be and forget themselves in the appreciation of what they are seeing” (Kacprzak et al. 2015:no page). Interpretation of the physical or virtual (simulated) surroundings is thus important to these consumers (Ali et al. 2014; Garg, Rahman, Qureshi & Kumar 2012; Mehmetoglu & Engen 2011). Educational experiences typically engage the customer’s mind and demand more active participation compared to entertaining or esthetic experiences. Absorption is at a higher level than immersion, and therefore consumers’ participation does not have a major impact on the experience. Escapist experiences, the final experience realm, might also be entertaining or educational but they involve greater customer immersion than the other two types of experiences. Consumers desiring escapist experiences typically long to go and do something (Pine & Gilmore 1999). Their activities and immersion in the experience are therefore likely to impact the course of the experience.

An experience does not necessarily include only one of the four realms and will often have elements of all the realms (Mehmetoglu & Engen 2011). Garg et al. (2012) argue that the optimal customer experience, or “sweet spot”, stems from the four realms permeating. However, research by Kacprzak et al. (2015) found that this might not always be the case. Where particular in-store events might be a pleasurable experience for some retail customers, the same events could be an uncomfortable or even an embarrassing experience for others due to differences in their preferences. It is therefore important that the experience is changed according to the consumer’s desires or that the consumer is allowed to be a co-producer instead of being a passive recipient of the experience (Kacprzak et al. 2015). Co-creation of experiences therefore constitute the third building block and is discussed in the next section.

THIRD BUILDING BLOCK: EXPERIENCE CO-CREATION

The development of the concept of experiences within the marketing and management literature has been accompanied by the argument that value should not simply be offered by the organization, but rather be co-created through the interaction of the producers and the consumers of value (Spena, Caridà, Colurcio & Melia 2012). This equally applies to customers of retail organizations (Journée & Weber 2017).

The retail organization and the consumer therefore have to become collaborators who jointly extract value from their interaction (Prahalad & Ramaswamy 2004; Sheng & Teo 2012). This co-creation process invariably calls for a consideration of the role of the customer and of the organization.

Im and Qu (2017) point out that, because contemporary customers are well informed, they have clear expectations and needs and have a good understanding of organizations’ value chains. They are therefore in a position to actively co-create their consumption experiences through co-production, personalization, and engagement (Minkiewicz, Evans & Bridson 2014). Co-production entails the active participation in one or more activities performed in the experience, while participation entails customers’ providing the organization with constructive suggestions and ideas on how to shape its offerings (Journée & Weber 2017). By participating in the experience, the consumer becomes an active co-creator of value (Lemon & Verhoef 2016) and an “involved experience authenticator”, resulting in more memorable experiences (Campos, Mendes, do Valle & Scott 2016:4). Engagement implies transcending into a psychological state of cognitive and emotional immersion (Journée & Weber 2017). Cognitive immersion is “revealed through consumers’ reflections on their experience, a desire to know more, involving questioning of their preconceptions and attitudes” while emotional immersion involves “feeling a sense of personal relevance and connection to the experience” (Minkiewicz et al. 2014:47). Engagement can take place when customers share their stories and memories with other consumers and staff members (Minkiewicz et al. 2014).

When personalizing the experience in the co-creation process, customers choose a self-directed path by using experience spaces in their own way and tailoring the experience through customization, interaction with service

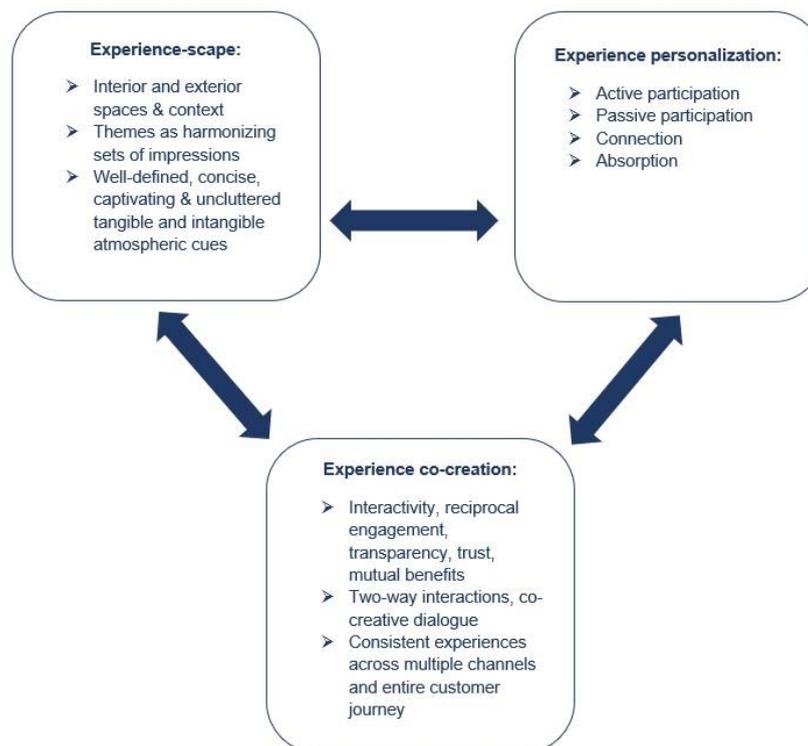
representatives, and technology (Journée & Weber 2017; Minkiewicz, et al. 2014).

From the organization's perspective, effective co-creation of experiences requires attention to the careful management of organizational processes and resources (Cambra-Fierroa, Pérez & Grott 2017; Journée & Weber 2017). Efforts to make the co-creation process meaningful require interactivity, reciprocal engagement, transparency, trust, and benefits that accrue to both parties (Campos et al. 2016). In addition, organizations should have a customer-centric orientation (Cambra-Fierroa et al. 2017). Such an orientation implies that retailers make their products and services interactive, that physical spaces allow for two-way interactions, that everyone in the organization is trained in co-creative dialogue, and that the experience is consistent across multiple channels and the entire customer journey (Journée & Weber 2017).

INTEGRATED FRAMEWORK

Based on the foregoing discussion, an integrated framework shown in Figure 2 is proposed. This framework combines three overlapping building blocks, namely the experience-scape, co-creation of the experience by the retailer and the customer, and personalizing the experience.

**FIGURE 2:
PROPOSED EXPERIENCE FRAMEWORK**



SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Customer experiences are touted as a solution to satisfying customer needs and differentiating the organization. However, the definition of a customer experience is not yet conclusive and uncertainty exists about ensuring valued, satisfying and memorable customer experiences. Some scholars argue that organizations cannot deliver customer experiences, but can at best ensure the presence of appropriate stimuli and conditions for the co-creation of memorable experiences. This research explored the experience concept, provided a holistic definition of a customer experience and proposed a framework with three integrated building blocks that can serve as a point of departure in ensuring stimuli and conditions that can foster the input of customers in creating experiences that satisfy their needs. A number of important points arose from the foregoing.

First, a customer experience is multi-dimensional. It comprises a form of activity or interaction with the organization and the consequent outcome, which together, will affect the customer's future expectations, perceptions and evaluations of the retail organization.

Second, most off-line retail customer experiences take place within the experience-scape or retail environment. The retailer can create the latter by combining various tangible and intangible elements to form the context for the experience and provide the stimuli to make the experience memorable. Using themes, for example by combining elements from the mindscape, landscape, cyberspace and marketspace, can significantly enhance the retail environment.

Third, since customers do not necessarily desire similar experiences, the retailer has to attempt personalizing the customer experience. Depending on whether the customer prefers active participation and immersion in the experience (which also supports higher levels of co-creation of the experience) or prefer passive observation and absorption of the experience, the retailer can emphasize the entertaining, educational, esthetical and or escape elements of the experience.

Fourth, retailers who want to offer experiences tailored to specific customer needs will have to make their products and services interactive, train staff well, provide an experience-scape that allows two-way interactions and provides optimal and consistent experiences across the entire customer journey. Customers also play an important role in co-creating personalized experiences. They should long for and enjoy becoming cognitively and emotionally immersed and engaged in their interaction with the retail organization and actively provide the latter with constructive suggestions and ideas on how to shape its experiences to best meet the customer's needs.

Finally, to ensure the presence of appropriate stimuli and conditions for memorable experiences to result, it is necessary to blend the three proposed building blocks. This process entails the following: the retailer acts as the resource integrator and facilitate the experience creation by providing a themed, stimulating and engaging environment where consumers are inspired to engage with the organization, at all touchpoints across the entire experience journey. This process of co-creation enhances the personalization of the customer experience.

When the experience building blocks are integrated as described and used holistically, the framework as shown in Figure 2 could provide management of off-line retail organizations with opportunities to differentiate themselves from competitors, position their organizations, maintain a competitive advantage, and increase sales revenue.

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