

AN EXAMINATION OF THRIFT STORE SHOPPERS

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An increasing number of service organizations are developing thrift stores to raise resources to support their mission-directed activities. Such stores seek donated merchandise . . . sell it . . . and use the proceeds to support their altruistic efforts. The purpose of this study is to examine the processes by which thrift store shoppers: (a) decide to buy pre-owned merchandise, (b) get information about competing shopping outlets, and (c) select which organization(s) are appropriate for their particular purchase decision. A web survey was administered to assess these processes. The results will allow organizations to evaluate their existing thrift store practices against shopper preferences in the interest of fulfilling their service missions

INTRODUCTION

Thrift stores (or, second hand stores, charity shops) actively seek donated merchandise to be sold in their retail outlets. The proceeds of such sales are then used for mission-specific benevolences (i.e., helping those unable to help themselves). As such, achieving a better understanding of buyer behavior can enhance the performance of the thrift store which will, in turn, provide greater resources for the organization. These expanding resources will then flow back into mission-driven activities such as building homes (Habitat for Humanity), youth development (Salvation Army), worker training (Goodwill stores), and other valued initiatives.

Thrift shopping, as defined by Bardhi (2003), is “shopping that takes place in second-hand settings, such as garage sales and thrift shops.” Parsons (2002) defines UK charity shops as “a shop which sells donated goods where the profit is used for charitable purposes.” The terms charity shop and thrift shop will be used interchangeably in this manuscript. The United States two largest charitable resale organizations are the Salvation Army and Goodwill Industries International (MSNBC 2008). Storeowners generally get gently used merchandise from people or retailers who go

out of business or are liquidating their stock (Glover 1992).

Thrift shops perform several functions in addition to their primary role of charitable fundraising. First, such stores raise awareness for their charity. A thrift store sponsored by a CASA (Citizens Against Spousal Abuse) raises awareness of this important cause. In the UK many charity shops perform this function as the “face on high street.” Second, charity shops provide merchandise for low income shoppers. According to Williams and Paddock (2003), the poor shop at thrift stores out of necessity, “It is their first option, but second choice.” Third, they provide a social function for staff and customers who come in for a chat or support for personal problems such as comforting a widow who is bringing in her husband’s clothing. Fourth, they provide employment, training, and rehabilitation for the community’s labor force. For example, over 1.5 million people received job training and other career services from Goodwill Industries in 2008 (see www.goodwill.org). Fifth, charity shops provide recycling to the community. Merchandise that is in good shape is resold. Merchandise in poor quality is recycled for other uses. For example, the two Computer Works Stores that Goodwill Industries operate in Orange County California, had \$655,000 in computer sales in 2003 while recycling 80 percent of the donated computers (Messmer 2004). This recycling function is particularly important amongst the younger generations and

should be featured in any communications targeting them.

The purpose of this manuscript is to outline an empirical study examining the processes by which individuals purchase from thrift stores. The results should help nonprofit organizations improve their retail performance which will provide more resources to carry out their benevolent service missions.

Three central research questions will guide this inquiry.

1. Why do shoppers buy from thrift stores?
2. Where do thrift store shoppers get their information about their purchase options?
3. What criteria do thrift store shoppers use to select among competing organizations seeking their patronage?

First, the thrift shopping literature is discussed to provide context for this study. Second, the application of the Consumer Decision-Making Model to thrift store purchases is provided. Third, the study methodology, including processes used to create the on-line questionnaire used for data collection, is presented. Fourth, the results and implications for thrift store operators are offered.

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Consumer Behavior

Alexander, Cryer, and Wood (2008) identified three charity shop consumer segments: *Moderate Means*, *Comfortably Off*, and *Urban Prosperity*. The buying motive for Moderate Means is thrift. Comfortably Off and Urban Prosperity (i.e., middle- and upper-income thrift shoppers) experience hedonic benefits including fun, leisure, haggling, social interaction, and realization of consumer fantasy that results from the search for the unexpected (Williams and Paddock 2003). Bardhi and Arnould (2005) found that consumers get both thrift and hedonic benefits from thrift shopping. Furthermore, they found that the pursuit or practice of thrift itself (as an outcome) provided hedonic benefits.

Christiansen and Snepenger (2005) discovered the existence of a *Thrift Maven* – someone who can and does transmit information about the thrift market to other individuals. Mavens have lower incomes and are motivated by frugality. Mavens are both purchasers and donors to thrift stores, maybe as a means of collecting information to disseminate. Mavens benefit from helping others. Because thrift stores spend little money on promotion, managing *Thrift Mavens* and word-of-mouth communications can enhance store performance.

Charity shops are increasingly targeting consumer niche markets by focusing their merchandise strategy to a specific audience. Computers, books, bikes, furniture, music, flowers by post, insurance, savings and other financial services, telephone cards, funeral plans, and adventure holidays are a few of the niche marketers in the charity sector.

Many charity shops are turning to “bought-in goods” (i.e., new merchandise) to target new consumer segments that want to support the charity but are not interested in second-hand merchandise. Bought in goods include crafts, stationary, pottery, jewelry, and household goods (Parsons 2002). Bought-in merchandise also overcomes the problem of quantity and quality of donated merchandise. Supply is more regular as is product quality.

Store Image

The old perception of thrift stores is that they are unorganized, dark, smelly, and dirty (Bardhi 2003). However, in recent years charity shops have become less stigmatized as shops try to reach a broad range of consumers. This can be seen on many high streets in the UK where up-scale charity shops are mixed in with traditional retailers. Moreover, a poll by Harris Interactive and Ebay found that 70 percent of adults said buying used merchandise is more socially acceptable than it was 5 to 10 years ago (Petrecca 2008). A study by Klouda (2007) in a word association with charity shops found: 66

percent chose “cheap”; 53 percent “friendly”; 36 percent “old-fashion”; and 15 percent “fun.”

Darley and Lim (1993) found no significant linkage between a favorable store image and store patronage. Darley and Lim (1999) found that the more favorable one’s store image and one’s quality-availability perception the more frequently an individual will shop at a second-hand store. However, a favorable general attitude toward second hand stores had no impact on shopping frequency.

A study by Bennett and Gabriel (2000) found that charities that have an image of being honest, trustworthy, well-managed, and operationally efficient, had higher favorability ratings for new unconventional products such as package holidays or household insurance. This study also found that high favorability ratings for current products are related to high favorability ratings for new unconventional products. An image of compassion, kindness, idealism, or progressive had no impact on the opinion of new unconventional products to be offered through the store.

Branding

In recent years many second hand stores have attempted to manage their brand. Branding simplifies recognition and store selection, promotes values and attributes, differentiates their competitive offering, influences consumer behavior, and builds loyalty (Stride 2006). The Salvation Army uses brand differentiation and positioning strategies to create a competitive advantage (Jenkinson, Sain and Bishop 2005). The non-negotiability of charitable values are what separates thrift retailing from for profit retailing. Charities should align organizational values with the values of consumers and donors alike. Consumers who associate with a brand personality experience emotional and self expressive benefits (Haigh and Gilbert 2005). Clearly, the management of charitable brands has its rewards. Haigh and Gilbert (2005) valued PDSA (a UK charity that cares for the pets of needy people) at 144 million pounds (approximately \$200 million US dollars).

Increased Professionalism

A recent trend in thrift retailing is increased level of professionalism within the sector. This can be seen in the paying of management and staff, better locations, standardized merchandise displays, higher quality store fixtures, pricing strategies, and promotional strategies (Croft 2003). This increased professionalism has led to a better image for thrift retailers (Horne and Broadbridge 1995). However, this increasing professionalism in the sector has had some negative side-effects. The need for higher wages, better locations, nicer fixtures, vans for rotating stock between outlets, new technology and shrinkage have dramatically increased the cost of running a charity shop. Additionally, a push for increased efficiency leaves employees with less time, and possibly fewer bargains ... which can squash entrepreneurial spirit and give the charity a “commercial image” (Broadbridge and Parsons 2003).

Thrift Store Competition

Thrift stores experience competition for customers from other charity shops, for-profit second hand retailers, and traditional retailers. For profit charity shops such as Value Village compete for both shoppers and donors. Frequently, people are not aware that they are patronizing a for profit company (Milke 1997).

Being located near other charity shops provides a cumulative pull which increases store traffic and increases competition and comparison shopping. This is especially true for up-market shops that feature designer clothing (Alexander, Cryer and Wood 2008). This increased cost, coupled with saturation in the charity retail sector, can be detrimental to financial performance (Parsons 2002). However, the tax-exempt status of non-profit organizations can be a strategic advantage. Interestingly, traditional retailers in the UK sought relief by encouraging government to restrict the number of charity shops in a marketplace (Horne 1998). Finally, one website (thethriftshopper.com) gives users access to a directory of over 9,000 thrift stores in the United States.

Location

According to Alexander, Cryer and Wood (2008), charity shop location is determined by customers, competition, supply chain, volunteers, costs, foot traffic, level of saturation, and availability. Volunteers often live within walking distance of the shop. Appealing to their sense of neighborhood may be a good recruiting tool. Because the value of merchandise is often low, the cost of moving the merchandise is cost prohibitive. Therefore, charity shops need to be located close to their donors (Mitchell, Montgomery and Rauch 2009).

Charity shops have traded up in recent years by acquiring better merchandise and moving into better locations in an attempt to bring in more up-scale consumers. According to Tim Alvis president of America's Thrift Stores, "Wealthy people will shop in thrift stores in wealthy areas but will not go into lower income areas. Lower income people will shop at both (Facenda 2006)."

Economy

The early 1990's recession produced a more value-conscious consumer. In 1991 many people were selling rather than donating used merchandise (Glover 1992). The current economy is ripe for thrift store sales. Consumers cannot control the cost of energy and healthcare or the performance of the stock market. They do have some control over the cost of clothing and household merchandise by haggling at thrift stores. The National Association of Resale and Thrift Shops report that 2008 September - October sales were up 35 percent compared to the prior (Petrecca 2008). Similarly, Hein and Miller (2008) found that thrift shops saw an 85 percent increase in the number of customers from January to August 2008. Even teens are turning to thrift stores as summer jobs dry up and their parents struggle in tough economic times (D'Innocenzio 2008). It's even becoming cool to be frugal and environmentally conscious ... two things thrift stores offer. The downside to the bad economy

for thrift retailers is a decline in donations which, in turn, affects their merchandise available for resale.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR THIS STUDY

The Model of Consumer Decision-Making is used to organize this research study. Here, we model the consumer as a rational problem solver ... seeking information ... and making decisions (see Engel, Blackwell and Miniard 1994). Consumers move through a series of sequential steps in order to make consumer choices. For this study, the application of the model to our work is as follows:

- **Problem Recognition** – Why do people buy?
- **Information Search** – Where do people get information about possible purchase?
- **Evaluation of Alternatives** – What criteria are important when selecting a place to shop?
- **Choice** – Which market segment description best describes each shopper?
- **Post-Choice Evaluation** – How important are prior experiences as a buyer when selecting where to buy?

METHODOLOGY

Questionnaire Development

The study was conducted using a disguised purpose format; that is, respondents were asked to discuss their donating and shopping behavior for all thrift stores or second hand stores. This was done to limit the possible influence on response by asking for an assessment of only one such store. Focus group research was used to identify:

1. the reasons shoppers seek to interact with thrift stores or second hand stores
2. the variables commonly used to assess shopping options
3. the information sources for shoppers
4. market segments for thrift store or second hand store shoppers

The questionnaire was refined following a number of pre-tests. The finalized questionnaire was then posted to a unique Internet address for data collection.

Data Collection

The population of analysis for this study consisted of citizens of two mid-sized US cities; one in the southeast and one in the Midwest. The data was collected using a non-random process: each student enrolled in the Principles of Marketing class assumed responsibility for sending the questionnaire to a pre-determined number of email addresses from members of their social network. The students have access to a wide cross section of the general population as family, friends, co-workers, and so on. The following letter was used for data collection:

As you know, I am a student at the Univ. of _____. In my Principles of Marketing class, we are conducting research to help a community partner improve their organization. Specifically, we've created a survey to study the process of DONATING and BUYING from thrift stores or second hand stores (such as Goodwill, Salvation Army, etc.). The link to the survey is provided below.

<http://www.xxx.com>

I ask that you go to the link and complete the survey. (You may have to paste the link into the address line of your browser.) Your doing so will help us successfully complete our work and help a worthwhile organization in our community. I thank you in advance for your time and cooperation.

The software used (VOVICI) provides information on information requests and questionnaire receipts. A total of 1,754 email addresses (i.e., possible respondents) received the questionnaire. A total of 1,193 usable responses were collected (n=1,193, and a 68 percent response rate). The aggregated profile of respondents is presented in **Table One**.

PRESENTATION OF RESEARCH RESULTS

Problem Recognition

Respondents were asked to report the reasons they have made purchases of pre-owned items in the past. Specifically, the following question was posed to respondents:

Many of us PURCHASE used clothing, furniture, and other items from thrift stores or second Hand stores. Below is a list of reasons making such PURCHASES likely. Please report why you've SHOPPED at Thrift Stores or Second Hand Stores in the past (please select all that apply).

**TABLE 1
A Profile of All Respondents (n=1,193)**

Item	Responses
Gender	Male = 450 (38%) Female = 729 (62%)
Age	17 and Under = 13 (1%) 18-34 = 763 (64%) 35-54 = 311 (26%) 55 and Older = 96 (8%)
Education	High school graduate or less = 237 (20%)
Marital Status	Married = 540 (45%)
Employment Status	Employed full-time (35 or more hours per week) = 647 (54%)

The responses to this question are provided in **Table Two**.

When asked to report the top three reasons for purchasing in the past, the most frequently cited items (in order) were:

1. Value Seeker ... I saved money.
2. Special Purpose ... I needed a unique item for a themed event.
3. Eccentric ... I looked for unusual items. Such stores have them.

ANOVA was used to determine whether differences in the three main reasons for past purchases were based on personal characteristics such as age, gender, marital status, education, and employment status. The results appear in **Table Three**.

The results indicate that women are significantly more likely to shop for value seeking and special purposes than men. This may be explained by the fact that women are more likely to shop than men in general. There were no gender differences for shopping for an unusual item. Younger respondents were significantly more likely to shop for special items and unusual items than older respondents. There were no age differences when it came to value seeking behavior. With respect to marital status, the only significant difference occurs with regard to buying unusual items. Married respondents are significantly more motivated to purchase unusual items than singles. Marital status had no significant impact on any of the top three reasons for past purchases.

Education had a significant impact on value seeking, special purpose buying, and looking for unusual items. Specifically, four-year college grads were significantly less likely to engage in value seeking behavior than any other educational status. High school grads or less were significantly more likely to seek out unusual items than respondents who had some college or were four-year graduates. Additionally, high school grads or less were significantly more likely to purchase items for a special purpose than respondents who had some college or studied at the post graduate level.

Information Search

Respondents were asked to report the relative importance of information sources when looking for a place to purchase used items. A five-point scale was provided:

- 5 = Extremely Important
- 4 = Somewhat Important
- 3 = Neutral / Indifferent
- 2 = Not Very Important
- 1 = Not Important At All
- n/a = Not Applicable

To assess sources of information for buyers, the following question was posed to respondents:

Assuming you needed to find a thrift store or second hand store for a current PURCHASE, how important would the following information sources be to help you identify those organizations SELLING such items.

The responses to this question are provided in **Table Four**.

ANOVA was used to determine whether differences in uses of information sources were based on personal characteristics such as age, gender, marital status, education, and employment status. The results appear in **Table Five**.

The results indicate that women are significantly more likely than men to rate visibility of location, past experiences, word-of-mouth, and their minister as important. This may be explained by the fact that women are more likely to shop than men in general. The only significant difference in importance of information source by age is for word-of-mouth. Specifically, respondents 17 and under were significantly less likely to rate word-of-mouth important than any other age group. This finding is counter-intuitive. Generally, at this young age you are more likely to be influenced by others than are older adults. This finding could be explained by perception rather than reality. That is, maybe those 17 and under think that they are not as influenced by others;

TABLE 2
Reasons for Past Purchases

Reason for Purchase	Frequency of Reporting by Respondents
Value Seeker ... I saved money.	684 (58%)
Special Purpose ... I needed a unique item for a themed event.	568 (48%)
Eccentric ... I looked for unusual items. Such stores have them.	365 (31%)
Pragmatic ... I found a used product fit my needs.	322 (27%)
Collector ... I looked for unique items for my collections.	252 (21%)
Supporter ... I believed in their cause. I found things to show my support.	225 (19%)
Other	95 (8%)

TABLE 3
ANOVAs for Past Purchases

Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	F-Value	P-Value
Value Seeking	Gender	4.540	.033*
Value Seeking	Age	.679	.565
Value Seeking	Marital Status	.270	.847
Value Seeking	Education	2.956	.032*
Value Seeking	Employment Status	2.021	.133
Special Purpose	Gender	14.227	.000*
Special Purpose	Age	10.026	.000*
Special Purpose	Marital Status	.506	.678
Special Purpose	Education	6.321	.000*
Special Purpose	Employment Status	1.460	.233
Unusual Item	Gender	.144	.704
Unusual Item	Age	7.292	.000*
Unusual Item	Marital Status	3.076	.027*
Unusual Item	Education	3.020	.029
Unusual Item	Employment Status	.368	.692

* Indicates significant at the .05 level.

TABLE 4
Relative Importance of Information Sources for Purchases

Information Source	Frequency of Respondents who Reported Extremely Important or Somewhat Important
Visibility of Stores.	950 (85%)
Past Experiences as a Shopper.	915 (83%)
Recommendations from Family and Friends.	915 (82%)
Ministers and Community Leaders	466 (43%)
News Media (television, Radio, Newspaper, etc).	409 (37%)
Yellow Pages.	347 (32%)
Internet.	321 (29%)

TABLE 5
ANOVAS for Information Sources

Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	F-Value	P-Value
Visibility of Location	Gender	17.300	.000*
Visibility of Location	Age	1.916	.125
Visibility of Location	Marital Status	.629	.596
Visibility of Location	Education	2.114	.097
Visibility of Location	Employment Status	.505	.604
Past Experience	Gender	4.775	.029*
Past Experience	Age	1.123	.339
Past Experience	Marital Status	.732	.533
Past Experience	Education	5.099	.002*
Past Experience	Employment Status	.076	.927
Word of Mouth	Gender	17.365	.000*
Word of Mouth	Age	4.212	.006*
Word of Mouth	Marital Status	1.009	.388
Word of Mouth	Education	4.696	.003*
Word of Mouth	Employment Status	.149	.861
Minister	Gender	17.593	.000*
Minister	Age	1.909	.126
Minister	Marital Status	.336	.800
Minister	Education	1.557	.198
Minister	Employment Status	8.291	.000

Indicates significant at the .05 level.

while the reality may be that they are influenced by others more than older adults.

The only significant difference in the importance of information source by education is for past experiences. Specifically, the more educated the respondent the more important past experiences are as an information source. There are no significant differences in the importance of information sources by marital status. Regarding employment status and the importance of information sources, those employed part-time are more likely than full-time employees to rate their minister as an important information source.

Evaluation of Alternatives

To assess store selection criteria important to buyers, the following question was posed to respondents:

Here's a list of variables to evaluate the attractiveness of a thrift store or second hand store for a SHOPPER. Please rate the relative importance of each variable on your willingness to SHOP in such a store using the scale provided.

The responses to this question are provided in **Table Six**.

When asked to report the top three reasons for selecting a thrift stores or second hand store in the past, the most frequently cited items (in order) were:

1. Cleanliness of store and surroundings
2. Quality of merchandise
3. Well-organized displays of merchandise

ANOVA was used to determine whether differences in store selection criteria were based on personal characteristics such as age, gender, marital status, education, and employment status. The results appear in **Table Seven**.

The results indicate that women were significantly more likely than men to rate all of the selection criteria as more important. Regarding age and store selection criteria, respondents in the 35-54 age category were

significantly more likely to rate well-organized merchandise and friendliness of staff as important than are respondents in the 18-34 age group. Single respondents were significantly more likely than married respondents to rate value, convenience, and friendliness of staff as important.

Respondents who studied at the post graduate level rated value as significantly more important than respondents who have one to three years college experience. A possible explanation for this finding is that many of the respondents with less than three years of college experience were still in college on their parent's dime. It is likely that those who have studied at the post graduate level are more financially independent and thus place higher value on their money. Lastly, employed respondents rated friendly staff as more important than unemployed respondents.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Sample Characteristics

A convenience sample was drawn from the general population of two medium-sized U.S. cities using email communication for data collection. The data was collected using a non-random process: each student enrolled in the Principles of Marketing class assumed responsibility for sending the questionnaire to a pre-determined number of email addresses from members of their social network. As such, only those with access to email would be contacted. And, only those with some sort of relationship with a student enrolled in the class could participate. Compared to the general population of the US, the following discrepancies are noted:

- Sample includes disproportionately more women than men (62 percent versus 38 percent). But, this number is closer to shopper practices (i.e., more women shopping in such stores).
- Sample tends to be younger than overall population – 60 percent of respondents age 35 and under (40

TABLE 6
Relative Attractiveness of a Store for Purchases

Criteria	Frequency of Respondents who Reported Extremely Important or Somewhat Important
Cleanliness of store and surroundings.	1,016 (89%)
Quality of merchandise.	1,011 (89%)
Well-organized displays of merchandise.	1,001 (88%)
Value (cost / benefit) of merchandise.	992 (88%)
Convenience of store location.	951 (84%)
Friendly store staff.	904 (80%)
Uniqueness of merchandise	758 (68%)
Store staff attentive to my needs	724 (64%)
Quality of brand names present.	666 (59%)

percent above 35 years). Younger people are more likely thrift shoppers whereas older respondents are more likely thrift donors.

Sample tends to be better educated than the overall population – 80 percent had some college experience. This is a function of the social class of the students and their social networks (a better educated group).

Problem Recognition

Buyers frequent thrift stores or second hand stores for a variety of reasons. However, two buyer motives seemed to jump out from the others; namely,

1. Value Seeker ... I saved money.
2. Special Purpose ... I needed a unique item for a themed event.

Some buyers must shop a second hand stores to extend their purchasing power. Others shop at such stores to fulfill special purpose needs. Luckily, these two groups are compatible and can be served simultaneously. Women held stronger attitudes than men towards buying motives, importance of information sources, and store selection criteria. It should be noted

men also agreed in big majorities and constitute a valuable thrift store segment. Lastly, young respondents were significantly more likely to shop for unique or unusual items. Promotions touting the benefit of unique or for a special occasion targeted toward young respondents should be effective.

Information Search

Today's shopper has many options. As such, it is important to identify where prospective shoppers look for information. Assuming buyers had a need for thrift and second hand store merchandise, the following information sources are most important to them:

1. Visibility of Stores.
2. Past Experiences as a Shopper.
3. Recommendations from Family and Friends.

It is important to maintain a very visible presence in the community for shoppers. This is often difficult for more visible locations are often more expensive. Relationship marketing and word-of-mouth communications of satisfied buyers are again shown to be very important. Store personnel must be taught the importance of their interaction with all buyers

TABLE 7
ANOVAs for Store Selection Criteria

Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	F-Value	P-Value
Cleanliness	Gender	78.966	.000*
Cleanliness	Age	.483	.694
Cleanliness	Marital Status	2.134	.094
Cleanliness	Education	.755	.519
Cleanliness	Employment Status	2.242	.107
Quality Merchandise	Gender	26.686	.000*
Quality Merchandise	Age	2.004	.112
Quality Merchandise	Marital Status	.040	.989
Quality Merchandise	Education	1.519	.190
Quality Merchandise	Employment Status	1.212	.298
Well-organized	Gender	25.088	.000*
Well-organized	Age	2.729	.043*
Well-organized	Marital Status	.659	.577
Well-organized	Education	2.400	.066
Well-organized	Employment Status	1.309	.270
Value	Gender	4.043	.045*
Value	Age	1.161	.324
Value	Marital Status	4.899	.002*
Value	Education	3.487	.015*
Value	Employment Status	2.552	.078
Convenience	Gender	7.312	.007*
Convenience	Age	.653	.581
Convenience	Marital Status	2.758	.041
Convenience	Education	.516	.672
Convenience	Employment Status	2.776	.063
Friendliness	Gender	55.424	.000*
Friendliness	Age	3.315	.019*
Friendliness	Marital Status	3.337	.019*
Friendliness	Education	.684	.562
Friendliness	Employment Status	3.725	.024

for the long-term benefit of the organization. Additionally, thrift store operators can actively target “thrift mavens” as a disseminator of word-of-mouth communications.

Evaluation of Alternatives

As noted earlier, shoppers have many options. And, unsatisfied shoppers will likely look elsewhere when future needs arise. When evaluating a thrift store or second hand store, the most important items to prospective buyers are:

1. Cleanliness of store and surroundings.
2. Quality of merchandise.
3. Well-organized displays of merchandise.
4. Value (cost / benefit) of merchandise.
5. Convenience of store location.
6. Friendly store staff.

Buyers expect excellence from all retailers, not just “first-run” sellers. Stores (and surrounding property) must be clean and well-organized. Merchandise must be perceived as offering a value (cost / benefit assessment). Store personnel must be attentive to the wishes of their customers. Otherwise, buyers will find other options. Employee training in retail atmospherics, product presentation, client interaction, and other matters are important to all retailers, including thrift stores and/or second hand stores. Single individuals rate value, convenience, and friendliness of staff as more important than married people. This may indicate stronger attitudes towards thrift shopping.

CONCLUSIONS

People have high expectations when selecting a thrift store to support with their purchases. Visibility of facilities is important to buyers. This visibility includes existing brick-and-mortar facilities but could also be the presence of mobile collection vehicles or kiosks that are highly visible as well.

Thrift stores shoppers are seeking value. They wish to extend their purchasing power by

realizing the savings possible from pre-owned merchandise. Buyers are often looking for items for themed events (i.e., a hat for a horse racing party, a black overcoat for a Blue’s Brothers party, or an outfit for Retro fest). Anticipation of such themed events (such as Kentucky Derby Parties in early May) will allow the store to highlight merchandise at the appropriate time. And, again it is important to attain top-of-mind awareness so buyers will begin visiting the store in anticipation of such events. Promotions targeted at young adults should focus on being unique.

Today’s effective nonprofit marketer seeks to create long-term mutually beneficial relationships with buyers. It is less expensive to keep existing buyers involved with the organization than to constantly seek new relationships. Respondents were very clear on this matter ... past experiences as buyers matter! And, positive word-of-mouth communication is an effective source of information for prospective buyers. Such communication is free to the organization and has more credibility to recipients. The organization must encourage positive word-of-mouth communications.

Additionally, today’s thrift store shopper expects much of what they see at the mall or chain store in their thrift Store: a clean store, quality merchandise, well-organized displays, value for their money, convenience, and a friendly and attentive staff. This will require employee training in customer interaction. Store leadership must recognize that while shoppers are seeking to support your organization, they are comparing your store to the for-profit shopping options available to them. While this may be an unfair comparison to make ... it is one that is, in fact, being made.

The purpose of this baseline study is to provide a better understanding of the processes by which people purchase from thrift stores and/or second hand stores. The results will allow store management and organizational leaders to critically evaluate their existing thrift store practices against buyer preferences in the

interest of continuous improvement. Achieving a better understanding of buyer behavior will allow thrift stores to improve their operational effectiveness. That is, they can increase the positive impact their organization has on the community by helping more of its citizens.

AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

One area for investigation is looking at the differences between thrift store donors and thrift store shoppers. An understanding of similarities may lead to standardized marketing strategies while an understanding of differences may lead to customized marketing strategies. Second, research needs to be conducted on strength of attitudes towards thrift shopping. Specifically, a profile of high involvement and low involvement consumers will aid strategy development. Finally, research on thrift shopping in emerging markets and differences in their buying processes should be fruitful. As new retailing patterns are introduced into emerging markets, it will be interesting to see if the number and types of thrift stores or charity shops expands as well.

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