



Music Soothes the Savage Customer; Impact of Music on Customers

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Synopsis

Experimental design is a high impact market research technique that is rarely used in a market research context. Greater use of experimental research approaches are warranted because experimental design can generate particularly powerful research outcomes including:

- It allows the researcher to infer causal or cause-and-effect relationships; that is, whether some variables cause changes in other variables;
- Often, major research outcomes can be achieved in relatively cost efficient ways (because the researcher can make use of information that already exists).

The current research project was conducted to guide the management decision on whether introducing music in its stores would be a cost efficient strategy to achieve attractive business outcomes. Experimental techniques were employed to determine the effect of music in a retail customer environment on customer attitudes and behaviour as well as the in-store experience.

The research suggested music had a number of impacts including:

- Impacts on customer behaviour;
- Impacts on customer perceptions;
- Impacts on customers as a result of subliminal stimuli (that is changes occurred to customers without customers being necessarily aware the music was present).

What is experimental research?

Consumers engage in experimental research continuously in that they try things (e.g. new products or services) and see what happens. What consumers are doing in this trial-type behaviour is comparing past experiences with new experiences.

The approach used by consumers is the essence of experimental research; *“the manipulation of one or more variables by the experimenter in such a way that its effects on one or more other variables can be measured”* (Tull & Hawkins, 1984).

Experimental research approaches can be very complex, but at the most simple level these techniques involve:

- Measuring the issue of interest (e.g. sales);
- Introducing the variable of interest (e.g. rewards program);
- Measuring the issue of interest again (e.g. sales).

If we can show that sales have increased after the introduction of the rewards program, it might be possible to infer that the introduction of the rewards program has generated (“caused”) an increase in sales.



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However it is important to note here that the above example is an extremely simple approach to experimental research. If we were really interested in drawing confident inferences about the relationship between the rewards program and sales, it would be important to apply a range of additional experimental design techniques including:

- Control groups;
- Matched samples;
- Randomisation and so on.

Techniques such as these provide the researcher with additional levels of confidence that the relationships they have observed are indeed accurate reflections of reality.

Market researchers rarely use experimental research procedures; although there is some use of control groups in some direct marketing applications and occasionally in some advertising research procedures (e.g. see Pelsmaker et al, 2004). Rather than use experimental research procedures market researchers tend to observe current behaviour (e.g. via questionnaires, depth interviews, group discussions or observations) and then attempt to predict future behaviour (or perhaps explain past behaviour).

A good overview of experimental research techniques in the context of market research is available in a recent article in the International Journal of Market Research (see Ryals & Wilson, 2005).

Experimental research approaches can deliver a range of benefits to researchers (and their clients). Some of these benefits include:

- Giving the researcher greater confidence that a relationship does indeed exist between the variables of interest. Indeed we would argue that more often than not conventional research techniques do not deliver outputs that allow researchers (and their clients) to conclude that relationships really do exist between the variables being researched.
- Often the data that is required already exists (e.g. sales data) and thus costs can be saved by conducting the analysis on data that already exists.

Chant Link & Associates has used experimental research approaches in a range of research situations including:

- Determining whether an innovative point of sale advertisement had an effect on sales of products in a supermarket environment (this research showed that the POS did have a positive effect on sales, and because the data used in the analysis was existing sales data from the supermarkets, the overall cost of the research was relatively low).
- Determining whether the introduction of music into retail stores would have a positive effect on customers.

The following discussion described the latter example in some detail.



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So what effect does music have on customers?

The research problem

In this research project our client was a very large organisation whose business was dependent on customers accessing its services via a very large retail structure. The organisation had been approached by an external supplier with the suggestion that the introduction of music into its retail outlets would deliver a range of positive customer outcomes.

The client's original intention was to conduct a survey of customers to determine their reaction to the concept of music being introduced into the retail outlets. However Chant Link & Associates suggested that an experimental approach to the research may deliver more useful outputs given that the key issue of interest to the client was:

Would the introduction of music in its retail outlets have a positive effect on customers, and if so, what would these effects be?

The research design

The research design involved:

- A pre-test; that is, information was collected prior to any music being introduced to the retail outlets.
- A post-test; that is, information was collected after the introduction of the music to the outlets.
- A control group; that is, for one retail outlet no music was introduced.

Information was collected from three retail outlets that were carefully matched so that they had similar customer profiles, similar sales, similar staffing and so on.

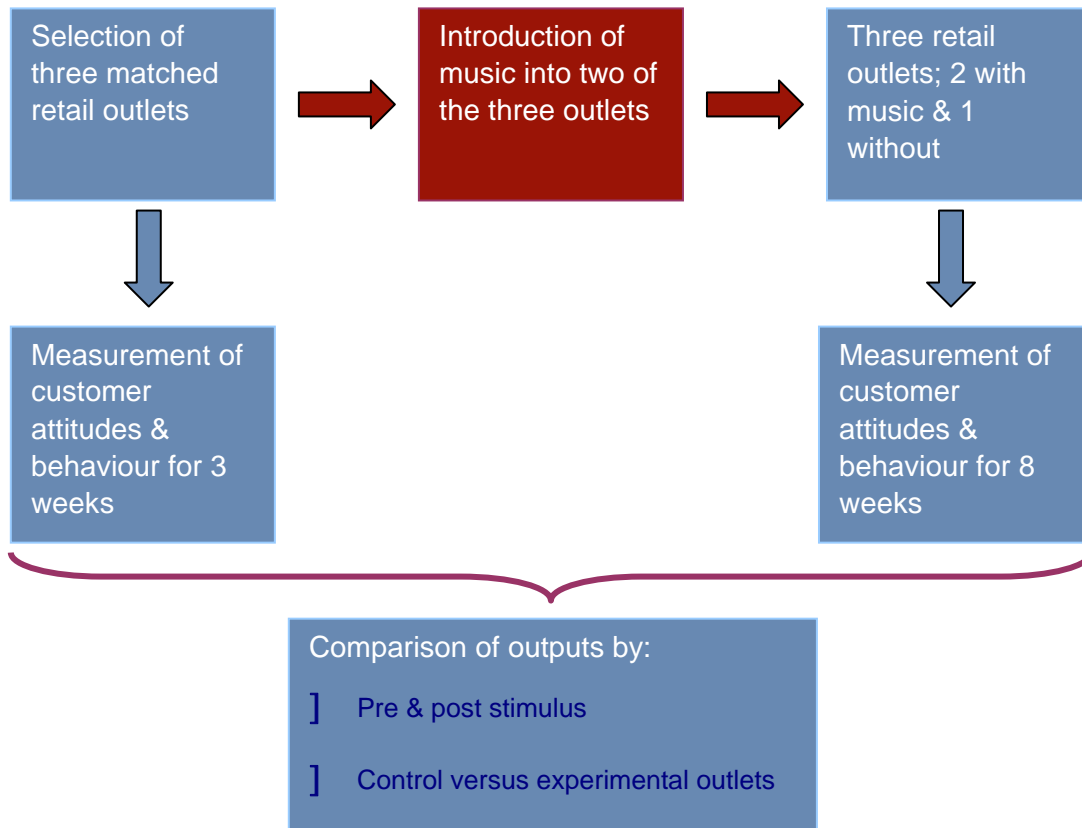
This design is summarised in the following exhibit:



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Exhibit: The Research Design



Information collected: A range of information was collected (pre and post the introduction of the music) including:

- **Emotional responses** (this was measured by a set of seven questions).
- **Cognitive responses**, including questions on:
 - Service quality.
 - Store quality.
 - Brand image.
 - Perceived time in queues.
 - Perceived total time in store.
 - Specific product awareness.
 - Satisfaction with service.
 - Satisfaction with the store.
 - Satisfaction with the store experience.
 - Satisfaction with the overall organisation.
- **Behavioural responses**, including questions on:
 - Approach behaviours.
 - Avoidance behaviours.
 - Information seeking behaviours.



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Key outputs

Music had a positive effect on customers: In summary the outputs strongly suggested that music had a very positive effect on customers' experiences in store. Music had a significant positive effect on 9 of the 12 key variables.

Thus as compared to stores without music, those with music showed:

- **Emotions:** Customers felt significantly more positive about their in-store experience.
- **Service quality:** Customers had significantly higher perceptions of service quality
- **Overall satisfaction with service quality:** Customers' overall satisfaction with service quality was significantly higher in the stores that played the music.
- **Store quality:** Mean ratings of customers' perceptions of store quality were significantly higher than for the stores without the music.
- **Overall satisfaction with store quality:** Customers' overall satisfaction with store quality was significantly higher in the case of stores with music.
- **Perceived waiting time in queues:** Perceived waiting time in queues was significantly lower.
- **Perceived total time in store:** Perceived total time spent in the store was significantly lower.
- **Overall satisfaction with overall store experience:** Customers' satisfaction with their overall store experience was significantly higher.
- **Avoidance:** Customers' desire to hurry out of the store and limit their communications with other people was significantly higher. In a retail context, this is not necessarily a negative finding given most customers probably aim to limit their time in a store. Thus, given overall satisfaction with the overall store experience also increased with music, it is likely an increase in avoidance behaviour was not a negative effect.

Music appeared to have an “unconscious” effect: The research found no significant differences in the mean ratings between those who said they heard the music and those who said they did not hear the music while in the store.

This suggests that music may have had an unconscious effect – that is, respondents did not have to be consciously aware of the music for it to have an effect. Such an effect has been previously suggested in the literature.

Effects on perceptions of time spent in-store: In addition the perceived total time spent in the store was significantly higher among customers who said they heard the music compared to customers who said they did not hear any music while in the store. This could be because those consciously listening to the music used the number of songs to determine how long they thought they were in the store.



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Key learnings from this research example

This research example demonstrates a number of important points:

- 1. Music had a positive effect:** At the most obvious level the research clearly demonstrated that music did indeed have a positive effect on the customer experience in retail outlets. However we emphasise that a similar effect may not occur for all types of retail outlets. It may well be that the characteristics of the retailer researched here may have been consistent with a positive effect from music.
- 2. Some findings would not have been apparent without an experimental research approach:** Conventional (non-experimental) market research approaches are unlikely to have delivered the above outputs. For example:
 - It is unlikely conventional research techniques would have identified the “unconscious” effect of music on customers. Indeed conventional research techniques would have almost certainly needed to specify to consumers that music was the issue of interest in the research.
 - It is unlikely that conventional research techniques would have allowed us to infer the causal relationships that appear to be apparent here (e.g. presence of music appears to result in perceived shorter queue waiting times, presence of music appears to result in higher customer satisfaction).

It is strongly recommended that researchers give serious consideration to widening their repertoire of research techniques by making more use of experimental research techniques.

References

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