

THE MANAGEMENT OF DESHOPPING AND ITS EFFECTS ON SERVICE: A MASS MARKET CASE STUDY

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Abstract

Purpose: Deshopping is the return of products, after they have fulfilled the purpose for which they were borrowed. Previous research indicates that deshopping is a prevalent and growing consumer behaviour. This paper examines deshopping from a retail perspective. It is a case study of interviews conducted with a mass-market retailer, to investigate their awareness and management of this behaviour.

Methodology: This paper is a case study of nine interviews conducted with different levels of staff at a mass-market retailer in their flagship London store, to investigate their awareness and management of deshopping.

Findings: The findings demonstrate the beliefs, attitudes and emotions of the different levels of employees towards deshopping and demonstrates their attempts to manage deshopping and combat the negative affects of this on customer service.

Research limitations: The limitation of this research is that it is only conducted with one high street retailer. However, it is important to highlight that this is a large womenswear retailer which is highly representative of other retailers within the sector. There is little detail given regarding the retailer itself or their fundamentals of the actual Customer Service Policy, this is due to the confidentiality agreement between the researcher and retailer. It is important to acknowledge the sensitivity of this type research to retailers who are reluctant to have this information publicised. It is also important to acknowledge that many retailers have not made any attempts to manage this behaviour by restricting their returns policy. So this research case study is conducted with a retailer that is actively introducing change to manage this behaviour.

Practical implications: The research concludes with the implications of deshopping and its management and makes recommendations on how to reduce deshopping whilst maintaining customer service for the genuine consumer.

Originality/value of the paper: This is the first case study with a mass market retailer highlighting their approaches towards managing deshopping whilst trying to maintain customer service.

Key Words: Deshopping, consumer behaviour, consumption, retail fraud; retail returns policies, customer service

Biography

Tamira King is a Marketing Lecturer and MSc Marketing course director at Brunel University. Her research interest is in a consumer behaviour named 'deshopping' the

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Charles Dennis was elected as a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM) for work helping to modernise the teaching of the discipline. He is a Chartered Marketer and Senior Lecturer in Marketing and Retail Management at Brunel University, London, UK. The textbook *Marketing the E-business* (Harris and Dennis, 2002) and research-based *E-retailing* (Dennis *et al.*, 2004) were published by Routledge; and research monograph *Objects of Desire: Consumer Behaviour in Shopping Centre Choice*, (Dennis, 2005) by Palgrave.

Joanne McHendry is currently an assistant buyer at a large womanswear retailer. Her research interests are in the management of 'deshopping' behaviour. Joanne has a Retailing degree from University of the Arts, London.

Paper classification: Case study

Introduction

Deshopping is the

“deliberate return of goods for reasons other than actual faults in the product, in its pure form premeditated prior to and during the consumption experience.”

(Schmidt *et al.*, 1999 p.2)

An example of deshopping would be buying a suit for an interview and returning it afterwards. This behaviour has been described as customers utilising retailers as a clothing library (King 2004). Previous research indicates that deshopping is widespread and is substantially affecting retailers' profits. Deshopping has previously been analysed from a consumer perspective and retailer's awareness of the problem has been highlighted (Zabriskie 1972-1973, Wilkes 1978, Jolson 1974, Schmidt *et al.*, 1999, Piron & Young 2001, King & Dennis 2003 & King *et al.* 2004). There is little research to date which explores how retailers are currently trying to manage this problem. This paper focuses on how a mass-market retailer perceives the current implications of the behaviour and investigates their management of returns in relation to customer service. It explores their newly introduced returns policy aimed at eliminating deshopping alongside a new customer service strategy aimed to ensure that top quality customer service is maintained.

The case study consists of nine interviews with employees of a mass-market women's wear retailer who operate from 218 outlets across 12 countries. In the UK they trade from 180 branches and 107 concessions. The product range includes clothing, accessories, footwear, jewellery, lingerie and lifestyle products for women. This retailer is quoted on the London Stock Exchange, their parent company owns four strong women's wear brands and in total they have sales of over £300 million. They estimate that 50% of returned garments are deshopped and the shrinkage from deshopping is climbing into 6 figures per annum.

In response to the effects of deshopping this retailer has recently introduced a new returns policy. This policy states “*We are pleased to offer a refund or exchange on any item returned together with the receipt within 28 days, provided it is unworn and free from any marks and defects*” This retailer implies that defects are those made by the customer. This policy was also introduced in collaboration with a new customer service scheme named ‘customer service policy’ (CSP), to ensure that the highest levels of customer service are maintained. The retailer is still keen to promote the returns process as an important element of service. The research aims to explore whether this policy enables the effective management of returns and a reduction in deshopping behaviour.

Background Literature: Consumption, risk reduction, warranties and customer service

There has been considerable literature on the increasing importance of consumption and its psychological significance. The products shoppers consume help create their self image (Ward et al, 1998). This means that consumption of products is a process that is associated with extensive pressure and risk (Mitchell and McGoldrick, 1996). As a result consumers benefit from applying risk reduction strategies to aid their shopping, such as by having a facility to return goods.

Research demonstrates that warranties perform as a persuasive sales variable (Knedall and Russ, 1975) of relative importance (McClure and Ryans 1968; Roselius 1971; Olsen 1972, Perry and Perry 1976; Darden and Rao 1979). Customer satisfaction and retention is also an important area to consider as tightening return policies may affect customer satisfaction levels. This type of customer relationship management is an important part of customer acquisition and retention, which has strong implications for profitability (Ang and Buttle 2006, Goodwin and Ball 2003.) It is important for retailers to consider how they communicate their offer (Sargeant and West 2001) and how they communicate with their customers (Buttle 2004), and this should be incorporated into their corporate strategy (Ang and Buttle 2006). A study conducted by Hogarth et al (2001) addresses satisfaction levels subject to a complaint resolution process. Previous research also indicates that less satisfied people engage in negative communications with typically eleven people (Hanna and Wozniak, 2001). Research also demonstrates that word-of-mouth also influences consumer’s purchasing decisions (Richins 1983, Kardes and Kim 1991, Stokes and Lomax 2002). Complaint handling has an important influence on negative associations as the more satisfied a customer is with how a complaint is handled the less negative things they will have to say (Richins, 1983, Naylor and Kleiser 2000). Complaints must be properly processed for the retailer not to lose custom and their business can benefit by listening to complaints of customers, if they are properly processed (Bennett, 1997).

Retail Crime is a problem threatening the profitability and competitiveness of retailers world wide (Hollinger et al., 1996, Guthrie, 1997). Bamfield (2003) demonstrates that retail shrinkage cost retailers the equivalent of 27,258 million Euro in 2002/3. This demonstrates that all forms of crime are having a significant impact on net profitability of stores, products and retail businesses (Bamfield and Hollinger 2001). Deshopping is a form of return fraud and would be punishable under The Theft Act 1968 (The Theft Act 1968 c.60) if a retailer chose to prosecute a customer for this.

Research Aim

The paper aims to investigate the effectiveness of a new refund policy and customer service strategy, which has been designed to eliminate deshopping behaviour. The new customer service policy (CSP) was introduced in collaboration with this returns policy to ensure that the highest levels of customer service are provided and deshopping prevented. The research explores whether these measures are effectively preventing deshopping whilst maintaining customer service.

Methodology

The branch manager and area manager were informed of the research and provided permission for interviews to be conducted with employees in the London flagship store. Nine employees were interviewed: four management and five sales assistants. The interviewees were selected on the basis that they had been with the company for over a year, as they would have experienced the implementation of new policies and had contact with customers. All interviewees were female and aged between twenty and thirty-five. The interviews were semi structured, with clear questions in the mind of the researcher aiming to explore the different aspects of deshopping and its prevention, and to investigate the success of the new customer service strategy implemented alongside the new more stringent returns policy. The interviewees were able to expand on areas that they perceived to be important. The interviews focused on their awareness and experiences of deshopping and their perception of the procedures that have been put in place to prevent this behaviour and the effects of the new customer service strategy in preventing deshopping and promoting customer service. The interviews were analysed manually and divided into categories which are related to the central constructs.

Findings and analysis

Evidence of deshopping

The following quotes demonstrate that deshopping is encountered by different interviewees who represent different levels of management and sales assistants. This analysis is sub-divided into categories which demonstrate different aspects of deshopping and its management. The first category demonstrates examples of deshopping, where the retailer does not feel empowered to refuse the return due to the customer denying the behaviour. This leaves the retailer in a difficult situation as legally it is their responsibility to prove that the garment had been worn and the consumer has demonstrated intent to deprive them of the goods (The Theft Act, 1968 c.60). It would be unadvisable to accuse a customer of returns fraud without substantial evidence.

“At Christmas time, we’ll get dresses coming back, where customers have spent a lot of money on the dress and obviously they are not going to wear it after New Years Eve. These garments have been washed, smell of smoke or they have got a lot of deodorant marks on them. With returns like this you have to tread carefully, because it is their word against yours, if they say no I definitely haven’t worn it” (Assistant manager)

[take in Plate 1-picture garment with marking demonstrating it has been worn - deodorant]

" You get the same customers coming back again and again and you notice them on a Saturday and they know exactly what time to come in and do their returns."(sales assistant 2)

The interview excerpts below demonstrate that employees are aware of customers continually deshopping and returning to their store and repeating the behaviour. Yet these regular deshoppers have not been confronted.

"We had this lady who would constantly unpick the shoulder pads of suit jackets. I've faced this a few times since I have been here. People unpick the trousers and make holes in things and ask for a refund. They might have their receipt but the damage is clearly done by them. They have obviously done this because they don't want the trousers anymore but it's clear that they have been worn." (sales assistant 4)

"..Like for instance the shoulder pad lady where if she was bringing back a linen jacket. If it is a case of that we haven't had many returned, then you think that person has unstitched it. A lot of the time you can tell from the appearance of the customer and just how they approached you" (supervisor)

[Take in plate 2- picture damaged seam]

The following interview extracts provide examples of when employees detecting deshopping refuse the return. It is important to note that the only examples of prevention are given by senior employees, including branch managers and supervisors.

"A customer wanted to return a blouse which had quite clearly been worn, it was in a very crumpled state, it was a black shirt and it had marks down the arms. I said to her, 'I'm sorry I can't take it back' and in response she asked me to exchange it instead. She didn't see the difference between taking it back for a monetary refund and exchanging it. I said 'you're not understanding me, that item is not in the condition that we would have sold it to you, so unfortunately I can't do anything' " (Branch Manager)

"This girl was bringing back this top and it was so obvious that she had worn it because it smelt of body odour, you could just smell it. It was quite funny because she actually worked for us previously and I said 'oh hello, you used to work for us didn't you? I'm not taking it back as it's been worn... you know it's got an odour on it,' it had such a bad odour on it I couldn't believe she was returning it, she was embarrassing herself" (Supervisor)

"A customer brought a top back saying that it didn't fit her so she wanted to return it, as I opened it, the smell just hit me and I knew it had been worn. I did a little check and then saw that it had a cigarette burn in it, I brought that to the customers' attention and she said 'oh, that must have been there when I bought it.' I said 'so besides the point that we do not have any smoking in the whole building, if you wanted something really nice to wear out for Friday night would you buy that in that condition?' she responded ' oh I gave it to a friend and maybe my friend wore it out.' I said' well you know you've worn it

*out, I can't return it and there is nothing that I can say about that'
"(Supervisor 2)*

The quote below demonstrates that when junior staff have tried to prevent the behaviour, they are often counteracted by more senior members of staff and head office, to provide optimum customer service. The staff feeling of being undermined in this situation is highlighted and this affects their reluctance to confront a deshopper in the future.

"This woman came in with this pair of boots that had obviously been worn. She was claiming that they hadn't been worn and that there was something wrong with them and she wanted a refund. She was being really aggressive and really throwing her weight around, so I went to show our branch manager, unfortunately the CEO was there so she said 'as a goodwill gesture we will take them back' but I knew that under normal circumstances she would have said no. But because I really stood my ground with the customer and she then got her own way it made me look really stupid and I was really irritated about that" (sales assistant)

Similar quotations are presented later in relation to the customer service policy.

The reference below demonstrates that some members of staff become complacent with returns in busy periods. This could be due to the lack of support they encounter from the management and the lack of responsibility they feel in identifying this behaviour.

"If it is busy and people are bringing stuff back you just put it through without checking it most of the time, because you'll just literally give the garment a quick once over and then just put it through"(sales assistant)

Combating deshopping

This section demonstrates how the employees try to detect deshopping behaviour. It is important to note that this behaviour is identified by visual or olfactory suggestions that the garments have been worn; like deodorant marks and creases or by smell or by unnatural types of damage.

"With trousers you are looking for creases in certain places where they would show up if you had worn them, like across the waistband, in the crotch area and the back of the knees, on tops I would be looking to check whether there would be any deodorant residue more than just from trying it on" (Branch Manager)

"Smell as well would be quite a key one, the smell of washing powder, smell of smoke... you can pretty much tell the difference between worn and unworn items" (Branch Manager)

"I'll look at the garment to make sure that it hasn't been worn, in the sense of deodorant marks, washing powder smell.." (Supervisor)

"I discreetly sniff them a lot of the time, check in the armpits if it is a top or a dress, check if the tag's there..." (sales assistant)

" I tend to bombard the customer with questions, ask them if they have worn it, look at them and see if they look guilty and see if they're going red, if they are really apologetic, I'll probably return it for them but if they get quite angry than that usually means they have something to hide"(sales assistant 4)

The selection of quotations below also demonstrates that as retailers have no substantial evidence that the behaviour has taken place and no record of the customers to rely on to demonstrate that the customer is a repeat offender. This makes the case for the retailer weak and unsubstantial and leaves the staff feeling vulnerable and in this instance they will allow a return.

" I'm sure sometimes people break the clothes... but there is no way that I could prove that"(sales assistant)

"There was a small hole, where she had clearly caught it on something and she was saying that it was the seam coming undone, when there was no cotton threads coming undone or anything it was just a hole there" Was it your decision to allow the customer to return it? "No, it was a member of management" Why do you think that they did it? "To keep the customer calm because she was making a fuss on the shop floor" Do you think that there should be more control over what is returned? " I think yeah, I mean at the moment we are getting a lot of faulty goods that we are having to write them off and it doesn't look good on the records at the moment because we are just taking in things for the sake of it not really looking at the situation"(sales assistant 6)

"A lot of the time I give people the benefit of the doubt, you have to take it that 8 out of 10 customers are genuine," "it's very difficult to prove that it has been worn"(Assistant manager)

The interview citations below illustrate that the retailers believe that modern customers are extremely demanding and some are learning how to manipulate the system. This could be a result of contemporary customers having high expectations of customer service and being aware that customers are now the authority. Although the majority of customers are honest, the retailers recognise that some customers are not honest and set out to rip off the retailer, which supports previous research (Vitell & Muncy 1992).

Do you notice customers trying to return worn goods? " Yes, quite a lot, I think that customers these days are getting more updated in how to do things, they go into different stores, which is why the emails and security ring rounds are still going around" (sales assistant 5)

"We used to get customers that would come up to the cash desk and ask if it was ok to do an exchange on a faulty item, but you don't get that no more.

They just walk into the store, get what they want and say that they want it exchanged for what they have just picked"(sales assistant 5)

"I think it happens a lot in our store, I think we have an easy reputation of returning items back" (sales assistant 2)

Is deshopping prevented?

The quotes below demonstrate prevention of deshopping. The branch manager feels strongly that deliberately damaged or soiled garments returned under the guise of being faulty are prevented due to training, as her staff would not sell faulty or soiled garments unless marked. Although this opinion is not supported by the more junior employees interviewed:

"I feel very strongly that we are looking for faults when we are selling garments and we are trained to do that... we do not just sell something with make up on. I feel 100% confident when saying to the customer that we would not have sold it liken that and if they feel strongly then they need to take it back to the store where they got it from, because we do mark the receipt and we do mark the item"(Branch Manager)

The excerpts below highlight that the management feel that if the garment is in a resalable condition then it is not as crucial to prevent its return. This attitude is apparent as this form of deshopping will not affect store profit or shrinkage figures. This highlights that the retailer is prepared to sell knowingly second hand garments to genuine consumers.

"If they have brought something back and the chances are they have probably worn it but when I look at that product it doesn't look like it has been worn, I could happily put back out on the shop floor ...then I would be more lenient with that"(Assistant manager)

" If it still looks new and it can be sold and you can get away with selling it then ...I do reckon it gets overlooked, I mean I've let it happen"(sales assistant 4)

" As a manager you just think that this is going to effect all my stock loss and writing things off, so we did use to be quite strong about it... now it's all changed...I think there is that thin line whether they're dodgy and they have nicked it then it would be no way, but then if has been worn and it something that we've got, then maybe you would get them the benefit of the doubt. If it was something that was so obviously worn then I don't think that I would give it to them" (supervisor 2)

"I think that every so often you are more lenient, sometimes it can depend on what kind of day that you've had. If it is something really obvious then you're never going to back down, but if it is something that can go out on the shop floor, there's no real problem with it, fair enough they have been a bit cheeky but at the end of the day is it really such a big issue, we've not lost anything, sometimes it's best to think ok I'm going to let it go..." (Assistant manager)

"It's part of the job because I have to accept what is in good condition back to the store, to be able to sell it to someone else, not to accept something that is not in good condition because I wouldn't want to sell that to another person because it's not fair" (sales assistant 3)

The excerpt below illustrates that if the retailers have no substantial evidence that the behaviour has taken place, the staff feel vulnerable and as a result are not confident in rejecting these returns. This supports previous quotes that highlight the importance of lack of evidence.

"You can say you have worn this and then the person just say no...it's totally your word against theirs... it's just hearsay basically" (sales assistant)

The quotations below demonstrate that due to the lack of evidence against the deshopper and the affects of negative confrontation on the staff, these employees are happy to let a deshop occur.

"There isn't much you can do, most of the time...I take it back, knowing that it's worn and there is nothing that I can do about it and I'll put it back out and it will get resold" (sales assistant)

"...I don't think it's worth the hassle really, I'm not going to argue with someone and make a big scene, also if it is busy I'm not going to hold up other people, for something that isn't going to amount to anything" (sales assistant)

"Now I think that even if I know that the customer had clearly done something to it, I will just give her an exchange or refund anyway, because the way I see it now is that there is no point arguing it through..., it's not my money, I just might as well keep calm about it" (sales assistant 5)

The passage below highlights that a junior member of staff is concerned that if she upsets a customer they may complain to her management.

"if you accuse customers of wearing garments some can get quite leary about it and saying what are you accusing me of, you can't say that or that I've not done that, I'm going to make a complaint about you and report you to Head office" (sales assistant 5)

What are the implications of the new customer service policy (CSP.)

The citations in this section present the retailers perception of the customer service strategy. The quotes firstly highlight the employees' awareness of the importance of good customer service and the affects of word of mouth on the companies' image.

"Customer service is the most important thing, obviously in terms of the business as a whole as it effects a whole lot of things, ultimately how much money we make and also how we are perceived on the high street by other people, especially where we are situated on Oxford Circus, we're right in the middle of all the main high street retailers, people come in like we do into

other retailers like Top Shop, River Island and look at them and think oh well that's not the kind of standard that we would expect"(Assistant manager)

"If you get good customer service you tell all your friends about it and when you get bad customer service you tell all your mates oh don't go in there, they've got really horrible staff. As a manager you have to use your judgement, and think I obviously know that she is dodgy, she's done this herself, I'm not going to get out of this situation, for the sake of say £18 and everyone listening, just get rid of her" (Supervisor 2)

"The plus side is that you are going to get customers wanting to buy our clothes and come back and feel like it is great shopping here, the negative side is that you will get customers taking advantage of the fact..." (sales assistant 2)

"With this CSP, with no returns, over 28 days, I just think that it so helping the criminals. I've found as well that customer seem to know about it, I've had customers that have come back to me saying, I know my rights, I know the CSP" (sales assistant 4)

This quotation also demonstrates that consumers firmly believe they are within their rights to return any garment as long as they are returning within the retailers 28 day policy.

The below excerpts demonstrate that the employees feel that CSP means their decisions are often counteracted by senior members of staff to offer good customer service. The retailer is more focused on CSP as *"every time I give my opinion about a garment that is trying to be returned it is overlooked so that the customer leaves the store happy"(sales assistant 4)*

" A lot of time I feel demotivated especially with CSP as I just feel that at the end of the day it's us who is judging the customer, the customer is in front of us not head office and we're just having to eat our words because of them"

"I have been in quite a lot of situations where I have actually said to the customer no and I've told the member of management as the customer wasn't really happy so in the end they just give the customer what they want, " (sales assistant 5)

The extracts beneath highlight that employees feel that CSP is ineffective as they are now more lenient with returns.

"I think that if you ask the girls they will probably think that we are now far lenient than what we were ever before " (Branch Manager)

"Its kind of under-mining as well because you know someone is doing something wrong but that's we're just going to let them do it " (sales assistant)

"You will notice the same customers come back again or go to other stores and say well this store let me have it, it was in this condition and I didn't have my receipt etc surely I am allowed. The exchange and returns policy gets a bit jumbled or you'll say something and the manager will say something totally different" (sales assistant 2)

"If something was faulty, like a hole where it has clearly been caught on something, I would not refund it or anything, but since they have come out with the CSP, I have just actually exchanged for customers" (sales assistant 5)

" Well before the CSP actually came out, staff were more standing their ground with refunds and actually calling a member of management over for judgements, but now because of the CSP, we just usually give the customer what they want, because it keeps us more calm as well as keeping the customer more calm and they will come back as well, but with dodgy ones you still have to stand your ground" (sales assistant 5)

"I do think CSP is pretty effective though, less complaints, customers are more happy and it makes you feel more relieved and not much stress"(sales assistant 6)

"Sometimes CSP and the returns policy clash"... "It's like if it was a dodgy refund, like with shrinkage, with all our clothes if you wash it at the correct temperature and in the correct way, it won't shrink. So with shrinkage if we were to say to a customer no, she would walk off and call head office and head office will therefore say yes so they can get what they want"

The succeeding quotations indicate that the branch manager feels the CSP is effective as they are more empowered to deal with returns and make individual judgements. The manager feels more supported by head office and highlights that the policy prevents stressful situations on the shopfloor. This could indicate that as a result of CSPP more returns are accepted without questions. Although the prevention of deshopping through the additional back up of head office has not been supported throughout interviews with other employees.

"our complaints are now down from 150 a month to 30... I think" (Branch Manager)

"The whole thing about CSP was not only to be relieving stress from customers but it was really to be relieving stress from ourselves and from that point of view they empowered us a lot more to deal with any quality issues, any returns issues that we had whether it be worn item or a QC issue but then they would back us up and say it was the managers discretion" (Branch Manager)

"I think that is the thing that probably now that there is less consistency then there was before and that is what CSP does, we treat individual situations and individuals, rather than having a blanket and saying this is what we will do and this is what will won't do" (Branch Manager)

Having analysed and explained the results the conclusions and recommendations will be addressed.

Conclusions and recommendations

The findings indicate the prevalence of deshopping behaviour and the employees heightened awareness of deshopping activity and the difference between the views and attitudes of staff and management towards deshopping. As the CEO of this retailer estimates that 50% of returned garments are deshopped and the shrinkage from deshopping is climbing into 6 figures per annum. The cost benefit to reducing and managing this behaviour is substantial

The research interviews highlight that there is still limited prevention of deshopping. The results also highlight that the restrictions on the returns policy are necessary, but they are perceived as damaging to customer service. To avoid this, the employees explain that in many instances the customer service policy will override and contradict the returns policy in order to satisfy the customer. Many of the employees demonstrate that although they detect a deshop and refuse a return their decision is often counteracted by a senior member of staff, which makes them complacent when encountering deshopping again.

The research also highlights that identifying a deshop is done by visually assessing and smelling of garments, which leaves the retailer in a vulnerable position without substantial evidence, and makes refusal of returns difficult to uphold. The research also demonstrates that if a garment is in a resalable condition the staff are happy for the garment to go back on the shop floor. By ignoring this type of deshopping the retailer is sending out the wrong message to customers which will leave them open to future abuse. The reaction of staff to CSP demonstrates their awareness of the importance of good customer service and its fundamental affects to their competitive advantage. Their comments highlight that there are aware that the majority of customers are genuine and these customers must be kept satisfied. This is important as mistrust of all customers returning items would have a negative affect on business and customer service.

The staff perception of CSP being ineffective and actually making returns easier and reducing complaints, gives the indication that deshopping is still extremely prevalent, acknowledged yet neglected. Overall the interviews demonstrate that despite the many changes this retailer has implemented to prevent deshopping it is apparent from the interviews that the retailer is still not managing deshopping effectively.

Recommendations are made in light of the interviews of how to implement a more effective anti-deshopping and consumer friendly approach to returns. The wider elements of this research demonstrate that deshopping can be prevented (King & Dennis 2003). Deshopping can be managed effectively and it could be identified at the point of return with the right managerial changes (Ibid). These changes should go beyond an employee smelling a garment and using their intuition to identify a fraudulent return. Identifying a deshopper could be done via technology demonstrating a garment has been worn. This should be conducted in correlation with a profiling database to track and monitor shoppers returns incorporating. This would enable the retailer to make decisions based on substantial evidence which would remove aggressive customers and the confrontation of deshoppers in store, which has a negative impact on shop floor staff and the genuine customer who witnesses what they perceive to be poor customer service.

This scheme would remove the undermining of employees as they would be aiding the process of building the database and evidence against the customer which would be handled by head office. The scheme would also eliminate unfair accusations of dishonesty.

This type of scheme would go hand in hand with a consumer education policy that would highlight the effects of deshopping on the retailer, and demonstrate that fraudulent returns are a serious offence with serious consequences. Retailers could highlight that there will be a crack-down to stamp out fraudulent returns. Educating the genuine customer will aid their participation in the schemes that retailers choose to undertake for returns. Education will also change the perception of deshopping so that it is recognised as a behaviour consequences equivalent to shoplifting. Schemes must highlight that deshoppers are not just stretching the goodwill and returns policies of the retailer but committing theft.

Concluding statement

This work has demonstrated the detrimental effects of deshopping behaviour on the retailer, and their emotions, attitudes and beliefs towards the behaviour. The research highlights the intrinsic problem of managing the behaviour and maintaining customer service in competitive environment. The research also demonstrates the current inadequate management of deshopping behaviour, and highlights that currently it cannot at present be prevented. Overall the study makes practical recommendations for retailers to improve the management of returns and provides suggestions that will increase the possibility of deshopping detection.

More broadly, this study has been a fundamental insight into our understanding of modern society, retailing and growing fraudulent consumer behaviour.

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Plate 1



Plate 2