

Title: Gendered Retailing: a study of customer perceptions of front line staff in the DIY sector

Author: Carley Foster

Contact details: carley.foster@ntu.ac.uk
Tel.no: 0115 8482983
Fax number: 0115 8484707

Address: Department of Strategic Management and Marketing,
Nottingham Business School,
The Nottingham Trent University
Burton Street
Nottingham, NG1 4BU.

Gendered Retailing: a study of customer perceptions of front line staff in the DIY sector

Abstract

This paper reports findings from a small scale study exploring the role gender plays in the interactions between customers and front line staff in DIY retailing. Drawing on materials gathered through observations, informal discussions with staff and focus groups, this study suggests that ‘maleness’ pervades many aspects of DIY retailing. For the respondents the image of the case retailer, B&Q, and the products sold had male connotations. Furthermore, male customers perceived male customer facing staff to have better knowledge of technical DIY than female employees, even though this was not always the case. Given the rising interest from women in home improvements, it would appear that measures need to be put in place to create a more ‘inclusive’ DIY store environment for female customers and one that challenges the stereotypical assumptions held by many male home improvement customers.

Keywords: DIY retailing, gender, front line workers, customers.

Background

Advocates of diversity management argue that business advantages can be gained from employing customer facing staff who reflect the visible characteristics of the community they serve (Cox and Blake, 1991). It is proposed that people are more inclined to apply for jobs and patronise organisations that are more ‘inclusive’ and facilitate interactions with front line employees that ‘look like them’ in terms of characteristics like age and race. In an effort to lose its white, middle class, English

image, Marks and Spencer, for instance, has introduced recruitment activities that are aimed specifically at attracting ethnic minority store staff. Store managers are encouraged to monitor the ethnic profile of store workers to ensure it reflects the diversity of their area (Whitehead, 1999). Research also suggests that employers regard the 'aesthetic' appearance of front line workers as an important element in attracting customers (Warhurst *et al.*, 2000). The UK health club chain, Fitness First, for example, was reluctant to issue uniforms to staff larger than a size 16 because according to an HR manager, 'we are a health club and are promoting weight loss' (Browne and Walsh, 2003). In brief then, the visible characteristics of customer facing staff can inform people's perceptions of an organisation's image, reputation and identity (Marwick and Fill, 1997; McGoldrick, 2000).

Employing customer facing staff with visible characteristics that customers identify with can also enhance customer service, particularly in relation to the information and solution seeking stages of a purchase decision. Johnson-Hillery *et al.* (1997) for instance found that older consumers preferred to be served by older retail staff rather than younger employees. This was because they perceived older staff to be more willing to help and more likely to suggest products that catered for their needs. Similarly, the retailer B&Q (the case retailer in this paper), found that older staff were more likely to have owned a house and carried out home improvements than younger employees and therefore in a better position to offer DIY advice to customers (Hogarth and Barth, 1991). Consequently, B&Q altered their employment policy so that now there is no upper age limit for potential applicants. Presently over 18% of their workforce is aged over 50 (B&Q, 2004).

Aside from race, age and 'aesthetic' appearance, limited attention has been paid to other visible characteristics of front line retail staff and how these inform people's perceptions of customer facing store staff, customer service and the retailer. In particular there is an absence of research that explores how the gender of front line workers affects an employee's ability to meet the requirements of the customer. This is surprising given that gender is an obvious aspect of a sales assistant's appearance and issues relating to gender pervade many aspects of retailing. According to the Equal Opportunities Commission (2004), for example, 77% of all sales and retail assistants are females. It can be also argued that in addition to job roles, certain retail sectors are 'gendered', that is the products they sell have stereotypical male connotations, such as car sales or men's fashion, or stereotypical female associations like cosmetic sales and ladies' fashion and very often the gender of customer facing staff reflect this association. Statistics taken from the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (2004), for instance, indicate that in 2001, only 10% of all US sales staff in new and used car dealerships were female.

In light of this, this exploratory research sought to explore, in relation to gender, the nature of interactions between customer facing staff and customers in the DIY retail sector and customer perceptions of front line workers. It also aimed to investigate 'gendered' perceptions of this retail sector more generally, as it was felt that this would provide a useful insight into why people might perceive male and female front line staff in a particular way. The UK DIY sector was chosen for a number of reasons. Unlike many aspects of superstore retailing, DIY stores employ more male workers than females and there is a perception that male staff '...know more about products sold in DIY outlets...' and are '...more physically competent to handle the products'

(Sparks, 1991:310). This is perhaps because DIY is an activity predominately undertaken by men and many items sold in this sector have stereotypical masculine connotations, such as power tools and electrical, plumbing and building products. Research conducted by Mintel (2002) suggests that men rather than women are the 'Mr Fix It' in that they are responsible for household DIY and repairs. Nevertheless there are some aspects to the DIY retail sector that are less masculine. 'Lighter' DIY products such as textiles and furnishings perhaps have more stereotypical feminine connotations. Indeed the research by Mintel (2002) indicates that women, rather than men, are more likely to be responsible for home development ideas and style improvements in the house. That said, research suggests that women are increasingly taking more interest in the 'heavier' aspects of DIY, prompted by the burgeoning numbers of women living on their own and home improvement television programmes (Hopkins, 2003). Additionally, some product areas within the DIY sector, like gardening are 'gender ambiguous' since there are 'heavy' masculine aspects, such as fencing and decking and 'lighter' feminine aspects such as planting. Finally, the nature of many of the products sold in DIY stores means that customers are likely to ask for product related advice. Customers are therefore required to interact with front line workers and make decisions relating to whom they approach for help.

Research Design

The research was carried out in two B&Q Warehouse stores located in the East Midlands. This retailer was selected because it is the UK DIY market leader and sells a wide range of products, ranging from building materials to soft furnishings (Mintel, 2002). The research adopted a qualitative approach since this has an emphasis on

exploring respondents' interpretations and a consideration of context (Bryman, 1989). The main method of gathering materials in this small-scale study was through a series of focus groups lasting approximately 60 minutes each and consisting of, on average, 6 respondents. Two focus groups were with all female front line employees, two with all male front line staff, one with all male customers and one with all female customers. It was felt that by having all female or all male groups, the respondents would feel more comfortable discussing between themselves potentially sensitive issues relating to gender (Madriz, 2000). Themes discussed in the focus groups were concerned with perceptions of DIY and B&Q, customer service, people's level of involvement in DIY, the role of sales staff in B&Q and the gender of front line workers in B&Q. The focus groups were also supplemented by informal discussions with sales staff whilst they worked on the sales floor and observations made by the researcher of customer shopping habits in store, particularly the nature of customer interactions with front line workers. The observations were not part of the original research design. This method was introduced because the researcher believed that some customer respondents were wary of candidly discussing with strangers, sensitive issues relating to the gender of sales staff. Observations, therefore, were a way of addressing this problem as they enabled the researcher to record customer interactions with male and female sales staff in their natural environment.

Findings

A number of interrelated themes emerged from an analysis of the materials.

Gendered Images

Overall the DIY retail sector had masculine connotations for the respondents. One female employee stated that *'It's a man's world, DIY'*. Another female customer advisor remarked that when she was looking for a supervisory role in retail *'I would never have chosen B&Q in a million years because, to me, it's male orientated. What did I want to work with hammers, nails and screws for? I'd rather go and work as a manager for Next. I think as a woman you'd go to Next first if you had the choice'*. Nevertheless, despite the perceived male orientation of the retail sector, some respondents noted that the number of females undertaking heavier aspects of DIY was on the increase. Both stores operated a 'Ladies' Club'. This was a free session open to any female customer who wanted to learn more about the technical and heavier aspects of DIY. These were organised and delivered by two members of staff to a group of all females on a monthly basis. Commenting on the interest in these sessions, a male B&Q Trade Expert said that *'There is a big interest in the Ladies' Club. The first one we ran, 72 signed up for it...There's a lot of single people out there and women are fed up with having to pay for plumbers and people like that. They want to know how to change a tap washer themselves'*. Likewise, another male sales assistant commented on how there had been more interest from women in lightweight power tools such as sanders and drills.

Respondents were also asked to describe more specifically what image they had of B&Q. This included imagining B&Q as a person and describing the qualities 'it' might have. Both customers and employees believed that the retailer had a masculine image as evident in the following interview extracts:

- *'...I think of a Bob the Builder type...'*
- *'...I imagine a Texan, John Wayne or Clint Eastwood...'*

- *'...quite a friendly bloke...'*
- *'...someone carrying DIY tools on him...'*

Employees in particular associated B&Q with stereotypical masculine qualities such as aggressiveness and being demanding. It is likely that this image stemmed from the retailer's quest to remain market leader in a competitive market and the performance pressures placed on stores as a result. Apart from some employees implying that B&Q may need to be more responsive to the rising interest in 'heavy' DIY from female customers, the 'maleness' of B&Q was not questioned by any of the respondents.

For most respondents, perceiving B&Q as having masculine characteristics was derived from associations with the products sold in store. One female customer said that *'I see B&Q as a 'male' because of the building products and wallpaper and stuff like that'*. Similarly a female sales assistant noted that *'We are not a builder's merchant but we sell all the sand and cement. Tradesmen can come in here in their overalls or their painting gear and they don't feel out of place. If they went into Homebase they might not want to walk in because it's so clean and pristine in there'*.

The layout of both stores also reflected the gender associations of the products on sale. One end of the store housed the stereotypical masculine products, that is the 'heavy' DIY items. This included plumbing and electrical materials and the building yard, which included a trade desk where trades people could seek advice. At the other end of the store the lighter, less masculine products were stocked. This was where the lighting, flooring, decorative, gardening and kitchen/bathroom related products were located. Remarking on the store layout, a female member of sales staff said *'When you walk in the store, the left half is for blokes and the right half is for women isn't*

it?’ Similarly another male employee said that *‘Building is not a big section for getting female customers on. The majority of customers are men. I’ve worked on decorative before and the majority of customers are female. Women shop on the softer side of the store rather than the harder side.’*

The uniform worn by all employees further emphasised the masculine image of B&Q. All staff were required to wear an orange apron which, for employees with ‘expert’ knowledge of a trade, such as plumbing and electrical, stated their trade expertise clearly on the front. A male employee stated that *‘the fact that everyone wears an apron gives a workman type of appearance’*.

Gendered Roles

On the whole, the job roles of both part-time and full-time front line staff reflected masculine and feminine stereotypes. Women tended to be located on the checkouts, returns desk and in ‘non-expert’ roles on more feminine product areas like decorative, gardening and showrooms. One female supervisor also highlighted further stereotypical assumptions about female staff when she said that *‘I think the women will always be asked to take the customer to the toilet. That’s a popular one for us. It’s like the male staff can’t open the toilet door or something!’* Only a handful of women worked as ‘non-experts’ in the more masculine areas of the store, such as the plumbing, building and electrical aisles. In a non-expert role, staff provided customers with general advice such as product availability and basic product related information. At the time of the study, there were no female ‘experts’, although the stores had employed female trade experts in the past. B&Q employs a small number of mostly full-time staff in ‘expert’ roles in each Warehouse store to provide technical advice to

customers on specific areas of DIY. This also includes providing in-store demonstrations to customers. These areas of expertise are: plumbing, joinery, electrical, gardening, building and decorative. In this study the male staff working as these trade experts had obtained their technical knowledge from their previous jobs, rather than being trained on technical aspects of say, plumbing or building, whilst working for B&Q. The fact that B&Q, as a source of customer service differentiation (Hogarth and Barth, 1991), recruits ex-trades people for these expert roles means that few women have the appropriate qualifications to apply for trade expert roles. As one male sales assistant stated '*You don't see women electricians. You don't get many women bricklayers or plumbers*'. Furthermore, some respondents remarked on the fact that it would be unlikely that B&Q would be able to entice people, including women and younger people, from their trade job into retail because of the significantly lower wages in stores. The experts employed at B&Q were therefore either retired or were forced to leave their trade early as a result of an injury.

Male front line staff not working as trade experts were generally located in stereotypically masculine areas of the store like the building yard, the trade desk and the electrical and plumbing aisles, providing 'non-expert' advice to customers. Additionally male customer facing staff picked large orders for customers from the warehouse area and provided security at the store exit.

In general, job adverts for 'non-expert' front line positions did not specify which area of the store the applicant would work in. This was decided during the interview based on the preferences and expertise of the applicant and the requirements of the store. That said, new recruits did have the opportunity to move to different areas of the store

at a later date if necessary. In contrast, trade expert job vacancies, such as plumbing, specified which areas of expertise were required from the applicant.

Customer Perceptions of Front Line Staff

As highlighted in the previous sections, most customers in the 'heavier' DIY areas of the stores were men and were more likely to interact with male staff, including trade experts, than female front line workers. Overall it would appear that male front line workers, especially the trade experts, had more knowledge of technical DIY than their female colleagues. It is unsurprising then that male customers perceived male front line staff to have better knowledge of technical DIY than female customer facing staff and often preferred to seek advice from male staff rather than female staff in these areas of the store. (Although, it is worth highlighting that if a male customer did want to obtain help on 'heavy' DIY from a female employee, it would be difficult for them to do so due to the low numbers of women with expertise working in this area of the store.) There was also limited evidence to suggest that some male customers perceived male front line workers to have better knowledge of 'lighter' aspects of DIY like decorating and gardening. Generally though, in the less technical areas of the store, the gender of front line workers was less important. What was more important for male customers was to find a member of staff available to help them.

Nonetheless, female front line staff were frequently disregarded by male customers when in search of advice, particularly in the technical or heavy areas of DIY. One male member of staff described how his female colleague had been overlooked by a male customer seeking help, *'I used to work on tools. I think it's perceived that males know more about tools than women. There's many a time when I've been on hardware and a female member of staff was standing 200 yards in front of me and the*

customer would pass her and ask me instead.' Furthermore, when female sales staff gave male customers DIY advice, there was evidence to suggest that some were reluctant to receive help from them, as highlighted in comments from one female member of staff, *'I had one male customer last week and he wanted some ceiling tiles. And I said 'we don't sell them but we sell these polystyrene ones instead'. But he wouldn't have it from me. Fred had to come and he said exactly the same thing to him and said 'that's just what Sarah's just said to you'. But he wouldn't accept it from me, the customer had to accept it from Fred.'*

The perception that male front line workers had more DIY knowledge than females was intensified if the male employee was older. One older male employee stated that *'We're in a technical sort of business and customers will head for older members of staff. The assumption is that age means experience and men know and women don't. I can be stood with a young lad and a young female member of staff and they'll always come to me.'* The perception that male front line workers had better knowledge of technical DIY than women seemed to stem from the assumption made by customers that males are more likely to have 'heavy' DIY expertise gained through working in a trade or carrying out home improvements. Describing why customers might approach older male staff, a female supervisor drew upon her own experiences, *'When I was setting up home for the first time, my dad used to do a lot of DIY stuff with me. I used to go into a DIY shop for help and I used to pick somebody similar to my Dad. You know, his age, because I assumed they'd have done DIY.'* Similarly a male customer said that an older male member of staff *'...looks like he knows what he's doing. He's probably been in that trade all of his life, instead of someone younger who's done botched up jobs all their life.'*

Occasionally the actions of front line staff challenged the customers' assumption that male staff had more expertise in DIY than females. The most obvious instance of this was when female front line workers had more knowledge of DIY than male members of staff. In these instances, customers were often surprised by the fact that a woman knew more about the area than a male employee. A female employee described how she had experienced this when she had carried out an in-store gardening demonstration. *'I was doing an Alpine garden demo a few weeks ago. And this little old man came up to me at the end and he said 'To be honest I thought it would be an old bloke doing this demo!' He didn't expect a woman to be doing it.'* Similarly another female employee working in gardening said that *'If someone wants some information on a chain saw or a mower, the male customers get surprised when I turn up! They'll go 'oh' and you can see them thinking 'but she's a woman!'*

There was some evidence to suggest that female customers also perceived male front line staff to have better technical knowledge of DIY than females. However, on the whole there appeared to be very few women actually seeking advice on 'heavy' DIY thus the instances of females approaching male assistants instead of females was very small. The only instances that respondents recalled when this happened was when females were buying power tools as presents for males or had been asked by a male to buy technical products on their behalf. For female customers then, it was more imperative that they were able to find an employee to assist them, whatever their gender.

Discussion and conclusion

This study sought to explore the nature of interactions between customers and male and female front line workers, in addition to the perceptions customers have of male and female customer facing employees in the DIY sector. The findings propose that overall both DIY and B&Q have a masculine image arising from the assumption that DIY is an activity predominately undertaken by men and many of the products sold in B&Q are associated with the masculine, heavy, technical aspects of DIY. Within B&Q, staff on the whole were employed in positions that reflected stereotypical male and female roles. So, for example, all trade experts in these two stores were male and most checkout operators were female. This appeared to be a result of not only the skills and interests of the applicants but also the gender assumptions built into the roles (Korczynski, 2002). Male customers were more likely to approach male staff for advice on technical aspects of DIY because there was a perception that these staff had better knowledge of DIY than women, particularly if the male staff were older. This perception was based on the assumption that male employees were more likely to have carried out home improvements or worked as a trade person than women. Indeed, if a female member of staff challenged this assumption, many male customers would question the credibility of female employees to provide sound advice. It seemed that female customers and male customers seeking help on less technical aspects of DIY were less concerned about the gender of front line employees.

Whilst the findings from a small scale exploratory study cannot offer generally applicable conclusions, they highlight an interesting dilemma for retailers operating in a 'gendered' retailing sector. This dilemma is concerned with the business case for reflecting the diversity of a retailer's primary customers in front line workers versus pursuing increased equality amongst customer facing employees. With the aim of

achieving greater workplace equality, one might argue that it is in part a retailer's responsibility to challenge customer's perceptions about the credibility of customer facing staff and their stereotypical assumptions about male and female front line workers. In this study, B&Q could actively encourage female front line workers to gain expertise in the heavier, technical aspects of DIY. Indeed, a current Equal Opportunities Commission campaign 'No more jobs for the boys or jobs for the girls' which is investigating the extent of gender segregation in the UK labour market, proposes that more women should be encouraged to work in industries traditionally dominated by men, such as construction and plumbing. Furthermore, the campaign suggests that employers should challenge stereotyped training and work choices. On the other hand, this research in B&Q has also proposed that male customers would rather approach front line workers that 'look like them' when seeking technical DIY advice. There is a danger that by employing more female front line workers with technical expertise, the majority of customers at present for 'heavy' DIY, that is male customers, may feel alienated and less inclined to patronise the store for fear of gaining inappropriate advice.

Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that more and more women are becoming involved in the heavier, technical aspects of DIY. This is likely to force DIY retailers to create a store atmosphere that is more inclusive for female customers and one that recognises the fact that female customers' interests are not confined to the lighter, style orientated aspects of DIY. It may even be that as the interest in heavy DIY increases amongst females, more women will want to seek technical advice from female front line workers, that is employees that 'look like them'. Training female front line staff in the technical aspects of DIY will therefore become essential,

particularly as it is unlikely that 'tradeswomen' will be able to be recruited directly from industry given the low levels of women working as plumbers, builders and electricians. Furthermore, training female workers in 'heavier' aspects of DIY will not only enhance levels of customer service in-store and begin to remedy the problem of skills shortages but also challenge stereotypical assumptions held by many male customers.

Further research that explores customer opinions of male and female front line workers in 'gendered' retailing sectors and the links these perceptions might have with customer service and a retailer's image would be beneficial. So, for example, it would be of interest to explore the sale of 'masculine' DIY products, like lawnmowers and power tools, in more gender neutral store environments like department stores. Of equal interest would be exploring the sale of 'feminine' products like fine jewellery to male customers in a gender neutral store environment.

References

- B&Q (online) (cited 8th April 2004). Available from <[URL:http://www.diy.com](http://www.diy.com)>.
- Browne, A. and Walsh, D. (2003) "Bulk order at gym is a thin excuse", The Times, London, May 13th, p.1.
- Bryman, A. (1989), Research Methods and Organization Studies, Routledge, London.
- Cox, T. and Blake, S. (1991) "Managing cultural diversity: implications for organizational competitiveness", Academy of Management Executive, Vol 5 No 3, pp. 45-56.
- Equal Opportunities Commission (online) (cited 26th January 2004). Available from <[URL:http://eoc.org.uk](http://eoc.org.uk)>

Hogarth, T. and Barth, M. (1991) "Costs and benefits of hiring older workers: a case study of B&Q", *International Journal of Manpower*, Vol 12 No 8, pp. 5-17.

Hopkins, N. (2003) "TV fuels a £14bn home improvement boom", *The Times*, London, February 1st, p51.

Johnson-Hillery, J., Kang, J. and Tuan, W. (1997) "The difference between elderly consumers' satisfaction levels and retail sales personnel's perceptions", *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*, Vol 25 No 4, pp. 126-137.

Korczynski, M. (2002), *Human Resource Management in Service Work*, Palgrave, Basingstoke.

Madriz, E. (2000), "Focus groups in feminist research", in Denzin, N., and Lincoln, Y., (Eds), *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed, Sage Publications, London, pp.835-850.

Markwick, N. and Fill, C. (1997) "Towards a framework for managing corporate identity", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol 31 No 5/6, pp. 396-409.

McGoldrick, P. (2000), *Retail Marketing*, 2nd ed, McGraw-Hill, London.

Mintel., (2002), *DIY Retailing – UK – November 2002*, Mintel International Group Limited, London.

Sparks, L. (1991) "Employment in DIY superstores", *The Service Industries Journal*, Vol 11 No 3, pp. 304-323.

U.S Equal Employment Opportunities Commission (online) (cited 27th January 2004). Available from <[URL:http://eeoc.gov](http://eeoc.gov)>.

Warhurst, C., Nickson, D., Witz, A. and Cullen, M. (2000) "Aesthetic labour in interactive service work: some case study evidence from 'new' Glasgow", *The Service Industries Journal*, Vol 20 No 3, pp 1-18.

Whitehead, M. (1999) "A time for buy-in", People Management, Vol 2 No 11, pp. 54-56.

Post-Print