CUSTOMER ATTITUDES TOWARDS BUYING E-BOOKS: PERSPECTIVES FROM A ROMANIAN PUBLISHING HOUSE

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Abstract: *The research is built around one single survey question that lies at its core, namely whether the prospects of a public sector publishing house would like to buy and download books directly from the house's website. Results indicate a strong modification of customer behavior within the boundaries of a digitalized economy. At least on paper, "brick-and-mortar" goods seem to loose their pace, whereas intelligent devices open new consumption opportunities. Such aspects are being presented in the first part of the research, which also attempts to present a definition of e-books, for better understanding the Methodology and Results section. This former one looks at the survey itself, whereas the paper concludes with a Discussions section that tries to establish a link to the third sector of the economy and, finally, presents the limitations of the article.*

Keywords: *e-commerce; public sector; books; social economy*

Introduction

With the accelerated digitalization of the world, increasingly more facets of life are being handled over the Internet, from issues such as keeping in touch with friends up to checking bank accounts or booking a table in a restaurant (Drămnescu, Stavre, 2015; Innopay, 2012; Tello et al., 2012). Given the circumstances, the landscape of buying is redefined, with the Internet gaining importance in purchase decisions thanks to a high number of connected devices (Ionescu, Diaconu, 2015). Products are now flowing directly into the lives of consumers, who do not have to make the effort anymore to get out of their homes and go to a shop. Many customers already turn to e-commerce, with online stores occupying a hot spot in the modern business environment (Koo, Ju,

2010). In 2011, the worldwide volume of e-commerce extended to 680 billion US Dollar, a 19% increase year-over-year (Innopay, 2012).

There is no wonder that a large part of trade is now to be found online. E-commerce, defined from a business-to-consumer perspective, is seen as the transaction of products through electronic channels (Grandon, Pearson, 2004). Paid for online, products can be distributed through two channels: still online, if the product has got an electronic form, or offline, if the product has got tangible properties.

On the other hand side, studies also regard e-commerce as a business operation, coordinated by company employees (Molla, Licker, 2004). E-commerce has been told to be particularly alluring for smaller businesses trailing behind market leaders, as it could provide marketing advantages. Adopting new technology allows businesses to open up to clients far removed in space. Acces to a larger clientele is related to the possibility of increased sales, one of the main drivers for businesses to trade online. Improved sales opportunities can, at their turn, improve revenues and reestablish competitivity.

In what concerns customers, opinions are split between adopters, late-adopters and non-adopters. Adopters are eager to purchase online thanks to a range of advantages they can benefit from. Online commerce offers great time- and cost-savings (Szymanski, Hise, 2000): the search for information, the comparison of products, as well as the placement of the order, amongst others, are easier to make. Most of all, however, purchasing online implies the home-delivery of the ordered goods, which spares the client from travelling to the retailer's brick and mortar shop to pick up the product. Convenience, hence, is seen as a quality of e-commerce.

Late-adopters hold back in doubt when it comes to purchase from the internet because of issues concerning security, privacy and industriousness (McKnight et al., 2002). It is the perceptions customers have about these issues that transform the former ones in late-adopters or non-adopters – people who haven't let themselves persuaded by the instigation to buy online.

E-Commerce of books

A research done by Gefen (2000) through the e-commerce establishment shows that books and CD's are the most sought-after products online. The author attributes a major role of this development to retailing websites such as Amazon and eBay, which serve millions of customers overall the world. The improvement of the webspace has modified retailing habits and has directed the bookstores' industry to undergo an electronic transformation (Jiang, Katsamakas, 2010). Books are one of the most suitable products to sell online, thanks to some characteristics such as:

- No pre-purchase testing is needed as with other technological goods, like cars, for example;

- Easy transportation and fast delivery;

- The risk of damaging while being delivered is low, as compared, for example, with technological goods;

- Books are easy to return to the seller if there are any problems with the item.

Hence, many e-bookstores have emerged after the dot-com bubble in 2002. Next to the web, another factor that encourages the online purchase of books is globalization. As readers want to buy foreign authors and read the book in a particular foreign language, customers have now got the opportunity to make international purchases. Books from all over the world can be bought. With such changes in mind, an important share of book sales is now driven by e-commerce (Lubiana, Gammon, 2004).

According to Muthitacharoen et al. (2006), two types of retailing models are possible. One of them is the pure Internet store, where online is the only sales channel, while the other one is a hybrid store that combines multiple sales channels. These two types of online retailing gain importance in the book selling business nowadays, adding to the third, classical type of offline retailing. Hybrid models are also known as omnichannel retailing, which refers to combining digital and physical selling and buying experiences. These hybryd models are described as „bricks-and-clicks" stores, with bricks standing for offline activities and clicks for online activities (Lee et al., 2011).

Most of the important publishers on the Romanian book retailing market, such as Humanitas, RAO, All, Curtea Veche, or Paralela 45, have added an online division to their already well established offline business. The brand capital built in the offline market previous to the digital revolution of the recent years was transferred to the online market. Publishers offer their clients the possibility to buy both offline and online. Publishers selling online have a more direct approach to costumers than „brick-and-mortar" bookstores. In an online store, a publisher sells only its own books, not needing any intermediary bookstores. On the contrary, a bookstore, offline or online, sells books of different publishers. Now that online retailing gives the costumers the possibility to make purchases from wherever they are, without having to visit the premises of a store, costumers tend to buy directly from publishers, as the items sold are cheaper, with the profit margins usually added by bookstores being deducted. In such a case, online bookstores will have to cope with a strong competition not only from other bookstores, but also from publishers that entered the online retailing business.

E-books

Given the existing opportunities, book publishers took up electronic retailing and set an even larger footprint on the market for information and knowledge. Part of the retail activity bookstores once did is now in direct control of the publishers themselves.

Electronic retailing done by publishers has got two components. One of them consists of selling hardcopy (or paperback) books that can be ordered online and delivered via post, without losing their tangibility. The other one consists of e-books, which are digital copies of the hardcopy books that are sent sent to electronic devices through which consumers can read them, such as PC's or PDA's like tablets or smartphones

(Kang et al., 2009). According to Kang et al. (2009), e-books provide the same meaning and incremental value as hardcopy books do: offering information that can be transformed in meaning through the process of reading. In fact, most printed books also have an e-version. The most evident difference between hardcopies and e-books lies in the format: while the former books are printed on paper, the latter ones are electronically saved in formats such as .pdf, .chm., .lrx or .epub. In marketing terms, differences may be found in product features such as storage, transfer, or accessibility. E-books are easier to store (no physical space is needed, as books are saved virtually on electronic devices), can be faster transferred between users (through e-mail, for example), and provide greater accessibility (anytime and anywhere if the consumer has an e-reader next to him or her).

Methodology and Results

Increasingly more specifically designed devices for e-reading are produced worldwide, opening new reading possibilities (Siegenthaler et al., 2011). Not only customers may profit from a wider array of titles where to choose from, but also bookstores and publishing houses may find it easier to sell their products. The purpose of this survey was to find out whether customers of Editura ASE, mainly bachelor, master and PhD students, as well as professors, would be ready to buy e-books. Editura ASE is the academic publishing house of the Bucharest University of Economic Studies; its printing activities date back to the year 1913, when the House first started publishing the lectures that professors held at the newly founded university.

For each printed book, there is also its e-book, an Adobe PDF document. As books are edited by the publishing house in Microsoft Word, the final, ready-to-print version is saved as a PDF document, which then goes to print, but, in the same time, stays available in the database of the house.

It was this database of available PDF e-books that motivated Editura ASE to launch an inquiry in order to find out whether there is a market for buying the electronic versions (instead of the printed ones), which would reduce the operating costs due to paperback printing of the publishing house.

In this sense, e-books were presented to the respondents as books adapted for computers, laptops, e-readers or PC-tablets. The survey consisted of one single question, displayed on the website of the publishing house in the year 2013. The question asked participants whether they would like to buy and download the books edited under the trademark of Editura ASE directly from latter one's website. Three possible answers were given to choose from: "Yes", "No, I'd rather read paperback editions", and "No, because I do not want to use my EC card for online payments".

There have been 297 respondents to the questions. Of those, 89,90% (267 votes) mentioned that, yes, they would be ready to buy books in an electronic format. 7,74% (23 votes mentioned that they wouldn't buy e-books because they'd rather have the paperback edition, while 2,36% (7 votes) stated that they wouldn't like to use their EC card for online purchases.

Discussions

The previously mentioned one question-survey is closely linked to what one can call a social economy approach. Offering both hardcopy and softcopy solutions actually does nothing else than to reinforce the decision making of prospects, who are free to decide by themselves whichever of the two solutions better fits their needs. A focus is set on the benefit of people, this being one of the pillars of a social economy (Neguţ, 2014).

In times of change to a digital economy, part of a world that witnesses revolutionary transformations (Cace et al., 2011; Enăchescu et al., 2011; Militello, Guajarado, 2013), the publishing house has brought upfront the idea of selling books in electronic format. The idea was validated by the answers, which demonstrate that the vision of the editors converges with the views of the readers. A market for e-books is being formed for the people to satisfy their consumption needs (Firat et al., 2013) whereby consumer behavior is shaped by social determinants. In an era that goes digital, people also want to consume online. The reading behavior of people is an important piece of information for the organizations on the market (Călin, Cernat, 2015). Having and using such pieces of information might help in reducing failures of communication (Smarandache, Vlăduţescu, 2014).

The results of the survey show that 90% of the respondents are ready to buy e-books, and the percentage could be even higher considering that the people who have answered „No" indicated that they actually did not want to make purchases with their EC card, not necessarily that they would not like to read ebooks.

By presenting the e-book possibility, the ASE publishing house, an organization affiliated to a public sector institution, shows its propensity to contributing to both increasing the value of services brought to the members of the academic community, as well as to a more resource-friendly activity.

The survey was just one step made in an economy that may change heavily over the coming decades. Generally speaking, if consumers are ready to buy the softcopies of the traditional „brick-and-mortar" goods, a contribution can be made to a more resource-friendly environment in line with positive ecologist practices, where time and material used can be optimized thanks to innovative solutions in order to protect a resource-limited environment (Stanciu, 2012). The market sector has still got place for improvement and the future is to decide how the e-book environment is going to look like. If the mentalities of people can be changed towards buying e-books, then this can contribute to a more socially responsible, ethical-based organizational activity, aim which economists encourage in order to diminish resource spend (Buşoi,2014; Buşoi, 2015).

In the end, even if this research has attempted to present and discuss the results of a market survey, the paper has its limitations, which also need to be presented. First and foremost, one can think about the fragility of the research, which lies in the fact that it only discusses one question with three answers. Hence, the methodology chosen has been as simple as possible, leaving enough spaces for counter-opinions. A more interesting view might have existed if the research consisted in more topic-related questions, which would have permitted broader analyses. At the same time, further

details are needed to enforce the assumptions made and the conclusions drawn. Future research might therefore want to concentrate on real market data about how the shift from paperback to softcopy is being made amongst bookstores and libraries.

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