



# INTRODUCTION

“In the silk department, a crowd had gathered. They were pressing in particular around the interior display, which Hutin had put up, Mouret adding the final touches. At the back of the hall, around one of the little iron pillars that supported the glass roof, there was a sort of cascade of material, a frothy sheet falling from above and spreading out as it descended towards the floor. First of all, a spring of light satins and soft silks: royal satins, renaissance satins, with pearly shades of spring water; and featherweight silks, crystal clear, Nile green, sky blue, blush pink, Danube blue. Then came the heavier fabrics, the duchess silks, the wonderful satins, with warm colours, tumbling in swollen waves. And down below the heaviest stuffs reposed as though in a basin: the thick weaves, the damasks, the brocades and the silks decorated with pearls or gold and silver threads, in the midst of a deep velvet bed - every sort of velvet, black, white and coloured, embossed on silk or satin, its shimmering patches forming a motionless lake in which reflections of landscapes and skies seem to dance. Women, pale with longing, leaned over as though to see their own reflections in it. All, confronted by this bursting cataract, stopped in their tracks, seized by a vague fear that they might be swept up in the torrent of such luxury and by an irresistible desire to leap and to lose themselves in it.” *The Ladies’ Delight* by Emile Zola, translated by Robin Buss

*The Ladies’ Delight* (*Au Bonheur des Dames*, 1883) by Emile Zola is both an excellent story and probably the best ever experiential marketing manual for the interested reader. The novel is about the creation of a department store, *Le Bon Marché*, founded by Aristide Boucicaut, and the beginnings of modern retailing. It is packed with extremely sensuous descriptions that help us to understand how showcasing and dramatising a product can play on the customers’ emotions. The extract above describes the silk department and draws a parallel between the store’s

activities (via Hutin and Mouret), which adopt a pioneering experiential strategy, and the impact on the customers, in other words, how the experiential context is received by the consumer.

The experiential context involves all of the goods displayed in each department. The metaphor of the cataract or waterfall evokes the irresistible pull of the displays on offer and the highly sensual experience it gives the customers, sweeping them along in its wake.

Two centuries on, imagine yourself shopping in the Bon Marché's grocery section in rue de Sèvres in Paris. The bold displays of goods quicken your senses, and their quality and originality makes them extremely tempting. Your visit will perhaps be enhanced by a literary note as you follow in the footsteps of *The Ladies' Paradise* customers. It's really fun wandering from department to department as you enjoy the customer experience orchestrated by the retailer.

As you leave the shop, a billboard catches your eye, a perfect photo of a magnificent dish of pasta crowned with a bright green basil leaf, with the slogan "*Barilla the taste of Italy!*" You have just been exposed to some emotionally-charged transformational advertising which attempts to metamorphose the consumption of a food staple into a rich and stimulating experience via a message, as in the example above for the Barilla brand. It offers you a fictional experience of the brand which you may try to reproduce through a hands-on consumer experience so as to 'taste' Italy via the product.

You go home and start to cook the pasta, but in fact, as far as you're concerned, it's not the brand but the *pesto* that counts. What's more, you have a very special recipe that your grandmother passed on to you, which is more or less a family secret. The ritual gestures and aromas lull you into a delightful sense of nostalgia. You are enjoying a consumer experience that you have orchestrated yourself in your own kitchen.

These examples help us to understand how consumers' daily lives can be thought of as a patchwork of personally chosen or imposed experiences, sometimes pleasant and sometimes not, at times grounded in real life and at times in fiction, which can occur in both the professional marketing framework and in the consumer's private sphere.

First identified in the pioneering articles by Holbrook and Hirschman in 1982, the experiential approach attempts to understand the mechanisms that come into play when individuals consume. It considers the

consumer to be a more rounded individual than the rational being previously suggested by marketers, and intimates that individuals seek pleasure, emotions and sensations in the consumer experience. Beyond this view of consumer behaviour, the experiential approach has led to a managerial perspective that encourages firms to review their offer through the lens of experience (Schmitt, 1999a; Hetzel, 2002; La Salle and Britton, 2003; Schmitt, 2003), advancing the idea that a customer-focused experiential approach offers a good differentiation tool and an effective shield against consumers losing interest in the retail offer when considered uniquely in terms of products and services (Pralhad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo and Lusch, 2004a).

The concept of consumer experience is central to the experiential approach, not only from the consumer behaviour perspective, but also in managerial terms. The consumer experience is also central to this book, which explores the notion from a conceptual, methodological and strategic perspective.

Why write a book on how to improve our conceptualisation of the consumer experience? Everyone consumes so everyone has a consumer experience, and each of us has a personal and intimate store of an infinite number of experiences. Consequently, everyone knows what an experience is. Apart from the obvious, we were drawn to the subject for three main reasons: (1) its significant managerial implications; (2) its theoretical potential; and (3) the fact that it calls on a range of methodological approaches.

## **The managerial interest**

While much has been written on the interest of experiential marketing (Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Schmitt, 1999a; Hetzel, 2002; La Salle and Britton, 2003; Schmitt, 2003; Carbone, 2004), it has to be said that twenty-five years after the seminal work by Holbrook and Hirschmann (1982) was first published, and after firms have spent a great deal of time and money creating experiential offers and differentiation strategies based on delivering experiences, the results in terms of market share and customer loyalty remain to be seen (Filser, 2001a; Dupuis and Le Jean Savreux, 2004).

True, there have been some fascinating and successful experiential strategies, including spectacular settings like the *Mall of the Emirates* in Dubai, with its indoor ski resort, or brands that have managed to transform points of sale into outstanding experience-oriented settings, like

Botanic (Paché and Filser, 2008), for instance, and concept stores that have reinvented fruit and vegetable retailing like the Grandfrais chain, or local brand promotion settings like the Nivea Haus in Hamburg.

Other experiential strategies have not been as successful though, like the *Planet Hollywood* restaurants, which closed or left their emblematic address on the Champs Elysées because the rent was too high and the turnover too low, or the *Dive!* restaurants opened by film director Steven Spielberg that met the same fate a few years ago (Kozinets *et al.*, 2004), illustrating the risks linked to experiential strategies. It's not enough to have a high profile name or brand and to open a themed environment to succeed, and many service or consumer locations have failed to deliver the promised experience. Employees may find it difficult to interpret the intended positioning, and the offer gradually loses its initial sparkle, outmoded by a more original, more dynamic or more interesting newcomer.

Finally, other experiential strategies such as those introduced in some flagship stores may not go under, but at times remain too close to art for art's sake, dangerously detached from the market and with a focus on customer loyalty that does not necessarily translate into turnover (Filser, 2001a).

These examples help us to understand that experiential strategies can clash with the constraints of traditional service marketing and, more broadly, that value added from the experiential approach remains a challenge. In management terms, however, the interest of improving our conceptualisation of the consumer experience goes way beyond the retail and service sector.

In effect, many of the strategies introduced by firms tend to link the consumption experience *with the product* and could therefore benefit from a clearer understanding of the scale of the experience and the tools that can help us to measure it. We spoke earlier about emotionally-charged or transformational advertising that makes full use of the experience (Puto and Wells, 1984; Swaminathan *et al.*, 1996; Naylor *et al.*, 2008), where there is an obvious interest in working on certain aspects of the experience to create messages that could strike a real chord with the consumer.

In another vein, as the consumption of any product inevitably gives rise to a consumer experience, the development of new products and improvements to existing ones logically involves a comprehensive un-

derstanding of the nature of the consumer experience linked to the product. This is the principle that underpins the *lead users* methodology (Van Hippel, 2005), based on contributions from particularly ingenious and motivated consumers who optimise their own consumer experience by adapting a product's characteristics to match their specific requirements. This approach can give rise to breakthrough innovations that cannot be obtained from traditional idea-generating techniques, as the solutions and ideas put forward are much closer to the individual experience of leading edge consumers. However, we believe that improving the conceptualisation of experiences can also provide new keys to the more intimate reality of experience.

Finally, the increasingly common use of mass customisation (Merle, 2007), which involves giving consumers the freedom to personalise a product to some extent, is based on the active and visible appropriation of the object consumed, and thus has a highly specific experiential dimension. To be successful, the process involved in this type of differentiation again requires a clear understanding of the nature of the experience so as to accurately target the type of customisation sought by consumers and avoid introducing anything that won't interest them or may even put them off.

The examples we have given in retailing, services or product-related experiences call for a return to what is intrinsically a consumption experience from the consumer's point of view, as much in the market as in the private consumer sphere, and illustrate its real interest for management. If managers are to adopt an experiential approach, we need to give them a comprehensive conceptualisation of the consumer experience, with clearly defined levers that can work in all market contexts.

## **The theoretical interest**

Seeking to take these aspects into account, the experiential dimensions of consumption and managerial approaches, known as marketing experiences, experiential marketing, and sensory marketing have been widely investigated by both academic and professional circles for around twenty years.

However, academic literature on experience has largely focused on the antecedents and the search for an experience (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982) and on experience outcomes such as satisfaction and value (Oliver, 1999; Aurier *et al.*, 2000, 2004). There has been little work on conceptualising the experi-

ence content (Benavent and Evrard, 2002; Filser, 2002), which is why several authors (Carù and Cova, 2002; Filser, 2002) called for greater conceptualisation of the consumer experience.

Our book attempts to fill this gap by exploring experience content so as to identify some of the stable components of experience, no matter what the context. The book therefore deals with a topic on which a great deal has already been written but which has rarely been taken very far.

Exploring the concept of experience gives rise to a number of academic and managerial issues, provides new theoretical perspectives on a topic of interest to both academics and managers, and helps organisations to develop experiential strategies, reducing risks by focusing corporate efforts on the aspects of experience that matter to consumers.

Having explained the interest of our subject, we now need to define the central term.

## **Defining Experience**

Experience is a many-sided concept that involves the cognitive, affective and conative spheres of the individual.

Generally speaking, the term ‘experience’ means personally encountering, undergoing, or observing something and gaining knowledge or practical wisdom from the event. In consumer behaviour, the term refers to a personal and emotionally charged event, generated by *stimuli* where products and services lead to increased knowledge for the individual concerned. In *marketing*, the term designates a new sort of offer orchestrated by an organisation that engages an individual in a personal way (Pine and Gilmore, 1999).

However, as Carù and Cova (2002) said, the term ‘experience’ is a kind of portmanteau word, and this does not make its conceptualisation any easier. When we link it to another noun to talk about a consumer experience or a shopping experience, the situation becomes even more complex. How can we differentiate between experience, a consumer experience and a shopping experience?

Whatever the experience, it inevitably involves an interaction between an object and an individual in a given situation (‘person x object x situations’ paradigm, or POS) (Punj and Stewart, 1983), generating meaning for the person who experiences it (Filser, 2002). However,

there are an infinite number of contexts in which experiences can occur and some authors prefer to describe the context in order to define the perimeters of the experiences under study. Several terms are thus used in the literature.

Consequently, the term 'consumer experience' is used to designate interactions structured around a consumption process (consumption of a product, which may include its destruction and hence its consumption (Heilbrunn, 2005), consumption of a service, consumption of a place). The term 'consumer experience' therefore usually refers to the consumer market, even though it is possible to 'consume' things that cannot be purchased (silence, space, dinner with friends...). It can thus apply to non market consumption if the consumption process is central to the experience.

The term 'shopping experience' refers to consumer experiences that take place specifically in points of sale or consumer outlets (e.g. shops, shopping malls).

Eating out provides an example of a superposed consumer experience (a meal) combined with a shopping experience (the choice of environment).

In addition to *terms that describe the context of the experience*, or whatever structures the POS interaction (Punj and Stewart, 1983), we also come across *terms that describe the intensity* of the interaction or how it features in a person's life (an ordinary, infra-ordinary (Badot and Filser, 2007) or extraordinary (Arnould and Price, 1993) experience, *peak experience* (Maslow, 1964) or optimal experience (*flow*) (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990)).

Finally, we find *terms that qualify the goal associated with the experience* in the consumer's mind (autotelic, instrumental experience) or the outcomes of the interaction (search for pleasure via a hedonic experience, or perhaps an ordeal).

Other, more recent terms clarify the *consumer's or company's role in managing* (Carù and Cova, 2007) or 'producing' the experience. These experiences may be managed by the consumer or the organisation, or co-created, co-constructed and co-produced. Here, the aim is to clarify the respective roles of the consumer and/or the firm in producing the experience. These terms reflect a collaborative or creative consumer,



identified as an emerging image of the new consumer (Cova and Cova, 2009).

## **Plan of the book**

The book is divided into four sections.

The first section, entitled 'the consumer experience', is divided into two chapters. In the first chapter, we attempt to define the concept of experience, differentiating between an experience produced by an organisation, a consumer experience and the notion of experiential context. In the second chapter, we consider the consumer experience as a research topic, and present the main stages of its conceptualisation.

The second section, entitled 'experiential marketing', presents the managerial challenges associated with experiential offer strategies, and how an offer can be differentiated through an experience.

The third section, entitled 'measuring the consumer experience' is also divided into two chapters. The first chapter explores how we measure an experience, and presents the main findings of an exploratory study on the search for acontextual dimensions of a consumer experience and the development of a measurement scale for these dimensions. The second chapter explores the experiential process and analyses experiential strategy performance measures. Finally, the fourth section looks at the risks and limitations of experiential approaches.