

SUPERMARKET BACKGROUND MUSIC:
DO EMPLOYEES AND CUSTOMERS DANCE TO THE SAME TUNE?

Douglas J. Lincoln
Gary McCain
Boise State University

Considerable attention has been given in recent years to the concept of retail image. The abundance of literature and discussion on this topic seems to substantiate the existence and importance of retail image to retail success. The general purpose of this study is to empirically address the role background music plays in retail image formation, using both a customer and store employee orientation.

Hundreds of image dimensions have been identified and used by various researchers. Some basic underlying factors or dimension classes have been identified, such as merchandise, service, clientele, physical facilities, convenience, promotion, institutional factors, post-transaction satisfaction and store atmosphere. Perhaps one of the most important dimensions is store atmosphere. A store's atmosphere is individually interpreted by a "feeling" one gets when physically present in a particular store. It is created through skillful and creative combination of visual, aural, olfactory, and tactile stimuli to achieve desired effects. This study focuses on benefits managers perceive to be derived from the use of the aural stimulus of background music.

Personal interviews were conducted with sixty supermarket managers. They were asked to respond to a structured set of questions. Fifty-six were complete enough for analysis. Forty-nine did use some form of background music, while seven did not. Each was asked to describe the types of music systems used, style of musical selections, the intended purpose of providing background music, and their perception of the effect of the music on customers and employees.

The predominant type of system, used in twenty six stores (55%), was "Piped Music," which puts music directly into a store sound system from tapes or record albums. Professional sound systems designed specifically for background use (e.g., Muzak) were used by fourteen (29%) and radio programming was used in eight (16%) of the stores included.

When Managers were asked why music was played in the store, nineteen (39%) indicated that their primary intentions were to please or influence consumers. No one indicated the primary function was to influence employees; twenty-six (55%) said it was for both employees and consumers, and four managers used music for their own personal interest.

Managers were then asked to evaluate the reactions of employees and customers to the music played in their stores. Although none had ever surveyed customers or employees to determine their feelings, managers believed that employees did not appreciate the music as much as customers (Table 1).

TABLE 1
Managers' Evaluation
of
Reactions to Background Music

	Enjoy	Indifferent	Dislike
Employees	17	17	12
Customers	30	16	0

Open-ended responses clarifying what managers felt would lead employees to dislike background music included lack of variety and type of music inconsistent with taste. The type of music used in ninety-six percent of the stores was considered "easy listening"; the others were "country." They considered type and variety less important with respect to their consumers for whom they indicated that the music was relaxing.

Of the seven managers without music in their stores, six indicated they would not consider adding a background sound system. They felt its effect was not important or that the costs exceeded the benefits.

Most retail supermarkets had some form of background music which managers considered beneficial. The benefits they expected were primarily in the development of a positive atmosphere for the consumer. Music to provide a pleasant working atmosphere was definitely secondary with many acknowledging that for some employees, the effect was negative.

Managers' observation of these attitudes may be a reflection of the differences in exposure to the music. Customers spend a limited amount of time in the store and, thus, don't hear repetitions in the programming. Short exposures may minimize reaction to less preferred music types. Employees hear the entire set of music with whatever degree of repetition that may require.

The differences in music preferences may be inevitable where employees and consumers are drawn from different segments of the population. In the example of supermarkets used in this survey, the potential for age, social, educational, and economic differences are substantial.

The decisions relative to selecting and playing background music are not as simple as some managers may feel. Attempts to use "atmospherics" to produce a favorable environment to facilitate customer response (buying) and employee response (working) may create a dilemma for managers for which the solution cannot be positive for all.