

FRAMEWORK FOR MANAGING THE SERVICESCAPE: A SUSTAINABLE COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

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Sommer (1966) suggests "man should design his environment on some basis other than vague human impulses and needs." Such behavior (vague human impulses and needs) may be commensurate with the behaviors of a large number of today's service business owners and managers. This paper reflects the experience of a real life service firm facing managerial dilemmas related to making tactical and strategic decisions about the firm's physical facilities and product offerings as it sought to develop and expand a differential advantage in an increasingly competitive and changing industry. The extant marketing literature is briefly reviewed to provide a theoretical framework upon which recommendations are made for the funeral service industry along with other service industries. In addition, specific recommendations will be made. Finally, a managerial servicescape framework is posited that managers across various industries may consider before investing their firms' limited resources.

INTRODUCTION

As the new millennium starts, service providers of all types need to be conscious of many different things. However, this conceptual paper focuses on one aspect that has been consistently overlooked by the mainstream marketing literature. This paper reflects an actual service firm's managerial dilemmas as they relate to making both tactical and strategic decisions about managing the firm's physical facilities and offerings in order to develop and expand a differential advantage in an increasingly competitive and changing industry. The extant marketing literature is reviewed, and specific recommendations made. A managerial servicescape framework is offered that managers across various industries may find useful as they make decisions allocating limited resources.

In most industries at the turn of the century, competition is fierce. Firms that are able to position themselves as leaders in their markets (by providing superior value to their customers) appear to outperform firms that cannot provide what customers

consider to be superior value (Loveman 1998). This paper is based on problems faced by a family-owned funeral home located in the southeastern United States. The funeral industry was selected for discussion for many reasons, several of which are: 1) a general lack of focus by marketing researchers and practitioners on a substantial sector of the service economy, 2) the intuitive importance of the service encounter in this industry, and 3) realizing that if a managerial framework for the servicescape can be provided in such an industry, then discussions of the potential benefits to other service industries may be developed/investigated by practitioners and academics. This may result in empirical research useful in managing the servicescape.

From 1980 to 1990 and from 1990 to 2000 the funeral home industry had a nine percent growth rate. This figure is expected to increase to 11 percent from 2000 to 2010; increase to 14 percent from 2010 to 2020; increase to 15 percent from 2020 to 2030; increase to 18 percent from 2030 to 2040. The funeral home industry is expected to grow for the foreseeable future. In 1997 annual Funeral Home Industry sales revenue was \$9.5 billion (Anonymous *US Bureau of the Census Report 2001*).

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Funeral homes face the problems addressed by most businesses. There is a need to be cost effective, to weigh investments in the facility itself, to add new services or not, to decide what services to "contract out", and so forth. There are also the needs and preferences of the market served to be evaluated. American "funeral directors now serve people with differing funeral customs from all parts of the globe" (Anonymous *NFDA* 2000). For example chapel size, appearance of the chapel (especially from a color perspective . . . red is not an appropriate color to Haitian-Americans, for example), furnishings, and lighting in the repose area are of interest.

There is also a need for merchandising at the funeral home (i.e., caskets, urns, markers, flowers). How much space should be allocated for this area? How should these items be presented to the potential customer? This is an important part of the business, and can, if done appropriately, help differentiate one company from another. Service providers can obtain substantial benefits from focusing on managing the servicescape.

The service provider may be able to have an immediate effect on how the physical facilities budget can be spent most effectively. More specifically, the service manager may incorporate the customers' as well as employees' perception of the physical environment (i.e., servicescape) instead of simply using their own, or ignoring these aspects entirely. The literature suggests that managers who focus on their respective physical environments based on the ambient, design, and social interaction factors included in the servicescape may be better positioned to create, maintain, and or expand a competitive advantage when compared to similar firms that do not focus on managing their physical environment (Hightower, Brady and Baker 2002).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The extant literature suggests that consumers rely on environmental cues in much the same way that they rely on packaging to categorize and form their initial beliefs about consumer goods (c.f. Kotler 1973; Markin, Lillis and Narayama 1976; Shostack 1977;

Baker 1986; Baker, Berry and Parasuraman 1988). In addition, the literature suggests that consumers may seek tangible cues (i.e., servicescape) to predict what the service provides (c.f., Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry 1985; Berry and Clark 1986; Shostack 1977, 1987).

It is suggested that the importance of the service provider's physical facility to consumers depends on the nature of the service work and the service consumption experience. It is also suggested that the physical environment is capable of performing several different roles at once (c.f., Kotler 1973; Bitner 1992; Wakefield and Blodgett 1994; Wakefield, Blodgett and Sloan 1996). The literature suggests that the physical environment can take the role of a package, a facilitator, a socializing agent, and/or a differentiator (c.f. Bitner 1992; Hightower, Brady and Baker 2002).

It is further proposed that the physical environment can play a role similar to a physical good's package in that it basically communicates an image of what is included in the service (Bitner 1992; Baker, Grewal and Parasuraman 1994). The facilitator role is demonstrated when the physical environment increases or restricts the efficient flow of activities during the service encounter (Baker 1986; Bitner 1990, 1992). The socializing role of the physical environment appears when it communicates various roles, behaviors, and relationships to employees and consumers (Bitner 1992). It is suggested that a service firm can use its physical facilities to signal the market segment for which the service is intended and to differentiate the service firm from its competitors.

Sommer (1966) reviews the ecological research literature's distinction between the biotic and physical environments. In this case, the biotic world refers to the world of living things. Sommer conceptualizes the physical environment as be composed of three parts: 1) the proximate environment, 2) the macro environment, and 3) personal space. The proximate environment is posited to include everything that is physically present (i.e., observable to an individual at a given

moment). Sommer (1966) suggests that the macro environment can be thought of as bigger than the proximate environment. In other words, the individual's proximate environment could include everything inside a room, and the macro environment could include everything both inside and outside of that space. Personal space is defined as the area immediately surrounding the individual.

PROPOSITIONS

Sommer (1966) suggests that man should design his environment on some basis other than "vague human impulses and needs." This behavior (vague human impulses and needs) may be commensurate to the behaviors of a large number of today's business owners and managers. Based on the research conducted by Sommer we offer the following propositions as guides for service organizations' managers.

- P₁: Firms that have a priori determined their targeted market(s) make better decisions regarding the use of their physical facilities than firms that do not know their target markets.
- P₂: Firms that effectively plan the use of their physical facilities are more profitable than those firms that do not effectively plan for their physical facilities.

In a conceptual article, Baker (1986) develops a framework that classifies environmental variables from a consumer's perspective. She suggests that there is agreement among service marketers that the physical environment is an important element in the services marketing mix. Borrowing from the work of Shostack (1981) dealing with the "reality" of a service, Baker suggests consumers' perceptions are influenced by tangible cues (the physical environment), because they often must form opinions of the service through means other than direct physical contact.

Baker contributes to the literature by suggesting a consumer's conceptualization of the key elements that comprise a firm's physical environment. She uses the environmental psychology literature to introduce a three dimensional framework which effectively discusses the physical environment on the basis of ambient, design, and social factors.

In a conceptual article, Bitner (1992) identifies a typology of service firms that purports to depict the impact of physical surroundings (the physical environment) on the behaviors of employees and customers. She defines servicescape as the "built environment" (p. 58), and reviews the marketing, retailing, and organizational behavior literatures in order to develop a framework which depicts the role the physical environment plays in the determination of the consumers' behavior and in the development of a firm's image. Bitner (1992) suggests that a service firm's environment "may in fact have a strong impact on customers' perceptions of the service experience" (p.57). She also suggests that consumers often look for cues about a firm's capabilities or the quality of the services, and that the physical environment is rich with these types of cues. The physical environment is posited to "influence the customer's ultimate satisfaction with the service" (Bitner 1990, 1992). For example, Bitner's (1992) typology suggests that interpersonal services have a strong inseparable characteristic (generally services are bought and consumed simultaneously and usually require human contact), and that "... the organization's environment should support the needs and preferences of both service employees and consumers" (p. 58).

Bitner (1992) "infers" from the environmental psychology literature that: 1) employees and customers both respond to the physical environment of a service provider cognitively, emotionally and physiologically, and 2) these responses are what influence consumers' behaviors. The servicescape can be viewed as a form of nonverbal communication that creates meaning through environmental cues. Thus, according to Bitner (p. 62), the servicescape may elicit cognitive responses, or the servicescape may help the consumer

categorize the service firm mentally. In these occasions, physical cues enable customers to perform this categorization process. Bitner (1992) relies on Shostack (1977) and Zeithaml (1981, 1988) to suggest that because of services' high intangibility and inseparability they generally "... afford fewer intrinsic cues on which to form beliefs about service quality" therefore, the customer must rely on altruistic cues like the servicescape to infer quality (p. 63).

Based on the research conducted by Baker (1986) and Bitner (1992) we offer the following propositions in regard to the management of the physical environment:

- P₃: A firm's physical environment that is designed with employees' and customers' needs in mind is more satisfying to customers than a firm whose physical environment does not consider employees' and customers' needs.
- P₄: A firm's physical environment has various levels of influence in the consumer decision making process because some consumers have to form opinions of the service through means other than direct physical contact during part or all of the service delivery process (consumers typically are not present during the body preparation process, i.e., recovery, preparation, embalming, and/ or cremation in the funeral service industry).
- P₅: A firm's physical environment provides the potential customer with cues regarding the firm's ability to deliver quality services that help the customer make a more informed purchase decision in service industries which include a high degree of credence qualities and or that have relatively little inseparability.

EMERGING VIEW OF THE SERVICESCAPE

The objective of this section is to discuss the operationalization of the servicescape. The first part of the section briefly discusses the conceptual issues related to the operationalization. In the second part, the actual operationalizations are discussed.

Conceptualization of the Servicescape

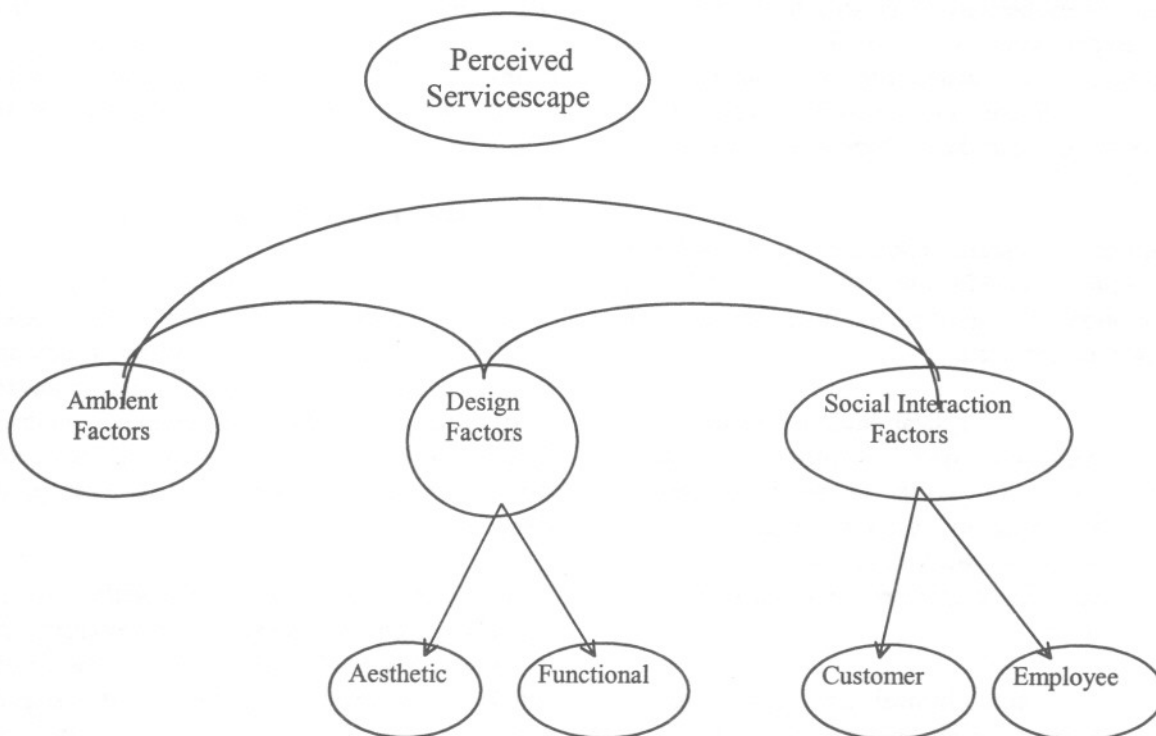
Servicescape is operationalized according to the research conducted by Sommer (1966), Baker (1986), Bitner (1992), and Hightower, Brady and Baker (2002). The servicescape is conceptualized as consisting of three components: (1) ambient factors, (2) design factors, and (3) social interaction factors. The three components of servicescape are identified in Figure 1.

Although the researchers have slightly different views regarding the physical environment, the common core shared by them is the general feeling that the environment has a direct relationship on behavior. The definition of servicescape employed in this paper is explored in greater detail in the next section.

Operationalization of Perceived Servicescape

For the purposes of this discussion, Hightower, Brady, and Baker's (2002) definition of the perceived servicescape as everything that is physically present about an individual at a given moment is employed. This environment affects and shapes cognitive and emotional responses as well as behavior (c.f., Donovan and Rossiter 1982; Baker 1986; Bitner 1992; and Hightower, Brady and Baker 2002). As discussed in the last section, the perceived servicescape is conceptualized to consist of the three basic components of the physical environment: ambient factors, design factors, and social interaction factors (Baker 1986; Hightower, Brady and Baker 2002).

FIGURE 1
Emerging View of the Servicescape



The ambient factor is posited to contain those factors that tend to impact upon the subconscious. Ambient factors generally exist below the level of customers' immediate awareness, so customers may be less than totally conscious of these conditions in the environment. Some examples of ambient environmental conditions are lighting, temperature, music, scent, and cleanliness. Consumers expect a certain level of ambient environmental conditions to exist and may be unaware of these background factors unless the factors are absent or are unfavorable.

The design factor is posited to include stimuli that are salient or, in other words, visual cues that make one think verbally of what is seen. The design component is suggested to have two sub dimensions: functional and aesthetic. The functional sub

dimension includes components such as layout, comfort, privacy, ingress ability, and egress ability. The aesthetic sub dimension includes architecture, color, style, materials, and fixtures. In general, aesthetic factors are more tangible than ambient factors and may have a stronger impact on the perceived servicescape and on purchase behavior (Baker 1986; Hightower, Brady and Baker 2002).

The social interaction factor is defined as the people component of the environment. The social interaction factor is suggested to have two sub dimensions: service employees and other patrons in the environment (Baker 1986; Hightower, Brady and Baker 2002). The service employees' appearance, behavior, and accessibility (i.e., number) can affect the way a consumer perceives the service firm. The number of other patrons (crowding), dress code, and

behavior of other patrons can affect the way a consumer perceives the service firm as well. It should be noted that the social interaction factor of the servicescape as defined herein is separate and distinct from the SERVQUAL construct.

The perceived servicescape, as conceptualized herein, causes a consumer to respond cognitively, emotionally, and/or physiologically (c.f. Bitner 1992; Hightower, Brady and Baker 2002). These responses are what influence a consumer's behaviors. The servicescape can be thought of as a form of non-verbal communication that creates meaning through environmental cues. Based on the extant research, we offer the following propositions regarding managing the servicescape:

- P₆: Service firms that realize consumers think of the servicescape at three different levels and manage their business based on these levels (i.e., **overall servicescape**, **dimensions**-ambient, design, and social interaction, and **sub dimensions**- functional, aesthetic, employee, and patrons) are more profitable than firms that do not make this distinction.
- P₇: The servicescape conveys the firm's overall image to the consumer.
- P₈: A firm that focuses on managing the servicescape is more market oriented than a firm that does not place as much focus on managing the servicescape.
- P₉: A service provider regardless of the industry can use the servicescape to differentiate itself from the competition.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

It appears that firms are finally beginning to realize that a consumer does not always buy the highest quality service (c.f., Olshavsky 1985; Cronin *et al.* 1997) or the lowest cost service (c.f., Onkvist and

Shaw 1987; Cronin *et al.* 1997). Therefore, it appears that service organizations with limited resources may need to focus on areas other than typical ones (physical/product components) as a source for developing, maintaining, and expanding a differential advantage in their industry. As a result of some industries becoming fiercely competitive, managers have to make decisions that could literally make or break the organization.

Focus On Managing the Servicescape in a Highly Competitive Marketplace

The nine propositions offered earlier provide service firms with a framework (see Figure 2) that can assist them in creating a competitive advantage in their respective industries. That is, the servicescape provides the clues that consumers need in order to formulate a mental reality of the service "product." Managers that indiscriminately adopt the widely accepted satisfaction → service quality conceptualization may inappropriately utilize programs which focus on service quality as the outcome of the service encounter without placing the appropriate emphasis on customers' satisfaction with the service provider or vice versa. This approach may cause the firm to be less profitable due to the primary focus in strategic planning being on service quality perceptions rather than customer satisfaction. Specifically, a service firm can deliver high service quality and the customer may still not return to the service provider in the future because he or she is not satisfied with the service provider for some reason (i.e., the family did not like amount of parking available at the funeral home, but greatly appreciated the funeral service, etc.). However, a satisfied buyer is likely to return to transact business in the future. Therefore, management needs to be aware that managing the servicescape in conjunction with customer satisfaction (as compared to service quality) may affect the consumer decision-making criteria differently.

In other words, the implication of this suggestion is that it is important for managers to focus not only on managing the quality of the service provided when the consumer appears to make cognitively

FIGURE 2
Framework for Managing the Servicescape

<i>P₁: Firms that have a priori determined their targeted market(s) make better decisions regarding the use of their physical facilities than firms that do not know their target markets.</i>
<i>P₂: Firms that effectively plan the use of their physical facilities are more profitable than those firms that do not effectively plan for their physical facilities.</i>
<i>P₃: A firm's physical environment that is designed with employees' and customers' needs in mind is more satisfying to customers than a firm whose physical environment that does not consider employees' and customers' needs.</i>
<i>P₄: A firm's physical environment has various levels of influence in the consumer decision making process because some consumers have to form opinions of the service through means other than direct physical contact during part or all of the service delivery process (consumers typically are not present during the body preparation process i.e. recovery, preparation, embalming, and or cremation in the funeral service industry).</i>
<i>P₅: A firm's physical environment provides the potential customer with cues regarding the firm's ability to delivery quality service that help the customer make a more informed purchase decisions in service industries which include a high degree of credence qualities and or that have relatively little inseparability.</i>
<i>P₆: Service firms that realize consumers think of the servicescape at three different levels and manage their business based on these levels (i.e. overall servicescape, dimension-ambient, design, and social interaction, and sub dimension-functional, aesthetic, employee, and patrons) are more profitable than firms that do not make this distinction.</i>
<i>P₇: The servicescape conveys the firm's overall image to the consumer.</i>
<i>P₈: A firm that focuses on managing the servicescape is more market oriented than a firm that does not place as much focus on managing the servicescape.</i>
<i>P₉: A service provider, regardless of the industry, can use the servicescape to differentiate itself from the competition.</i>

Note: This framework is suggested for service providers (with a physical environment) to consider with respect to developing a differential advantage over their competition. Those firms with lean or minimal customer servicescapes should address these issues from an internal (company employees) organization perspective.

based decisions, but to also focus on managing the firm's servicescape because it appears that they work together to influence consumers' behavior. Thus, managers should be better able to understand consumer behavior if they focus on—the quality of service provided (i.e., the object) and the servicescape (i.e., the situation).

Likewise, when consumers' desires are considered in a free marketplace, service firms benefit substantially from providing satisfying outcomes for their patrons. In other words, when customer satisfaction (i.e., emotive based) is more important than service quality in determining consumer purchase behavior, the confirmation of the service quality → satisfaction relationship helps to clarify where and how management should focus its efforts to increase profitability. Managers who are cognizant of the need to focus on service quality elements, customer satisfaction and the servicescape can implement programs that utilize service quality elements (i.e., for a funeral service, empathetic interaction with family members, accessibility of the funeral director, reliable preparation of decedent, etc.) in conjunction with various satisfaction antecedents (i.e., the servicescape) as a means of improving customers' satisfaction with the service provider to increase the service firm's profitability via increased satisfaction and loyalty (Smith and Bolton 1998).

The managing the servicescape framework offers support for Bitner (1992) who posits that servicescapes create positive feelings that are likely to attract customers. Likewise, we suggest that servicescapes that are unpleasant tend to be avoided by the customer. Therefore, managers should pay careful attention to how they create, manage, and improve their physical facilities.

For some service providers, the largest investment made is in their physical facilities. The managing the servicescape framework contributes to marketing management by suggesting components of the physical environment (design, ambient, and social interaction factors) that consumers may consider to be most important in their evaluation of a service

provider. With this type of knowledge, managers can focus on what the consumer considers to be the important aspects of the service firm (i.e., the number of employees available, their ability to interact with a customer, etc.).

Rather than owners expanding a waiting room area or redecorating merely because of their own opinions, by focusing on managing the servicescape managers may be better able to determine which specific element(s) of the physical environment need attention. This can reduce the potential for mismanagement of the firm's scarce resources. The operationalization of the emerging view of the servicescape helps managers focus on which components they need to manipulate, and the extent to which they should be manipulated. In addition, managers who are more aware of the emerging view of the servicescape are better able to determine to what extent a service encounter can be enhanced by changes to the servicescape, and to thereby identify where facility budgets can be most effectively spent.

These findings suggest specific strategies for service businesses. The main implication is that management's attention should be focused on each given aspect of the servicescape (i.e., ambient, design, or social interaction factors as well as the aesthetic, functional, employee, and customer sub dimensions) to ensure that customers are satisfied not only with the primary service, but also with the entire service encounter. We suggest that different industries require different strategies to effectively manage their servicescape. The funeral home industry calls for management's focus on the social interaction factor first because consumers may be more interested in employees (i.e., experienced versus inexperienced funeral directors, experienced versus inexperienced embalmers, effective versus ineffective office managers, etc.) along with other types of employee characteristics (i.e., their appearance, dress, how many customers are in the servicescape, etc.) as opposed to the design (i.e., architecture, layout, flooring, furniture, etc.) or ambient features (i.e., lighting, temperature, scent, etc.) of the servicescape.

Thus, the funeral home owner may need to hire excellent employees rather than focus solely on the physical building. This manager also should understand that he or she has to control how employees dress and interact with customers. Likewise, the manager should maintain a comfortable seating format within the establishment in order to minimize the potential for customers feeling crowded. While the key points suggested here for the funeral service industry focus on the social interaction dimension of the servicescape, the framework suggests that it is also important for owners to be aware of the design and ambient dimensions of the servicescape as well.

Management can use the servicescape's design factor to help differentiate one funeral home from another. Such layouts can range from the traditional small family owned funeral homes to the large corporate facilities that offer every possible funeral service option on site. The various local government regulations and zoning ordinances may influence how, when, and where this is done. For example, based on the number of cremations requested by their current market, the service provider might forego including a crematory in-house. However, strategic plans (i.e., acquiring new property or improving existing locations) might, at a later time, provide a relatively inexpensive option of adding a crematory.

In considering providing space for additional merchandising, service owners should investigate what the industry averages are for their size business and obtain information from their own targeted customer set to better determine how to meet the consumers' specific needs relating to merchandising. In other words, would funeral service buyers, for example, like to have a full selection of actual caskets on display rather than the quarter panels currently displayed? What about how headstones, urns, and flower arrangements are presented? One can see the importance of understanding what the industry averages are, and what your customers desire. As an example, a funeral director could spend a great deal of her/his limited resources on things like urn merchandising which may not be of

importance to the particular market segments served.

The expected growth of need for funereal services will provide justification for multiple chapel facilities to accommodate running simultaneous services in the same location. Also, employee input should be solicited in regard to the design of the servicescape. Especially in terms of furnishings and lighting selection. Visiting a funeral home is an experience the consumer may never forget and thus management should try to make this process as pleasantly memorable as possible. Thus, the servicescape can be critically important as a means of communicating a message. Management should be aware of this and be prepared to manipulate the physical environment in order to differentiate their service from its competitors. We suggest that a service provider, regardless of the industry, enhances favorable outcomes when it is able to differentiate itself from the competition using the servicescape as a tool.

The framework for managing the servicescape suggests that the funeral home industry, as well as other industries, can utilize the servicescape to attract customers to the place of business, keep them there longer, and convince them to come again. Customers purchasing services remain at funeral homes with more favorably perceived ambience longer than they intended, and they spend more money. In addition, if customers think the funeral home is clean, well decorated, well lighted, and has a comfortable climate, they are more likely to employ that company's service again.

The ambient focus within the funeral home industry is a straightforward strategy because competition on the design and social interaction factors of the servicescape has become standardized. In other words, all funeral homes tend to have similar design factors both from an aesthetic and functional standpoint and the competing owners all understand (i.e., know how to manage the type, number of employees, etc.) the social interaction factor. Therefore, it appears that the greatest room for creating a competitive advantage for this particular

industry may be to focus on the ambient dimension of the servicescape.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Perhaps the most important future contribution of a follow on study related to the current paper would be the development of a reliable and valid research instrument to measure consumers' perceptions of a service firm's physical environment. To date there are no scales in the marketing literature that identify and measure the complete physical environment of the service provider. Management is more likely to utilize a tool (i.e., a reliable and valid servicescape scale) that is known to produce accurate results. It would appear that the business community needs an instrument that measures a service firm's physical environment reliably and validly. Management could use such an instrument to assist in identifying how new physical facilities should be designed so as to maximize their contribution to the performance of the service firm (i.e., the servicescape's relationship to service encounter outcomes like repurchase intentions, price sensitivity, word-of mouth-communications, and desire to stay in the service environment). In other words, management could use the servicescape instrument to help determine where the physical facilities budget can be spent most effectively.

Despite the appearance of several conceptual articles in the marketing literature, (c.f. Baker 1986; Bitner 1992; Arnould, Price and Tierney 1998; Wirtz and Bateson 1999; Aubert-Gamet and Cova 1999) and several empirical articles that partially measure some aspect of the physical environment (c.f. Wakefield and Blodgett 1994; Wakefield, Blodgett, and Sloan 1996; Hightower, Brady, and Baker 2002) relatively little has been done to identify and empirically test the influence of the relevant dimensions of a service provider's physical environment on consumers' behavior.

CONCLUSIONS

The current conceptual paper provides a strong framework that suggests firms that focus on managing the servicescape may be better able to develop a differential advantage over their competitors. This suggests that managers should determine if their firm's servicescape conveys the appropriate message to consumers in terms of the service quality perceptions and their satisfaction in doing business with the firm. Management should also give careful consideration to the suggestion that the servicescape not only directly influences a customer's satisfaction, but also indirectly influences satisfaction through consumers' service quality perceptions.

Management can determine the appropriate approach in evaluating the means to improve, obtain, and/or maintain customer satisfaction. Regardless of the industry, managers should constantly evaluate the firm's service quality and their customers' level of satisfaction through a regular measurement program. Managers should also seek input from employees and customers on a regular basis as to what improvements can be made in the service process to increase customers' service quality perceptions and their level of satisfaction with the service provider. As stated by Sommer (1966), we believe that service providers should design their environment on some basis other than "vague human impulses and needs." Service managers can use the servicescape framework offered within to leverage their sizable investment in the physical facilities in order to increase overall firm profitability.

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