

A Shopping Ethnography

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Urban Outfitters is an international chain store servicing the 18 to 30 year old market in clothing, footwear and home décor. Known for its hip and sometimes controversial products, Urban Outfitters has excelled by keeping a broad and faithful consumer base. The retailer has established itself as a brand by housing stylish products for a moderate price.

The stores' environment is constant from location to location, helping the company establish recognition as a brand. A darkly lighted open floor plan is encompassed by dozens of displays in various colors. The mannequins exhibit numerous trends and materials, aiding the shopper in creating a complete look. Behind each display, various sizes of each piece are found, making it easy for the customer to recreate the look. Vintage, homey furniture adorned with accessories and clothes create a persona in the store. Loud music represents the freedom and fun of shopping, while the numerous employees bounce throughout the room. This atmosphere makes the shoppers feel entertained and energized, instead of bored while shopping. By creating a positive mood in the store, Urban can produce more sales.

Urban does little for advertisement, save the one sign posted outside the store, informing Bostonians of the current sale. This, however, does not matter, as the only sales promotion the company needs is from its customers; nonmarketer sources who inform others about their purchases, encouraging them to visit the store. Internet mediums such as the stores' website and various blogs help to get the brand message out to the public. Although Urban has done little to market, they have succeeded in becoming a recognized commercial entity.

Urban Outfitters has become a retailer filled with value to its consumers. Utilitarian value is derived from the mere fact that everyone needs clothes and shoes. Socially, the company's recognition as a trendy and fashion-forward vendor provides an outlet for modern shoppers. Explaining that an outfit was purchased at Urban presents a conversation starter for the consumer and publicity for the company. Seeing the trends Urban caters on celebrities or the public enhances the influence in the market. Shoppers of Urban possess a need for identity that they feel can be gained through purchasing stylish apparel. These "in" pieces express their knowledge of trends, conscientiousness of appearance and fulfill wants. Lastly, shopping at Urban grants recreational shopping and purchasing for pleasure. Consumers feel an emotional connection to the brand and can enjoy the time they spend building their personal character.

At Urban Outfitters, consumers are motivated by the knowledge that they can find items to represent their actual and ideal self. By purchasing basic items, they are granting the needs of their actual self. They can discover pieces that are not out of their comfort zone, but will exhilarate them to purchase at the same time. Additionally, buyers can explore riskier attire that will spice up their outfit, obtaining the ideal, ultra-trendy person they wish to be.

Visiting the conveniently located Newbury Street store on a Thursday afternoon gave insight to the diverse group of people who shop at Urban Outfitters. While all shoppers

were visibly in their 20s, each customer came with their own style, noticing that all these customers consumed in similar ways was the surprising part.

Contrary to my prediction, many of the shoppers were alone or in sets of two, rather than a large group of friends. Listening in on conversations, I gathered that most shoppers were on a task-oriented mission – finding last minute outfits for the weekend ahead.

This location has a small downstairs, filled with random trinkets and hip décor, and a big upstairs filled with clothing. I noticed that many people flew past the employee who warmly greeted them, straight to the upstairs. Starting by slowly browsing the store, the customers gained familiarity. It was obvious to depict which shoppers were religious Urban buyers not only by their outfits, but their fluency of the store. After scoping out the lay of the land, shoppers began to dive in, slowly walking past displays and racks.

As they pulled items they liked, many consumers held the clothing up to their bodies. The busiest part of the store proved to be the sale section, marked with orange price signs. Bargain hunters stood there for minutes trying to decide if they should add an article to their pile. A hot topic was attempting to carry summer sale items into fall wear. One girl stated that she didn't like going in dressing rooms, so she would just throw the garment on top of what she was already wearing. Since Urban is bountiful in their styles and patters, many customers found a certain type of clothing, then gathered the same piece but in different prints. By knowing what looked good on their body, they could purchase the item in an assortment of colors.

Many customers had a hard time distinguishing between their needs and wants. Urban's variety of products left consumers in a forward buy situation. They had to try to think of where they could wear their purchase. Conflicts of practicality came into play, especially because many consumers were cost sensitive.

My friend ran into a conflict of her own when she had no luck finding a skirt in store that she saw online. She had hoped that she could try it on and buy it that day. Unfortunately, the store didn't carry what she wanted, and she explained that she couldn't buy online because of the shipping cost and uncertainty of what size she would take. Disappointed, she left with only a pair of shoes that she noted would serve daily use.

Finally, after circling the store more than once, consumers entered the dressing room. Almost all of them had large piles to try on. One girl said that she had never seen the dressing room at Urban so clean. Friends helped each other discover whether the outfits were flattering and worth the purchase. Never would a customer make a purchase that her friend disagreed with. Since many customers were alone, they had no outside influence, especially because the employees were not very interactive.

When the customers left the dressing room, they had narrowed their pile fairly. Another girl bragged that her shirt would only cost her \$9.99, her friend reminded her, however, that they had more ground to cover and may encounter other potential purchases. As

some customers went straight to the register to make their purchase, others would circle the store again to check for anything they may have missed, in hopes of finding clothing that they could get.

In line, customers would go through their findings while waiting to pay. Numerous consumers were heard justifying their purchases, many stating they were so excited to hit the sale. Two people noticeably changed their mind while waiting to pay, putting aside an item they intended to buy. No big purchases were witnessed, just a large turnover of customers getting one or two items. I noticed that although the accessories were placed near the register, not many customers were interested in browsing through them.

Marketing managers can see Urban Outfitters as a model of a company who has excelled without big marketing campaigns. Solely through word of mouth and internet the organization has created a trademark and developed a growing customer base. Nonmarketer prophets are proven to be the best advertisers, as they have no commitment to display the retailer in a positive light, they do so simply because they believe in the brand.

Overall, I think Urban has done a great job in developing their brand. One thing I would recommend is spreading the displays out. The displays really help to create a style, and they are extremely accessible. The only problem is that the displays and racks are all so close together in the store. This makes for confusing and blurred wayfinding, it's hard for the customer to decide where they will start shopping first. If the displays were simplified and spread just a bit in a more organized matter, the customer could go about the store in a systematic manner.

The consumer set I observed proved to be a responsible and spending conscious group. Although they came shopping for a reason, they were frugal and smart with their money. They were thoughtful on how useful the product would be and what they were giving up to get it. By incorporating the sale items with their fall attire helped them get new items but save money at the same time. I think when going to Urban it is easy to get one item and use it to edge up the personal style you already rock; one piece can make new an outfit you already own.

It was obvious that customers were satisfied with their shopping experience. This was most likely because they understood Urban's stance as a reputable brand. Also, the distinct style and creative environment improved their shopping experience. Reliability is associated with the Urban Outfitter brand because the shopper knows that they will be able to leave with a fashionable item, for a reasonable price. I believe that Urban Outfitters will continue to be successful in the retail business for years to come, thanks to their steady customer base.