

The Role of Shopping Companions

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52% of consumers go shopping accompanied by shopping companions (Trade Association Germany, 2022). **Shopping companions** may encompass **family, friends, and other consumers**. Furthermore, **technological actors** (e.g., service robots) or **salespersons** have a significant influence on shopping decisions.

The Influence of Shopping Companions

Shopping companions can

1. **provide specific information** on stores or brands before the purchase (**pre-purchase phase**),
2. **influence consumer decisions** and even **decide which product or service to buy** in the store (**purchase phase**), and
3. **judge the fit of the garment** (**post-purchase phase**).

This implies that shopping companions take on **different roles** before, during and after shopping (purchase phases). Furthermore, the person who buys the garment or decides upon its purchase is not necessarily the one who wears it. For example, not uncommonly, if a couple searches for a new suit at an offline fashion retail store it is often the woman who makes the decision which suit or even brand her partner should buy and wear.

Shopping companions influence the **customer experience** (Brocato, Voorhees, & Baker, 2012; Gao, Melero-Polo, & Sese, 2020; Grove & Fisk, 1997) but **cannot be controlled** (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) by the retailer. For example, if shopping companions make **negative** comments about the garment this could result in a **non-purchase**. Therefore, it is important to understand the shopping companion's influence in more depth.

Roles of Shopping Companions

The buying center concept, originally developed and applied in a B2B context (Webster & Wind, 1972), can be used to explore the roles shopping companions perform (Table 1). Notably, shopping companions perform not only different roles in the purchase phase **but also**

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in the pre- and post-purchase phases. In doing so, they can act as **service providers to the consumer**.

Buying Center Role	Explanation for fashion retailing
Influencer	Informs a consumer on the choice of stores, brands, garments and their usage either based on personal experience or external information (e.g., through social media, websites) with the aim that the consumer can assess alternative options
Gatekeeper	Controls what information (e.g., regarding stores, brands, garment, usage of garment) the consumer receives
Decider	Decides which store to enter or which garment to buy

Table 1: Shopping companion's roles in fashion retailing based on the Buying Center concept.

Findings by Kullak, Woratschek, and Baier (forthcoming) in offline fashion retailing confirm that shopping companions perform **the following roles**:

1. **Gatekeeper informs** about stores (pre-purchase), garment brands (purchase) and its usage (post-purchase)
2. **Influencer advises** and **evaluates** about stores (pre-purchase) and garment brands (purchase)
3. **Decider selects** the store (pre-purchase) and/or garment brands (purchase)

Retailers should acknowledge the roles in all three phases and ensure that their **salespersons are trained in**:

1. **Identifying the roles** of shopping companions
2. **Addressing the roles** of shopping companions adequately
3. **Moderating** the social reference group during purchase

In this process, the salesperson takes on the **role of a service provider**. This includes that he/she **moderates the purchase process** between the consumer and his shopping companions.

To put it in a nutshell:

1. Shopping companions perform different roles in the **pre-, purchase, and post-purchase** phases.

2. Shopping companions influence the overall **customer experience**.
3. Shopping companions perform **three roles** in an offline fashion retailing context: **influencer, gatekeeper, and decider**.
4. Salespersons are advised to **identify** and adequately **address the roles of shopping companions**.
5. Therefore, **shopping companions** can act as **service providers** whereas salespersons can take on the additional **role of a moderator**.

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