



Volume 33, Issue 4

What Drives Individual Sales at Nonprofit Thrift Stores?

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Abstract

In a tough economy thrift stores have become increasingly popular and are growing at a faster pace than other retail stores, in part because nonprofits are using thrift stores to raise funds for other programs. Understanding what factors influence sales is important for the nonprofits that run thrift stores. But this is not necessarily easy because thrift stores have become less stigmatized and now cater to the middle class and the wealthy as well as the poor. In this paper, we use data collected at a nonprofit thrift store in Washington, DC, to analyze the determinants of sales. The analysis suggests that client characteristics such as gender, race, age, unemployment, income level, and time required to come to the store all affect sales per visit, the frequency of visits, and/or total sales. In addition, in the specific store where the survey was carried, quality plays a more important role for total sales than pricing and service do, essentially because clients who have high regard for the quality of the merchandise come back more often.

We implemented the survey under the guidance of Michael Bartscherer, who was then Director for food and clothing programs at Martha's Table. For the analysis of the survey using the stata software and the conceptual framework used in this paper, we benefited from help from Quentin Wodon. We are deeply grateful to both for their help, as well as to the staff of Martha's Outfitters for supporting us in this work.
Citation: Divya Wodon and Naina Wodon, (2013) "What Drives Individual Sales at Nonprofit Thrift Stores?", *Economics Bulletin*, Vol. 33 No. 4 pp. 2791-2800.

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Submitted: August 18, 2013. **Published:** October 25, 2013.

1. Introduction

Given persistent weakness in the economy, non-profits are struggling to serve those in need. While nonprofits face a higher demand for their services as more people are poor and unemployed (e.g., Guo, 2009), they also face budget constraints. Federal and local governments have reduced their funding for nonprofits, and funding from individuals and corporations is limited. As a result nonprofits have been trying to find new sources of revenue in order to fund their programs. One innovative strategy used by some nonprofits to raise revenue consists in opening up thrift stores whose net earnings are used to fund programs for low income beneficiaries. This strategy has been used by Martha's Table, the nonprofit considered here.

According to NARTS, the association of resale professionals, the number of thrift shops being operated in the United States is growing at about seven percent per year, which is faster than other retail stores (see also Solomon and Rabolt, 2004 more generally). Some 16% to 18% of Americans now shop at thrift stores according to America's Research Group, quoted on NARTS's website. Although the stigma associated with thrift stores has not disappeared entirely (Roux and Korchia, 2006), their clientele now includes not only low income individuals and families as had traditionally been the case (Ferrel, 1990), but also the middle class and even the wealthy who may come to such store for the "thrill of the hunt" (Darley and Lim, 1999; Bardhi, 2003; Bardhi and Amould, 2005; Albinsson and Perera, 2009; James, 2011).

Because the clientele of thrift shops is becoming more and more diverse, it is not completely clear what drives sales for clients. Understanding the determinants of individual sales is therefore important for nonprofit and other thrift stores, since the more sales a nonprofit store generates, the more revenues it will be able to allocate to other programs (discussions with the Director for clothing and food programs of the organization considered in this paper did confirm that the net earnings from the thrift store are indeed used for other programs for the poor).

Given this broader context, the objective of this paper is to conduct an analysis of the determinants of individual sales at a nonprofit thrift store operated by Martha's Table using a survey that we implemented at the store in July 2012. Martha's Table is a respected nonprofit in Washington DC running not only an 'Outfitters store' on which this paper is based, but also food and education programs. The Outfitters store sells different types of second hand items (i.e. clothes and household goods) at very low cost. Although the store is open to the general public, it aims to cater to those in need, including by providing free clothing to individuals referred by local social agencies. Over the past few years, the store has become popular in the neighborhood, and it has succeeded in doubling its sales, which has helped in funding other programs for low income households (on the store's performance and the use of its earnings from sales to fund food pantry programs, see Bartscherer et al., 2013, and Wodon et al., 2013a, 2013b).

The paper analyzes various factors that may affect positively or negatively sales using a client survey that we implemented July 2012. Section 2 explains the methodology used for the analysis. Basic statistics and the analysis of the impact of various factors of total sales, sales per visits, and the number of visits are discussed in sections 3 and 4. In the regression analysis, the focus is not only on total sales per client, but also on a simple decomposition of total sales into sales per visit and the total number of visits per month of the client. A brief conclusion follows.

2. Data and Methodology

The data were collected through a client survey that we implemented from June 30, 2012 to July 6, 2012 at the store. The survey was conducted on the four days that week during which Martha's Outfitters was open (the store was closed on July 4 for Independence Day). The survey was implemented in order for Martha's Table to better assess who they catered to and how satisfied their clients were with the thrift store. A total of 411 questionnaires were collected, but there were missing values for some questions, so that only 241 surveys without missing values for any of the variables included in the analysis for this paper are used here. Clients who participated in the surveys received a 20% discount off their purchases in the store that day. This promotion may have affected satisfaction rates with the store for some clients, but probably not by very much because many in the clientele are repeat customers. In addition, it is unlikely that the discount would have resulted in biased results because clients who bought nothing did not get the reward, simply because an overwhelming majority of visitors to the store do purchase items.

The survey questionnaire was divided into three categories of questions on demographics, satisfaction with the store, and income and socio-economic characteristics. The survey had a total of 24 questions with several sub-questions. Most of the questions required numerical or categorical answers, but some questions were open-ended (that information is not used here).

This paper aims to identify what variables affect how often customers shop at the store (number of visits per month V), how much they spend per visit (sales visit S), and finally how much they spend overall in a month (total sales T). The variables tend to be log-normally distributed, so their logarithm will be analyzed, noting that $\ln(T) = \ln(S \times V) = \ln(S) + \ln(V)$. Denoting by X_1, \dots, X_N the independent variables, the regressions can be written as:

$$\ln(S_i) = \alpha_S + \beta_{1S}X_{1i} + \dots + \beta_{NS}X_{Ni} + \varepsilon_{Si} \quad (1)$$

$$\ln(V_i) = \alpha_V + \beta_{1V}X_{1i} + \dots + \beta_{NV}X_{Ni} + \varepsilon_{Vi} \quad (2)$$

$$\ln(T_i) = \alpha_T + \beta_{1T}X_{1i} + \dots + \beta_{NT}X_{Ni} + \varepsilon_{Ti} \quad (3)$$

Above, the subscript i denotes the individual observations, with $i=1, \dots, 241$. The regressions provide insight into whether some characteristics influence the number of visits for clients (as measured through the estimates values for $\beta_{1V}, \dots, \beta_{NV}$) or how much they purchase per visit (as measured through the estimates values for $\beta_{1S}, \dots, \beta_{NS}$), with the sum of the effects leading to total impacts on sales (as measured through the estimates values for $\beta_{1T}, \dots, \beta_{NT}$, noting that for any independent variable k , we have $\beta_{kS} + \beta_{kV} = \beta_{kT}$). This decomposition of the total effect on sales of independent variables helps to understand whether impacts on total sales per customer are due to impacts on the number of visits or the sales per visit. In some cases some of these effects may cancel each other out (effects on sales per visit and on visits may go in opposite directions), while in other cases effects on sales per visit and visits may be cumulative.

3. Summary Statistics

Summary statistics are given for the variables used in the regressions in table 1. For categorical variables such as race, the reference category is omitted, but the share of those in the reference category can be computed by subtracting from one the other shares. In the case of race for example, the omitted category is that of African Americans, who make up most of the clientele at Martha's Outfitters. On average, the clientele spends almost US\$ 20 per visit, but the

total amount spent per month is close to US\$ 27 because the average customer comes 1.28 times per month (some clients come up to five times a month). There is quite some variability in sales per client per month, with the values ranging from a minimum of zero dollars to US\$300. Few clients declare buying nothing, but for those, given the fact that the analysis is conducted in logarithm (because the variables tend to be log-normally distributed as mentioned earlier), a few cents were imputed as sales in order not to lose the observations. In logarithms, the average sale per visit is 2.76, the total sale per month 2.33, and the frequency of visits -0.43.

Table 1: Summary Statistics for the Variables Used in the Regression Analysis

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Dependent variables				
Sales per visit S (US\$)	20.00	13.52	1.01	100.01
Total sales per month T (US\$)	26.63	37.81	0.02	300.03
Visits per month (V)	1.28	1.35	0.02	5.00
Ln (S)	2.76	0.77	0.01	4.61
Ln (T)	2.34	1.61	-3.90	5.70
Ln (V)	-0.43	1.35	-3.91	1.61
Time to arrive to the store				
Time (minutes)	20.21	22.00	1	180
Gender (reference: male)				
Female client (%)	0.69	0.46	0	1
Race (reference: African American)				
Latino (%)	0.24	0.43	0	1
Caucasian (%)	0.20	0.40	0	1
Other (%)	0.08	0.28	0	1
Age (reference: other age groups)				
Middle age (%)	0.46	0.50	0	1
Household size				
Size	2.97	2.10	1	11
Occupation (reference: employed)				
Student (%)	0.08	0.28	0	1
Unemployed (%)	0.15	0.36	0	1
Inactive (%)	0.15	0.36	0	1
Income (reference: very low income)				
Low income, US\$ 15,000-30,000 (%)	0.25	0.44	0	1
Medium income, US\$ 30,000-50,000 (%)	0.19	0.39	0	1
High income, US\$ 50,000+ (%)	0.20	0.40	0	1
Finds what is looking for (ref.: yes)				
Does not find what is looking for (%)	0.29	0.45	0	1
Ratings (reference: lower ratings)				
Great pricing (5/5, excellent) (%)	0.61	0.49	0	1
Great quality (5/5, excellent) (%)	0.58	0.49	0	1
Great service (5/5, excellent) (%)	0.76	0.43	0	1
Shops at other thrift stores (ref.: no)				
Shops at other thrift Stores (%)	0.55	0.50	0	1

Source: Authors' estimation.

Note: Number of observations: 241

In terms of independent variables, the average time it takes for a client to arrive to the thrift shop from his/her home or work is 21 minutes, but some come from several hours away. Women tend to shop for themselves as well as their family, so it is not surprising that they account for 69% of the clients (31% for males, the reference category). Over half of the clientele is African American (the reference category, not included in table 1), and the thrift store also caters to Latinos (24%), Caucasians (20%), and others (8%). The clientele of the store is fairly diverse with 46% of the clients being in the middle aged group (several categories were identified in the questionnaire, but we reduced the number of variables included in the regression as age tended not to be statistically significant). Most of the clientele lives in small households, and the average household size is at about three members (the maximum is eleven members).

Table 1 also provides data on the socio-economic profile of the clientele. A few clients (8%) are students, and a larger share are unemployed (15%) or inactive (also 15%), but the reference of the employed is the largest (62%). Many clients have very low income, with 25% stating that their yearly income is under US\$ 15,000 (the reference category) and another 19% earning between US\$ 15,000 and US\$ 30,000 per year. But some clients make a good living, with 20% earning more than \$50,000 per year and categorized (comparatively) as high income. The last category, referred to as middle income, comprises those earning between US\$30,000 and US\$50,000 (19%). Thus, as observed among others by James (2011) and Mitchell and Montgomery (2010) for other thrift stores, Martha's Outfitters attracts a fairly diverse clientele in terms of demographic and socio-economic characteristics.

Roughly a third (30%) of the clientele states that it often does not find the items they are looking for, but overall, when clients were asked to rate the store in terms of characteristics such as pricing, quality and service on a five point scale, over half of the clients rated the store as excellent, that is the top rating. That is, 61% of the clients rated pricing as excellent, 58% rated quality as excellent, and an impressive 76% rated service as excellent. Finally over half (55%) of the clientele shops at other thrift stores, including those of Goodwill and the Salvation Army.

4. Regression Results

In discussing the regression results provided in table 2, we focus on variables that have a statistically significant effect on sales per visit, total sales, and/or the number of visits. Since the dependent variable is in logarithms, for coefficients that are sufficiently small in size, the interpretation of the coefficients is in percentage terms. For example, for a dummy (0/1) variable a coefficient of 0.1 means that the characteristic is associated with a 10% increase in sales per visit, total sales, and/or the number of visits (for larger coefficients and for simplicity we will use the same approximate interpretation of the magnitude of the coefficients in percentage terms in order to facilitate the discussion even though the approximation is then less precise).

The results suggest that women spend one third (34%) more than men per visit. This is likely to be related to the fact that men tend to only buy clothing for themselves, while women tend to buy clothing for their whole family as well as other household items. Although gender has a statistically significant impact on the amount spent per visit, the impact on the frequency of visits is not statistically significant. And even though the effect of gender on the amount of sales per visit is statistically significant, the overall effect on total sales is not. Race also has an effect on the amount of sales per visit, with Caucasians spending about a third (31%) less per visit than the reference category of African Americans. Again, while being Caucasian affects the amount spent per visit, it does not affect the frequency of visits or the total amount spent per month.

Finally, clients in the middle of the age categories tend to come less to the store (possibly because they are busy with other things to do, such as taking care of their family), and thereby spend less overall, but the coefficients are only marginally statistically significant.

Table 2: Regression Results for Sales per Visit, Frequency of Visits, and Total Sales

Variable	Ln(S)			Ln(V)			Ln(T)		
	Coeff.	St. Err.	P>t	Coeff.	Std. Err.	P>t	Coeff.	Std. Err.	P>t
Gender (ref. : male)									
Female client	0.34	0.12	***	-0.21	0.19		0.12	0.24	
Race (ref.: African American)									
Latino	-0.07	0.13		0.25	0.22		0.18	0.27	
Caucasian	-0.31	0.13	**	-0.08	0.23		-0.39	0.27	
Other	-0.18	0.16		-0.14	0.35		-0.31	0.43	
Age (ref.: other age groups)									
Middle age	-0.10	0.11		-0.35	0.19	*	-0.45	0.24	*
Household size									
Household size	0.04	0.03		0.03	0.05		0.07	0.06	
Occupation (ref.: employed)									
Student	-0.25	0.17		-0.01	0.26		-0.27	0.31	
Unemployed	-0.26	0.13	*	-0.38	0.26		-0.64	0.31	**
Inactive	-0.35	0.19	*	0.08	0.24		-0.26	0.35	
Time to arrive to the store									
Time	0.01	0.00	***	-0.01	0.00	***	0.00	0.00	
Items found (ref.: yes)									
Items not found	0.01	0.11		-0.03	0.19		-0.02	0.24	
Shops at other stores (ref.: yes)									
Other thrift stores	-0.01	0.10		-0.07	0.17		-0.07	0.21	
Income (ref.: very low income)									
Low income	0.05	0.12		0.09	0.22		0.14	0.25	
Medium income	0.06	0.15		-0.25	0.26		-0.19	0.32	
High income	0.10	0.15		-0.69	0.27	***	-0.59	0.31	*
Ratings (ref.: lower ratings)									
Great pricing	0.10	0.09		-0.09	0.20		0.01	0.21	
Great quality	0.12	0.09		0.39	0.20	*	0.50	0.22	**
Great service	0.16	0.13		0.14	0.24		0.30	0.28	
Constant	2.27	0.22		-0.06	0.33		2.20	0.43	
R ²		0.1714			0.1464			0.1401	

Source: Authors' estimation.

Level of statistical significance: *** 1%, ** 5%, * 10%. Number of observations: 241.

Unemployment and inactivity are also correlated with sales per visit. If the client is unemployed, he/she spends 26% less, and if the client is inactive, he/she spends 35% less than the reference category of the employed. This makes sense since the unemployed and inactive tend to be worse off than the employed, on average, and thereby may have less to spend. Unemployment does not affect the frequency of visits (the coefficient is not statistically significant), but the overall effect on total sales is statistically significant and large. The total

amount spent per month is 64% lower for unemployed clients versus those who are employed. For the inactive, the effect on visits and the overall effect on sales are not statistically significant.

Time to come to the store affects the amount spent per visit, with every extra minute it takes for a client to commute from his/her house or workplace to the store leading to an increase in sales per visit of 0.56%. By contrast, every added minute a client has to commute to come to the store reduces the frequency of the visits to the store by about one percent. This is not surprising since people coming from farther away would want to spend more per visit so that they would have to visit less often. Overall, because the two effects work in opposite ways, time does not have a statistically significant impact on total sales.

Clients who earn above US\$ 50,000 per year tend to visit the store substantially (69%) less than the reference category of those with very low income. This could be because they have less time, or perhaps because they come to find “hidden gems” as they do not need the clothes and other items. In other words, they need the store less, and thus probably come less. This lesser number of visits is what drives the impact on total sales, as compared to clients with very low incomes, even if for that variable the impact is only marginally significant.

Finally, the last but important variable with a statistically significant impact is the quality of the items in the store, as assessed by the clients. Clients who rate the quality of the items as excellent come more often to the store, and this also leads to higher total sales, with an increase in overall sales of 50% in comparisons to clients who rate the quality of the merchandise lower. Thus, while service and pricing may matter for overall aspects of the store experience, it seems that perceptions of the quality of the merchandise is the variable that has a statistically significant impact on the number of visits to the store, and thereby the overall sales per month per client.

In the regressions, there are also a number of variables that were expected to be statistically significant but were not. The household size was expected to increase sales because the larger their family, the more clients would seem to need clothing and other items. Great pricing and great service were also expected to increase sales, but did not. Finally, it is worth emphasizing that while the regressions do have explanatory power, only about 155 (R-squared) in the variation of the independent variables are explained by the models.

How do these results compare with the literature, and are they likely to have external validity beyond the specific thrift store being considered here? As mentioned in the introduction, the thrift store sector is changing. Thrift stores have traditionally been seen as providing low quality merchandize and as being poorly organized or even at times dirty (Bardhi, 2003). Today however, many stores, including Martha’s Outfitters, provide quality clothing and pay attention to customer service. Middle class shoppers and the well-off can be seen shopping for unexpected or valuable items (Williams and Paddock, 2003; Alexander et al., 2008). In a 2008 poll mentioned by USA Today, more than two thirds of respondents stated that second hand shopping is now more socially acceptable than in the past (Petrecca, 2008). Better off segments of the clientele even value thrift shopping itself because it provides hedonic benefits (Bardhi and Amould, 2005; Albinsson and Perera, 2009; James, 2011; Guiot and Roux, 2010; Cervellon et al., 2012). Under such circumstances, it is not clear that low prices alone matter.

Beyond pricing, the organization of the retail space and a store’s atmosphere matter and may ultimately affect purchases (e.g., Turley and Milliman, 2000; Verhoef et al., 2009; Puccinelli et al., 2009; Spina et al., 2012). Darley and Lim (1999) have suggested that in the US that a thrift store’s image as well as positive perceptions of the quality and availability of the merchandize may lead shoppers to come more often to a store. Mitchel and Montgomery (2010) also suggest that when clients assess a thrift store, cleanliness, quality of merchandise,

organization of displays, and cost to benefit ratio (value) of the merchandise all matter. Pricing does affect value and matters for the low income clientele (Williams, 2003), but without good quality nonprofit thrift stores would not be able to attract a diversified clientele and thereby raise their sales.

Our results thus seem to have a good likelihood of external validity, even though they are based on a survey carried in one particular store only. Importantly though, while our sample is relatively small, and thereby does not permit the estimation of regression models separately for low income and better-off clients, assessing the extent to which different store characteristics (including pricing, quality, and service) matter more or less for different socio-economic groups is clearly an avenue for further research to be conducted with larger datasets.

5. Conclusion

In hard economic times, more nonprofits have started to operate thrift stores to generate earnings for their other programs. Understanding what drives sales is important for these nonprofits, so as to generate as much funding as possible for their other charitable purposes. But the clientele of thrift stores has changed, and today's client can be virtually anybody, from a low income to a high income individual or family. It is thus important to understand what particular characteristics of the clientele affects sales, and then, controlling for such characteristics, whether the focus should be on pricing, quality, or service when trying to increase sales.

The analysis suggests that in one specific thrift store located in Washington, DC, client characteristics such as gender, race, age, employment or the lack thereof, income level, and time to come to the store all affect sales per visit, the frequency of visits, and/or total sales. In addition, the results suggest that in this specific store, quality plays a more important role for total sales than pricing and service do, essentially because clients who have high regard for the quality of the merchandise come back more often. Although the results do seem to fit well in the emerging literature on thrift stores, they are nevertheless valid for only one store, and therefore tentative. More research is needed to confirm the external validity of the findings, and research with larger datasets could also permit an assessment as to whether different store characteristics such as pricing, quality, and service matter more or less for different socio-economic groups.

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