Luxury e-services at the pre- and after-sales stages of the decision making process:

Watch, car, art and travel blogs analysis

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Summary

Needs and expectations of customers in pre- and after-sales stages in the e-commerce purchase process in the luxury products sector are not well known and defined. We were interested in discovering the opinions of customers concerning the role of internet in the pre- and after-sales stages of the purchasing process in this industry. As we are just at the beginning of the e-commerce area in the luxury sector, we decided to focus on blogs' content. After-sales service in the luxury sector is considered with circumspection. Practitioners feel that consumers are still very much attached to the 'physical' experience. On the contrary, we assumed that Netsurfers belonging to net communities are also luxury goods and services consumers. According to the netnography methodology (Kozinets, 1998), we analyzed the Netsufers comments about pre- and after-sales services. We identified and selected blogs that are specific to the Web 2.0 generation; these blogs are discussing about luxury watches, cars, travels and art objects. The results permitted us to identify three categories of services needs: 1) the need for the service in broad terms, especially the service that should be linked to a product 2) the need for a specific information or a very specific service, and 3) specific complaint about service experiences. These insights were discussed to be fully integrated in the e-commerce strategy in general.

Keywords

After-sales services ; Web 2.0 ; e-commerce ; luxury industry ; purchasing process

1. Introduction

In general, specific needs of the pre- or after-sales stages of the decision making process of goods or services on the Internet are not taken into account in the design of the offering. From the time being, if the customer wants to get more details about a luxury hotel, or to get technical information about a luxury watch or car, or to know more about the origins of an art object, s/he can search and might find them on the net. But the customer might want something more, i.e. what he wanted delivered to her/him, as s/he could get from a customer representative in a store or by telephone. Especially in the luxury industry, a customer could expect that experts deliver the right personalized information when needed.

Some luxury products can be bought on the Internet, either through a brand operated website (for instance, www.dior.com, www.louisvuitton.com or www.121time.com) or through an e-commerce portal such as www.eluxury.com or www.watchestore.net. Besides the discussion about a superior online distribution strategy for luxury goods (Broillet, Dubosson and Trabichet, 2007), professionals are still arguing the possibility of offering a remote after-sales service and about the definition of the best pre- and after-sales service.

Almost all the sales of luxury watches and jewels are made through independent distributors. These channels are also handling and managing the after-sales services for luxury watch and jewel brands. Offering after-sales service, and in some case repairing watches, is a part of the functional role of a retailer. Actually, 50 % of the activities performed by a typical retailer come from services activities apart from the margin made on distributing new products (JMRH, 2007). The retailer is the interacting point of contact with the customer and it is the only one that can get information about customers' attitudes, expectations, preferences and motives. It is also the retailer who has to face a customer who experienced some trouble with her/his product or service. So s/he comes for after-sales service or for complaining about after-sales service. Brand image is communicated and supported by the interaction with the retailer and the way the customer experienced it.

2. Pre – and after-sales services in service industry

In the marketing literature, the online consumer behavior was described and structured in general terms (Wang et al., 2007), for specific groups, like retired persons (Bergadàa et Hebali, 2001), whether it was a substitute or a complement of the "brick-and-mortar" store (Weltevreden, 2007). The literature, also analyzed the consumer attitude toward virtual stores (Lee, 2007), the direct marketing on the internet and consumer attitudes (Metha and Sivada, 1995), the influence variables of e-commerce, (Allagui), perceptions of emotions in e-commerce (Allagui, 2006), internet facilities in general (Burt and Sparks, 2003; Harris and Cohen, 2003; Lovelock and Wirtz, 2007), supply chain management issues for internet (Agatz et al., 2007), luxury branding on the internet (Olmo Riley and Lacroix, 2003). But we did not find anything specific about the needs and expectations of customers in pre- and after-sales stages in the e-commerce purchase process in the luxury products sector.

The characteristics of services (Zeithaml et al, 1985), i.e. intangibility, heterogeneity, simultaneity and perishability (IHIP paradigm), can be applied to pre- and after-sales phases of the decision making process. Sometimes simultaneity might be not guaranteed, as we tried to proceed with a live chat through an American luxury watch portal (www.lussori.com). We had to wait about 5 minutes to get in touch with a person. This is far too long especially if you compare this waiting time to a direct interaction in a physical store. Moreover, we also had to wait about 5 minutes to get answers to specific questions about watch brands, such as the possibility of buying Baume & Mercier watches through the Lussori website. Such waiting times are just inacceptable for luxury customers in general, and for Netsurfers in particular, as they are used to getting information instantaneously. Heterogeneity and simultaneity are important characteristics of pre- and after-sales stages in the luxury industry. These aspects will be parts of a whole branding management and customers will judge a luxury brand through a waiting time for a service too.

Innovative solutions for offering services in the luxury sector over the web are just starting. Chaumet, a luxury jewel brand, is offering a consulting service via mail or over the phone (http://www.chaumet.com/default.html). The consumer just needs to click on "contact us" and answer to a few questions, such as phone number and the best time to call her/him back. Chaumet will call her/him immediately or within 1- to 3- minute time lag.

For the time being, re- and after-sales services in the luxury sector in the internet could be conceived as "professional services" (Schmenner, 1986) as the need of customization and the intensity in human resource would be high. Luxury companies may recruit people with specific knowledge and a luxury culture for those e-information services, like a watchmaker who is acting as an expert for answering to complaints. Not only the content on itself is important, but also the quality of the reply that should fit to the image of the watch brand (JMRH, 2007).

Luxury goods should always be associated with pre- and after-sales services. For instance, before buying a luxury watch, the customer would like to get some specific information, such as where to get a certain watch model for the best price.

The expectations of a luxury brand customer include also the after-sales services according to high-class standards, such as regular maintenance of the watch, assistance in case of trouble, up-to-date information, etc. The service stands for the luxury brand image of the watch; one does not go without the other one. The pre-sales services may include different needs with various levels of communication explanations and implications, in the information search and evaluation of alternatives phases of the purchasing process (Zeithaml et al, 2006), such as finding out technical information about a watch, determining its price, and comparing its performance with a set of alternatives defined by a customer. Finally post-experience evaluation process which is carried out by the luxury customer influences positively or negatively her/his expectations and so, next consumer decision making (Zeithaml et al, 2006) of the luxury good and potential referral. Dimensions of service quality, as reliability, responsiveness, assurance empathy and tangibility (Zeithaml et al., 2006) can be used as dimensions for assessing the after-sales performance.

We can summarize luxury e-services in the following figure:

Figure 1
Pre- and after-sales services in the purchasing process in the watch industry
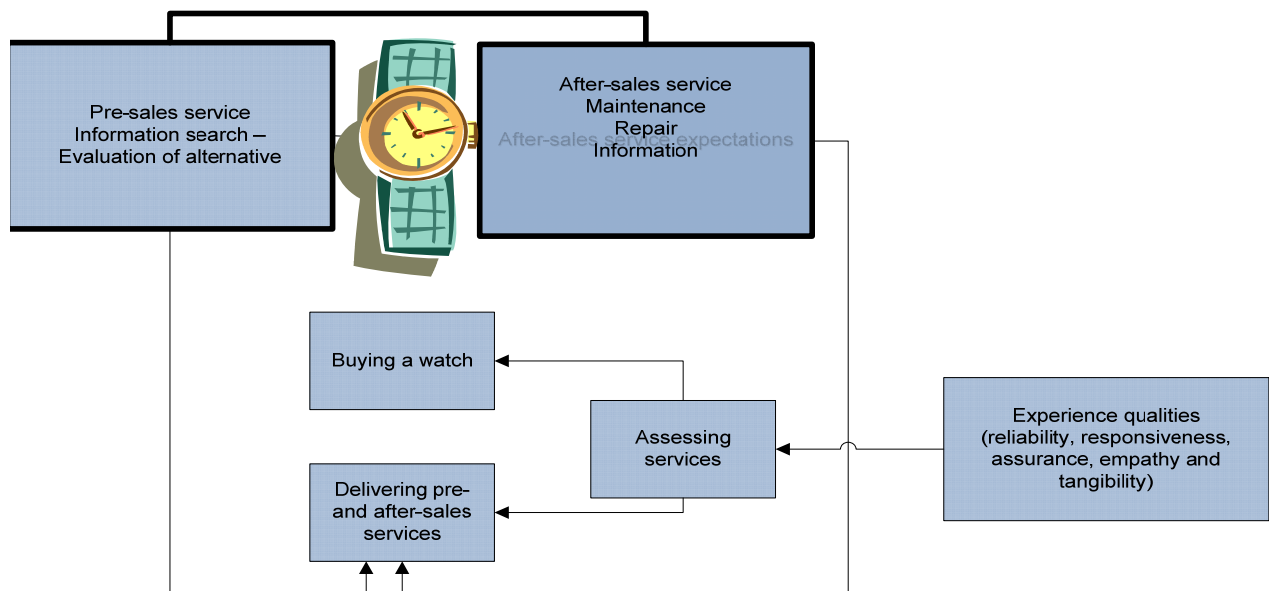
Consumer decision making and evaluation of Web services in the luxury industry
The model of Zeithaml et al. (2006) of the stages in consumer decision making and evaluation of services is discussed in the context of the luxury industry, and we are focusing on the pre- and after-sales services parts, particularly when delivered remotely, on the web.

Figure 2
Stages in Consumer Decision Making and Evaluation of Services
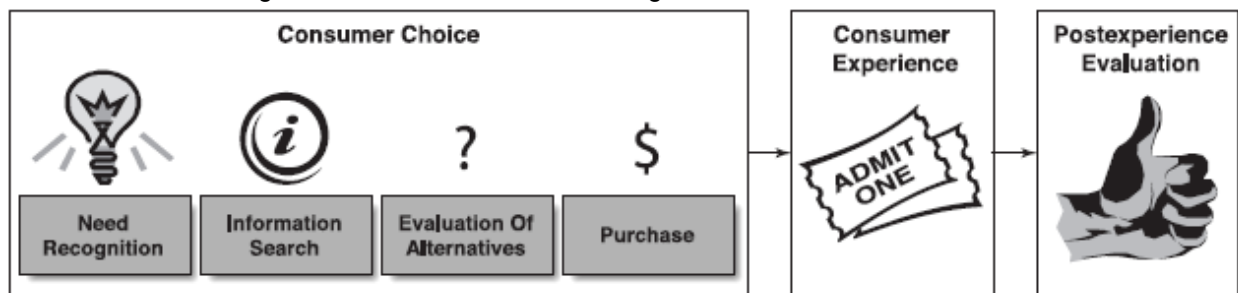
Source : Zeithaml et al. (2006)

The consumer is not only buying a product, he is also buying a complete package of products and services. How this customer can make sure that he will get and experience the right service when he will need it? One way of finding out, or at least reducing the perceived risk could be going on the internet in order to find out the kind of service you can get. Has the company to offer on the internet exactly the same services as in the "real" world or are there different segments? Do they have to introduce remote centralized after-sales services over the net (that would be experience by the industry as a revolution)? If so, may the customer trust the virtual after-sales service and even, prefer to use it instead of having to go the retailer? Do the virtual after-sales service expectations differ to the physical ones? As we do not have any experience at all in this sector, we think that the perceived risk of the luxury customer for a virtual after-sales service is higher than for a physical one. This might be due to a lack of experience in after-sales service for luxury watches.

H1: The perceived risk of a virtual after-sales service is higher than the perceived risk of a physical after-sales service.

Information search
H2: The information search stage would be more thorough when dealing with a virtual retailer than with a physical retailer as the perceived risk is higher.

Evaluation of alternatives
H3: The evaluation of alternatives would be easier on the web so consumers will consider more alternatives on the web than when they remain on the "brick-and-mortar" world.

H3': The evaluation of alternatives would be more thorough when dealing with virtual retailer than with a physical retailer as the perceived risk is higher.

Postexperience evaluation
H4: Referring to the Gap model of service quality, there is a lower probability to have a gap of type 1 for after-sales services in the case of remote web services than for after-sales services handled by retailers as manufacturers will be in direct contact with consumers that will express their needs and expectations on the internet without intermediaries.

3. Web 2.0 and after-sales service

Bloggers' behavior as representatives of Web 2.0 generation was analyzed as it can be considered as the most advanced and widely used technology by now. To the contrary of many practitioners, we believe that bloggers are not only young and poor people that can be neglected by luxury companies. We decided to analyze the content of web 2.0 blogs in order to find what are the needs and expectations of bloggers in terms luxury goods and services consumption.

A study has shown that 76 % of Americans earning more than 150.000 dollars per year is spending very regularly their time reading blogs (Mc Kinnon, 2007). So, can the luxury industry still continue to ignore the e-commerce and the Web services which go with?

O'Reilly (2005) was the first to define the Web 2.0 as an interactive platform, offering dynamic solutions and to fasten B2C communication. Later on, the literature is showing two axes, the original one, which is based on the social networking aspect and the other one which is focusing on the development of the RIA (rich interface application).

We prefer the social networking definition (O'Reilly, 2005) because it is focusing on people participation instead of putting forward technical aspects enabling people participation. Therefore, WEB 2.0 offers opportunities to companies to build better relationships with their customers (Olmo Riley and Lacroix, 2003) and may engender an increased customer loyalty to the brand. That would be a new position for luxury watch companies as they are presently relying exclusively on intermediaries and then, they are rarely dealing directly with their customers.

The main hindrance with selling luxury watches through the Internet is the lack of face-to-face human contact. Different studies have shown that about 2 % of Internet users buy online. But, 40 % of them would do so, if they had the opportunity to get in touch with an expert. So what are the solutions for "rehumanizing" the online experience?

For the time being, some solutions are offered:
- Intelligent robots, for instance a virtual person that can be activated to become an helper or a guide for the internet user, (like a virtual woman called Mona which is assisting the user on a French media website, www.france5.fr)
- Co-browsing and, or chat, that can assist the user via a human assistant (like http://www.crm.webhelp.fr/fiches/chat_co-browsing.html)
- Skype connections which enable the user to contact vocally a help desk without leaving his computer (like http://www.getax.ch/pm/Contact.html)
- Telephone service via a website address.

Might intelligent robots be a solution for an online service? We do believe that an intelligent robot has to be used in connection with a human who is able to answer to specific questions. Otherwise a company has to assume the risk to lose a consumer and to damage the image of its brand.

Web 2.0 allows an interface customization of an e-commerce platform. The luxury client may choose himself his own visual representation of the company. This concept is already well known by MyGoogle, Mymarque, or you may see it on my Tag Heuer or on the French labor party site (www.partisocialiste.fr). Some e-commerce websites offer the possibility of saving its own shopping lists or consumer preferences. The next time, the customer will return to the same website, s/he arrives directly to specific WebPages (like www.leshop.ch, or http://www.dvdfly.com/).

4. Research method

For a better understanding of the behavior and the attitudes of Internet users interested in pre- and after-sales service for luxury goods and services, we analyzed what they were saying and writing on the different blogs. The analyses of their postings gave us an idea of their most stated opinions and their perception of pre- and after-sales services for luxury watch brands, luxury cars, luxury travel and art objects. We have chosen to focus not only on watches but to find out what are the behaviors and attitudes of the consumer of luxury goods in general. These categories were chosen as we observed that bloggers were discussing their decision making in their blogs.

We have used Netnography (Kozinets, 2002), a qualitative research which is considering the textual output of internet-related field work (Kozinets, 1997, 1998). This kind of research permits to observe the Internet communities without participating actively and in an anonymous way. Observational research in internet contexts where already discussed (Metha and Sivadas, 1995; Bergadaà and Hebali, 2001; Caterall and Maclaran, 2001; Koontz and Gibson, 2002; Harris and Cohen, 2003; Moetti, 2003; Olmo Riley and Lacroix, 2003; Robinson, 2006; Miller, 2006; Lee and Broderick, 2007; Knight 2007; Weltevreden, 2007) in the literature. The netnography studies pure cybercultures and virtual communities, which are inspired by techniques of cultural anthropology (Kozinets, 1997, 1998). The virtual communities are understood as "…a social group that has a "real" existence for its participants,

and thus has consequential effects on many aspects on behavior, including consumer behavior (Turkle, 1995; Kozinets and Handelman, 1998).

As the virtual communities are not accessible by now via the official websites, we concentrated on different types of the Web 2.0 technology. We identified two kinds of Web 2.0 communication bases:

1) "Chats" which treated specifically the subject of luxury watches, cars, travel and object arts, like for the watches (Watch Talk Forum, l'horlogerie-suisse.com, forums.timezone.com, watchparadise.com/blog, forums.watchuseek.com or the proper section about watches in Small World).

2) Selling platforms were only existing for luxury watches and travel, including an interactive blog (like portero.com, thewatchery.com, Vialuxe, traveler.fivestaralliance.com)

The selection of different Web 2.0 platforms was done through the "Google blog search" tool. After having visited many of them, we selected 10 blogs which fitted to our selection criteria. An intense flow of opinions and a big community of Netsurfers which are organizing the different blogs belonged to our selection criteria. Single opinion or coordination by few bloggers on Web 2.0 platforms, were excluded from our Database. After an observation period of 4 months, we finally collected

- 43.000 words, treating the discourse about luxury watch brands
- 8. 546 words, treating the discourse about luxury cars
- 14.695 words, treating the discourse about luxury travel
- 4.803 words, treating the discourse about luxury art objects from bloggers.

We were only analyzing the parts of the different discourses which were about pre- and after-sales services. Contents analyses were done through the application of specific software. It counted the frequency of the words. The highest frequencies represent the words which were used most often on the selected blogs. Then, researchers categorized these words into categories. Those categories went through a perception control process of all research members of this project. We have compared our results and kept only the significant ones.

5. Discussion of major results

The category which is including the highest frequencies stands for the words which are describing the opinion of a person and the way in which the blogger conceive the different pre- and after-sales service in the luxury sector. There is a difference between the communication messages sent by the luxury watch companies (Broillet et Dubosson, 2006) for instance, and the point of view of the bloggers (see appendix I for details).

These insights of pre- and after-sales service were discussed to be fully integrated in the e-commerce strategy in general. We found that discussion about the different service needs represents in most cases functional or technical discourses. Bloggers talks are about services which go with a product, or direct product advice. The percentages of the frequencies which concerned specifically pre- and after-sales services, varied between 12 and 21 %, depending on the luxury sector. 21 % was found in the luxury cars sector, followed by 18 % for the luxury watches. Finally 12 and 13 % of the service discourses have been reached in the luxury travel and art objects sector. We found interesting that bloggers were more concerned about the service which go with the product and less for the service itself.

Three categories were identified in different discourses about pre- and after-sales service in the luxury sector:

1. *The need for the service in broad terms*
   (this category includes the demand for a service itself, how to get it, where to find it, which information channel to use; such as *"I know you guys are experts on the brads. Help me out here… For information…")*

2. *The need for a specific service*
   (questions and discussions about the different distribution places, delivery and price conditions and especially technical information needs about the luxury products themselves, like specific watch models or cars, *"Can anyone please tell me how much should I pay for one*

of his watches?... Got a new watch, divers watch it is, had to drown the bastard to get it!... But what's the difference compared to Landcruiser?")

3. *Specific complaints about service experiences*
(bloggers discuss directly their negative service experiences, exchange opinions and give advice to others; they do also correct themselves in cases which are judged as "exceptional", like *"Very cool. I'll never travel with luggage again if I can help it... Luggage Forwarding is brilliant! Know of any other hotels that offer this service?... our travel agent specialists are having a hard time getting the hotel on the phone. The website hasn't been updated either... People often indicated that we'd missed the mark and that, in their opinion, the safety benefits of run-flat tires certainly did not outweigh the problems...")*

A company needs not to intervene in each complaint case. We found interesting that the bloggers "correct" somebody and tell them, that his negative service experience might be an exception and that they had live positive ones. A luxury car company intervenes only in delivering information which wasn't known by the bloggers by now. This is a new way of service contact with luxury customers and also a new service experience. By the way also a different way to offer value differently.

Our results didn't show whether a physical shop is necessary to offer pre- and after-sales service for luxury goods and service on-line.

The results may seem to show that bloggers look for a lot of information before buying (H2) but it does tell if they buy afterwards on the net or in a brick-and-mortar store. They are also discussing alternatives among bloggers. For example, a blogger want to buy a diving watch and ask for advice. Every blogger who owns this kind of watch is trying to convince him to buy a specific watch and a comparing for him 2 or 3 alternatives. This kind of discussion is supporting H3.

We focus on the behavior and attitude of the blogger which demonstrated clearly that the Web 2.0 techniques belong to their daily live which *is confirming our research question, namely that luxury watch brands cannot ignore the Web 2.0 any longer as a communication and/or distribution channel.*

6. Implications

Implications for research

There is still a gap in the Web 2.0 literature, nothing do exist in the luxury marketing field which is dealing with the issues of Web services and the needs of luxury customers.

Attitudes of the blogger might be compared to the attitudes of the consumer who is only using the physical distribution channels. What are the different variables describing typical Netsurfers using Web 2.0 tools? Marketing practitioners are already using a method which is called "Hyperprofiling" (w-forum, 2008) in the e-marketing sector in general. Nothing was done in academic research by now in the luxury services field.

Some marketing professionals start wondering why companies are still ignoring e-servicing as bloggers are demonstrating a real interest, via their specific discourses (e-marketing, 2008). Blogs has real research leverage and its impacts are still ignored in the service literature too.
Netnography should be tested in a wider application range, especially having a better definition of e-service needs and expectations and by now, it was used only for marketing purposes.

Implications for managers

The consumer which is regularly using Web 2.0 tools cannot be longer overlooked by the luxury sector. They are real experts on luxury issues. They are well informed, they do buy luxury watches or book their luxury travel on-line, are interested in getting a high-standard service with a luxury product. Luxury shoppers are very interested in their product/service world. Internet is used as information tool in order to obtain the latest news via other bloggers; they do not talk at all about their physical shopping experiences.

The blog has to be considered as a real marketing service tool. Luxury companies may share specific themes directly with their target markets, let them discuss about complaints and intervene differently if they feel the need to react. They may suggest special themes about services and test the perception of customers and get feedback directly.

Netnography represents an observation (non participating) tool for analyzing trends in different blogs which are discussing luxury services. This method does not introduce any bias in the results. Our outcomes about the attitudes and behavior of Netsurfers allow considerations in integrating those aspects when design e-commerce platforms for luxury watch brands, luxury travel agencies, art object portals and luxury car websites. As it is not possible by now to analyze attitude and behavior for luxury Web-service, on official virtual shops of luxury watch companies, luxury cars our results stand for a better understanding of attitude and behavior in regard to existing distribution channels and intelligibility for the creation of a new luxury Web-service offer on line.

Conclusion

There is a real need of Web-services in the luxury sector. Through the analysis of blogs contents, a typology of the types of service that were discussed was established. The blogger is very concerned about services that should be linked to the luxury product; i.e. the service from the very beginning, pre- to after-sales services. There is a big difference between the explicit service needs stated by bloggers who is using Web 2.0 tools and the official communication from the luxury companies. Luxury Web-services at pre- and after-sales stages of the decision making process are completely neglected by the companies by now. This may represent a huge risk. We think that the Web1.0 and 2.0 technologies have to be used efficiently for knowing the different luxury service needs better and using the tools for participating officially in the different discussions, for delivering efficiently the e-services and offering the right products/services to the customers.

Appendix I (Summary of the discourses results in services of bloggers using Web 2.0 techniques)

Key-words	Connotations	Type of discourse	Frequencies
LUXURY WATCHES			
At, in from, there	Place of distribution (selling points)	Functional	1049
New, know, most, actually	Tendencies	Relational social	214
Looking, how, about, who, where, want, ask, tell, interested, interest, need, wanted	Research for special information – communication channel	Functional	391
More, much, price, cheap, expensive	Pricing	Functional	239
Gold, steel, diamonds, leather, diamond	Materials	Technical	189
Master, vintage, collection, model, classic, edition, seamaster, models, submariner	Model in general, Subject	Relational ideological	166
Dial, chronograph, chrono, long, automatic, small	Technical information	Technical	132
Black, white, pink, yellow	Colors	Relational Social	113
Strap, case, bracelet	Parts of the watch	Technical	86
Way, back	Delivery	Functional	47
Diving, dive	For what for… (you should wear this watch for…)	Social	40
Service, help	Service	Functional	39
Dubai	Distribution place or better price?	Functional	38
Design		Functional Relational	16
LUXURY CARS			
From, about	Distribution place and information	Functional	38
Tires, tire, flat, back, feature, engine, liter, fuel, safety, high, parts	Parts and technical characteristics of the car	Technical	188
Service, consumer reports	After-sales service	Functional	23
All, new, flash	Tendencies	Relational Social	50
LUXURY TRAVEL			
All, but, room, construction, service, rooms, staff, reservation, towels, problem, online, package, mobile, business, offers, website	After-sales service	Functional	311
From, about, where, what, some, information, interested, details, contact, help	Source (information)	Functional	206
LUXURY ART OBJECTS			
About, looking, around, from, Miami	Information and distribution places	Functional	86

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