

Charting and Shaping the Modern Consumer

The Rise of Customer Research in the Dutch Department Store

*De Bijenkorf, 1930-1960*¹

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JAN HEIN FURNÉE

In the decades before and after World War II, major European department stores were increasingly eager to know and understand their customers. This article analyses how the Dutch department store *De Bijenkorf*, in dialogue with leading European partners, developed a wide range of research techniques to chart the social composition and buying behavior of its customers in order to enhance the company's efficiency in procurement, advertising, spatial organization and sales. The customer research of *De Bijenkorf* helped to legitimize new business policies such as up- and downtrading and impulse buying, but also reflected and established new ideas and images of modern urban consumers as statistical categories behaving in astonishing regular ways.

De moderne consument in kaart gebracht. De opkomst van klantenonderzoek in warenhuis De Bijenkorf, 1930-1960

In de decennia rond de Tweede Wereldoorlog werden grote Europese warenhuizen steeds nieuwsgieriger naar hun klanten. Dit artikel onderzoekt hoe het warenhuis *De Bijenkorf*, in samenspraak met vooraanstaande Europese partners, allerlei nieuwe onderzoekstechnieken ontwikkelde om de sociale samenstelling en koopgedrag van hun klanten in kaart te brengen, teneinde efficiency in inkoop, reclame, ruimtelijke organisatie en verkoop te bevorderen. Het klantenonderzoek van *De Bijenkorf* droeg bij aan nieuw bedrijfsbeleid ten aanzien van bijvoorbeeld up- en downtrading en impulse buying. Het gaf echter ook uitdrukking en vorm aan nieuwe visies op stedelijke consumenten als statistische categorieën die zich op verbazingwekkend regelmatige manieren gedroegen.

Introduction

‘Consumption is our common goal and pursuit!’ Dr. G. van der Wal, *De Bijenkorf’s* CEO, let himself go completely as he unfolded his vision on modern consumers in academic and business circles across the country during 1956 and 1957.² In his lecture ‘*Buyology*, or the art of buying’ he familiarized his audience with a new trend in the operation of large department stores: systematic research on the buying behavior of modern consumers, ranging from the analysis of cash registers, customer tracking studies, automatic counting systems to interviews, surveys, and photographic motion analysis. ‘Buyology’, the economist Van der Wal explained, focused on charting the size, composition, timing, routing, and purchases of various customer groups, and aimed to enhance a store’s efficiency in procurement, advertising, spatial organization, and sales.

Systematic research on consumers was nothing new in the 1950s. As recent studies on the history of marketing and advertising have amply demonstrated, advertising agencies such as J. Walter Thompson, major industrial companies such as Unilever, and marketing consultants had already, well before World War II, successfully developed a wide range of techniques to analyze the social composition of customers, their product preferences, and, increasingly, their subconscious concerns. Eagerly exchanging methods, categories, and ideas, experts from the US and various European countries not just learned to chart modern consumers, but also helped to shape them.³ Surprisingly, however, the historiography of marketing has until now almost exclusively focused on research by and for large industrial companies and advertising agencies and ignored similar research conducted by large department stores, indisputably major drivers of twentieth-century consumption patterns. We know that from the mid-nineteenth century department stores organized their staff, procurement,

1 I would like to thank the external reviewers for their thoughtful comments on the earlier version of this article, and Joost Jonker for his careful and generous editing work.

2 SAA, Archive Koninklijke Bijenkorf Beheer n.v. [hereafter: KBV], inv.no. 1463, ‘Buyology of de kunst van het kopen’. Lecture dr. G. van der Wal for the Amsterdam University Association, 16 March 1956. Van der Wal presented the same lecture for instance at the International Advertisement Conference in Scheveningen. *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 12 September 1957. All source translations are mine.

3 R. Fitzgerald, ‘Marketing and distribution’, in: G. Jones and J. Zeitlin (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Business History* (Oxford 2009) 396-419; H. Berghoff, P. Scranton and U. Spiekermann, ‘The Origins of Marketing and Market Research: Information, Institutions and Markets’, in: idem (eds.), *The Rise of Marketing and Market Research* (Basingstoke 2012) 1-26; S. Schwarzkopf and R. Gries (eds.), *Ernest Dichter and Motivation Research. New Perspectives on the Making of Postwar Consumer Culture* (Basingstoke 2010); V. de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire. America’s Advance Through 20th-Century Europe* (London 2005).

and sales in a rationalized and increasingly systematic way, including the monitoring of sales data to feed procurement and advertising.⁴ Recent studies have also highlighted early initiatives of American department stores to exploit credit account books to understand buying behavior, leading to the development of ideas about targeted segment marketing during the 1930s.⁵ However, the kind of customer studies which Van der Wal signalled has been curiously ignored.

If we want to better understand the rise of modern consumer society in the twentieth century and the making of the modern consumer in particular, we need to know more about customer research conducted by department stores.⁶ This topic also offers us the opportunity to link the historiography of marketing with the more established historiography of department stores, as well as with the older scholarship on scientific management and efficiency.⁷ Starting in the 1930s and reaching surprising levels of sophistication in the first years after World War II, customer research in department stores sprang from an international consensus that these enterprises, like industrial companies, should invest in systematic research to enhance business efficiency. However, systematic customer studies also sprouted from and contributed to a broader and equally international trend recently termed the ‘scientization of the social’: the rise of sociological and psychological concepts, categories, methods, and insights reaching out from consumption to politics, religion, and social care.⁸ What makes these customer research studies especially interesting from the perspective of cultural history is how they not just charted the composition and behavior of modern consumers, but also built

- 4 M. Miller, *Au bon marche. Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 1869-1920* (Princeton 1981); S. Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures. Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940* (Champaign 1987), especially 54-58 and 113-114; G. Reekie, *Temptations. Sex, Selling and the Department Store* (St Leonards 1993), chapter 3 ‘scientific selling’; B. Lancaster, *The Department Store. A Social History* (Leicester 1995) 116-118; G. Crossick and S. Jaumain (eds.), *Cathedrals of Consumption. The European Department Store, 1850-1939* (Aldershot 1999).
- 5 J. Lauer, ‘Making the Ledgers Talk. Customer Control and the Origins of Retail Data Mining’, in: Berghoff et al., (eds.), *The Rise of Marketing*, 153-169. I. Jeacle, ‘Emporium of Glamour and Sanctum of Scientific Management. The Early Twentieth Century Department Store’, *Management Decision* 42 (2012) 1162-1177.
- 6 For a brilliant synthesis of the wide field of consumption history in general, including an extensive bibliography, see Frank Trentman, *Empire of Things. How we became a World of Consumers from the Fifteenth Century to the Twenty-First* (London 2016).
- 7 D. Nelson, *Frederick W. Taylor and the Rise of Scientific Management* (Madison 1980); Judith Merkle, *Management and Ideology. The International Scientific Management Movement* (Berkeley 1980).
- 8 K. Brückweh, R.F. Wetzell, D. Schumann et al., (eds.), *Engineering Society. The Role of the Human and Social Sciences in Modern Societies, 1880-1930* (Basingstoke 2012).



De Bijenkorf on Damrak, Amsterdam, circa 1950.

Amsterdam City Archives (copyright AD Nieuwsmedia)

upon images of modern consumers and impacted on those. Even though department store managers knew their customers much better from personal encounters, often daily ones, than advertisers, large industrial entrepreneurs or indeed politicians did, the new systematic studies still offered them increasingly complex and surprising insights in their customer base. How did managers respond to these studies? What impact did the studies have both on their business policies and on their images of the modern consumer at large?

De Bijenkorf's customer studies offer an ideal case study to explore these issues in detail. Founded in 1870 as a small haberdashery shop in a major shopping street in Amsterdam, *De Bijenkorf* (the Beehive) evolved into the leading Dutch department store chain during the first half of the twentieth century, with monumental stores in Amsterdam (Damrak, 1914), The Hague (Grote Markt, 1926) and Rotterdam (Coolsingel, 1930). During the 1920s, notably the Amsterdam branch had increasingly targeted a well-to-do public, reaching an annual turnover of 10.6 million guilders in 1930.⁹ More than rival Dutch department stores such as *Vroom & Dreesmann* or other major chain stores such as *C&A* and *Gerzon*¹⁰, *De Bijenkorf* actively committed itself to an international exchange of management expertise and scientific management in particular.¹¹ It was the only Dutch member of the International Association of European Department Stores (see below), thereby profiting from an exclusive exchange of expertise, while from 1934 onwards the company's managers and head buyers undertook regular study trips to foreign department stores, especially in the United States.¹² The vast and scarcely studied business archive, deposited in the Amsterdam City Archive and counting 2,200 inventory numbers, includes

9 For the history of *De Bijenkorf* see R. Miellet, *Honderd jaar grootwinkelbedrijf in Nederland* (Zwolle 1993) 98-125. Ileen Montijn, 't *Const.* 125 jaar *De Bijenkorf* (Amsterdam 1995). SAA, KBB, inv. no. 1141, Balansrekening 1930.

10 Miellet, *Honderd jaar grootwinkelbedrijf*. P. Hondelink, *Vroom & Dreesmann: De opkomst en ondergang van het warenhuis (1887-2016)* (Hilversum 2016).

11 Miellet, *Honderd jaar grootwinkelbedrijf*, 106 mentions the introduction of *scientific management* in *De Bijenkorf* shortly. Despite a few exceptions, the historiography of Dutch retailing and consumer culture is still in its infancy. See the overview of literature in the introduction to this special issue. For the history of retailing in

Amsterdam see C. Lesger, *Het winkellandschap van Amsterdam. Stedelijke structuur en winkelbedrijf in de vroegmoderne en moderne tijd, 1550-2000* (Hilversum 2013). For the history of twentieth-century advertising and market research see: W. Schreurs, *Geschiedenis van de reclame in Nederland* (Den Haag 1989); Jaap van Ginneken, *De uitvinding van het publiek. De opkomst van het markt- en opinieonderzoek in Nederland* (Amsterdam 1993).

For the dissemination of scientific management and the efficiency ideal in The Netherlands in general, see Cita Hartveld, *Moderne zakelijkheid. Efficiency in wonen en werken in Nederland, 1918-1940* (Amsterdam 1994).

12 SAA, KBB, inv.no's 336-358.

a complete collection of customer research studies.¹³ Focusing on the Amsterdam branch of *De Bijenkorf* in particular from the 1930s to the late 1950s¹⁴, this article will analyze from the sources how the management and the employees of the Research Bureau tried to understand and influence the shifting buying behavior of prewar and postwar consumers: which research methods they used, what their main focus and findings were, and how these impacted upon their policies and their general perception of the modern consumer. As we will see, *De Bijenkorf* initiated customer research based on sale registers in the prewar period, but exchanged this type of desk research for empirical observation inside the store in the postwar years, with a quickly expanding range of techniques and a systematic accumulation of research questions. In this process the researchers reconfigured modern consumers from an amorphous mass of individuals or intuitive and stereotyped social categories into statistical units, which appeared to behave in astonishing regular ways. During the 1950s the research results caught CEO Van der Wal by surprise and they fascinated him, but they also raised puzzlement and occasionally concern.

‘As soon as getting this chart...’ The initial customer research projects, 1932-1946

In recent years, the idea has increasingly surfaced that for the development of a company and for taking the right decisions about company policy it is valuable to examine the potential market (e.g. purchasing power, spending of income, buying habits, social composition of the population etc.).¹⁵

In 1930 *De Bijenkorf* joined the prestigious International Association of Department Stores (IADS), a select club of prominent European department stores such as Harrods, Printemps, Tietz and L’Innovation. This branch organization, established in 1928 and modelled on the Retail Research

13 SAA, KBB, inv.no’s 1442-1477. For the great potential of this archive see also Anna Foulidis, *Een stap voor. Hoe de Bijenkorf de Nederlandse consument (weer) leerde consumeren* (BA-thesis University of Amsterdam, 2013), based on semi-annual corporate guidelines; Jeroen Melsen, *Meer dan verkopen. Het aansturen van het verkoop personeel in de Bijenkorf, 1930-1950* (BA-thesis University of Amsterdam 2014), based on personel instructions; Marleen van Stokkum, ‘Amerikaans consumeren. De succesvolle Amerika-maand van de Bijenkorf, 1955’, *Geschiedenis Magazine* 48 (2013) 27-30. Both

theses and the article resulted from two courses on consumption history that I taught at the University of Amsterdam in 2013 and 2014. The customer research of *De Bijenkorf* was not part of the students’ research projects.

14 In 1959, *De Bijenkorf* took the first initiatives with store image and motivational research, opening a new era of research which is another story. SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1472, Notitie inzake de voorbereiding van een motievenonderzoek (1959).

15 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1446, ‘De klanten van het filiaal Amsterdam, hun woonplaats en inkomen’ (1937) 1.

Association set up in the US the year before, explicitly aimed to introduce the principles of scientific management, well developed in manufacturing, to department stores. With the fascinating figure of Hrant Pasdermadjian as its tireless secretary, the IADS organized regular meetings, annual ‘critical store visits’, and policy memos to promote the exchange of knowledge about topics such as merchandising, store management, sales promotion, selling, accounting, and staff management.¹⁶ Following the IADS’s requirement that members do dedicated research, *De Bijenkorf* established its own Research Bureau in 1932.¹⁷

During the 1930s the IADS still considered systematic customer research as a low priority.¹⁸ Nevertheless, ‘repeated discussions’ had already signalled that modern market research techniques mostly served manufacturing industries rather than retailing.¹⁹ Members agreed that research on customers mix and behavior would likely become a major and perhaps even essential asset for department store policy. But how to go about it? In February 1932 the Amsterdam store of *De Bijenkorf* performed its first, somewhat elementary, customer count to support its analysis of turnover statistics, common practice for department stores everywhere since the mid-nineteenth century.²⁰ On a cold Wednesday and on a bright Saturday employees posted at all four entrances tallied the number of incoming people per hour and counted a total of 37,251 men, women, and children.²¹ Three years later the Danish *Magasin du Nord* reported to the association about its surveys conducted on a selection of customers, while the London department store Harrods explained how it distilled information from the traditional monthly customer accounts.²² With the Dutch economy in a bad slump during the mid-1930s and turnover at the Amsterdam showing a serious

16 H. Pasdermadjian, *Management Research in Retailing. The International Association of Department Stores* (London 1950); SAA, KBB, inv. no. 2694, D. Knee, *The international association of department stores. An informal history* (typescript 1978); A Modern History of the IADS, originally founded as the Management Research Group of Department Stores, is not yet available. The organization is discussed briefly as an example of Americanization in De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire*, 149. L. Badel, *Un milieu libéral et européen. Le grand commerce français, 1925-1948* (Paris 1998) 211, 222, 408-413 points to the important role of the IADS in the organizational and mental preparation of European economic and political unification. See also: <http://www.iads.org/> (8 August 2016).

17 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 266, Algemene richtlijnen voor het organisatiebureau (1932).

18 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 295-304, Reports on the meetings of 1929-1937.

19 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1446, ‘De klanten van het filiaal Amsterdam’, 1.

20 Miller, *Au bon marché*, 66, 70.

21 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1444, ‘Staten van aantallen bezoekers in filiaal Amsterdam per uur op 6 en 10 februari per ingang’ (1932).

22 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1446, ‘De klanten van het filiaal Amsterdam’, 1. See also *ibid.*, inv.no. 301, ‘Verslag van de 21^e meeting van de International Association of Department Stores, Parijs’ (1935).

drop, *De Bijenkorf's* Research Bureau seized upon these examples for its first extensive customer research study, presented in 1937.²³

Its report 'The Amsterdam branch customers, their residence and income' focused on customers' social class and their buying power so as to help managers decide the wider policy issue of which income groups ought to be *De Bijenkorf's* prime target.²⁴ Five researchers had analyzed three months' worth of lists with parcels posted to customers and paid upon delivery, resulting in more than 100,000 transactions with information on the customer's address, the article bought, and the price paid. Using the district classification of the municipal Bureau of Statistics and official information about the number of tax payers and average tax bills per neighborhood, the research team clustered the delivery addresses into eight districts and 37 neighborhoods, each labeled with a distinct class category.²⁵ The study concluded that 57 percent of delivery turnover and an estimated 61 percent of total revenues was drawn from Amsterdam itself, of which more than half from the well-to-do southern area. The surrounding region counted for 32 and 29 percent respectively, of which more than two-thirds went to the Gooi and Haarlem, and the rest of the country for 11 and 10 percent.²⁶ A complex calculation pointed out that people with annual incomes below 3,000 guilders, that is to say, 90.7 percent of Amsterdam taxpayers, accounted for only 6 percent of *De Bijenkorf's* sales. By contrast, the middle income group of 3,000-6,500 guilders, 6.9 percent of taxpayers, yielded 67 percent of sales and the highest income group with more than 6,500 guilders, 2.4 percent of taxpayers, 27 percent.²⁷

With this report, a first in the company's history, *De Bijenkorf* managers gained a firm, systematic touchstone with which to test their personal, intuitive views of their customer base. Although the results broadly corresponded with their own experience and expectations, some of the outcomes encouraged them to reconsider company policy: but it remained unclear which direction to take. The report strongly suggested that the most affluent bought 'only the cheaper things here': in the top four tax neighborhoods average cash receipts were *lower* than in the four bottom ones, customers there bought proportionally fewer carpets, men's fashion, frocks, girls' and children's clothing, baby items and table goods, and customers with the highest incomes contributed on average almost the same sum to

23 J.L. van Zanden, *The Economic History of the Netherlands in the 20th Century* (London 1997) 109-118 [NL versie 151-163]; Miellet, *Honderd jaar grootwinkelbedrijf*, 105-106. The yearly turnover of the Amsterdam branche decreased from 10.8 million guilders in 1929 to 8 million in 1936, rising back to 9.7 million in 1940. SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1141, Balansrekeningen 1930-1940.

24 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1446, 'De klanten van het filiaal Amsterdam'.

25 *Ibid.*, 2-4.

26 *Ibid.*, 4. Estimated total revenue was based on departments with more than 40 percent COD customers.

27 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1446, 'De klanten van het filiaal Amsterdam', 12.

company revenues as the middle income group. The authors fretted therefore that ‘apparently we do not stock items suited to more affluent customers or we fail to put enough spotlights on them; perhaps we do not meet the taste of this public’; so they thought it wise to align the product range more with the taste of what was called ‘the better public’ (‘het betere publiek’).²⁸ However, the authors also considered the opposite strategy. Because 94 percent of all sales were generated by only 9 percent of taxpayers, *De Bijenkorf* might also try to radically broaden its customer base and make its product range suit the taste and purse of lower incomes. This could be a risky enterprise, though, given the ‘fear that then the more affluent customers, who have now so much more significance for us, would stay away’. Setting up a US-inspired ‘bargain basement’ was presented as a lucrative alternative: this would easily expand the customer base and probably increase ‘the level of the main store somewhat’.²⁹

De Bijenkorf did two more, smaller customer research projects in 1938 and 1939, but the outbreak of World War II prevented the company from applying their results to policy.³⁰ The war had a tremendous, dreadful impact on *De Bijenkorf*. On 14 May 1940, the massive German bombing that ruined most of the city centre largely destroyed its Rotterdam branch. In October 1940, the two Jewish managers Alfred Goudsmit and Frits Isaac were forced to resign following the German occupier’s aryanization policies and in February 1941 the company was placed under German supervision or *Verwaltung*. Then, about 1,000 Jewish employees out of the approximately 3,000 employees in the three branches were fired, of whom 767 did not return after the war; most of them had been killed.³¹ The Amsterdam branch continued operations throughout the war, even with strong financial results, but in the spring of 1945 the store was close to being abandoned. The stock had almost entirely disappeared, many departments were reduced in size and lacked heating, any remaining products were sold on rationing vouchers. The book department alone still did good business.³²

28 Ibid., 11.

29 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1446, ‘De klanten van het filiaal Amsterdam’, 12. Goudsmit had explained this American concept in the IADS after his study trip to the United States. SAA, KBB, inv.no. 301, ‘Verslag van de 21^e meeting van de International Association of Department Stores, Parijs’ (1935).

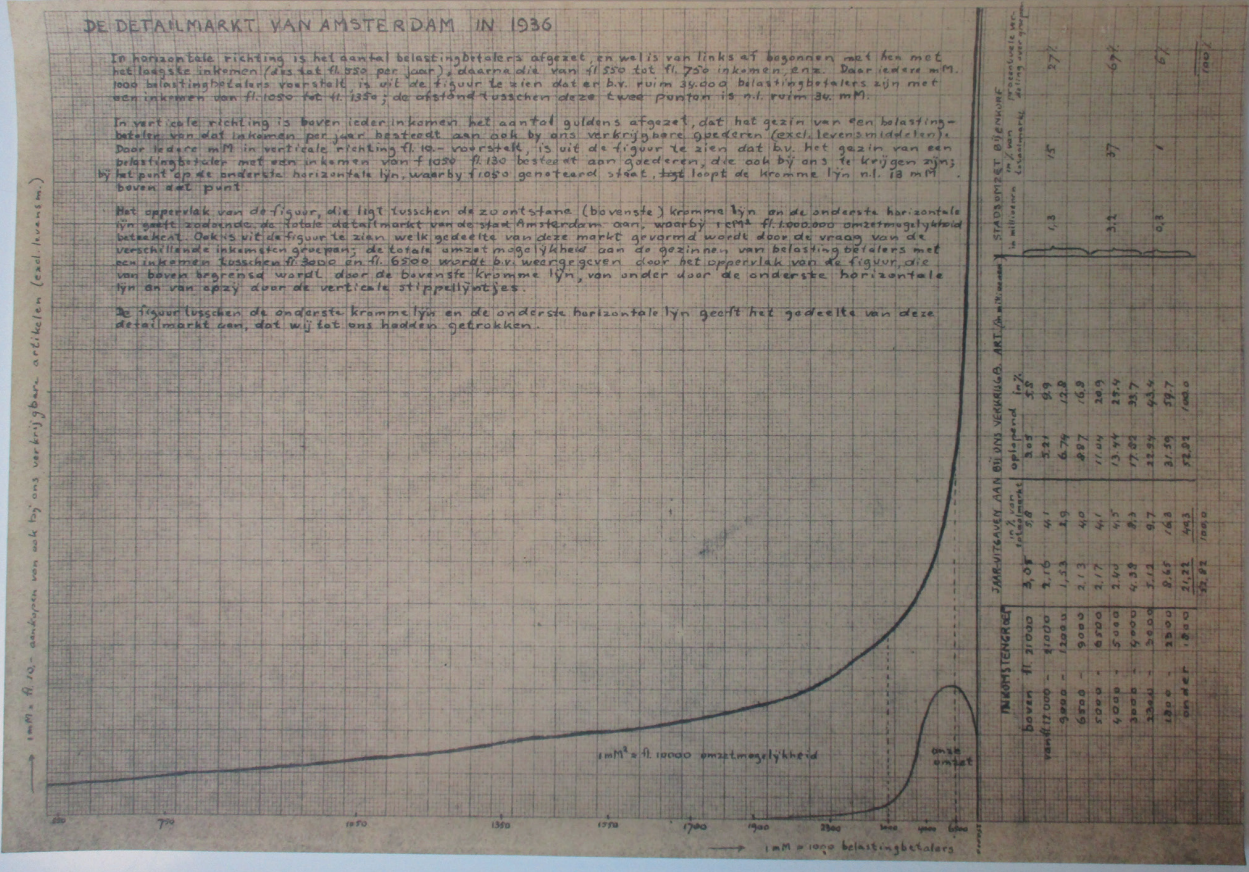
30 In September 1939 the Research Bureau conducted a closer analysis of the average spending per tax class for all product types. SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1449, ‘De klanten van het filiaal Amsterdam, hun woonplaats en inkomen, en

de plaats van het filiaal in de detailmarkt’ (1939).

This research was preceded by *ibid.*, inv.no. 1448, ‘Staat van het aantal klanten per m per verkoopafdeling’ (1938).

31 Miellet, *Honderd jaar grootwinkelbedrijf*, 106-107; Montijn, ‘t *Gonst*, 71-82.

32 Montijn, ‘t *Gonst*, 78-80. In 1943 the Amsterdam branch had a record turnover of 11 million guilders, falling to 7.2 and 5.2 million guilders in 1944 and 1945 respectively: SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1141 en 1142, Balansrekeningen 1940-1945.



▲
 Graphic representation of the retail market of Amsterdam in 1936.
 Amsterdam City Archives.

Following the Liberation in May 1945, *De Bijenkorf* management, once again with Goudsmit and Isaac, immediately launched a range of initiatives drawing on the now valuable insights from the prewar studies. Early in 1946, the Research Bureau presented a study entitled ‘On which public do we want to focus in the future?’³³ It concluded that an answer had become both more difficult and more relevant than before the war, because *De Bijenkorf*’s market position had changed considerably. First, during the war and since ‘a much lower public’ had been accustomed to buy in the store: ‘Although we don’t have any figures available, a single visit to the sales area is sufficient to ascertain this fact’. Second, the authors noted ‘considerable uncertainty’ about the different income groups’ purchasing power evolution. Although they expected that the ‘better situated’ customers would continue eating into their income during the coming five years, in the end their purchasing power would definitely decrease sharply. However, the closure or uncertain future of several formerly leading fashion stores, some of them Jewish ones, such as *Hirsch*, *Maison de Vries*, and *Gerzon* created opportunities to permanently win their well-to-do customers. The Research Bureau concluded that the future target public should be reconsidered fundamentally and asserted that ‘we should not rule out a radical change from our pre-war policy’.³⁴

To support this fundamental discussion, the Research Bureau showed data from prewar research in a graph, another company first, admitting that ‘initially the reader may have some trouble to work’ with this new way of presenting information (see p. 48). With two lines tracing levels of purchasing power and spending along various income groups, the graph offered a visual argument that both high and low income groups spent a remarkably high proportion of their disposable income on assorted articles present in *De Bijenkorf*’s product range, but actually bought from rival stores. ‘As soon as getting this chart’, the authors claimed, graphs like this would become very useful to assess the question of store target level.³⁵

With its graphical representation of the room between disposable income and expenses, the chart showed more clearly than the pre-war reports’ numbers and tables how *De Bijenkorf* could profit from targeting higher income groups with a product range tailored to them. However, the authors acknowledged that lifting the range posed evident risks. Attracting affluent customers required heavy investment, raising the service level to that common in chique fashion houses like *Hirsch*, and accepting the cost and risk associated with the usually lower turnover rate of more expensive goods. The graph was also be used to present an opposite strategy, a radical turn to the lower income groups, which appeared even riskier. First, the authors

33 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1452, ‘Tot welk publiek willen wij ons in de toekomst wenden?’ (March 1946) 1. Cf. the report Goudsmit wrote in New York in 1940 on company policy following the Liberation: SAA,

KBB, inv.no. 251, ‘Rapport inzake de doelstellingen en richtlijnen voor *De Bijenkorf* voor 1940’.

34 Ibid., 1. See also 8-9.

35 Ibid., 2.

reminded managers that it was ‘an open question whether the better-situated customers would still feel at home’, because they would probably ‘feel uneasy amongst the very mixed crowd in the store, in the presence of goods of a much lower level than they are used to buying’.³⁶ A strong expansion of the customer base would also cause store capacity bottlenecks. Shoppers would probably not appreciate ordinary days becoming the ‘unpleasant bustle’ of ‘pushing and punching, and squeezing up and down the staircases’ which they now suffered only during the peak Saint Nicholas season. *De Bijenkorf’s* professional buyers would have difficulty in meeting popular taste: after all, they were much more familiar with the needs of better-off customers to which they largely belonged themselves. In contrast to the prewar report, the report’s authors strongly opposed a bargain basement, though not because they feared deterring wealthy customers. Showing a curious sense of responsibility towards the spending and the taste of the lower income groups during the immediate postwar years, they argued that a bargain basement would stimulate more ‘speculating on the foolishness and bad instincts of the lower class than meeting the needs of this popular class [‘volksgroep’] in a solid and responsible way’.³⁷ Summing up, the Research Bureau advised managers to continue targeting customers with prewar annual incomes of 3,000 to 10,000 guilders as the department store’s ‘backbone’ and to put the limit not lower than the 2,500-3,000 guilders group: ‘We can firmly rule out the actual working population and even the group that follows immediately behind as our future customers.’³⁸

The postwar research studies: customers as classes, sexes and generations

In the fifteen years following World War II *De Bijenkorf* managers regularly adapted its company policy to the country’s extraordinary, fast-changing social and economic conditions. They closely watched government policies on rationing, wage restraint, social care such as child support, and taxes, tracked fluctuations in average income, thrift, and spending habits of various classes, observed what competing stores did, and weighed the impact of major, unexpected events such as the Korean War and the disastrous North Sea Flood of 1953. Every six months, managers drafted guidelines for all heads of department, issuing specific directives about purchasing, advertising, window displays, and serving customers.³⁹ The immediate post-war period saw the company profiting from an ‘unlimited demand’ in what managers described

36 Ibid., 6.

37 Ibid., 3.

38 Ibid., 9.

39 SAA, KBB, inv.nos. 248 en 249, ‘Richtlijnen voor de bedrijfspolitiek van de directie voor de chefs’

(1945-1960). Foulidis, *Een stap voor*, passim. For the socio-economic context in The Netherlands see Kees Schuyt and Ed Taverne, 1950 – *Prosperity in Black and White*. Dutch Culture in a European Perspective 4 (Basingstoke 2004) chapters 1 and 10.

with the English term as a ‘seller’s market’, in which *De Bijenkorf* could sell all stock goods without advertising or even proper service. As early as 1948 pent-up demand had been largely satisfied, however, forcing managers to develop new ways of catering to a new ‘buyer’s market’.⁴⁰ Responding to the expected leveling of incomes, managers decided in 1951 to focus *De Bijenkorf* increasingly on ‘the more affluent groups in the civil service, administrative staff, and working class, which in terms of taste are attracted to the style of *De Bijenkorf*’, but ‘without losing the current clientele’.⁴¹ From 1954 a rapidly rising prosperity boosted turnover, stimulating the company to restyle itself as a *Magasin de nouveautés*, a deliberate policy of ‘upgrading’ with trendsetting products, avant-garde shop windows and special promotions like the 1955 America Week.⁴²

This constant adjustment raised the importance and profile of customer research. Between 1946 and 1958 the Research Bureau expanded from four to seven staff members and conducted six studies for the Amsterdam branch alone.⁴³ Stimulated by the continuous exchange of best practices within the IADS,⁴⁴ researchers quickly developed ever more sophisticated methods and techniques to monitor the size, composition, and buying behavior of the customers – exchanging the prewar desk research for empirical observation inside the store and accumulating their new research questions, methods and findings in a self-conscious and systematic way.⁴⁵ During 1946/47, the Bureau for the first time did a customer tracking study (‘klantenachtervolgingsonderzoek’). On random days and at random hours over a period of nine months research assistants followed a total of 433 visitors through the store, noting their class, gender, age, accompanying persons, and

40 Foulidis, *Een stap voor*, 13-17. In the US, the concepts seller’s and buyer’s market were already in use in the middle of the nineteenth century.

41 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 248, ‘Richtlijnen’ (1951 II) 1; Foulidis, *Een stap voor*, 31. Many British stores opted for a similar change: Jon Stobart, *Spend, spend, spend. A History of Shopping* (Stroud 2008) 198-201.

42 Miellet, *Honderd jaar grootwinkelbedrijf*, 108-109; Montijn, ‘t *Const*, 50-51, 137-138, 170-171; Foulidis, *Een stap voor*, 48-53. Stokkum, ‘Amerikaans consumeren’. Between 1946 and 1960 the Amsterdam branch’s annual turnover increased from 14.1 million guilders to 43.4 million. SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1142-1144, Balansrekeningen 1946-1960.

43 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 268, Organisatieschema’s van het concern, 1946-1959. In 1947 dr. F Menalda, later to

become manager, acted as head of research, and in 1955 drs. L. van Kranendonk, also later manager.

44 This continuing exchange of information in the postwar years speaks most clearly from the extensive internal overview of IADS documents. SAA, KBB, inv.no. 305, Inhoudsopgave van documenten van de IADS (1928-1969). For example: Market and Customer Research for Department Stores (dec. 1946); List of research jobs undertaken by the Research Department of members (1946, 1947, 1948); Market and Customer Research at the Innovation (1950); The Customer Opinion Investigation for Magazine du Nord by Gallup Institute (1950).

45 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1465, Overzicht van klantenonderzoeken 1932-1956.

purchases.⁴⁶ In 1948 a large follow-up study had staff track as many as 10,555 buyers through the store and also interview them personally.⁴⁷ Ten years later the Research Bureau expanded its methodological repertoire with its first extensive survey ('enquête') of 760 customers.⁴⁸

Postwar customer research studies, like the prewar ones, primarily focused on the customer mix as categorized by social class and matching purchase behavior. Methodologically, this was not an easy task. Asking customers for their income level was considered not done, rendering it impossible to objectively determine a visitor's social class. Research assistants mostly guessed customers' social class using aspects of outward appearance, which remained unspecified but probably included an appreciation of clothing, physical care, and behavior. One of the first studies acknowledged that there were 'no specific criteria' and all assistants had 'more or less divergent views [...] on the question in which class one should classify a particular customer'.⁴⁹ Asking customers for their residential address as a proxy for social class was considered as a solution, but rejected in the expectation that customers would object.⁵⁰ Only in 1958 did researchers dare to add questions about home address and occupation, bluntly determining the social class of housewives from the occupation of their husband or father.⁵¹

The customer research studies provided *De Bijenkorf* managers with clearly categorized yet complex and shifting representations of the socio-economic mix and buying behavior of its customers. In 1946 research confirmed the intuitive observation that a substantial proportion of visitors consisted of a 'much lower public' than before the war: no fewer than one third of the visitors were classified as belonging to the 'popular class' ('volksklasse').⁵² In 1958, however, the share of the 'popular class' appeared to have dropped considerably, because *De Bijenkorf* was again overwhelmingly visited by the 'middle class' ('middenstand') and the 'wealthy' ('welgestelden'), a category also referred to as 'the wealth' ('de welstand').⁵³ This was not the

46 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1477, 'Het resultaat van een onderzoek naar onze klanten en hun gedragingen in de zaak' (November 1947).

47 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1453, 'Waarnemingen en ondervraging van de kopers in onze verschillende afdelingen' (April 1949).

48 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1468, 'Klantenenquête Bijenkorf (1958). For the remaining three reports see: SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1455, 'Nader onderzoek naar de welstandsklasse van de bezoekers van het filiaal Amsterdam' (March 1948); *Ibid.*, inv.no. 1457, 'Uitkomsten van het onderzoek naar het aantal bezoekers van het filiaal Amsterdam met behulp

van de automatische telapparatuur' (January 1950); *Ibid.*, inv.no. 1458, 'Klantenachtervolgingen' (May 1952). The introduction of automatic counting equipment will be subject of the next section.

49 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1453, 'Waarnemingen en ondervraging', 3.

50 *Ibidem*, 4.

51 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1468, 'Klanten-enquete', 1.

52 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1477, 'Het resultaat van een onderzoek', 2.

53 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1468, 'Klanten-enquete', 3.

Table 1. Social class of visitors and buyers of *De Bijenkorf* (Amsterdam branch), 1946-1958, in percentages.

	1946/47 (visitors)	1948 (visitors)	1948 (buyers)	1948 (turnover)	1952 (buyers)	1958 (visitors)	1958 (buyers)
'Popular class' (‘volksklasse’)	34	33	10.0	6.6	18	19	16
'Middle Class' (‘Middenstand’)	42	45	73.6	71.8	70	63	61
'Wealthy' / 'Wealth' (‘welgestelden’, 'welstand’)	24	22	16.4	22.6	12	18	23
N =	433	?	10 555	10 555	136	760	760

Sources: see note 46, 47 and 48.

Table 2. Occupational classes of visitors and buyers of *De Bijenkorf* (Amsterdam branch), 1958 (N = 760).

	visitors in 1958 (%)	buyers in 1958 (%)	Netherlands 1958 (%)	Average income CBS 1953 (guilders)
Workers (‘arbeiders’)	6.5	7.5	49	3,300
Other employees	27.5	26	11	4,700
Administrative staff, independent entrepreneurs, civil servants, primary teachers	41.5	45.5	28.5	4,800
CEO’s, accountants, doctors, other professionals, secondary and higher education teachers	14.5	11	3	13,800
Retirees	10	10	8.5	

Source: see note 51.

whole story, however. Focusing on buyers rather than on visitors, an opposite trend emerged. In 1948, only 10 percent of the 10,555 buyers were classified as belonging to the 'popular class', while their share had risen to 18 percent in 1952 before slightly dropping to 16 percent in 1958.⁵⁴ In 1952 the Research Bureau also noted with some alarm that during the first two postwar years the 'customer level' had risen back towards its pre-war level, but noted 'a tendency to drop rather than increase' since then.⁵⁵

Additional research on visitors' occupations (or their husband's and father's) complicated the picture further. Without much ado the Research Bureau equated the professional class of 'administrative staff' with the 'middle class'⁵⁶, but the proportion of this occupational group in both visitors and buyers soon appeared to be substantially smaller than the proportion of the income class 'middle class' based on estimates. Similarly, the proportion of the occupational group 'workers' was much smaller than of the visitors classified as 'popular class'. This striking discrepancy went unnoticed by the researchers themselves and probably stemmed from their decision to put most customers with occupations classified as 'other employees' in the income class of the 'popular class', despite their having similar average incomes as the 'middle class'. Researchers inferred from it that 38 percent of the visitors enjoyed an average income of less than 4,000 guilders and identified a similar friction: 'It is striking that less than 38 percent of the visitors as classified by their appearance belongs to the popular class, even though the boundary between the popular and middle class is usually set at a (family) income of about 4,000 guilders'. Implicitly undermining their own method of categorization by external appearance, the researchers explained this friction by suggesting that *De Bijenkorf* attracted 'many customers with their own (non-family) income below 4,000 guilders, who will undoubtedly be classified ["getaxeerd"] in the middle'.⁵⁷ For *De Bijenkorf* the significance of subjective status groups in Dutch postwar society were ultimately as important as their classification in 'objective' class categories. In the case of class relations the scientization of the social reinforced rather than challenged traditional ways of representation and classification.

The income classifications of the Research Bureau were really status groups, but that did not prevent it from continuing to apply the problematic labels of 'popular class', 'middle class' and 'wealthy' and to investigate their buying behavior as based on perceived income more rigorously. In 1948, additional customer tracking studies empirically confirmed the personal experience of the sales staff that on Tuesdays *De Bijenkorf* attracted more 'wealthy' customers than on average and on Wednesdays more customers from the 'popular class'. On weekday mornings, the Research Bureau asserted,

54 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1453, 'Waarnemingen en ondervraging', 3. Ibid., inv.no. 1458, 'Klantenachtervolgingen', 3.

55 Ibid., inv.no. 1458, 'Klantenachtervolgingen', 3.

56 Ibid., 14.

57 Ibid., 13.

‘the accent is slightly stronger on the better public [‘het betere publiek’] and in the afternoon on the popular class’. During lunchtime, however, ‘the popular class was represented considerably stronger’: particularly on Mondays the public was ‘very popular’ during lunchtime, yet on Tuesdays ‘very chic’.⁵⁸

Researchers applied the same ‘income’ labels to explore preferences of various (status) groups for specific goods and departments. During 1946-1947, they found that the ‘popular class’ bought relatively more food and household supplies, while the ‘better situated’ spent relatively more on sports and leisure items and on gifts.⁵⁹ An extensive customer research study in 1948 calculated for the first time the three categories’ relative share in the turnover of all 53 departments, presenting another first, a bar chart to visualize the relation between variables. The chart showed at a glance that in all departments the ‘middle class’ shaded gray produced most of the turnover. However, visually the ‘wealthy’ dominated. All 53 departments had been neatly arranged according to their share in sales, from blankets, gift items and trimmings up to white goods, bedding and biscuits. This ordering relegated the contribution of ‘popular classes’ to turnover – from 28 percent for white goods to 0 percent for blankets, shoes and chocolate – to an irregular fringe at the chart’s bottom, emphasizing their perceived and almost desired marginal importance.⁶⁰

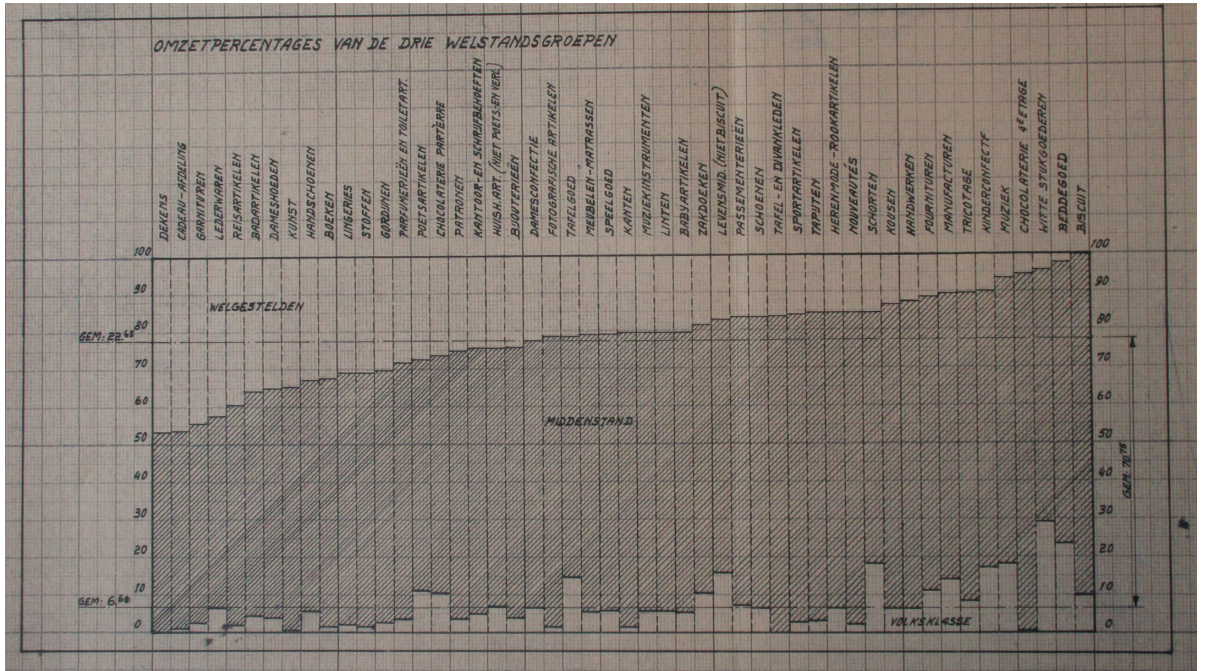
Next to investigating shopping and buying behavior along income or status lines, the postwar customer research increasingly focused on categories of gender and age. During 1946/1947 the first survey revealed that 79 percent of the visitors were women and 21 percent were men and in 1952 that gender ratio had changed only slightly to 76 and 24 percent respectively. These figures could hardly surprise: *De Bijenkorf* was clearly a women’s paradise. More interesting is that the researchers categorized 48 percent of visitors as ‘women walking alone’ (‘alleenlopende vrouwen’), 12 percent as ‘men walking alone’, 14 percent as ‘couples’ and 28 percent as ‘other groups’, such as mothers with daughters, friends, and colleagues. On average, couples tended to visit the store mostly in the late afternoon and most often made a purchase compared to the others. Men walking alone had a preference for the morning, stayed somewhat shorter than women walking alone and purchased relatively the least. Yet even though they represented only 13.4 percent of all buyers, they accounted for 14.3 percent of all sales. ‘Apparently the man is generous in spending money’, the researchers concluded with a strikingly naturalizing singular form.⁶¹ Just as with the three income categories, the Research Bureau used a bar chart to visualize the proportions in which all 53 departments

58 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1455, ‘Nader onderzoek naar de welstandsklasse’, 1-2.

59 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1477, ‘Het resultaat van een onderzoek’, 5.

60 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1453, ‘Waarnemingen en ondervraging’, annex II.

61 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1477, ‘Het resultaat van een onderzoek’, 1. Ibid., 1453, ‘Waarnemingen en ondervraging’, 2.



▲
 Turnover percentages of the three income classes in the Amsterdam branch of De Bijenkorf, 1948.
 Amsterdam City Archives.

depended on male and female purchases and presented the management with explicit lessons for the store's spatial layout:

A logical layout should conform as much as possible to the requirement that the departments which are important for men lay close to each other. Our entire third floor already meets this requirement to a certain extent. The second department is not bad in this regard. However, the men's wear and smoking articles on the ground floor are more or less isolated islands in the middle of 'female' departments. With the layout of the new store in Rotterdam we should make use of the facts that we have found.⁶²

At first sight the age groups distribution offered few surprises. Almost all age groups visited the warehouse in more or less the same numbers, even though clear divisions existed between 'juvenile' departments such as photography, books, and corsets against relatively the 'old' departments for hats, hosiery, socks, and trimmings.⁶³ However, in terms of their share in turnover the differences between age cohorts were much greater than expected on the basis of personal observation.⁶⁴ In 1948, the 35-44 age cohort appeared to be responsible for no less than 47.5 percent of total sales, with an average customer aged 40 buying three times more than 28 year old customers and nine times more than those of 65 years. The researchers considered this as a result 'one would hardly expect', despite the large catch-up demand just after the war.⁶⁵ Between 1946/1947 and 1958 customers' age mix changed profoundly. While the proportion of young visitors up to 27-29 years dropped from 27 to 15 percent, that of visitors between 38-47 and 40 to 49 years rose from 25 to 36 percent.⁶⁶ Given their greater purchasing power managers were probably pleased to receive those older visitors, but the trend also posed a risk: if young people found *De Bijenkorf* less attractive, they were likely to frequent it less later. Not surprisingly, managers decided in 1953 to target the so-called 'mademoiselle' and from 1959 embraced the target group of young baby boomers, who demographically and culturally began to put their stamp on society. Managers claimed it to be of paramount importance to carefully monitor 'the style, the use, and the consumption habits of this group' and to keep the product line in line with the 'teen-appeal'.⁶⁷

62 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1453, 'Waarnemingen en ondervraging', 2 and annex II.

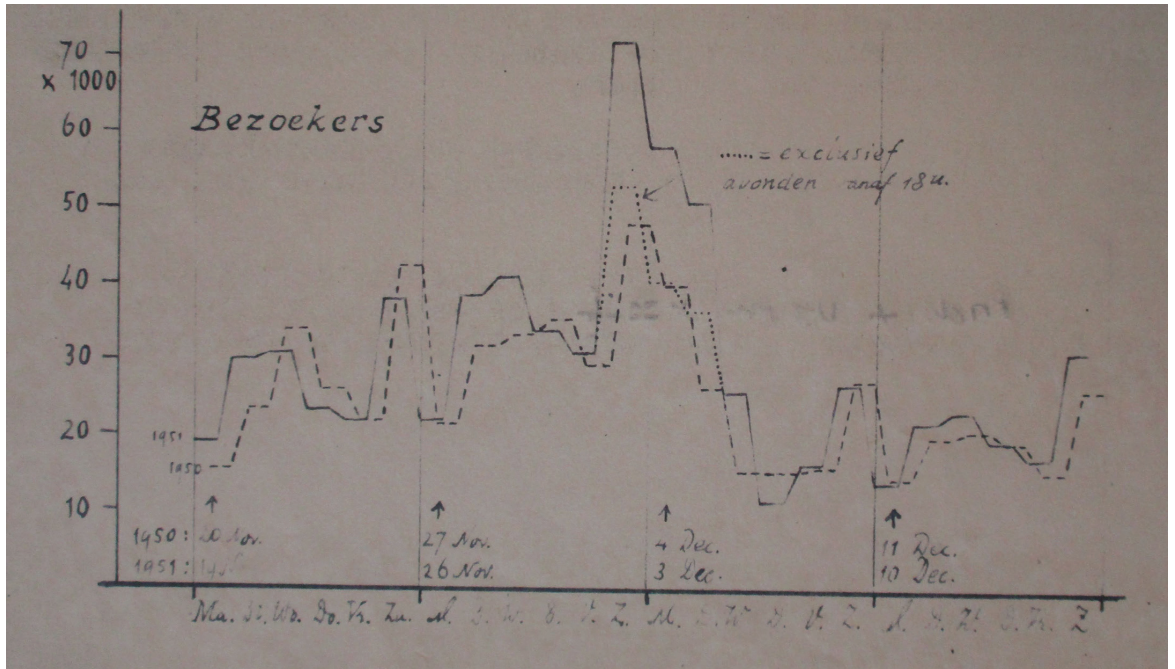
63 Ibid., 7-8. Measured by percentage of buyers under 28 years relative against percentages of buyers over 45 years.

64 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1477, 'Het resultaat van een onderzoek', 1.

65 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1453, 'Waarnemingen en ondervraging', 8.

66 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1477, 'Het resultaat van een onderzoek', 1; Ibid., inv.no. 1468, 'Klanten-enquete', 2.

67 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 248, 'Richtlijnen' (1960 I), 5 en 7, cited in Foulidis, *Een stap voor*, 79-80. See also Montijn, 't Gonst, 171.



Number of visitors per day in the weeks around Saint Nicholas: a comparison of 1950 and 1951.

Amsterdam City Archives.

The first immediate postwar customer research studies offered *De Bijenkorf* primarily a clear, 'objective' picture of the social mix and the buying behavior of its customers. However, the exact size, timing, and routing of visitor flows remained an open, and increasingly intriguing, question. At the IADS annual meetings member stores concluded that the dominant technique of counting door traffic showed a systematic error: on average incoming visitors counted outnumbered exiting people by 15 percent.⁶⁸ To solve this problem *De Bijenkorf* installed a brand-new 'automatic' customer counting system in 1949. All five revolving doors of the Amsterdam branch were provided with electronic contact points under the rubber mats connected to telephonic counters on the third floor. The automatic counting system monitored the number of incoming visitors for each hour of the day, how long they stayed on average, and how many visitors were present in the building at the same time. It could not distinguish between mothers with children or complete strangers sharing a single revolving compartment, though, and wear quickly caused disruptions.⁶⁹ The new, absolute, results were nevertheless fascinating and were eagerly applied to optimize business operations. Yet they also raised some fundamental philosophical questions about the modern consumer's free will.

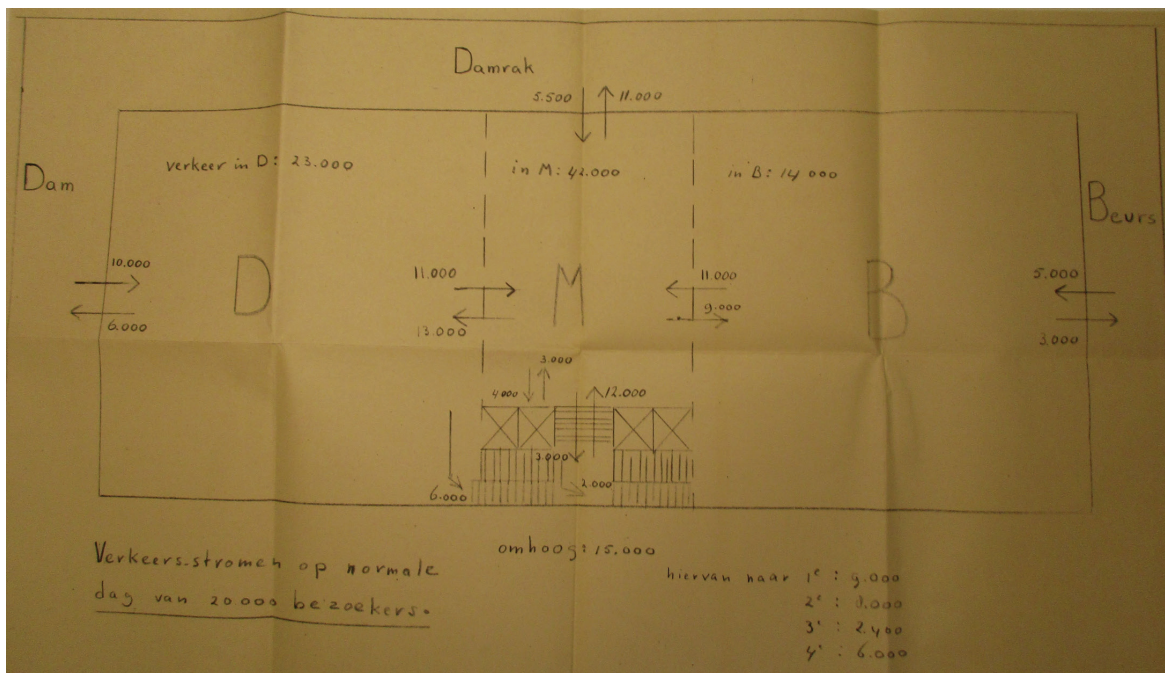
Early in 1950 *De Bijenkorf* managers received the first data on the number, timing, and routing of all visitors to the Amsterdam branch. It turned out that the store on average attracted about 120,000 visitors per week and 20,000 per day. During clearance sales and the arrival of spring and autumn fashion, weekly numbers could reach 150,000 and during the Saint Nicholas season even up to 210,000. Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Saturdays were confirmed as the busiest days, attracting 11-20 percent more visitors than the average, which tallied with the number of transactions and turnover on those days. The daily pattern was equally revealing. After a quiet start between 9 and 10 the store had three peak periods: around half past twelve, around one o'clock and at half past four.⁷⁰ A follow-up study, carried out during the Saint Nicholas season of 1951, offered the most intriguing results. With the aid of a graph, the Research Bureau showed that over two consecutive years the pattern of peaks and troughs in visitor numbers per day had been almost exactly the same. Moreover, exactly the same days appeared to have a high or low turnover per visitor, strongly correlated with almost identical patterns in the number of transactions per visitor and the peak of the

68 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1463, 'Buyology of de kunst van het kopen', 4.

het filiaal Amsterdam met behulp van de automatische telapparatuur' (1950), annex.

69 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1457, 'Uitkomsten van het onderzoek naar het aantal bezoekers van

70 Ibidem, 1-4.



Traffic in De Bijenkorf on normal days (1957).

Amsterdam City Archives.

average amount of incoming cash. The Bureau qualified these results as very ‘striking’ and ‘remarkable’ and was quick to expect other major sales events showing similar regularities.⁷¹

When in early 1952 the various branch managers of *De Bijenkorf* discussed the latest results, they acknowledged that the Research Bureau had radically changed their view of customers: ‘It appears that customers in total behave with stunning regularity.’⁷² The added value of this new systematic information was evident. Firstly, the figures provided a business case to organize the deployment of the sales staff more efficiently, by adjusting lunch breaks to the traffic patterns of customers or by replacing some of the permanent staff by part-timers to be deployed only at peak times.⁷³ Secondly, the results provided sound arguments for choosing the best evening for late openings: Thursday, when *De Bijenkorf* attracted the ‘better public’ and the average cash receipt was relatively high, or Friday, when the store attracted ‘more massive visits’, including people on weekly pay who had just received their wages.⁷⁴

Soon after installation in 1949 the automatic customer counting system in the Amsterdam branch had established that on average customers stayed for 27 minutes, substantially longer than the 18 minutes estimated just after the war.⁷⁵ The majority of visitors (50.5 percent) entered the store through the revolving doors at the Vissersdam and left the store through one of two doors on Damrak (52.8 percent).⁷⁶ In 1952, additional customer tracking studies revealed how many minutes visitors spent on average at individual floors, their preferred walking routes, and the intensity of visitors on of the floors at certain times.⁷⁷ All these findings fed into a discussion amongst managers about the relocation of departments with relatively high profit margins to busier floors, as well as the number, location, direction and even the speed of the escalators.⁷⁸

However, the automatic customer count studies also raised more philosophical considerations. In 1956-1957, CEO Van der Wal, who by that time also served as president of the IADS, proudly explained in his ‘Buyology’ lecture mentioned above how in the modern department store the traditional intuition of the entrepreneur had given way to science:

71 SAA, KBB, inv. no. 1457, ‘Klantentellingen in het filiaal Amsterdam tijdens de St Nicolaasperiode’ (1951) 1 en 3.

72 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1457, ‘Notulen filiaaldirecteuren’, 14 February 1952.

73 Ibid., SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1463, ‘Buyology of de kunst van het kopen’, 4.

74 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1457, ‘Notulen filiaaldirecteuren’, 14 February 1952, 4.

75 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1477, ‘Het resultaat van een onderzoek’, 2. Ibid., inv.no. 1457, ‘Uitkomsten van het onderzoek’, 4.

76 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1457, ‘Uitkomsten van het onderzoek’, 1-2.

77 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1458, ‘Klantenachtervolgingen’, 8-10.

78 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 517, ‘Stukken betreffende het personenverkeer en het gebruik van roltrappen in de vestiging in Amsterdam’ (1957).



The urbanized man appears to respond according to group patterns. *De Bijenkorf*, ca. 1950

Amsterdam City Archives (copyright AD Nieuwsmedia)

In the three major cities we daily record 30,000 observations. This daily stadium full of people constitutes the object of the findings of our buyology. [...] By observing mass phenomena personal experience is worthless [...]. We predominantly record exceptions, resulting in distorted and biased observations. Mass phenomena require special techniques to arrive at an understanding of actual events.⁷⁹

According to Van der Wal, revenue statistics traditionally provided a clear assessment of the impact of seasons, holidays, and clearance sales on buying behavior, as well as of the effects of extraordinary events such as the Korean War or the recent Flood. Meanwhile customer observations had greatly enhanced the knowledge of the mix and behavior of the public. Yet only the automatic customer counting system – explicitly presented with the American concept ‘gadget’ – had uncovered this remarkably regular ‘daily and weekly pattern of store visits, where every quarter, every hour and every day has its own place. Every quarter has its own number of visitors with its own average duration of stay. Even deviations from the normal pattern appear to behave according to established rules’.⁸⁰ Van der Wal found this a fascinating outcome, yet at the same time he quite anxiously reflected on the modern consumer’s free will:

Is the undefined behavior predictable? This question can to a large extent be answered in the affirmative. The occurrence of an hourly, daily, monthly pattern and even a walking-pattern within the store speaks volumes. The latter phenomenon raises the *comparison with rabbit trails*. It seems there a free will of the individual does not exist; the urbanized man appears to respond according to group patterns.⁸¹

During the immediate postwar years, the finding that modern urban individuals appeared to have not much of a free will and, as consumers, largely followed group patterns fascinated people, but it also disturbed them, if only because they remembered all too vividly what collective peer pressure could lead to. Not surprisingly during those years, Dutch politicians, scientists, and novelists tried very hard to conceive a new, humanist concept of modern man, focusing on self-insight and personal judgment. The ‘rabbit trails’ which Van der Wal detected in *De Bijenkorf’s* systematic customer research implicitly threw these efforts into doubt. In fact, modern consumers seemed to follow animal instincts.⁸²

However, the CEO did not despair. ‘What is the business benefit of all this?’, he presented his audience: ‘The clockwork of the metropolitan civilization can only be predicted in its regularity, but it can also be accelerated or delayed

79 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1463, ‘Buyology of de kunst van het kopen’, 2.

80 Ibid., 4.

81 Ibid., 5. My italics.

82 Ido Wijers, *Terug naar het behouden huis*.

Romanschrijvers en wetenschappers in de jaren vijftig (Amsterdam 1991).

by those who manipulate it with understanding'. It was the intellectually challenging task of modern department stores like *De Bijenkorf* to understand and to influence the consumer behavior in order to enhance the store's efficiency.⁸³

Catching the impulsive consumer

In 1952, the accumulation and combination of the customer studies conducted since the war revealed some striking shifts in the relation between the number of visitors, actual buyers, transactions, and average cash receipts. While the number of visitors had risen considerably since 1946-1947, the proportion of buyers against visitors had increased from 32 to 41 percent and the average number of transactions per visitor from 0.5 to 0.74. However, the average expenditure per visitor had hardly risen, from 3.27 guilders to 3.41, while average cash receipts had markedly dropped, from 6.65 to 4.60 guilders.⁸⁴ This striking discrepancy could hardly come as a surprise and typically marked the transition from a seller's market to a buyer's market. During the first postwar years *De Bijenkorf* had profited from a huge pent-up demand from customers for long unavailable, often large purchases, and for products in large quantities. In 1950, the Korean War had stimulated a new wave of hamstering goods, but this demand had also been largely satisfied. Since the Dutch government continued its policy of restrictions on consumption, *De Bijenkorf* introduced cheaper products in order to broaden its customer base, with decreasing average cash receipts as a logical consequence.⁸⁵ This trend caused an evident problem: the sales staff had to perform more transactions per person to maintain turnover level, prompting the Research Bureau into probing the customer mix and behavior for ways to monitor and, if possible, stimulate customers' appetite for impulse buying.

To boost transaction numbers the Research Bureau proposed to reintroduce the prewar system of individual sales commissions and complimented this with a new type of research tracking sale process speed.⁸⁶ In 1950 initial findings showed that on average customers waited 1.07 minutes at a counter to be served. Subsequent phases from the sales pitch to getting the receipt for collection took another 1.08 minutes, followed by 0.9 minutes waiting at the checkout and paying, and 1.1 minutes waiting for wrapping and finally receiving the purchased items.⁸⁷ In 1956 the Research Bureau updated its research techniques by introducing a 'photographic Robot', which registered the speed of transactions at a number of sales locations and cash desks with even greater precision. Two years later a study

83 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1463, 'Buyology of de kunst van het kopen', 5-6.

84 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1458, 'Klantenachtervolgingen', 1.

85 *Ibid.*, 1-2.

86 *Ibid.*, 2.

87 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1456, 'Bepaling van de tijdsduur welke klant nodig heeft'.

visit to the Parisian department store *Printemps* helped to further refine their time-motion analyses.⁸⁸ This obvious Taylorism in full swing transformed the sales transaction from a personal exchange between seller and consumer to a closely monitored and managed product.

While striving to make the selling process more time-efficient, *De Bijenkorf* managers also attempted seducing visitors to increase their average spending per transaction, thereby leading the Research Bureau to make some unexpected discoveries. With an average of 120,000 visitors per week and a total of some 6.2 million visitors a year, the Amsterdam branch seemed to operate fairly successfully. However, customer questionnaires found as early as 1948 that as much as 65 percent of visitors lived in Amsterdam.⁸⁹ Four years later interviews showed that 22 percent of visitors had visited the store less than three days ago and 56 percent less than a week ago. The Research Bureau used these findings to calculate that the Amsterdam branch had a base of 15,000 ‘solid buyers’ and a total of 30,000 ‘regular visitors’ on a population of more than 830,000 people.⁹⁰ Showing as they did that *De Bijenkorf* not only failed to attract large numbers of inhabitants in its home town, let alone a wider regional or national public, these results came as a great surprise: once again systematic customer research clashed painfully with ideals and personal intuition. Managers nursed social and commercial ambitions for *De Bijenkorf* to occupy an exceptional position in the Dutch retailing landscape, so they found the conclusions ‘disappointing’: ‘We still conceive the department store as something more than just a reliable address for 30,000 patrons for more or less daily needs’. There was also a clear financial side: a wider, national public visiting *De Bijenkorf* for special purchases would substantially raise the average cash receipts.⁹¹

The need to raise receipts but also the ambition to perceive and promote *De Bijenkorf* as a unique department store in the Dutch and Amsterdam retail landscape inspired fresh research. In 1958 the Research Bureau concluded that quite a few customers, now referred to with the new, not too flattering English term ‘shoppers’, combined a visit to *De Bijenkorf* with other destinations such as the city’s leading shopping street Kalverstraat (30 percent), the cheaper Nieuwendijk (4 percent), or other department stores such as *Vroom & Dreesmann*, *Gerzon*, *Hema*, *Galleries Modernes* or *C&A* (14 percent). Even so 47 percent of the ‘total customer mass’ – another new term highlighting the increasing habit to perceive customers in statistical categories – visited *De Bijenkorf* only. They reached the store by bus or tram

88 Ibidem. SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1463, ‘Buyology of de kunst van het kopen’, 4. Ibidem, inv.no. 358, ‘Verslag van een bezoek van De Vos en Visser aan de sectie tijdstudie van het researchbureau van Au Printemps in Parijs’ (1958).

89 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1453, ‘Waarnemingen en ondervraging’.

90 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1458, ‘Klantenachtervolgingen’, 8.

91 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1457, Minutes branch managers, 14 February 1952, 3.

(37 percent), walking (27), car (14), rail (13) or bicycle (9).⁹² With an average of 270 cars during the quiet hours and 600 cars on busy moments parked simultaneously in the immediate neighborhood, *De Bijenkorf* did not yet really struggle with a parking problem. Yet car ownership rising and managers' ambition to geographically expand the customer base beyond Amsterdam, plans for a parking garage along American lines were already under way.⁹³

To increase the average cash receipts per transaction *De Bijenkorf* managers became increasingly interested in another strategy: stimulating what us marketing experts had only recently framed as 'impulse buying'. In his 1956 lecture 'Buyology', manager Van der Wal implied that, at that moment in time, this concept was not yet widely known in Dutch academic and business circles, explaining to his audience:

There is a major discrepancy between the contents of the shopping list and the shopping bag. A significant proportion of spending consists of the so-called 'impulse purchases' ['impuls aankopen'] which happen 'on the spur of the moment', in contrast to the so-called 'planned purchases', preceded by consultation.⁹⁴

Although the phenomenon of impulse buying had, of course, been known for centuries and shopkeepers had already encouraged these in all sorts of ways, measuring the quantitative significance for the total sales was a new challenge for systematic research.⁹⁵ As early as 1948 the Research Bureau noted with great satisfaction that their studies 'for the first time offer some insight into the importance of impulse purchases in relation to the purchases which the public had already planned to do'.⁹⁶ The researchers concluded that about 15 percent of total revenue could be credited to impulse purchases, noting that average cash receipts for impulse purchases was substantially lower than for planned purchases (3.30 guilders against 5.20). The ratio between impulse purchases and planned purchases strongly differed according to department: from 50 percent for handkerchiefs to a surprising low 5 percent for fabrics. As expected, the proportion of impulse purchases in total turnover was higher

92 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1468, 'Klanten-enquete', 8 ('totale klantenmassa').

93 Ibid., 6-7. Ibid., inv.no. 1387, 'Rapport over de betekenis van het parkeervraagstuk voor de detailhandel in de Amsterdamse city door het researchbureau' (1960). See in this context also Lesger, *Het winkellandschap van Amsterdam*, 335-338. Tim Verlaan, *De toekomst van de Nederlandse binnenstad 1960-1978* (PhD University of Amsterdam 2016), chapter 1 and 4.

94 Ibid., SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1463, 'Buyology of de kunst van het kopen', 3. Van der Wal used the English phrase 'on the spur of the moment'.

95 One of the earliest marketing studies touching upon the subject of impulse buying was W. Applebaum, 'Studying customer behavior in retail stores', *Journal of Marketing* 16 (1951) 172-178, 178. Cfr. David Lewis, *Impulse. Why we do what we do without knowing why we do it* (New York 2013) 150.

96 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1453, 'Waarnemingen en ondervraging', 9-12.

among affluent visitors than among the ‘middle class’ and ‘popular class’ (respectively 15.9, 15.7 and 12.5 percent), and also higher among visitors from outside Amsterdam than from Amsterdam residents (18.2 versus 14 percent), leading the researchers to generalize in the singular form ‘that the customer coming into town more easily succumbs to the temptation of the department store’. Falling back on the centuries-old trope that female consumers were more irrational and easier to seduce, the Research Bureau established that women did more impulse purchases than men (24.6 versus 20.6 percent of total purchases). However, the average cash receipt of men’s impulse purchases turned out to be higher than those of women. As a result, *De Bijenkorf* achieved a higher proportion of sales from male impulse purchases than from women: 18 versus 15 percent.⁹⁷ In his lecture ‘Buyology’ Van der Wal turned this surprising finding in a new general law about the modern consumer: ‘The woman lets herself being seduced more often yet for less than the man, who yields to his impulses less often yet for more’.⁹⁸

Customer research once again proved its worth for determining where to place ‘impulse buying’ items in order to maximize revenue. Integrating data on percentages of impulse buying, corresponding revenues, and the average number of visitors to each department, the Research Bureau, for example, calculated that out of each 1,000 visitors the handiwork department generated 107 guilders from impulse buying, but the lace department only 8. In this way, managers received a research-based argument why the handicraft department merited a place on the crowded ground floor: ‘for the construction of our new branch in Rotterdam this example can be of great importance’.⁹⁹

In the meantime, customers had still surprisingly little opportunities to touch the alluring products available, because nearly all goods were still stored behind counters in cupboards and drawers and shown only on request. Encouraged by recent American experiments with self-service (again indicated in English as ‘pre-selection’), the Research Bureau launched, in 1953, an observation study into customer behavior concerning products already available without sales staff assistance. In 88 percent of cases, customers appeared to pick out what they wanted independent of the sales staff and without showing any ‘helplessness’.¹⁰⁰ Did modern consumers turn out to have a free will after all? In 1954, *De Bijenkorf* decided to radically change the arrangement of a large number of departments: the so-called ‘retail island’ was introduced, which was to significantly enhance impulse buying.¹⁰¹

97 Ibid., 12.

98 Ibid., SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1463, ‘Buyology of de kunst van het kopen’, 4.

99 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1453, ‘Waarneming en ondervraging’, 10-11 and annex 5.

100 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1509, ‘Onderzoek betreffende aard en omstandigheden van de

verkoophandelingen ten einde meer inzicht te krijgen in het preselection vraagstuk’ (1953), 1, 12-13. Foulidis, Een stap voor, 40-41.

101 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 594, ‘Plattegronden en afdrucken van foto’s van de vernieuwde lay-out van enkele afdelingen’ (1954).



Conclusion

In 1952 *De Bijenkorf* managers observed lifestyles becoming more ephemere ('vervluchtiging van levensstijl') in postwar Dutch society. The ongoing leveling of incomes seemed to break down the prewar class society and the recent independence of Indonesia and the Cold War heralded an uncertain future. Prewar virtues such as thrift, solidity, and sobriety, regarded as typical of the Dutch, as well as the living memory of the hardships of the war suddenly appeared to have lost their social and cultural significance: 'the uncertainty of existence encourages a lust for consumption'.¹⁰² For the leading department store in the Netherlands this transformation of postwar consumer culture offered attractive opportunities. But how to take full advantage of this phenomenon?

Building on research findings acquired before the war, a continuous exchange of expertise with European colleagues in the International Associations of Department Stores and a keen eye for developments in the United States, *De Bijenkorf's* Research Bureau performed an ambitious series of customer research studies that monitored the size, mix, routing, timing, and purchases of the customers with a quickly increasing range of advanced methods and techniques and an increasing focus on correlations between a growing number of variables. Explicitly striving to apply the principles of scientific management to the department store, managers eagerly translated the wealth of findings and insights in specific business policies concerning the procurement, advertising, store layout, and sales techniques.

De Bijenkorf's customer research not only informed and stimulated managers to attract a larger and broader range of visitors and to entice them to buy more products and follow their impulses. The studies also mirrored and promoted new *images* and *perceptions* of postwar consumers. The Research Bureau increasingly reduced customers to statistical categories, which, represented as abstract measurable units with average qualities, appeared to behave in strikingly predictable ways. Even though researchers realized that estimating social class on the basis of outward appearance was problematic and that a category as 'popular class' defined on either income or occupation did not necessarily correspond with each other, the artificially constructed research categories still regained a status of 'objective' and 'real' social groups in managerial policy. Without hesitation behavioral patterns of male or female visitors were translated into sweeping statements about the behavior of 'the'

102 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 250, 'Overpeinzingen over de nota 'Onze zakenpolitiek' (1952) 1.



man and ‘the’ woman. Statistical age cohorts were increasingly treated as generations with their own demands and identities. Terms such as ‘shoppers’ and ‘impulse buyers’ created new social categories whose identities were completely defined on the basis of their purchasing behavior, and, phrased in English terms, integrated into a global, Anglo-Saxon consumer culture. The surprising regularity customers demonstrated in their routes through the department store inspired manager Van der Wal to draw a comparison with ‘rabbit trails’, justifying researchers to represent the visitors as a ‘total customer mass’ whose instinctive, almost animal behavior was difficult to direct, yet which could be manipulated with sophisticated techniques.

Nevertheless, the new images, perceptions, and categories of postwar consumers which the Research Bureau constructed did not always result in an uncontested appropriation at the store’s managerial level. Manager Van der Wal’s public lecture cited at the start of this article clearly reflected the ambivalence of postwar elites about their role and responsibility towards the modernization of Dutch society. ‘Buyology’, he explained, ‘is an ambivalent sound of American origin.’ The phonetic association with biology confirmed his undeniable fascination to discover regular and even instinctive patterns of modern consumer behavior. Yet the apparent elimination of free will and the ability to manipulate customer behavior also raised serious doubts. At the end of his lecture, Van der Wal extensively reflected on Walt Riesman’s recently published critical essay *The lonely crowd*, which questioned the easy way in which ‘other directed’ people could be influenced by modern mass media and industry. ‘Under the influence of radio, film and television the last type is increasing in the Netherlands’, Van der Wal noted pessimistically: ‘Film and television call for identification and projection, expressing itself in the Audrey [sic] Hepburn hairstyles of young girls. Staring at film and television threatens to degenerate our culture to a gaping cult [‘tuur cult’].’

Van der Wal was fascinated by the emergence of the ‘impulsive and often irrational consumer’ and stressed that ‘group behavior – not even consciously and with consultation – would play an increasingly important role in spending’. Frankly, he admitted that this would create attractive opportunities for advertising to influence modern consumers’ buying habits. But he also stressed the ‘great and growing responsibility’ of both industry and retail in this respect. ‘From the point of view of culture it is of cardinal importance’, he noted, ‘which direction this influencing will take’. Instead of appealing to the superficial, traditional taste of the general public, he called on industry and retailers – and *De Bijenkorf* in particular – to elevate the taste of the modern consumer with ‘effective and esthetic design’.¹⁰³ This was definitely not hollow talk to cover up commercial interests. In 1954, an internal memo on *De Bijenkorf*’s ‘business morals’ explicitly stated

103 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1463, ‘Buyology of de kunst van het kopen’, 1 and 5-6.

that the company's primary goal was not simply short-term profits, but 'properly' ['naar behoren'] distributing goods to the social 'middle section' ['middenmoor'].¹⁰⁴ The following year another memo further explained: 'We aim to direct and educate the taste of the general public, among others by a gradual increase of requirements in this respect.'¹⁰⁵ Finding a balance between this patronizing yet idealistic mission and the often contradicting lessons resulting from the customer research projects: that would be the future challenge.

Jan Hein Furnée (1972) is professor of European cultural history at Radboud University. He studies the history of urban leisure culture, consumer culture, tourism, and cultural policy in The Netherlands and Western Europe since 1750. Recent publications: with Peter Borsay (eds.), *Leisure Cultures in Urban Europe: A Transnational Perspective* (Manchester 2016); with Clé Lesger (eds.), *The Landscape of Consumption: Shopping Streets and Shopping Cultures in Western Europe, c. 1600-1900* (Houndmills 2014); *Plaatsen van beschaafd vertier. Standsbesef en stedelijke cultuur in Den Haag* (Amsterdam 2012). Email: j.furnee@let.ru.nl

104 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 250, Over het belang van vaste, uitgewerkte zakenpolitiecs en een stabiele zakenmoraal met positieve en negatieve voorbeelden van beide (1954); Foulidis, Een stap voor, 48.

105 SAA, KBB, inv.no. 1515, Inkooppolitiecs, 2. Foulidis, Een stap voor, 58.