

TOWARDS A THEORY OF RETAIL EVOLUTION:
AN AUSTRALIAN HISTORY OF RETAILING
IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

By

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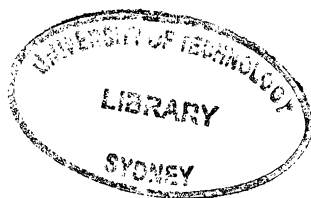
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Abstract

This thesis explores retailing evolution in Western countries during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A systems theory approach is used to examine retailing at three levels: individual stores, the industry or “population” of stores, and as a part of the larger distribution industry. The interactions of retailers with manufacturers, wholesalers, consumers, trade unions, governments, and others in the system are examined. This affords a view of retailing from the outside, but also from the inside, and the retailers’ point of view. This dual focus exposes change as a process of co-evolution, with retailing firmly embedded, and interdependent, within its environment.

A case study is presented from the archives of the Australian retail industry’s main trade Association for the period 1903-1930, the heyday of department stores in this country. This provides an original history from the primary source documents produced by the men who ran the Association, and Sydney’s largest department stores. The longitudinal coverage of the case affords a view of change as an accumulative process, and confirms the largely untested hypothesis that retail institutions are a significant influence on the course of retailing evolution.

The findings of the research suggest that there are multiple causal mechanisms in the evolution of retailing. The impact of innovators, competition and conflict, and the constraints of the environment were found to have direct and indirect influences on the course of retailing development, and these influences have been identified in extant literature. In addition to extant explanations, this research suggests that consumers’ “innate desire for novelty”, or more broadly a human need for variety, appeared to be a driver of evolution in retailing in the period under study.

Overall, the research presented in this study demonstrates that retailing evolution cannot be properly understood outside the systems of which it is a part. The study shows that, while the retailing system was subject to forces outside its control, it could also exert influence on the system. Furthermore, that the population of retailing institutions, as represented by the industry trade Association, was an important factor in shaping the course of retailing evolution in Australia.