



BRANDING STRATEGY ON CONSUMER CHOICE: EMPIRICAL REVIEW OF BOTTLED WATER.

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ABSTRACT

Branding is one of the most intriguing marketing strategies used for the purpose of winning or over the coming competition; its efficacy is not in doubt. When the companies focus on their brands and develop them according to consumer wants and needs, it creates a competitive position. Companies must then try to build a positive image of their brands in the consumer's imagination, so as to a positive value of the brands assisting consumers making choices. The manufacturers, on their part, have to be innovative and creative to ensure that customers get to pick their products and consider their services for the firms to remain competitive in the market. Branding of the company's products and services is one of the strategies that companies such as supermarkets may adopt to attract consumers and ensure the goods get picked and re-picked. The study investigated the effect of branding on consumer choice of bottled water. The empirical review indicates that branding as a strategy is crucial in creating a competitive advantage of the product. The research concluded that branding strategies play a major role in the quality of communication quality, creating differences, and image improvement of the product hence assisting bottle water customers in making a choice. It recommends that organization should apply branding strategies like brand positioning, brand personality, brand equity, brand experience, brand differentiation, and brand communication in not only assisting the customer to make choices but also for a competitive edge.

INTRODUCTION

Consider the chaos that would be at the point of purchase if manufacturers had no means of distinguishing their products from that of their competitors. Consumers would definitely be

put through the rigors and time-consuming task of determining what product to choose from a list of unbranded products. The likelihood of selecting the wrong product among the several unbranded products is imminent in this case, given the unscrupulous behavior of some middlemen (Okafor, 1995). Ogbuji, Anyanwu

and Onah (2011) posited that, “Consumers seeing a favored brand (to which they may exhibit loyal behavior), may cut short the analysis of alternatives prior to the purchase decision, and proceed more rapidly towards the purchase.” Moreover, a realization of the fact that branding as a marketing tool affects other product management decisions confronts one with the fact that its impact on marketing activities and consumers cannot be overemphasized. Okafor (1995) captures the very essence of branding when he opined that “apart from the herculean task that will be associated with trying to decide what manufacturers’ product to buy from all the unbranded products, other product management decisions, based on market segmentation, promotion, product positioning, pricing would have been practically impossible”.

The past decade has shown dynamic changes in both the global and local market environment, forcing many companies to come up with new innovations daily so as to give their products a competitive edge. However, this can only be achieved if a company has put in place branding strategies that will enable them differentiate their product as well as create awareness in the mind of the consumer. Globally branding has a high power of attracting customer and retaining them, especially when they are loyal to the brand. Competition in the market has made many companies realize the need to use branding strategies to be able to survive in the market. However, the market is flooded with a variety of products of poor quality hence putting the consumer in a dilemma while making a purchasing choice. Research findings reveal that there are a number of factors that affect

consumer choice, like preference, price, quality, and brand awareness, color, cultural factors, and health risk. However, branding in isolation has not been addressed by many studies done hence backdrop to find out the effects of branding on consumer choice of bottled water.

Bottled water has been used in place of tap water for its convenience, better taste, for good health, perceived purity, and quality (Doria, 2006). Currently, people can find bottled drinking water almost everywhere. However, bottled water varies in terms of brand name, packaging design, ingredient content, and taste. Competition is inevitable for beverage indispensable to deal with the competitors, changing product industry, especially bottled water market (Ferrier, customer tastes, and preferences. As living organisms, human beings cannot survive without water, and it is major constituent of body cells, tissue, and fluids (Gleick, 2004). Next to oxygen, water is the most important substance for human existence. For this reason, the pattern of human settlement throughout history has often been determined by its accessibility (Saleh, Ewane, Jones, & Wilson, 2001).

From the ongoing discussions on the importance of branding, marketers and producers alike are developing an increasing interest in this strategy. The bottled water industry is not an exception to the growing adoption of branding as a strategy for winning the heart of consumers. However, a lot still needs to be vindicated as to whether branding is the major factor influencing consumer choice. The bottled water business is a child of necessity. Necessity stemming from the fact that there was lack of potable drinking water

across the country at the time (Baba-Yaro, 2007). In the beginning, bottled water in Nigeria started without serious consideration to ethical standards, or strict adherence to the purity and hygiene of the water. But with the efforts put by the National Agency for Food and Drugs Administration and Control (NAFDAC), the fear drinking contaminated water prevalent in the past by consumers of the product has now been remarkably allayed. Bottled water has become a pervasive global business, and bottled water consumption continues to increase rapidly, particularly in countries where clean potable tap water is available at very low or no cost. The contrast between tap water and bottled water can be seen as a reflection of a contest for authority and public trust between governments and corporations, in a context of heightened anxieties about risk and health. Organizations currently are using branding as a strategy tool in today's business environment with increasing regularity. Although brands and branding are not new ideas, firms are applying them to more diverse settings where the role of branding is becoming increasingly important (Wentz & Suchard, 1993). It is not exceptional in bottled water companies to put in place branding strategies to avoid being edged out.

Sredl and Soukup (2011) argue that consumers want quality brands, and they value branded products more than unbranded ones. Consumers associate quality with the cues such as the brand name, price, product warranties, and advertisement. In manufacturing, a company's quality is a measure of excellence, free from all defects and significant variations, which come with strict and consistent adherence to standards. Consumers choose products based on a number of reasons; they

include the availability of brand, attitude towards the brand, beliefs, accessibility, expected benefit, and the loyalty they have on the brand.

There are many water bottling companies globally, regionally, and locally currently, which translate to the stiff competition of bottled water in the market. Consumers go through a buying process, that is need recognition, information search, evaluation of information, product choice, purchase decision, and post-purchase decision before making any choice. Water, by its nature is generic and once produced under hygienic conditions; the burden lies on how consumers choose among the available brands. Branding is essential in the bottled water industry since a brand is a tool that communicates to the consumer, developing captivating brand names and company made packages which can be supported by good quality water and help them attract customers and retain them for companies' profitability. The purpose of the study was to investigate the effects of branding on consumer choice of bottled water since the market is flooded by several products that consumers have to choose from.

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Consumer Choice Concept

Consumer choice is the decision consumers make in relation to the consideration to buy products or services from the available alternatives. It is generally how consumers make a choice on which product to purchase when there are alternatives to choose from. The choice is like a classical illustration of a person walking down the road who hesitates before deciding on which path to take. The consumer

choice combines the three aspects: there must be two or more choice alternatives to choose from, the choice alternatives must arouse certain amount of conflict, a cognitive process must occur and be aimed at reducing the conflict. Consumers will make their choices based on the brand presentations, based on the value of product or services, the expected benefits drawn from the product and the quality of the products. However, others make a choice under the influence of family, friends, the social class they belong to and other cues such as frequency of advertisements, promotions messages, and slogans associated with the brand. Some products like consumer goods are however hard to choose but based on cues like price comparison with what competitors are offering provides the best criteria to help the customer make a choice and ensure their expectations are met (Shah & Oppenheimer, 2008).

There are six stages of a buying process that consumer goes through before making a choice; the recognition of need or services and takes a step to fill in the need (Bruner & Pomazal, 1988). Marketers should note customers' needs and take appeal need even when they do not realize they have that need. After need customer moves to search for information from internal and external sources comprising of friends, family, and other customers depending on the complexity of choices to be made. Then consumer evaluates information and perception he/she has on brand image to get desirable characteristics of a product; it leads to 'evoked set.' That is the set of a brand that has the probability of being chosen by consumer among the alternatives (van Rollin & Thorpe, 2001). Consumers will seek information from various sources to be

aware of essential characteristics such as color, price, quality, and size of the product (Cohen, 2013).

Consumers then evaluate among alternative brand available to narrow down their choices (Heike et al., 2005; Agway & Carter, 2014). Evaluation criteria are based on some features that the consumers think are important to them, such as price, color, size, and quality. Once the consumers have evaluated the products available to respond to their needs, they will be able to choose the product or brand that seems most appropriate to them and then preceded to actual purchase (Cohen, 2013). Marketing professionals use informative advertisement to convince customers about the benefit (Bearden et al., 2004). Consumers depend on the information on the product features and their previous selection or experience of the brand. For example, consumers committed to the idea of buying stereos of a well-known brand could change their decision if they have unpleasant experience with sellers in the store. Also, a promotion in a supermarket for bottled water brands could tip the scale for these brands in the consumers' minds that were hesitating among brands of their evoked sets.

The consumer in the post-purchase stage, questions his decision, on whether the satisfaction expected has been attained by the product (Bernini & Goreville, 2012). When a product has not met the expectation of a consumer, he suffers post-purchase dissonance where he regrets the purchase decisions, and on most occasions, he spreads through word of mouth to others about the experience. If the product has deep satisfaction to the consumer, he will minimize stages of information such as alternative evaluation for the next purchase in

order to buy the same brand hence creating customer loyalty. A satisfied customer is very likely to become a loyal and regular of a brand, especially for low-level involvement- fast moving consumer goods or consumer packed good (Saylor, 2009).

Consumer choice can be influenced by brand awareness, brand loyalty, brand familiarity, brand recognition, and the image of the company manufacturing the products. Consumers' expectations, perceived quality, and price influences how consumers choose the products they consume over time. According to Alamgir, Nasir, Shamsuddoha, and Nedelea (2010), people often purchase branded cars because they are aware of brand performance. The market information is used to position brand in the market as per the market strategy, and most customers think the brand is a guarantee to quality and hence brand plays a major role in consumers' purchasing decision and behavior. Thus, companies should try to keep customers informed of the brand through repeated advertising and meeting the expectations for repeat sales. However, many customers have more knowledge on the perceived quality offered by the brand and they always prefer one brand over alternatives that are in the market. Brand image is critical when customers are making a choice for the first time. Also, family and friends are other factors that are found by other researchers to affect the purchase decision.

Branding Strategy Concept

Branding strategy can be defined as a value-adding process that increases the value of a product by packaging, naming, positioning, and promoting it in the customers' mind. The American Marketing Association describes a

brand as follows: "brand is a name, a term, a sign, a symbol or a combination of these to determine and distinguish the products of a firm from the others" (Wood, 2000).

This study relates brand with a logo, symbol, or term that identifies one company's products or service from others in the market. It is the value a consumer attaches to a product available in the market. This value is determined by consumer perception and experiences with the brand. If people think highly of a brand, then it will have a positive equity. However, when brand consistently underdelivers and disappoints, consumers will perceive it negatively. A brand can be seen in the way the customer thinks, feels, and perceives the product along with its price as well as profits. Brand image is very important, especially when customers have to make purchase decision for the first time (Baba-Yaro, 2014). Brand is the tool that easily changes consumers' perception of a product or service. Today consumers are more careful and conscious about the brand than in the past few decades (Kotler, 2005). For example, car users may trust Toyota model cars more because they have a brand association and displays dimensions of perceived quality such as performance, serviceability, and fitness for the purpose.

Sallam (2016) did a study in Saudi Arabia on the impact of brand image and corporate branding on consumers' choice. The focus of the study was to explore the role independent variable, brand image, and corporate branding on consumer choice; the respondents in the survey were 105 consumers of mobile phone. He found that corporate branding had a positive impact on brand equity and consumer choice,

while brand image had no significant effect on brand equity. Further, he found out that brand equity had no impact on consumer choice. These findings are similar to Njuguna's (2014), who also found that brand equity had positive effects on consumer choice, but differs in their findings of brand image effects on consumer choice.

Dolnicar and Shafar (2006) did a study in Australia to understand the reasons why people buy bottled water rather than other water delivered through a central supply. Their findings relate to perceptions surrounding the relative safety of the water source, healthiness, and taste preference, with some people substituting bottled water for soft drinks and other beverages. Other factors found to influence consumer decisions included: demographics, perceived quality of the source of tap water, and trust in water companies. Additionally, he found that, while most respondents did not perceive a health risk associated with their supply, those that did were very likely to change their source of drinking water. Their findings have some similarities with the study done in Ghana by Korankye (2015) and the one done in Nairobi by Njuguna (2016) on some variables that were seen affecting consumer choice.

Korankye, Asante, Danquah & Okyere, (2015) conducted a study in Ghana comparing two brands and consumer choice. The study adopted cross-sectional survey design, with 300 respondents who were categorized into six groups, nursing mothers, men aged 45 years and above, women aged 44 years and above, men between 18-44 years, women between 18-44 years and pregnant women. The findings revealed that consumer's choice is significantly

based on family influence, packaging, availability, brand image, taste, and advertisement. The consumers were loyal to specific brands even though many brands were available in the Ghanaian market. The study further indicates the importance of brand to a consumer who always is faced with a choice to make. The factors that were found to have a significant influence on consumer choice in this study were demographic factors. However, the study differs with Legese and Wadoje, (2018) who only used educated respondents and age 18 years and older with no limit. The branding strategies and relevance of branding did not feature; hence, the need for further research on branding and branding strategies as a standalone study.

Quansah, Okoe & Angenu, (2015) in their study on factors affecting the consumers' buying behavior of bottled water in Ghanaian Market aimed to examine the factors influencing consumers' choice of bottled drinking water. The survey research design was employed. Questionnaires were used as the data collections instrument. The items measuring the constructs were adapted from the extant literature. A sample size of two hundred and forty (240) bottled water consumers. The results showed that there is a strong relationship between age categories, income groups, educational levels, and bottled water buying behavior in the Ghanaian market. Again, the study found a correlation between perception and beliefs of bottled water usage. Further, the study pointed out that quality, brand price, availability, and package were found to influence consumers' choice of bottled water. The study is similar to the one done by Legese and Wodaje (2018) both found price, quality, packaging brand name, and

availability of brand was influential on consumer choice.

Legese and Wodaje, (2018) in their study on factors affecting brand choice of consumers on bottled water brands in Ethiopia found that packaging, product quality, price, advertisement, brand name, brand image, and brand availability were significantly associated with consumer choice for bottled water. However, they found out that brand image, brand name, packing, and price were contributing most on consumer choice of bottled water. The study adopted a descriptive and explanatory research design, involving 400 consumers of bottled water in Gondar city who were educated and from age 18 years and older. The study used both purposive and convenience sampling technique to get respondents who were restaurants and hotels, coffee houses, sports centers, supermarkets, and universities in the city of Gondar. The study only targeted the educated consumers when water is a necessity to all human beings whether learned or not, again the study was conducted on Bottled Water Manufacturing industry; therefore, findings are limited only to the context of the sector.

Njuguna's (2014) study in Nairobi on the effects of brand equity on consumer choice revealed that determinants of consumer choices were quality assurance, taste, and odor of brand name. The study primarily focused on the components of brand equity, which are brand loyalty, brand association, and brand loyalty. The study also found out that Consumers perceived the quality of a brand with the past experience with the brand and how often they can recall. The findings in this study have similar findings of Korankye et al.'s (2015)

study in Ghana which found out that consumer choice is influenced by family influence, packaging, availability of brand, brand image, taste, and advertisement. Conclusively the study found out branding has greater power of influencing consumer choice, but further research is recommended to investigate the effects of branding in other sectors.

Njuguna (2014) did a study on the effects of country of origin and consumer characteristics on consumer behavior towards foreign clothing brands. The main objective in the study was to determine the impact of country of origin consumer characteristics and attitudes on consumer behavior towards foreign clothing brands. The study adopted a descriptive cross-sectional research design, and primary data was used. The target population was 384 consumers of foreign clothing brands; the target group was adults of 20 years. The findings of the study revealed that country of origin affect consumer buying behavior towards foreign brands, and there was a significant association between attitude and consumer behavior. Also, findings indicated that the characteristics influence consumer behavior towards foreign brands clothing. In this study characteristic, attitudes are the variables seen affecting consumer buying decision on brands. However, the study did not address the effects that branding has explicitly on consumer choice of product, the study targeted only a group of 20 years old adult as the population under study bearing in mind characteristics and attitude affects nearly all ages when it comes to making a purchase decision. Other studies researched on brand rather than country of origin towards foreign clothing brands (Korankye et al., 2014; Njuguna, 2014; Dolnicar & Schaffer, 2006, and Ogbuji, *et al.*, 2011)

Njuguna (2014) in his study investigating the influence of brand equity on consumer choice in branded bottled water among supermarket customers in Nairobi Central Business District, Kenya found out that brand loyalty was the most variable that had great influence on consumer choice. The study used a cross-sectional research design; the population of interest was Nairobi consumers with smart cards. This study, however, differs with others in terms of the target population, he targeted only registered supermarkets customers, but his findings of brand effects are similar.

Ogbuji, Anyanwu, and Ohna (2011) conducted a study examining the impact of branding on consumer choice of regulated Bottled water in the Nigerian Market. They found out branding influenced consumer choice, and its influence is stronger than product quality. However, all elements of branding do not have an equal effect on consumer choice for bottled water. Company-of-make and packaging play a greater role while brand name plays a supportive role while packaging with all its attendant elements plays a significant role in determining consumer choices for bottled water. One other hand, Dolnicar and Schaffer (2006) found out that key factors influencing consumer choice and behavior included the safety of source of water, healthy and perception on the quality which differs from that of Ogbuji *et al.* (2011).

According to Grewal and Levy (2008), the more the consumers are familiar with the brand, the easier their decision-making process becomes. A product that is bought without much involvement like bread, sugar brand awareness may not be necessary. However, brand awareness is very important for the

infrequently bought products, if consumers recognize the brand and the attribute that makes it valuable, they will definitely make a purchase. For example, those who have never purchased a Toyota, for instance, just being aware of the brand can help facilitate a purchase decision. This finding varies with what Korankye (2011) says on the effects of the brand on consumer choice of bottled water in Ghana.

Summary of Empirical Review

The empirical literature that has been revealed in this chapter, most of the studies done by different researchers on branding effects on consumer choice show that discussion was only based on consumer goods, e.g. bottled water, country of origin brands, and powder milk brands. Therefore, further research is needed to investigate on branding strategies that can be used to brand institutions and service offering companies because they equally need branding for efficiency.

Most of the findings in the study project factors that affect consumer choice of bottled water but without providing a green light on effects of branding on consumer choice and other vital parameters of branding like brand position, customer focus, and differentiating. Ogbuji, Anyanwu, and Ohna (2011) found out that branding influences consumer choice, and its influence is stronger than product quality. It is evident that not all elements of branding have an equal effect on consumer choice for bottled water. Company-of-make and packaging play a greater role while brand name plays a supportive role, whereas packaging plays a significant role in determining consumer choices for bottled water. Therefore, it essential for companies, manufacturers, institutions to

carefully adopt branding strategies such as customer focus, differentiating, and position to keep on featuring in the business world.

Conclusion

It is unequivocal saying the fact that branding is one of the most critical strategies in marketing for the purpose of influencing consumer choice positively. This research work, aside laying a confirmation to this assertion, should go further in introducing a new dimension to the importance of branding in influencing consumer choice by dissecting the anatomy of it and thereby isolating its various elements to determine their individual contribution in determining consumer choice. Against this backdrop, the research work is to investigate the effects that branding has on consumer choice compared to other factors. The companies should always put in place keys pillars of branding in place which are brand position, customer focus, and differentiating. There should be unlimited branding campaigns that will help create awareness and position the product in the mind of consumers. The companies should also focus on consumer needs as they differentiate their product to gain a competitive edge globally and locally.

Recommendation

Companies should look at key things when prospecting customers by giving attention to the key pillars of branding strategies to create awareness to the consumer. Policy makers and authority must take measures in branding to ensure consumer rights are protected. They should provide the right information in every branded item like the benefits that consumers get when they make a choice to consume that particular product and also ingredients of the

products to avoid confusion. It is believed that branding or re-branding, with a new name or logo, does not come cheaply; therefore, should be handled with utmost care and precision lest it amounts to a total waste of money and other resources.

The surveys that have been done show that the value of a strong brand lies in the impression left by anyone who comes into contact with the organization and its products or services. Besides, the surveys indicate that the most compelling reasons for effective branding is to achieve customer loyalty and support a premium price because purchasers rely on experience and their long-held attitudes about a brand and that successful brands are often focused on one specific market segment. Therefore, managers and market players should endeavor to produce unique packages and labels that would attract and sustain the consumer's attention, and in the long run, increase companies' profitability. There is a need for marketing players to position various water brands in the market by creating packages and communications that will guarantee them reasonable shares of the market. Consumers make choices based on past experience with the brand, performance of the brand, and satisfaction. Therefore, when companies are branding their products, they should be consumer-centered. Organizations should consider adopting the following branding strategies:

Brand Positioning Strategy

Positioning is the way a product is placed in the market. It basically defines what segments of the market it is targeting. For instance, Virginia Slims is a cigarette targeted at women. Basic ingredients in all cigarettes are the same, but

this one has been positioned to attract women by making it slimmer in size and making the packaging sleeker.

Brand Personality Strategy

Brand personality is just like the personality of human beings. It comprises of certain emotional or personal qualities that consumers associate with a particular brand. For example, we can associate youthfulness with Pepsi or ruggedness with Wrangler. Every element of the brand identity, including the color of the logo and the typography on the brand name adds to the personality.

Brand Equity Strategy

Brand equity is the value of a brand. It may include tangible financial values such as market share and revenue as well as intangible aspects such as strategic benefits of the brand. Some of the components include brand association, brand loyalty, perceived quality, and brand awareness. For example, Apple is a major technology brand, and people perceive it is a premium, cutting edge manufacturer of quality products. So, it is not only the sales but the sheer image that takes the equity to a different level altogether.

Brand Experience Strategy

Brand experience is a combination of everything that a customer goes through while purchasing and using that brand. For example, how does one feel while ordering food and eating at KFC? How does the staff behave and how fast do they deliver and of course, how did the food taste? Also, since it has many outlets all over the world, all of them are expected to maintain uniform standards of experience.

Brand Differentiation strategy

Differentiation, as the word suggests, is how a brand stands out in the crowd. For instance, Dell Computers lets people choose their components and assemble their own system, thus making it different from others who sell readymade machines at the shop with no scope for customization. Branding is seen as a tool that drives company products, by increasing sales volume hence profitability of the company. Marketing professional must be the lead to help companies put in place branding strategies that will help in making their product unique.

Brand Communication strategy

Brand communication is the message it delivers through various sources like adverts, brochures, punch lines, and hoardings. If the brand must grow, it must be able to communicate its core benefits to the customers clearly. Consumers use information cues while making purchase decision; the cues includes advertising and product attributes. It is necessary in the marketing world organization to communicate effectively to their customers for sustained growth. If the company do not position themselves through effective promotions and advertising the competitors will outweigh them. According to Alamgir, Nasir, Shamsuddoha, and Nedelea (2010) people often purchase branded cars because they are aware of brand performance. The market information is used to position brand in the market as per the market strategy and most customers think brand is a guarantee to quality and hence, brand plays a major role in consumers.

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