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CONVERGENT DISCOURSES. Exploring the Contexts of Communication

Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureş, 2016

ISBN: 978-606-8624-17-4

PACKAGING ROLE IN BRAND POSITIONING AND COMMUNICATION STRATEGY IN THE FAST MOVING CONSUMER GOODS MARKET IN ROMANIA

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Abstract: Globalization, the increase of competition and the fast development of retail chains, where consumers choose the product directly from their shelves, has increased the importance of the product strategy and brand positioning communication through packaging. This article is a literature review on the product strategies followed by marketers in the Romanian market in order to position their brand in the mind of the consumers in line with the company's perspective. It includes both the most important aspects in product strategies and the brand positioning delivery through packaging. Results show the high importance of packaging in communicating positioning in fast moving consumer goods products and the considerable importance of colors used in connecting with consumers.

Keywords: packaging, brand positioning, product strategy, package communication, retail

1. Introduction

Foods and fast moving consumer goods are type of products which imply the consumer's reduced engagement, as the purchasing decision is usually taken in front of the shelf, without prior research. (Shakhshir, Orienting communication-promotion activities in the preserved food field – Home Garden study case, 2009) Consequently, the experience is offered by brand communication, via promotions and packaging. As communication and promotions generate very high costs for companies, the only communication is the one provided by packaging.

This study has considered relevant articles from the data bases to which the Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca is currently subscribed (JSTOR, Springer, Emerald Insight, Ebsco, and Wiley Online Library) as well as Google Scholar. The searches were conducted between January and May 2016 using the following keywords: food packaging, label, packaging positioning, color positioning and packaging color. Only English language original articles providing empirical results were considered, with no restrictions as to the publication year. The article is aimed at scholars in the fields of marketing and brand management as well as professionals in the field of marketing and design strategy.

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Below we can look at the results of an empirical research carried out in 2011 on consumers of preserved foods, with a view to the most important factors that influence clients in choosing a food and the packaging details considered. The research is an empirical study on a sample of 701 clients of preserved foods in 133 stores chosen randomly throughout Cluj county, Romania.

We may thus notice that most of the clients have chosen the quality and price of foods as the most important influence. Habit and curiosity follow. The fourth most important factor is “packaging”, which has a higher impact than promotions, assortment or recommendations from family or sales people.

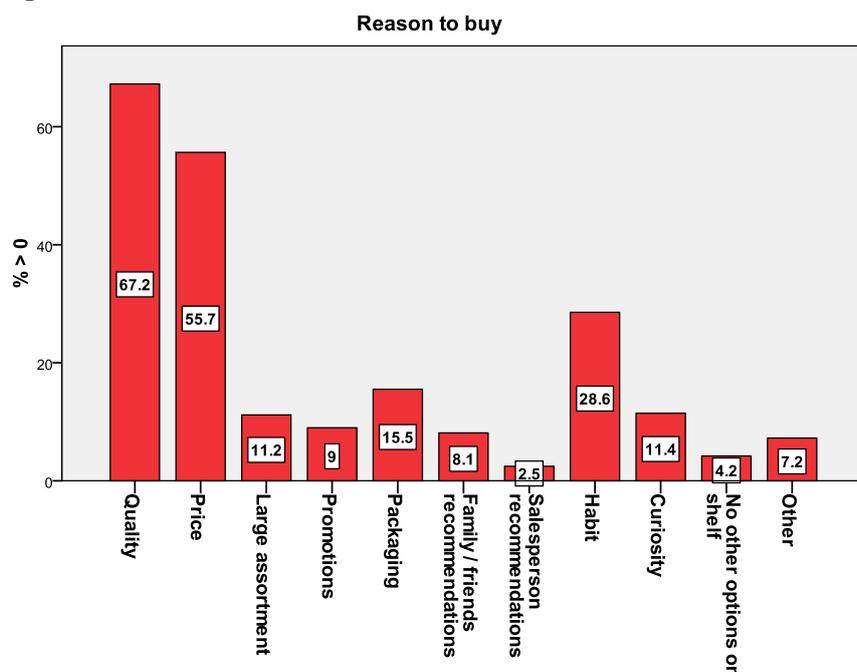


Figure 1: Reasons for which clients buy a certain brand of preserved food (Shakhshir, Researching the Efficiency of "Push" and "Pull" Strategies, 2011)

2. Food packaging

Packaging encloses and protects foods during storage, delivery and sale, while at the same time fulfilling other functions, such as facilitating product use. Moreover, packaging communicates important information to the consumer, with regard to brand positioning. Prior to launching the product on a new market, especially on one which is culturally different, the producer must be aware of all international differences and standards regarding packaging format, including colors, symbols and pictures (Vaclavik & Christian, 2008).

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Packaging is one of the main communication means, but it is often neglected as such, although it represents the direct communication means between consumer and producer, both upon purchase, as well as upon consumption (Brody & Lord, 1999).

The package design is aimed at attracting potential clients and it may be changed so that it contains corresponding products – recipes, coupons etc.

Marsh and Bugusu (Food Packaging — Roles, Materials, and Environmental Issues, 2007) identify convenience as one of the main functions of packaging. In their opinion, convenience includes features such as ease of access, handling, disposal of packaging, its visibility, reseal and microwave ability. Consequently, packaging holds an important role in reducing the effort to prepare and serve a meal. As such, oven trays, cooking bags and microwave packaging allow the consumer to cook an entire meal at minimum effort, while the new ways of opening and resealing packaging also provide a series of advantages, such as the possibility to reuse, as well as fast opening and disposal (Marsh & Bugusu, 2007).

Changing the packaging may determine visible results on sales, but such changing must be thought through and it must not be major, in order not to mislead current and loyal product clients (Vaclavik & Christian, 2008). According to the same authors, there are certain products, such as milk cartons, whose packaging change would be accepted at great difficulty by the public; however, for other products, such as cereals, changing the packaging material or form may be welcomed, accepted and even beneficial for the product. In a study conducted by professor Brian Wansink from the University of Pennsylvania, it was noticed that a consumer would consume more of a product if it comes in larger package sizes (The bigger the package, the more you eat., 1997). This may be determined by the phenomenon of “buy more, use more”, as products bought in larger packages are perceived by consumers as being less expensive, although this is not always the case. The second reason may be that products in larger packaging will last longer, while the third reason may be the wish to consume faster the products in large packages, as they take up more space (The bigger the package, the more you eat., 1997).

The market of self-service stores, which reduces the product distribution costs from producer to consumer, would not exist in the absence of graphical communication of the message on packaging. The task of communicating brand identity, price, instructions, warnings, warranty terms and conditions, or storage conditions etc. falls on the packaging and corresponding labels (Vaclavik & Christian, 2008). Globally, most domestic regulations require the packaging to display considerable information, especially in the case of foods. Such information is destined to support the consumer and to provide the necessary information for optimum consumption. With a view to the features of the self-service system, the packaging must convey clearly and visibly the information needed by the consumer (Brody & Lord, 1999). As such, the package on the shelf is the main connection between the producer and the buyer, as the purchase object is not the product, but its packaging. In fact, the latter represents the promise of what it contains. Consequently, a recognizable packaging is extremely important to the process of selling goods, if not essential. Brody and Lord (Development of New

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Food Products for Changing Market Place, 1999) claim that the graphic elements which hide, cover or misguide may lead to the client's refusal to continue the purchase, which results in the producer's sales drop.

At global level, less than half of the products sold in supermarkets are supported by a significant media campaign. Consequently, the packaging itself becomes an advertising environment which communicates extremely efficiently the benefits obtained by a potential consumer, following the investment of an amount of money in the product (Brody & Lord, 1999). Nevertheless, in spite of its important role in communication, roughly 25% of the products on the market are distributed without packaging or with minimum packaging. For instance, fresh meat, delicacies, freshly-baked products are usually distributed without graphic elements on their packaging.

Apart from legal and marketing requirements, packaging must observe environmental impact and recycling regulations (Marsh & Bugusu, 2007). Furthermore, new regulations demand that it contains traceability data. According to the Codex Alimentarius Commission (2013, p. 25), traceability is "the ability to follow the movement of a food through specific stage(s) of production, processing and distribution". Traceability has three objectives: improving supply management, facilitating the following of the movement for safety standards and quality reasons, depending on batches, and in order to differentiate and introduce on the market products with subtle and undetectable quality features (Golan, Krissoff, Kuchler, Calvin, Nelson, & Price, 2004). In order to comply with the traceability principle, food-manufacturing companies include on the label of their products unique codes of various formats (e.g. bar codes, magnetic codes etc.), which may be read either with the naked eye or by using equipment (Marsh & Bugusu, 2007).

During the same research carried out in 2011, we have also analyzed the packaging elements which influence the purchasing process. The chart below answers the questions of what clients consider important with regard to the packaging of a product.

It may be noticed that the most important aspects are "the ability to see the product", "handling" and "product description".

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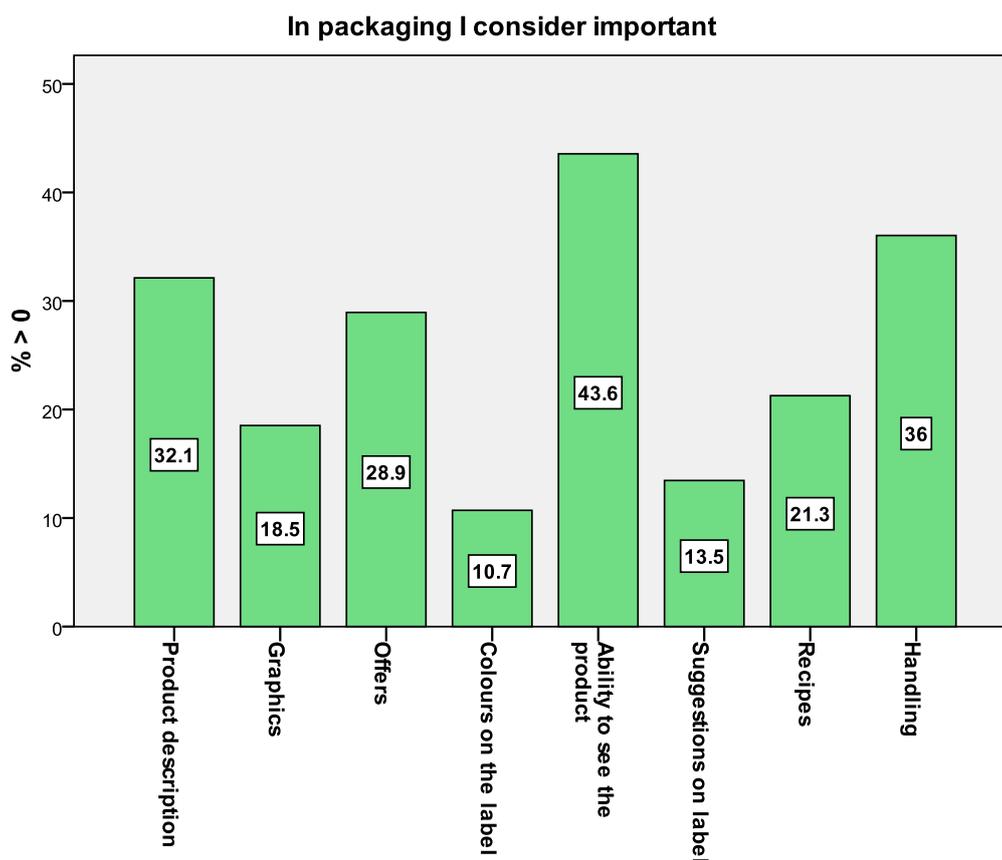


Figure 2: Important factors regarding product packaging (Shakhshir, Researching the Efficiency of "Push" and "Pull" Strategies, 2011)

The chart in figure 3 indicates what clients read as a matter of priority when buying a food product. It shows that the most-read information when buying preserved foods are the shelf life, ingredients, E content and weight.

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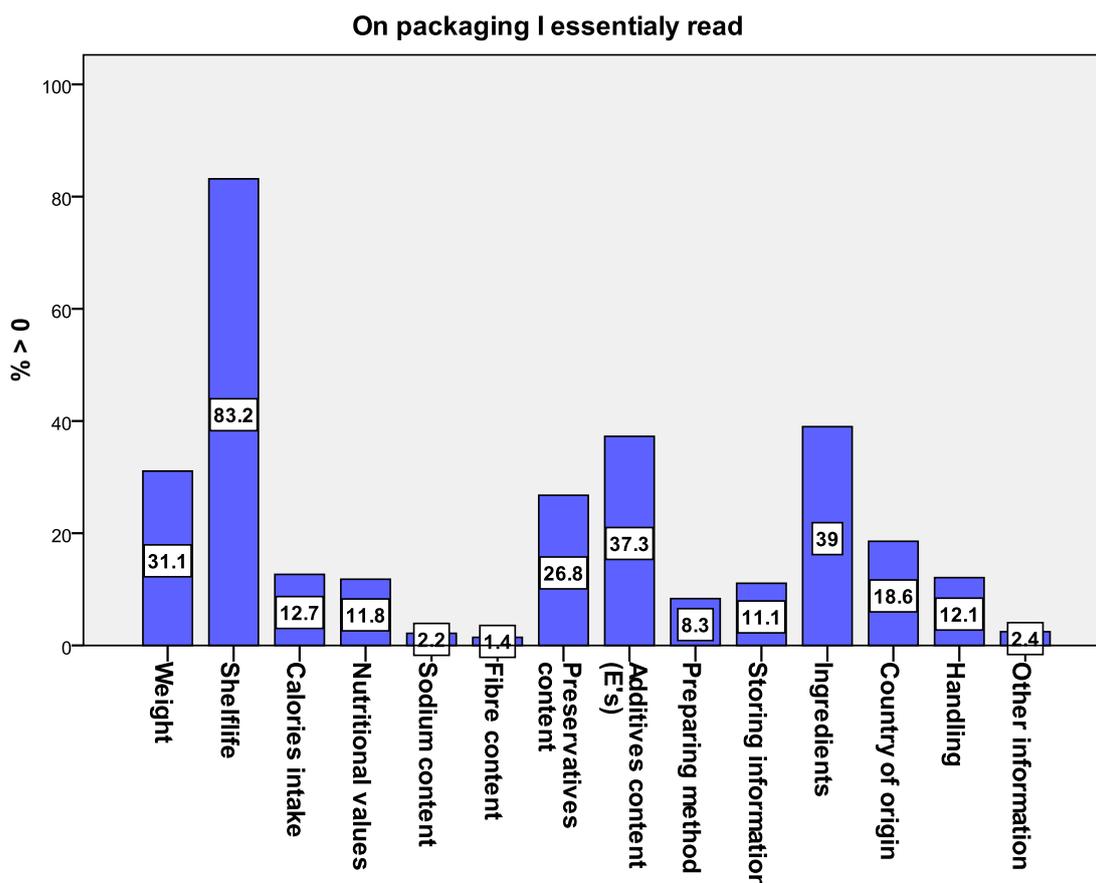


Figure 3: Information prevalently read by clients on packaging (Shakhshir, Researching the Efficiency of "Push" and "Pull" Strategies, 2011)

3. Product features as positioning elements

With concern to products, positioning features three specific elements (A.B.C.): Attributes (features), Benefits and brand Claims (promises) (Lautman, 1993). In order to identify such information from the clients' side, it is necessary to carry out a quality analysis. The brand attributes (features): the first step when approaching positioning or re-positioning is to identify the intrinsic features of the products/service. Anil Kaul and Vithala Rao (1995) differentiate between the features of products and their attributes. Product features refer to physical traits that shape the product: size, volume, raw material used, substance, color. These do not influence directly the consumer's decision, instead they help at building the attributes. Product attributes are the dimensions which determine the consumer's perception, as they are more abstract and fewer than product features. Product attributes represent a mix of features, as well as its marketing mix. Lautman (The ABC of Positioning, 1993)

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identifies the main product elements referred to, namely: product name, packaging, price and distribution.

Brand benefits derive from attributes and take expression as follows: functionality, as well as physical and psychological aspect (Lautman, 1993). The acknowledgement of benefits represents an intermediary stage in establishing positioning alternatives. In his article, Arango (2008, p. 32) stated that there are certain packaging features which are sought by consumers, with regard to color and form, and which helps them identify the product, its qualities and uses. Lautman (The ABC of Positioning, 1993) considers that Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory may help in establishing the correlation between needs and the means to satisfy them. According to Maslow's theory, physiological needs represent the basic level of the pyramid, as they are rather standardized and relatively easy to satisfy, while the need of self-actualization represents the tip of the pyramid, as it is extremely difficult to satisfy and varying significantly from one individual to another (Pride, Hughes, & Kapoor, 2011). Based on this idea, Lautman (The ABC of Positioning, 1993) states that at the most basic level the benefits provided by a brand or product will satisfy a physiological need, such as thirst or hunger, while at the highest level, benefits will reflect the consumers' need of self-actualization.

Benefits represent the material with which copywriters work in order to draft advertising texts. By using terms specific to advertising, marketers and copywriters express reasons for purchase, promotions, positioning strategies. Body language, face expressions, and images are non-verbal modalities of conveying the message, alongside the client's engagement in the process of communicating claims.

The communication of attributes, features and benefits is carried out via brand claims (Lautman, 1993). As such, the brand Claims (Promises) made via communications become essential to consumers, while observing promises creates the basis for positioning. Brett Killip (1997) describes packaging as a critical element in communicating the promise regarding product experience prior to trying or consuming it (Killip, 1997). In the case of wine, the research of Draskovic et. al (2011) demonstrates that a wine consumer makes a clear connection between the packaging of the product and the price of a wine bottle. Consumers expect that the most expensive wines should have glass packaging, while plastic is associated with cheap wine.

Packaging communicates the personality of a brand via several structural and visual elements, as well as the combination of the logo, colors, fonts, packaging materials, product description, form and other elements which help to a stronger association with the brand (Underwood, 2003). The packaging of a product communicates with the consumer via color, form, size and information rendered (Fill, 2009).

Color holds important functions with regard to packaging. Valdez and Mehrabian (1995) explain how psychologists associate color to emotions and Underwood (2003, p. 65) indicates the fact that a consumer perceives the colors of packaging in three different ways: physiological, cultural

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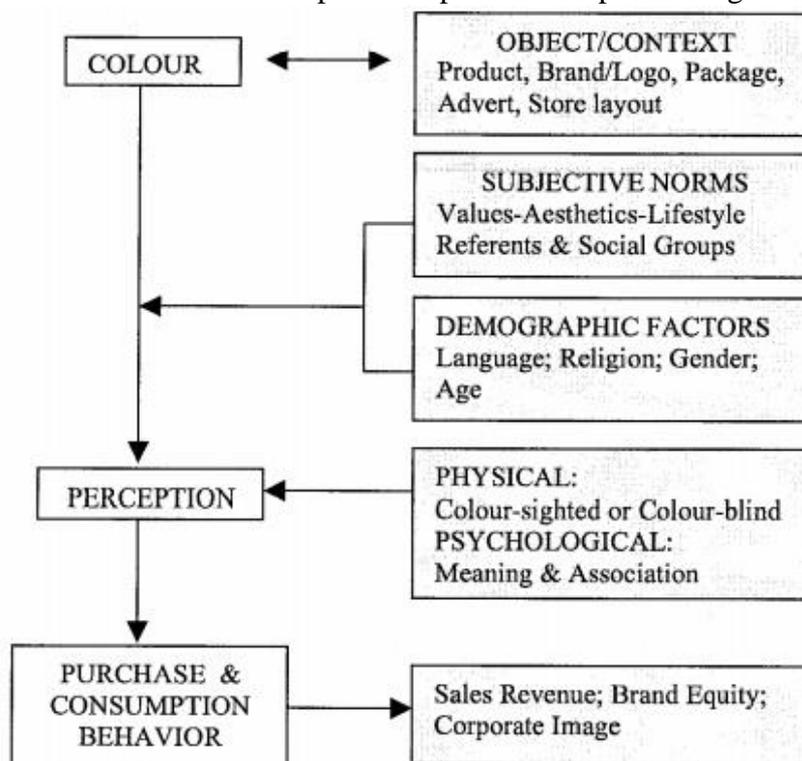
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and associative. The physiological way is universal and involuntary (such as red, which accelerates the pulse, while white and green slows it down). The cultural experience is represented by visual connections accumulated in time within different societies (for instance, black evokes elegance and premium in Europa and America (Hine, 1995; Jacobs, Keown, Worthley, & Ghymn, 1991), while in Japan it is connected with fear(Aslam, 2006)). Within the cultural difference we can see in Byron's research (Byron, 2009; Valdillez, 2012) P&G's decision to change the color of its product in the Spanish market, "Tide" to yellow, as opposed to orange in the United States in order satisfy the local detergent consumer. Associative elements reflect the consumers' expectations as influenced by the colors of a certain category, or of some products, following marketing efforts during a longer time period (Hine, 1995). Plasschaert and Floet (1995) state that these are able to: simplify the process of recognizing different product categories (light colors for detergents, white for medicine), communicate product positioning (black and gold create an image of elegance and premium), represent codes for a certain category (for detergents, yellow means lemon, for sweets, green means mint), and give the impression of complex attributes (green means that it does not fatten or that it is environmental-friendly). (Plasschaert & Floet, 1995).

We can see below a model proposed by Mubeen M. Aslam (2006, p. 11) regarding the role of color and the elements it influences in the purchase process and positioning in the consumers' mind.



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Figure 4: A hypothetical model of color application in marketing (arrows show the direction of influence)(2006, p. 11)

Underwood (2003) concludes that packaging communicates brand identity, the social experience associated to design elements on the packaging, and that it plays the leading role in creating or determining the quality of the relationship between the consumer and the brand, especially with regard to consumers of fast moving goods. In this way, packaging becomes the most important element with which they come into contact at the shelf; together with its elements, packaging helps at fixing the positioning in the consumers' mind (Underwood, 2003)

4. Conclusions

Once self-service (and retail) stores have developed rapidly, a process which can be simpler observed on the Romanian market having recently been accessed by international retail stores, and the number of brands on shelf has increased, the product strategy and the packaging of foods and fast moving consumer goods has become essential for marketing departments. This was supported by a decrease in the influence of store personnel with regard to sales. These products are goods implying reduced engagement, meaning that the decision is taken when in front of the shelf; and, as we noticed following the result of the empirical study carried out in 2011, packaging represents an influence factor of increased importance, following quality, price and habit closely.

Apart from the role of protection, preservation and providing functional and legal information, packaging holds an important role in product communication and convenience. As such, we are able to confirm that the packaging represents the promise of experiencing a product prior to consuming it (Killip, 1997).

The product strategy, via its most important element, packaging, aims at creating a relationship between the consumer and actual product, positioning it in the mind of the former precisely where the brand owner wishes to, and the present document shows us that colors used are the most important element, both for recognizing the category or the product, as well as for the emotion rendered.

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