

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH IN COMMERCE & MANAGEMENT

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PRODUCT POSITIONING STRATEGY CAUSING SUCCESS OR FAILURE: CASES-BASED OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Last few decades have witnessed the various marketing programs and tools in cementing brand image and perception in the consumer mind space, which was championed by Ries and Trout during 1970's. The purpose of this paper is to explore how positioning plays a role in influencing the success or failure of a product in a competitive market. Methods include exploratory research containing reviews and cases. The findings strongly suggest the way positioning is used has a greater influence on the fate of a product. Limitation lies in methodology of the study, hence it does not safely merit generality and universality. The study is significant to the academia, marketing practitioners, consultants, researchers, students and others.

KEYWORDS

positioning, communication, branding, product success, and product failure.

INTRODUCTION

From classic marketing to current one across the temporal spectrum, product is conceptualized, developed, and delivered, to meet or exceed the consumer's expectation on its three pronged performance - functional, emotional, and aesthetic. Across this continuum, the marketer diligently places or positions the image of a product or brand in the consumer mind in a competitive market with a view to lucidly telling about the purpose, attributes, and benefits of the offerings in socio-commercial spectrum. The way management conceptualizes, strategizes, and practices largely determines the success or failure of a product.

The marketers used positioning strategy until 1970s, but the approach was presumably directed to the market place. But later, the term, 'positioning', was first formally tossed by Al Ries and Jack Trout in 1982, through their book, "Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind", which revolutionized its true applicable concept. According to them, positioning is to create a distinct and unique image in the consumer's mind. It is perceptual and relative to one or more competitors. It is "the process of designing the company's offering and image to occupy a distinctive place in the minds of the target market" (Kotler and Keller, 2006). The act of positioning, being strategic, is integral to the organization's purpose and promise. Nonconformance to the positioning concept and practice is detrimental to a product. New Coke in 1985, Tylenol in 1982 exemplifies this. Reliance retail recently suffered from myopic positioning. Delight, a non-vegetarian Reliance retail store was terminated as it could not strike a fine balance among availability, convenience, and community.... "Non-veg business doesn't gel well with the values of Ambani family (Pandey, 2013).

Recent time has witnessed how wise custodians of products, such as Apple, McDonald's, Zara, Hyundai, Harley-Davidson, etc., have successfully positioned their product's image, first, in the already battle-infested mind space of the consumer, and then shelf space.

The positioning is about how the consumers "perceive the quality, attributes, value, price, and image of the brand" (Keller, 2008). Right positioning is a key to brand building for any firm. Firms chart out communication and promotion strategies to make positioning and branding relevant and meaningful. The companies use repositioning mantra when the product's performance is questioned. Mahindra and Mahindra used revitalization strategy through Spark the Rise, which proved success.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this paper is to explore how positioning strategies influence the success or failure of a product or service in a competitive market.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study is significant to the academia, scholars, budding researchers, students, practitioners, consultants, and others.

SCOPES AND LIMITATIONS

Scope of the study includes product, brand, positioning, competition, and elected giant firms, while limitation are time constraints, limited resources, selected mini cases, and research methodology.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Positioning is a way of a firm's products and perception to capture a clear place in the consumer's minds (Kotler, et al, 2012). "Positioning is the act of fixing the locus of the product offer in the minds of the target consumers" (Ramaswami and Namakumari, 2009). The purpose of a product positioning is to build an image for a brand in the consumer's mind in order for it to be above the overcrowded market (Subroto Sengupta, n.d, Ramaswami and Namakumari, 2009). Brand positioning is central for the application of a brand in a cluttered market (Aaker, 1996; Hooley et al., 1998; Kotler, 2000). Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000) viewed brand positioning as a supplement to its identity and value proposition directed to communication for the consumer. Product can be positioned on the parameters, such as usage, product class, cultural symbol, customer benefits, pricing, etc.

The basis of brand positioning is set on the various marketing programs, strategies and tactics. "Positioning entails communication plans regarding the development of images of the brands that companies offer" (Ganiyu, et al, 2013). "A positioning strategy comprises of several related decisions or activities and it is the key outcome of the strategy development phase in the strategic marketing planning process" (Ganiyu, et al, 2013). Ries and Trout (1997) viewed that positioning a brand in the consumer's mind is one of the starting points to be successful in the competitive market, which provides competitive advantage. Positioning usually refers to plain connotation a place - place of a product in the market), a comparative basis - product deliverables of the product against its competitors on certain evaluative parameters, and as a mental attitude - consumer's perception towards a product (Ganiyu, et al, 2013).

RESEARCH METHOD

The research design is exploratory and descriptive in nature using literature review and six cases of globally reputed organization experiencing positioning strategies and resultant consumer response.

CASES

Following is the list of famous successful and failed products

S. No.	Failed brands	Company	Launching Year	Main Reasons of Failure
1	Nano	Tata Motor	2009	"logical upgrade for a family of four with a two wheeler" did not work effectively, revised high price, hype
2	The Zune	Microsoft	2006	marketing strategy, less attractive than iPod, high price, and lower sales
3	Breakfast Mate	Kellogg's	1999	refrigerated milk in the pack, taste, child-unfriendly pack, wrong ads, high price, etc.
4	Arch Deluxe	McDonald's	1996	adults targeted, pricy, and sophistication
5	Persil Power	Unilever	1994	removed stains, but damaged clothes also, consequence was huge recall, lawsuits, etc.
6	Apple Newton	Apple	1993	high price and bulky
7	Premier, Smokeless Cigarettes	RJ Reynolds'	1988	"produced a smell and a flavor that left users retching.", smell like crack cocaine
8	New Coke	Coca-Cola	1985	low performance, taste, originality issue
9	Corfam, fake leather shoes	DuPont	1960s	fake leather and discomfort
10	The Edsel	Ford Motor	1958	design, mismatch between hype and delivery

List of Successful Products / Brands

S. No.	Successful Brands	Company	Launching Year	Main reasons for Product's Success
1	Galaxy S4	Samsung Electronic	2013	ad spend, technology, innovation, inspiration, futuristic, 'life companion'-slogan
2	iTune Store	Apple	2013	aesthetics, simplicity, and ease of use for songs
3	Gillette Fusion	P&G	2006	five blade technology, soothing micro-pulses, etc.
4	Nike Plus	Nike	2006	innovation, measuring pace and distance
5	Fair and handsome	Emami Group	2005	15-35 age group of Indian men for fairness tagged as, Be fair Be handsome'
6	Gmail	Google	2004	scholastic search, storage capacity, better feature, ease of use, fast, etc.
7	Zara	Inditex Group	1974	digital strategy, least turnaround time, sophistication, aspiration, key pillars: beauty, clarity, functionality, and sustainability
8	Big Mac	McDonald's	1967	access, quick service, everyday value price, secret ingredients, etc.
9	Corolla	Toyota	1966	economy, safety, reliability, and style
10	Lux	Unilever	1924	toilet soap, promoted through movie star

EMIRATES AIRLINES

The positioning statement of Emirates Airlines is "The finest in the sky". "Emirates have a new platform and direction "Hello Tomorrow" which positions itself as an enabler of global connectivity and meaningful experiences". The company has placed itself on consumer life style and not as brand of travel icon. The company has positioned itself on the high end and long haul turf (Leick, 2007). "The introduction of glitzy A380 to Los Angeles provided a logical fit as this airliner epitomizes the pompousness of the Hollywood glamour" (www.khaleejtimes.com, 2013). The company has been successful in presenting a memorable and special experience. "They provide quality service to their clients in terms of comfort, convenience, safety and onboard entertainment". "Emirates ranks first in product differentiation such as on board mobile phone usage, internet browsing and sun and moon concept". Emirates airlines close competitors are Lufthansa, Air France and Etihad (Paul, 2013).

STARBUCKS

The company has globally emerged as powerhouse of beverage brand in an incredibly short span. Part of success is attributed to its positioning strategy, which is essentially centered on experience, which is an equivalence of unique selling proposition. It has tried to create human spirit over a cup for the user and another for the neighborhood. The company plants its resounding message in the mind of young college students, social classes, and neighborhoods who do not mind paying \$3 to enjoy its holistic value. The company, being in an expansion mode, is capturing the audience of wider age band, small towns, country sides, highway rest stops, with rapid growth and expansion (Bremont, 2013). Positioning statement of Starbucks is roped in a premium beverage, which promises a unique pleasant and pristine experience to its consumer. The approach diligently creates a fine balance between its offerings and consumer's lifestyle. They want to be more than just a comfortable coffee house and be associated with high quality products and service. The ambience should be relaxing and calming. Starbucks has positioned themselves for the very busy people and those who will not compromise on taste and quality. The company thus has been phenomenally successful in its product positioning and marketing activities at large.

SOUTHWEST AIRLINES

South West Airlines as ingrained its positioning into internal branding in its promises and deliverables, which is mirrored in its mission statement as "dedication to the highest quality of customer service delivered with a sense of warmth, friendliness, individual pride, and the company spirit (www.southwest.com, 20132). The company hopes to see its employees spinning the same warmth, respect, and responsiveness to the customers. Such approach at Southwest Airlines is not in congruence with the conventional practice of 'customer first'. The positioning mantra includes luv, team spirit, and altruism (Milles and Mangold, 2005). The positioning through internal branding is further reinforced through "company's pledge to provide safe, affordable, reliable, timely, courteous, and efficient air transportation" (Southwest Airlines, 2005).

FAILED BRANDS**NEW COKE**

Turner (n.d) is of the view that, "many people have selective memories about the Coca-Cola Company's decision to launch the product and the initial consumer reaction". The company was experiencing a continued saturation in the market or its products for many years, while Pepsi was doing good by repositioning itself on youthfulness through Pepsi Challenger' and Pepsi Generation in 1970's and 1980 respectively. All along, Pepsi continued to claim on customer's preference of Pepsi's taste over Coke, which propelled the latter to introduce the new formula on taste in response to Pepsi. The company introduced New Coke and terminated original Coca-Cola on April 23, 1985. But consumers did not accept this newer version (Haig, 2011). "And production of the original formulation ended that same week" (Mikkelson, 2011). This is believed to have been one of the biggest marketing blunders in its history (Haig, 2011).

ARCH DELUXE

McDonald's with famous tag line, 'I am loving it', revolves its positioning around kids, family, teens and health and wellness. It is promoting itself not only as a fast food place but also as a social space. McDonald's, based on thorough research, two years testing and huge promotional spend of \$100 million, introduced hamburger, Arch Deluxe to adults, in 1996. The company ran campaign employing 'Ronald McDonald playing adult's role such as playing golf and night club dance stating, "McDonald's is growing up". But the consumer complained about its taste, unhealthiness, high price: being at more than \$2 relative to 99 cents from Burger King, higher calories-610 (Peterson, 2013). Consumers did not count on "sophistication, tantalization, and culinary delights", rather, they were looking for "cleanliness, consistence, and convenience".... Miller opined that "McDonald's in this context was not cognitive, it was reflexive....it created a need to think" (Haig, 2011). It's been considered one of the most expensive product failures in McDonald's history (Bhasin, 2011).

HARLEY-DAVIDSON

Harley-Davidson, in excess of a 110 year market presence, created Harley Owners Group (HOG), and rose to 1.4 million members by 2010. Harley Davidson has raised its brand to have assumed cult power (casestudyinc.com, 2012). The CEO of Saatchi and Saatchi puts, this brand has built its own mythology. The brand characterizes courage, determination, boldness, ruggedness, confidence, freedom, macho connotations, rituals, raw power, among others. The owners are true to the brand and least bothered about miniscule pitfalls. This appeal is also about masculinity of the rider. The owners love to have tattoos and imageries on their bodies. The company capitalized on its consumer's strong loyalty by introducing perfume, aftershave, wine cooler, among other perfumery and fashion accessories (Haig, 2011). But, these new line extension including ties, and infant clothing went too far in the 1990s. Even the loyal customer could not resonate with the new line of products. The hard criticisms eventually forced the company to pull of several odd products (casestudyinc.com, 2012).

DISCUSSION

Based on the study coverage from literature review and mini cases on positioning strategies, Emirates has been successful in resonating with the consumers through various positioning strategies. 'Keep discovering, Fly Emirates' connected the consumer quite closely, and even 'The finest in the sky' has been contributing its part making the airliner ironically successful. Starbucks, since its inception, worked on professionals who wanted a third place, away from the office and the home. Also, the company offered a cozy environment for unwinding hem up, and even holding meetings. The company became successful in positioning its products quite sensibly. Southwest Airlines positioned its services being distinctive from its rivals in the industry. The company focused on internal branding with the expectation of passing the satisfaction to the consumers. The company did the necessary positioning strategies, which proved an enviable success. On the front of failures, Coca-Cola, sensing a continued success of Pepsi and resultant threat, hurriedly introduced New Coke, a sweeter version. The mistake lied in ignoring the long held originality of the product, eventually leading to a legendary fiasco. Arch Deluxe targeted the youth with huge ad spend and fanfare, but this segment found it unhealthy, expensive, and basically unappealing, which was a disaster. The company should have undergone a thorough research before formulation and introduction. Harley-Davidson concluded that its loyal customers would fall for anything containing its tag. But it was brand extension resulting in the failure of perfume and aftershave products.

CONCLUSION

In a highly competitive market, product positioning plays a key role in determining the product's success or failure. Company succeeds when it formulates and offers right product and is able to establish a right fit; such product, then, is set to succeed, whereas, when there is misfit between a product, communication, and consumer's learning, the product or service in question dwindles to doom. Success and failure of product should be attributed to a multitude of marketing programs, strategies, and tactics; of which positioning is one of the key constituents.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The firms must evaluate various internal and external forces and know the customers before introducing a product or service to the market. A good mix of communication, promotion, and marketing should be designed to communicate to the right customers at right time. Most importantly, positioning strategy must be holistic on paper and practice and be intended to establish competitively unique image in the consumers mind with a view to eventually create patronage from them.

FUTURE DIRECTION

The study can serve a basis for further researches on success or failure of a product because of 'positioning' separately. The nature of the study can also be taken up as an empirical one. Multi-disciplinary, comparative, and methodically various researches can be carried out for different extent.

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