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AN INSIGHT ON CONSUMER CHOICE AND MARKETING OPPORTUNITIES FOR BREAKFAST- CEREALS**SIMI SIMON****LECTURER****BUSINESS & ACCOUNTING DEPT****MUSCAT COLLEGE****SULTANATE OF OMAN****DR. MURALI MANOHAR****PROFESSOR****VIT BUSINESS SCHOOL****VIT UNIVERSITY****VELLORE****ABSTRACT**

This study aims to explore the changing meal patterns of contemporary consumers to Breakfast-Cereals in the global market scenario. Paper attempts to determine the consumer choice and hence forth the future market opportunities for Breakfast-Cereal companies. The study reviewed many international publications and records as well as large amount of secondary sources of data on Breakfast-Cereals. The finding shows Breakfast - Cereal as an accepted consumer product with immense opportunities for the marketers to get hold of a permanent place in the Breakfast market. The study also derived at some commendations to Breakfast-Cereal Marketers for improving the existing system.

KEYWORDS

Breakfast-Cereals, Consumer choice, Marketing opportunities.

BACKGROUND

Market Line reports that the world Breakfast - Cereal industry worth \$28 billion in 2010, recorded 4% growth for the four preceding years. Ready-to-eat cereals stand to be the leading market segment generating almost \$24.5 billion in 2010, and almost account to more than 87% in value of the overall market. It is expected to accelerate and exceed a yearly rate of 4% between 2010 and 2015 which will generate more than \$34 billion (Breakfast and Cereal Industry, Reportlinker.com: 2011). Changing life styles, consumer awareness regarding healthy eating habits and diverse food consumption patterns fuelled growth in the global cereal industry. Cereal manufacturers are producing more organic and specialty food products due to the increased focus on the benefits of a healthy diet. Breakfast-Cereals grant a diverse, inexpensive and suitable source of nutrition, serving a multi-billion dollar global industry. The manufacture of cereals involves processing raw materials like rice, sugar, flour, wheat, corn and malt extract into ready-to-eat cereals, cereal bars and hot cereals. The finished cereal products are sold to retailers, food service providers and grocery wholesalers and making it available to the final consumers. Keeping the above background in view, current study aims to explore the changing meal patterns of consumers. It focuses on the consumer choice and future market opportunities of Breakfast-Cereals. Information collected by the study tried to derive commendations to Breakfast-Cereal Marketers for improving the existing system. The method used in this research study includes desk reviews of international publications and records and a large amount of secondary sources of data on "Breakfast-Cereals".

CHANGING MEAL PATTERNS

There are many social changes noticed on food and drink markets across the world. Health awareness has also improved by giving special emphasis on balanced food. Over the past few years attitude towards Breakfast has changed dramatically. People are more aware of overall calorific intake as a part of new lifestyle. The trends are particularly strong in urban areas where consumers have high purchasing power. An increasing number of manufacturers have fortified Breakfast-Cereals with vitamins and health benefits, thus creating a favourable perception for cereals.

Perception theory of Mitchell and Boustani (1992) indicates various risks as motivating factors in consumer's choice of Breakfast- Cereal. It significantly affects the consumers' choice and purchasing behavior for Breakfast-Cereals. The most important risks identified were those of taste and nutritional value. As per their studies, risk relieving solutions for these risks are choosing a well-known brand and also to try free samples of products. The study highly supports the elevated spends on advertisements and promotional efforts of the marketers. The consumers are alert to the information that is related to his/her purchase decision. The consumer will respond to all favorable information and acquire them as beliefs and end up in taking it as their attitudes.

Consumer Attitudes to Foods and Nutrition study by Stephen (1986) revealed that consumers care about the nutritional content of their foods, as this is the first step towards a healthy diet. A consumer survey (Mitchell, Boustani, 1992) affirmed that eating Breakfast-Cereal is because consumers enjoyed its taste. And also another reason is estimated as the increase of convenience which Breakfast-Cereals have over other Breakfast alternatives. Consumer prefers Breakfast-Cereal because of non-nutrient characteristics also such as grain type, texture, sugar and fruit content. There is recurrently an exchange between nutrient quality and taste by the socio-demographic variables (Shi and Price, 1998).

The percentage of men in forties, in the last two decades considered obese with a body-mass index of over 25 has increased from 21.4% to 34.1% resulted in heart disease, the biggest killer in the world (Tabuchi, 2008). The health benefit is the highest trigger to adopt Breakfast-Cereals in the modern consumer's diet. Cereals are excellent source for carbohydrates, protein and dietary fiber. In addition most of the cereals help to reduce the cholesterol which is favorable for controlling the heart disease. Customer's perception for traditional breakfasts is that they are heavy stuff, which keeps stomach full until a relatively late lunch. Now the marketers are trying to convince them that Breakfast-Cereals also offer the same 'fullness' solution, though not cooked in oil or ghee.

One of the main reasons consumers adopting cereals for their breakfast is the sheer convenience of getting it ready by three minutes. Comparatively all the traditional breakfasts are cumbersome to prepare. Particularly for double-income couples, where the morning time is considered as high premium, this is a favourable trigger. Convenience backed up with health benefits can be an unbeatable combination. The growing interest and action in the instant food market is also an emerging trend. The young demographic profile, increasing family income, improving urbanization, increasing number of working couple, time constraints, global travel and increasing global cuisine have played a major role in the acceptability of Breakfast-Cereals. The taste preference varies from one consumer to another as the cereals offers different flavours to their brands. Children will not prefer the taste of cereals if it is not containing the sweet taste. Children will get influenced by their favourite taste and would become loyal to their favourite brands.

MARKET OPPORTUNITIES

International market of the Breakfast-Cereals is more than what meets our observation. The challenge faced by Breakfast industry is to develop programmes that recognize the nature of opportunities in the market. Research (Stephen J., 1986; Mitchell and Pari Boustani, 1992; Ogba and Johnson, 2010; Allagolab and

Binkley, 2005) from secondary sources clarified why consumers are opting Breakfast-Cereals to traditional breakfast. It also justified the opportunities of Breakfast-Cereals in the global market. According to majority of these studies, Cereals are rich in whole grains which supplies high percentage of vitamins, minerals and fiber. Consumption of Cereals is now becoming the one of the physiological needs which most of the consumers seeks to fulfil.

Stephen J. (1986) performed a research to ascertain the degree of consumer concern with diet and health issues, and evidence suggests that the level of concern on health is significant. With the study it was evident that issue-specific slogans such as 'less fat', 'more fiber', 'less salt' or 'less sugar' tries to put emphasis on the importance of nutritional attributes. A study by Mitchell and Pari Boustani (1992) investigated many secondary sources, some focus groups and a survey from 180 shoppers revealed that various risks of taste and nutritional value appeared significant in affecting consumers' purchasing behaviour.

Another consumer study by Mitchell and Pari Boustani, (1992), recognized the significance of taste offered by different Breakfast - Cereals. Another reason was the increased convenience with Breakfast-Cereals has over other breakfast alternatives. The results of this survey turn to be the eye opener for leading manufacturers and marketers to encourage non-eaters to consume Breakfast-Cereals. Ogba and Johnson (2010) gave information to the marketers regarding how packaging would affect the purchasing preferences of children in the Breakfast – Cereal industry. The outcome reflects that packagings affects children's product preferences and influence their choices. The results from this study also emphasise the importance of packaging as an important element of the marketing mix, i.e. the "silent salesman" and the power it can add towards the communication.

Research by Tate and Lyle (2012) gives insights to marketers on consumers' perception to Breakfast-Cereals. The survey polled 1,565 European consumers on the various elements they consider as important in their options for Breakfast-Cereals. It revealed that the reasons for those who are buying these cereals are considering future potential benefits. A focus group research (Lee et al., 2007), investigated the attitudes, opinions and concerns of the two largest consumer segments of ready-to-eat (RTE) cereal and their findings illustrated that the concerns and needs of different segments of healthy breakfast cereal (HBC) can be readily transferred to the commercial sector.

Annunziata and Vecchio (2010) studied the factors affecting Italian Consumer Attitudes towards functional foods and found that healthy food products have rapidly gained market shares. The study has helped to develop a variety of new products with health-related claims and images. In addition, it was found that demographic characteristics are only partially correlated with the acceptance of these products. Findings would give interesting market opportunities for policy makers and food companies.

Allagolab and Binkley (2005) examined the effect of prices, household structure and purchase behaviour of the household Breakfast-Cereal choice. They examined three measures of the healthiness: an overall nutritional quality index, a fiber index and sugar index. Households with older members make healthier choices when compared to the households with teens and children. Educated households also choose healthier cereals. There is a positive relationship between income and the choice. A higher income serves as an access to nutrition information of various Breakfast-Cereals. They also suggested that among various factors expected to influence the purchasing behaviour, the prices appear to the strongest effect on the health choices. The more, healthy cereals become less expensive, the more households would buy them.

Binkley and Eales (2000) conducted an exploratory study on how the prices of Breakfast-Cereals, demographic variables and health elements of consumers affect consumer choice between high fiber and low fiber Break-fast Cereals. There was also an increase in the consumer awareness of the functional foods and health benefits with age. Middle-aged women were more likely to consume functional foods than other age categories. They are considered to be the innovative consumers in terms of purchasing new products. Females generally had more knowledge about diet and health relationship than males and more positive attitudes towards functional cereal foods (Poulsen, 1999).

Ares and Gambaro (2007) indicated that socio-demographics such as age and gender as the key determinants which influenced consumer acceptance for functional food products. The study provides valuable information to food companies for identifying new market segments and positioning strategies. Moreover, consumers can very well provide information to marketers with relevant information on the specific needs and concerns in order to design their new products.

Results from the above literature review establish that cereal foods seem to be satiate, healthy and convenient. This is consistent with the previous research (Dean et al., 2007; McKeivith, 2004) which showed that consumers treated cereals as having healthy properties. Consumers' knowledge of cereal foods is found to be a determinant specifically because of their perceptions towards health benefits.

INSIGHTS FOR MARKETERS

The rising trend for the demand of healthy food among urban middleclass people is fascinating many Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) companies to explore the Food market. Most of these firms have begun to focus on the Breakfast cereal market where the profit margins are anticipated to be high. Breakfast was traditionally a sit-down meal in most of the countries. The past few years witnessed a drastic shift in the eating habits of the young urban consumers. Young generation is very conscious of the importance of Breakfast. The westernized form of Breakfast-Cereals, muesli and oats has seen a growth in the market. By looking to the changed outlook of consumers' food habits and life styles the food makers have tried to change the food norms from ethnic to modern trends.

Breakfast around the world is a meal rooted in tradition. As global demand grows for western breakfast foods, cereal marketers are battling to make their brands popular globally instead of traditional norms. Marketers are watchful to design strategies to offer their products suitable to the local breakfast habit. Though there is high demand in the Breakfast market, it is extremely difficult for these food products to find a place on consumer's dining table. In order to know the consumer buying behavior patterns and preferences, a proper understanding of the consumer attitude is significantly important. Thus any company is advised to fit their products to the existing consumer attitude rather than trying to change people's attitude.

In addition to the demographic characteristics, knowledge of nutritional and health effects of food ingredients has direct influence on consumer beliefs in the benefits of functional foods (Bech-Larsen and Grunert, 2003; Urala and Lahteenmaki, 2003). The acceptance of functional foods is partially determined by the awareness of the base product and their perceptions in terms of health improvements after consumption of functional foods (Dean et al., 2007; van Kleef et al., 2005).

It was noticed throughout the studies that consumers are rational about the purchasing environment before they arrive at a purchase decision. So marketers will have to come across with all the possibilities of understanding the rational attitude of the consumers before launching a new product. Key dimensions of a product like flavour, size and style must be designed in accordance with the target consumers.

Among all the factors analysed in the study, the price appear to have the strongest effect on the choice of Breakfast-Cereals. Fixation of the prices shall be justifiable enough to match the nutritional concerns of the product. It is significant to consider the prices as an important aspect by marketers as the Breakfast-Cereal prices have increased over the past years. All customers are not interested in buying the low-priced alternative. Consumers would accept a price if it is within their acceptable range.

Breakfast-Cereals are looked upon as a healthier and quicker alternative compared to any other breakfast option. Considering the lifestyle changes that present consumer is faced with, marketers should not treat Breakfast-Cereal as a low involvement product. Now many products that were considered as low involvement products are turning to be the high involvement products. This is mainly because of the different Marketing Strategies taken up by the companies with regard to the existing beliefs and attitudes of the consumers which leads to brand awareness in the consumer purchase preferences.

Catering to the health needs of today's rational consumer is essential to make a company's brand success. Competition from other rival products such as health drinks, nutritional bars and cookies can be dealt with by pronouncing the fact that Breakfast- Cereal coupled with milk will provide a best source of calcium for all ages which is preservative free (Michael et al, 2007). The companies should aim at supplying the ideas that help the consumer to feel good about their brand choice.

Marketers should consider family as a core audience seeing that parents ensure their children to start a day with a healthy meal. Competition in children's cereal market is very much noticeable. The marketers must concentrate in promoting the consumption of cereals at different occasions other than morning hours. If the target markets are families, marketers could chose large and resaleable packages in order to extend the brand's shelf life and thereby encourage families to buy them.

The marketers should observe the media vehicles which are influential with the target segments. To get more improved market position, the product information transferred to the consumers shall be simple so as to increase the decision-making capabilities in their purchasing environments. Specific advertising objectives may be set to complement or support objectives for personal selling, direct marketing or other tools. Personal selling can be a very useful tool as it can provide more tailored information to the consumers. One of the advantages of direct marketing is that the results of the efforts are quickly seen and also aid to refine the strategies if required.

From practical marketing point of view, each marketer shall concentrate on unique marketing mix strategy to avoid all risks associated in selling their products. Effective packaging can also affect the product choices. Evaluation from Breakfast-Cereals studies shows the significance of pervasive targeting on children in all media platforms and in stores (Yale news, 2009). Companies shall continue to offer healthy cereals in the future by producing 'instant varieties', which have greater potential.

Economic factors such as urbanization and demographic factors such as population and aging could exert an influence on the evolution of future demand. Many of these developments will influence the world demand; especially education, health conditions, technology, transport and communication. The next generation of Breakfast-Cereals must be considerably more convenient combined with clever marketing.

Marketers would need to develop a good marketing mix for promoting the Breakfast-Cereals to women, children or the other potential consumers. This can be made possible if they are watching continuously the triggers of different individuals and correspondingly creating correct stimuli to them. Considering the socio-economic factors would also help in developing a major role in developing new products. Fancy packaging strategy with the strong backing of health aspects can hold the loyalty index with the consumers. Low calorific cereals may be welcomed as consumers are aware of health.

CONCLUSION

This research paper made an attempt to bring out the changing meal patterns of present consumers. The results of this study exposed Breakfast-Cereal as an accepted consumer product. Much stronger action is needed by all Cereal companies to enhance the overall step up in the present market. Appropriate research and background studies would further value to Marketers to understand the consumer trends and thus to get a significant focus to address them. To maintain a reasonable share, manufacturers shall try product innovation and brand variation which in turn would help the marketers to showcase the products. Given its healthy image, the Breakfast-Cereal market will continue to prosper in the long term.

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