Consumer perceptions of product packaging

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Abstract
Purpose – This paper seeks to discuss the need to understand consumer perceptions in order to correctly design product packing and to achieve the desired position in the minds of consumers.
Design/methodology/approach – Data collection was divided into two phases. The first, (based on designers’ opinions), to determine the key graphic variables in the design of packaging. The second, (based on consumers’ opinions), to associate each packaging with a positioning strategy. The seven product-positioning strategies selected were represented from the consumers’ standpoint using multidimensional scaling. Four maps were obtained related to: alternative packaging colours; alternative packaging typography; alternative packaging graphical forms; alternative packaging images
Findings – Each positioning strategy appears associated with particular packaging dimensions.
Research limitations/implications – Consumers have exhibited harmonious perceptions towards products-packaging strategies, so one can conclude that a general feeling as to what a particular packaging exactly means exists. So the general opinion should guide packaging designers to appropriately meet consumers’ expectations.
Originality/value – A range of simulated packaging was prepared for the 46 consumers that took part in the two-phase experiment: One of the seven positioning strategies was explained. For example: “Product ‘A’ is positioned as reasonably priced. People say the price is OK”; Case to be solved: “From this selection, choose the packaging that seems most suitable for product ‘A’, taking its characteristics into account”. The simulated packaging alternatives were shown and the subject chose the options that seemed most suitable (colour, typography, forms and images). The sequence was repeated for the remaining six positioning typologies.

Keywords Product positioning, Packaging, Perception, Presentation graphics, Consumer behaviour

Paper type Research paper

An executive summary for managers and executive readers can be found at the end of this article.

Introduction

The term positioning is a subjective and relative concept; because product positioning is defined in the minds of consumers taking into consideration the rest of the market offers. Therefore, in order to obtain a particular position, consumer product perceptions must be analysed in great detail. The reason for this is that the perceptions of a given set of consumers reflect and inspire at the same time the company’s strategy for its products.

The relevance of the term “positioning” is due, in part, to the relationship between a well-positioned product and the success and growth of a company, just as many different authors sustain (Ramsay, 1983; McAlexander et al., 1993). So, given that success is traditionally associated with the choice of an appropriate product positioning strategy, the first step must be to correctly define a positioning strategy.

In this area, little work has been done to discover the role of packaging in forming consumer perceptions of a product, and consequently, in defining its positioning in consumers’ minds. The reason for this lies in the fact that, traditionally, studies have focussed on positioning through ephemeral messages transmitted by the mass media, without taking into account the permanent character of the tangible codes that packaging transmits. Underwood (2003) states that the proliferation of brands in the market and the varied range that a purchaser finds at the point of sale, force efforts to achieve effective differentiation to be increased. This is why traditional mass media communication is being redirected to point of sale promotions and communication.

To this end, this article will examine the possibilities that packaging provides within the positioning strategy of tangible products. So an experimentation-based empirical research study has been carried out to relate each positioning strategy to certain specific packaging elements (colour, typography, shape, image). To summarise, this study has come about because of the growing managerial recognition of the ability of packaging to create differentiation and identity, above all in the case of relatively homogenous perishable consumer goods.

Literature review

If we examine exactly what the term “positioning” is understood to mean, there are studies (Maggard, 1976) that sustain that its origins lie in an article by Al Ries and Jack Trout published in the magazine Industrial Marketing in 1969. This was followed by other articles published in the magazine Advertising Age in 1972 under the title “The age of positioning”, which served to extend and disseminate the
term. According to these authors, positioning has its origins in product packaging (the concept was called product positioning). This literally meant the shape of the product, the size of the package and its price in comparison to the competition. At that time, these authors announced the start of a new age: “The age of positioning”, which recognised the importance of the product and the image of the company, but, above all, it underlined the need to achieve a position in the mind of the consumer. Positioning starts with a product, but it does not refer to the product; rather it refers to what can be done to the mind of the probable clients or persons that are to be influenced, that is to say, how to position the product in their minds.

Once the positioning plan has been completed (and the company knows how it wants to present itself to the market with respect to its competition), the company implements a plan of action through the construction of a suitable marketing mix (Brooksbank, 1994). In this way, it can be said that the positioning of a product induces its marketing mix (pricing policy, place, products and promotion) (Maggard, 1976; Aaker, 1996; Bigné and Vila, 2000). Later on, marketing mix elements (product, price, distribution and advertising) reach consumers and contribute to determining the desired product positioning in the minds of consumers (Maggard, 1976).

If we focus on “communication” activities, the sequence should be the following: a positioning decision identifies the product characteristics that should be stressed in the marketing mix, particularly in its communication campaign. In other words, positioning guides communication action plans (Aaker, 1996). That is to say, the origin is a positioning strategy which provides a base for several decisions to be consequently followed.

If instead of centring on communication activities, we pay attention to “product” decisions, we can see that it is composed of several elements. One of these elements is packaging, which is becoming an increasingly important factor for several reasons. These are summarised by Underwood et al. (2001) and Underwood (2003). The first reason that these authors propose is that, when faced with reduced advertising budgets, brand building expenses are reduced in the traditional mass media and communication efforts are concentrated on sales promotions and on point of sale communications. Second, for perishable goods there is an increase in the purchasing decisions made directly in the shop (according to the Henley Centre, 73 per cent of purchasing decisions are made at the point of sale). Similarly, managers are increasingly recognising that packaging can create differentiation and identity, above all in relatively homogenous perishable consumer goods. And finally, the proliferation of the number of brands in the market and the varied offer that purchasers find at the point of sale force there to be an increase in efforts to achieve effective differentiation.

However, what exactly is the term “packaging” understood to mean. In general terms, packaging is the container that is in direct contact with product itself, which holds, protects, preserves and identifies the product as well as facilitating handling and commercialisation (Vidales Giovannetti, 1995). More specifically, and following Vidales Giovannetti (1995), there are three types of packaging. Primary packaging is in direct contact with the product, such as perfume bottles. Secondary packaging contains one or more primary packages and serves to protect and identify them and to communicate the qualities of the product. It is normally discarded when the product is used or consumed. Following the previous example, this would be the cardboard box that contains the perfume bottle. Finally, tertiary packaging which contains the two previous ones and its function is to distribute, unify and protect products throughout the commercial chain. This would be the cardboard box that contains several bottles.

In marketing literature, packaging is considered to form part of the product and the brand. So, for example, for Evans and Berman (1992) packaging is a product property or characteristic, whereas for Olson and Jacoby (1972) packaging is an extrinsic element of the product, that is to say, it is attribute that is related to the product but that does not form part of the physical product itself. Price and brand are also extrinsic elements of the brand and according to Underwood et al. (2001); these are the most important extrinsic values when it comes to deciding what food products to buy. Keller (1998) also considers packaging to be an attribute that is not related to the product. For him it is one of the five elements of the brand together with the name, the logo and/or graphic symbol, the personality and the slogans. Packaging is presented as part of the buying and consuming process, but often it is not directly related to the ingredients that are essential for the product to function (Underwood, 2003).

The view that Zeithaml (1972) sustains lies halfway between these two positions. He considers packaging to be both an extrinsic and intrinsic attribute (an intrinsic attribute is one that cannot be changed without altering the physical composition of the product). For example, if we refer to the non-drip top, packaging is an intrinsic attribute; but if we refer to the information that appears on the label, packaging is an extrinsic attribute.

From the managerial point of view, in order for packaging to suitably develop its functions, the structural and graphic design of the packaging and even the optimum size of the pack will be subject to market research undertaken by the company and the positioning that the company wants the product to occupy in the market (Iváñez Gimeno, 2000). So, packaging is, without doubt, specifically related to the strategic decisions of the marketing mix (Underwood, 2003) and, therefore, to positioning decisions.

From the consumer perspective, packaging also plays a major role when products are purchased: packaging is crucial, given that it is the first thing that the public sees before making the final decision to buy (Vidales Giovannetti, 1995). This function has increased with the arrival and popularisation of self-service sales systems which have caused packaging to move to the foreground in attracting attention and causing a purchase. Prior to this, it had remained behind the counter and only the sales attendant came between the consumer and the product (Cervera Fantoni, 2003). According to Sonsino (1990), self-service has transferred the role of informing the customer from the sales assistant to advertising and to packaging. This is why packaging has been called the “silent salesman”, as it informs us of the qualities and benefits that we are going to obtain if we consume a certain product (Vidales Giovannetti, 1995). In the current self-service economy, packaging provides manufacturers with the last opportunity to persuade possible buyers before brand selection (McDaniel and Baker, 1977). Therefore, all the packaging elements, including texts, colours, structure, images and people/
personalities have to be combined to provide the consumer with visual sales negotiation when purchasing and using the product (McNeal and Ji, 2003). This becomes even more crucial when the data contributed by Clive Nancarrow et al., (1998) is taken into consideration: nine out of ten purchasers, at least occasionally, buy on impulse (Welles, 1986) and unplanned food shopping articles can account for up to 51 per cent of purchases (Phillips and Bradshaw, 1993).

Behaeghel (1991) and Peters (1994) go a step further. They consider that packaging could be the most important communication medium for the following reasons:

- it reaches almost all buyers in the category;
- it is present at the crucial moment when the decision to buy is made; and
- buyers are actively involved with packaging as they examine it to obtain the information they need.

In this situation, it is essential to communicate the right brand and product values on packaging and to achieve a suitable aesthetic and visual level (Nancarrow et al., 1998).

Similarly, McNeal and Ji (2003) underline that the peculiarity of packaging as a marketing element lies in the fact that it often accompanies the use or consumption of products and, therefore, the possibility of transmitting brand values and product characteristics increases. With regard to this aspect, Deasy (2000) points out that the characteristics of a product – its positioning – are permanently transmitted over seven stages:

1. point of sale;
2. transporting the product home;
3. home storage;
4. opening;
5. serving the product for consumption;
6. reclosing or putting away; and
7. disposal.

Underwood (2003) points out that, unlike the transmission of positioning though advertising, packaging allows positioning to be transferred live. As it accompanies products, packaging lives in the home and potentially becomes an intimate part of the consumer’s life constituting a type of live experience between the consumer and the brand (Lindsay, 1997).

With regard to the main components of packaging, many different points of view have been expressed (Sonsino, 1990; Vidales Giovannetti, 1995; Hine, 1995; Ivañez Gimeno, 1995; Underwood et al., 2001; Cervera Fantoni, 2003). Generally speaking, a distinction is made between two blocks of components:

1. graphic components: colour packaging, typography, the graphical shapes used and the images introduced; and
2. structural components: shape, size of the containers and the materials used to manufacture them.

**Research aims**

As we have already stated, packaging plays a major role in communicating brand personality by means of several structural and graphic elements. So, this article aims to discover how consumer perceptions vary according to product packaging strategies. To do this, the role that packaging plays in positioning strategy will be studied.

The proposal recently developed by Blankson and Kalafatis (2001) has been selected, because it is based on consumer perceptions. However, of the eight positions strategies defined by these two authors, the second option “extraordinary service” has been eliminated as it refers to the particular case of service positioning, in which packaging does not play a significant part. The seven remaining positioning strategies have been studied in depth to see what kind of packaging best represents them:

1. positioning based on status, for the upper classes;
2. positioning based on accessibility/economic price;
3. positioning based on safety;
4. positioning based on elegance/sobriety;
5. positioning based on the country of origin/patriotism;
6. positioning based on excellence/high price; and
7. positioning based on noble principles/for the middle classes.

Of all the packaging components, this research is only focussed on the elements whose definition corresponds to graphic design (colour, typography, graphic shapes and images), leaving the other structural elements that are related to industrial design or engineering attributes (size, shape, closing systems, manufacturing materials, formats..) for subsequent research studies. So, the graphic elements to be studied are the four that are reflected in the literature: colour, typography, shapes and images. Therefore, if we relate the positioning strategies and the graphic elements to the studies, the following hypothesis can be proposed:

**H1.** Consumers’ perceptions towards products will vary according to the packaging strategies defined for these products.

**Methodology**

In order to achieve these objectives, data collection was divided into two phases: the first, aimed at determining the key graphic variables in the design of packaging; and the second, aimed at associating packaging with positioning strategies.

**Phase 1: determination of the key elements of packaging (colour, typography, shapes, and images)**

In the first phase, eight interviews were conducted with experts in packaging design. The objective was to determine the most important graphic variables in the use of:

1. colour;
2. typography;
3. shapes; and
4. images.

In order to have a complete vision of the alternatives that can be used with these four components, interviewee heterogeneity was sought. The profile of the eight designers is:

- Gender: Women – 62 per cent; Men – 38 per cent.
- Age: 20-30 – 37 per cent; 30-40 – 38 per cent; 40-50 – 25 per cent.
- Education: Primary education – 13 per cent; Higher studies – 87 per cent.

As a result of this first phase, several alternatives were selected for each of the four key variables.
Phase 2: association of the key elements to the different positioning strategies

A dossier showing a range of simulated packaging was prepared for the 46 consumer that agreed to participate in our experiment. The profile of the 46 consumers is:

- **Gender**: Women – 57 per cent; Men – 43 per cent.
- **Age**: 20–30 – 85 per cent; 30–40 – 15 per cent.
- **Education**: Primary education – 7 per cent; Higher studies – 93 per cent.

This packaging represented each one of the four selected graphic variables (colour, typography, shape and image) in the different alternatives obtained in the previous qualitative phase. So, for example, for the “colour” graphic element six prototypes were prepared. In the first, related to the “brightness” variable, two packaging alternatives were presented: one in a dark colour (less brightness) and the other in a light colour (more brightness). In the second, related to the “saturation” variable, two packaging alternatives were presented: one with a saturated or bright colour and the other with a non-saturated or dull colour. In the third prototype, relating to the “temperature” variable packaging in warm colours (red, orange and yellow) and packaging with cold colours (green and blue) were shown. Finally, for the variable “shade”, packaging in three types of colours was presented:

1. black/white;
2. blue/green; and
3. yellow/orange/red.

These simulations were repeated for the other three graphic variables (typography, shape and image) (Figure 1). The complete prototype dossier was shown to the interviewees and they were asked to relate the positioning strategies proposed by Blankson and Kalafatis (2001) to the graphic variables that best represented them. This procedure was done with a sample of 46 consumers. The experiment was done according to the following three-stage sequence:

1. One of the positioning strategies presented by Blankson and Kalafatis (2001) was explained. For example: “Product ‘A’ is positioned as reasonably and affordable priced. People say the price is OK”.
2. The following is used to present the case to be solved: “From this selection, choose the packaging that seems most suitable for product ‘A’, taking its characteristics into account”. The simulated packaging alternatives (Figure 1) were shown and the subject chose the one that seemed most suitable. The sequence was repeated for the remaining six positioning typologies.
3. Finally, the number of times that each graphic variable was associated to each positioning strategy was calculated.

The defining graphic variables for each strategy were obtained by frequency counting.

**Statistical techniques**

The seven product positioning strategies have been represented from the consumers’ standpoint. For this purpose, multidimensional scaling has been applied. The idea is that the packaging attributes that are situated close to a particular positioning strategy on a perceptual map, correctly represent this positioning strategy. Four maps (Figures 2–5) have been obtained with multidimensional scaling based on the data obtained related to:

1. alternative packaging colours;
2. alternative packaging typography;
3. alternative packaging graphical forms; and
4. alternative packaging images

**Results**

As far as obtaining the maps is concerned, SPSS software ASCAL aggregated scaling was used[1]. In general, we can state that the adjustment indices used to measure to what extent these maps reflect the perceptions of the subjects questioned (S-Stress, Stress and RSQ) are reasonably good. The S-Stress and Stress take values close to zero, which means that the perceptions are reflected accurately. The RSQ, however, are close to 1, which means that the variability explained by the model is almost 100 per cent. On our maps, the indices obtained from the consumer information are outstanding. This means that consumer perceptions regarding the seven product positioning strategies with respect to the different packaging variables analysed are reflected on the maps.

With respect to the first graphical dimension analysed, “packaging colour”, the four quadrants of map 1 (Figure 2) show four groups of positioning strategies with different characteristics (Table I):

1. **Products directed to the upper classes, high price products and elegant.** The packaging of these three positioning strategies are highly associated with cold (10) and dark (1) colours, mainly black (14) and not to yellow, orange and red colours (23).
2. **Reasonably priced, accessible products.** On the contrary, the packaging of this strategy is associated with light colours (2), mainly white (13).
3. **Patriotic products and products based on guarantees.** Neither of these two strategies was clearly associated with any of the graphic design variables. They were associated with the options “none” and “any”: any temperature (11), no shade 1 (16), no brightness (4) no temperature (12), no saturation (8), no shade 2 (20). However, there was a slight association with the colour red, maybe because of its presence on the Spanish flag and thus related to the idea of “patriotism”.
4. **Non-selective products.** The packaging of this strategy is not well defined. It appears to be associated to both light colours and dark colours (3), both saturated and non-saturated colours (7) any of the yellow, orange and red shades (24) any of the green and blue shades (19) and any of the black and white tones (15). This strategy, then, has no clearly defined colour, although it is associated to warm colours (9).

With respect to the second graphical dimension analysed, “packaging typographies”, the four quadrants of map 2 (Figure 3) show four groups of positioning strategies with different characteristics (Table II):

1. **Elegant products.** This type of product is associated with bold letters (30), expanded characters (34), upper case (38) large (42) and Roman letters (26).
2. **Products directed to the upper classes and high price products.** The packaging of both positioning strategies is highly associated with any weight (32), any width (36), any
Figure 1

Colours:
- Brightness
- Saturation
- Temperature

Shades:
- Shade 1
- Shade 2
- Shade 3

Typography:
- Slope
- Weight
- Width
- Shape
- Size
- Type family

Shape:
- Straight line direction
- Geometric figures
- Line shape

- Number of elements
- Type of figures
- Composition

Image:
- Image nature
- Image motive
shape (40) and any type family (49). So, both strategies are “Any typography associated”

Accessible products. The lettering of this strategy is associated with serif (47) and sans serif (46).

(4) Products based on guarantees, patriotic products and non-selective products. The packaging of these strategies has not been associated with weight (33), width (37), shape (41) and type family (50). So, theses strategies do have not a defined typography.

With respect to the third graphical dimension analysed, “packaging graphic form”, the four quadrants of map 3 (Figure 4) show four groups of positioning strategies with different characteristics (Table III):

(1) Upper class products and elegant products. The packaging of both strategies is mainly associated with the “none” option in five cases: straight line (55), line shape (65), type of figures (73), elements (69) and composition (77).
(2) Accessible products. However, the packaging of this strategy is associated with “any graphic form”: any straight line (vertical, horizontal, oblique) (54), any line shape (straight, curved, broken) (64), any type of figures (circles, squares, triangles) (72), any amount of elements (single, several) (68) and any composition (symmetrical, asymmetrical) (76).

(3) Products based on guarantees, patriotic products and high price products. The packaging of these strategies has been associated to straight lines (61), vertical lines (51), straight outlines (70) symmetrical compositions (75) and single elements (66).

(4) Non-selective products. Conversely, the packaging of this strategy is associated with horizontal lines (52) and oblique
With respect to the fourth graphical dimension analysed, “packaging images”, the four quadrants of map 4 (Figure 5) show four groups of positioning strategies with different characteristics (Table IV):

(1) **High price products, elegant products and patriotic products.** The packaging of these strategies is not related to any of the image options: photographs and illustrations (81) and images of the product or people (85).

(2) **Non-selective products.** Conversely, the packaging of this strategy is associated with both illustrations and photographs (80).

(3) **Products based on guarantees and upper class products.** The packaging of both strategies has been associated with photographs (78) and with images of the product (82).

(4) **Accessible products.** In contrast to the previous strategy, the packaging of this strategy has been associated with illustrations (78) with people (83).

In summary, each positioning strategy is associated with particular packaging dimensions as follows:

(1) **Top category positioning, prestige status, directed to the upper classes:**
   - Colour: Cold, Dark, Black.
   - Typography: Any.
   - Graphic form: None.
   - Image: Picture, Product.

(2) **Accessible product, reasonable price positioning:**
   - Colour: Light, White.
   - Typography: Serif, Sans serif.
   - Graphic form: Any.
   - Image: Illustration, Person.
Table II  Packaging typography in product positioning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Top category positioning, prestige status, directed to the upper classes</th>
<th>Accessible product, reasonable product positioning</th>
<th>Positioning based on durability, guarantee and safety</th>
<th>Positioning based on refined, sober and elegant aesthetics</th>
<th>Positioning based on country of origin, patriotism</th>
<th>Positioning based on excellence, high price, variety</th>
<th>Non-selective positioning, for the middle classes, based on noble principles</th>
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<td><strong>Slope $X^2 = 52.943^{</strong>}**</td>
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<td>19.6</td>
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<td>30.4</td>
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<td>4.3</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Each cell is a relative frequency (how many persons have associated each property with each strategy in relative terms)

(3) **Positioning based on durability, guarantee and safety:**
- Colour: Red.
- Typography: None.
- Graphic form: Straight line, Vertical, Straight outline, Symmetrical, One element.
- Image: Picture, Product.

(4) **Positioning based on refined, sober and elegant aesthetics:**
- Colour: Cold, Dark, Black.
- Typography: Bold, Expanded, Upper case, Large, Roman.
- Graphic form: None.
- Image: None.

(5) **Positioning based on country of origin, patriotism:**
- Colour: Red.
- Typography: None.
- Graphic form: Straight line, Vertical, Straight outline, Symmetrical, One element.
- Image: None.

(6) **Positioning based on excellence, high price, variety:**
- Colour: Cold, Dark, Black.
- Typography: Any.
- Graphic form: Straight line, Vertical, Straight outline, Symmetrical, One element.
- Image: None.

(7) **Non-selective positioning, for the middle classes, based on noble principles:**
- Colour: Any.
- Typography: None.
- Graphic form: Horizontal, Oblique, Circle, Curve, Wavy outline, Asymmetrical, Several elements.
- Image: Any.

**Conclusions**

Our results give rise to the following four conclusions. First, with respect to packaging colour, it seems that products that
are directed to the upper classes, with a high price and based on elegant and refined aesthetics require cold, dark coloured (mainly black) packaging. In contrast, accessible products that are directed to price sensitive consumers required light (mainly white) coloured packaging. Safe and guaranteed products and patriotic products are associated with red packaging, maybe because the colour of the national flag of the consumers interviewed is essentially red.

Second, with respect to packaging typography, our results show that packaging for elegant products usually presents bold, large, roman, upper case letters with expanded characters. In contrast, accessible products of reasonable price are associated with serif and sans serif typographies.

Third, with respect to graphic forms, we can see that non-selective products, directed to the middle classes, use horizontal and oblique straight lines, circles, curves, wavy outlines, asymmetrical compositions and several elements. In contrast, high price products appear to be associated with vertical straight lines, squares, straight outlines, and symmetrical composition with one single element.

Fourth, with respect to packaging illustrations, safe guaranteed products and upper classes products are associated with pictures showing the product. In contrast, accessible products directed to price sensitive consumers are associated with illustrations showing people.

In sum, each positioning strategy seems to be associated to some particular packaging graphical elements. Theses elements (colour, typography, form and illustration) are combined in different ways to transmit the desired perception in consumers’ minds.

Table III  Packaging graphic form in product positioning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Top category positioning, prestige status, directed to the upper classes</th>
<th>Accessible product, reasonable price positioning</th>
<th>Positioning based on durability, guarantee and safety</th>
<th>Positioning based on refined, sober and elegant aesthetics</th>
<th>Positioning based on country of origin, patriotism</th>
<th>Positioning based on excellence, high price, variety</th>
<th>Non-selective positioning, for the middle classes, based on noble principles</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Straight line direction</strong> $X^2 = 57.685^{**}$</td>
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<td>53 Oblique</td>
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<td>26.1</td>
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<td>10.9</td>
<td>15.2</td>
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<td>17.4</td>
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<td>32.6</td>
<td>32.6</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>57 Square</td>
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<td>15.2</td>
<td>26.1</td>
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<td>17.4</td>
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<td>62 Curve</td>
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<tr>
<td>63 Broken</td>
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<td>8.7</td>
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<td>15.2</td>
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<td>26.1</td>
<td>39.1</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>28.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Each cell is a relative frequency (how many persons have associated each property with each strategy in relative terms)
Managerial implications

From what has been said, it is possible to make the following basic implications for management.

First, the definition of a product's competitive positioning is a relative concept. Positioning strategy becomes meaningful when seen in comparative terms. Thus, good or poor performance is not sufficient; you have to perform better than those competitors whose competitive capacity is strong enough to influence strategic decision-taking. This enables the company to analyse competition product strategies in greater detail and in a more objective way than relying merely on intuition. In this sense, packaging design has been shown as a useful tool to achieve positioning objectives.

Second, how do we go about singling out more important product competitors in order to focus company attention on them? A cognitive approach is a positive departure. In this line, perceptions are recommended on the grounds that the way a consumer sees competitive offerings will affect his buying decisions. So, opinions regarding alternative packaging formulas should be proved to anticipate the opinions that they originate and the behaviours that consequently cause. For this reason, once the firm has acted over the packaging to affect perceptions, consumers will convert these perceptions into attitudes, which will determine the final buying decision. We support that packaging is, without doubt, specifically related to the strategic decisions of the marketing mix and, therefore, to positioning decisions and consumer behaviours.

Third, as has been shown, consumers have exhibited harmonious perceptions towards products packaging strategies, so we can conclude that a general feeling as to what a particular packaging exactly means exists. In this sense, the general opinion should guide packaging designers to appropriately meet consumers’ expectations. So we recommend taking into account the permanent character of the tangible codes that packaging transmits, instead of just focusing on positioning through ephemeral messages transmitted by the mass media.

In sum, the proliferation of the number of brands in the market and the varied offer that purchasers find at the point of sale force there to be an increase in efforts to achieve effective differentiation. In this scene, the power of the packing has been demonstrated.

To this end, this article will examine the possibilities that packaging provides within the positioning strategy of tangible products. So an experimentation-based empirical research study has been carried out to relate each positioning strategy to certain specific packaging elements (colour, typography, shape, image). To summarise, this study has come about because of the growing managerial recognition of the ability of packaging to create differentiation and identity, above all in the case of relatively homogenous perishable consumer goods.

There are limitations which we should point out. The perceptions were expressed for a given point in time, so that dynamic analyses or previsions about how the positioning-packaging associations may evolve in the future could not be carried out.

With regard to the future, we could suggest the possibility of extending the analysis to different cultural backgrounds so as to analyse changes in the positioning perception of one particular packaging, in accordance with the area in which it is marketed. It would also be interesting to study the cooperation/association links between competitors in order to understand packaging reformulations to attend several positioning strategies. Looking ahead, it might be possible to extend the analysis to consider different cultural scenarios in order to analyse changes in the packaging of the same brand depending on the area where it is marketed. Finally, the evolution of the relationships analysed could be studied over time in order to add a dynamic perspective to the analyses carried out.

Note

1 Although it would have been possible to represent data three-dimensionally, we decided to use two-dimensional maps in order to facilitate the visual interpretation of the results, as per relevant literature such as DeSarbo et al. (1991), who are the precursors in the combined use of techniques involving spatial representation and grouping. Similarly, we have found that the use of more axes does not substantially improve the adjustment indices of the results obtained. (S-Stress, Stress y RSQ)
References


Further reading


About the authors

Olga Ampuero is a researcher in the Department of Graphic Expression in Engineering in the School of Design Engineering at the Politechnic University of Valencia. She has developed several projects related to graphic design, visual identities, multimedia design and packaging design.

Natalia Vila is a Lecturer in Marketing in the Department of Marketing in the School of Economics at the University of Valencia. She has carried out research on topics such as competitive positioning, identification of strategic groups/competitive groups and the application of multidimensional scaling in marketing. Her research work has been published in diverse refereed journals (i.e. Journal of Marketing Management, Journal of Strategic Marketing, European Journal of Innovation Management, Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal, Journal of Euromarketing, The Marketing Review and Spanish refereed journals). She has presented papers at several conferences such as EMAC, AM and AMS. Natalia Vila is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: Natalia.Vila@uv.es

Executive summary and implications for managers and executives

This summary has been provided to allow managers and executives a rapid appreciation of the content of this article. Those with a particular interest in the topic covered may then read the article in toto to take advantage of the more comprehensive description of the research undertaken and its results to get the full benefits of the material present.
Product packaging and marketing

Marketers have become increasingly alert to the notion that product packaging has a major role to play in differentiation strategies, especially where largely uniform perishable goods are concerned. The bulk of advertising has invariably been executed through different media channels but reduced budgets have forced many managers to shift the emphasis to point of sale communication and sales promotions.

Almost three-quarters of purchase decisions relating to such products are made at point of sale, making effective differentiation therefore imperative in a product category where consumers enjoy abundant choice. Furthermore, the shift towards self-service has meant closer contact between consumer and product, therefore increasing the importance of advertising at the position that represents the last and perhaps most important opportunity of influencing consumer choice.

Most products are positioned to intentionally target specific consumer sectors and. diffusing messages via the media has traditionally been regarded as the most effective way to achieve the desired market position. However, such messages are obviously transient by nature and there is growing realization that the relative permanence of product packaging and its immediacy to the purchase decision can prove a more efficient means of ensuring successful positioning. It has also been pointed out that while packaging remains in the consumer’s home after purchase, it continues to communicate brand messages.

How positioning is achieved

Ampuero and Vila argue that packaging is able to influence consumer response to a product. They identified color, typography, graphical forms and images as being the key packaging variables that combine to influence perception that the product is positioned to target a specific consumer group. The premise is that the right combination of elements is needed in order for the desired effect to be achieved. Based on previous research, seven different product positioning strategies were identified: status, value, safety, elegance, country of origin, excellence and noble principles. The aim was to discover if there is general agreement among consumers as to which packaging combinations of the above named variables relate to each product positioning strategy.

To test the theory, the authors carried out a study in which 46 Spanish consumers were exposed to a portfolio showing various packaging combinations and asked to select the combination they regarded as most suitable for each positioning strategy. The frequency that each variable was chosen was the determining factor. Prior contact with packaging design experts determined the combinations that were included in the portfolio.

The findings indicated that the respondents’ perceptions were broadly in agreement with prior expectations established from consultation with the packaging experts. As a result, the authors were able to draw several conclusions. For example, products in cold, dark colored packaging were associated with products that are high priced, elegant or aimed at the upper classes. Elegant products also require bold, large, roman, upper case fonts with expanded characters. At the other end of the scale, it was determined that products aimed at the price conscious shopper ideally come in white or other lightly colored packaging containing illustrations of people and serif or sans serif typographies. Packaging aimed at the upper classes is associated with pictures that show the product itself. Among the other assumptions was that products based on noble principles and aimed at the middle classes are packaged using a variety of graphic forms that include circles, curves, wavy outlines and different types of straight line.

Implications

The authors believe that the study provides significant evidence of correlation between packaging design and positioning perceptions because each positioning strategy appears to be associated with precise graphical elements in some or all of the variables. This conclusion is seen as particularly significant in the light of belief that consumers can both reflect and inspire a company’s strategies for marketing its products.

In addition to achieving positioning objectives, it is additionally concluded that package design as a marketing tool can help to better inform about competitors’ product strategies. The importance here is also emphasized, since analysts maintain that the success of positioning can only be realistically calculated in relative terms.

Indeed, Ampuero and Vila suggest that the findings can enable organizations to effectively scrutinize competitor performance. It is recommended that marketers closely monitor alternative packaging design that might be used by a competitor. The aim here is to measure consumer reaction and the impact on purchase decisions so that counter strategies can be devised.

The evidence indicates a general agreement as to how specific packaging designs will be interpreted. In view of this, the authors recommend a greater focus on product packaging as a marketing weapon. They do, however, point out some important limitations. For instance, this study was carried out at a given time, so there is no assessment of if and how perceptions of packaging design might transform in the future. Likewise, there is no analysis of any historical development of the concept. The authors also emphasize the significant point that perceptions associated to product packaging may well be culture specific and therefore limit the conclusions that can be drawn. In respect of this, it is suggested that research into how product packaging is perceived within various cultural frameworks would be enlightening, not least as it could reveal that products may need to be packaged differently to achieve the same position within different markets.

(A précis of the article “Consumer perceptions of product packaging”. Supplied by Marketing Consultants for Emerald.)