

Packaging As An Index Of Product Quality

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Abstract

Over the years, research efforts have concentrated in examining the role of advertising and other promotional strategies in business. Not much attention has been recorded in the area of packaging compared to the popular advertising or other promotools. This has become a matter of serious concern now that packaging has become central to the overall product concept. This is more so when the corporate world has become a place for only the strategic that appreciates more the place of other silent promotools which include packaging. As buyer decisions are motivationally – driven, packaging remains a key contributor. This paper examines the place of packaging in relation to product quality and highlights the extent to which packaging influences or shapes the consumers’ perceived quality of a product

Key words: Consumers, Packaging, Positioning, Product, Product Quality

Introduction

In an effort to underline the selling point of its RAV4 model through a positioning strategy, the automobile giant, Toyota, boldly asserts: “No matter how you look at it, the all-new RAV4 is capable of doing anything except being ignored”. This statement, in a nutshell, implies that the appearance or outlook of anything determines the perceived value attached to the object or the thing in question. The value attached to the thing or object also connotes its perceived quality. This leaves one with the understanding that packaging which simply refers to the design made of an object is a part of the quality of a product, idea or anything. The common refrain that the eye appreciates before the mouth eats is therefore relevant here as it not only upholds but supports the idea that the aesthetic value of anything is paramount in determining the real value/quality made of it by people. This understanding and impression have since permeated the minds of people in society especially manufacturers of products, marketers, as well as consumers. Individual actions whether as a manufacturer,

marketer or consumer etc now influence the increasing concern in the manner an idea, product or even service could be designed or packaged.

The average car manufacturer strives towards turning out brands that are “poshy” or “flashy”, reflective of the design or packaging. Consumers on their own are interested in quality, which, packaging is a good measure of and which underscores why it is a popular and effective marketing strategy by marketers who employ and apply it greatly today in order to stave off the ever pervasive competition. Undoubtedly, Fan (2005:152) notes that “quality is a normal good...” Based on the above thinking, consumers are interested in quality products that will help them to satisfy their needs, desires and aspirations. A banker who regularly puts on suit to work understands that his social status could be enhanced by the way he packages himself. To him, appearance is an essential personality ingredient of great concern. Similarly, a young lady who regularly titivates herself with make-ups and adorns herself with the finest apparel obviously appreciates packaging more than the professional marketers. In the world of business today, packaging has come to be an intrinsic and indispensable tool of competitiveness and business growth. Hence, this intrinsic value of packaging has earned it the appellations of: *the package is the product, every package is a five-second commercial and packaging is the least expensive form of advertising*. Indeed, packaging is the driver for brand visibility.

THE CONCEPT OF PACKAGING, PRODUCT, AND PRODUCT QUALITY

Many attempts have been made by scholars aimed at expressing their conception of the word packaging. Kotler (1984:490) defines packaging as “the activities of designing and producing the container or wrapper for a product”. Onah (1996:284) sees packaging as “containment and packing prior to sale with the primary purpose of facilitating the purchase and use of a product”. These definitions help one to understand and appreciate more the rationality behind the packaging of products. Similarly Okoro (1996:305) defines packaging as “the process of conceptualizing, planning and designing a packet, container or wrapper to contain, protect and merchandise a product”. A package, according to Farese et al (1997:467) is “the physical container or wrapping for a product”.

Now let us attempt a definition of what a product is. Stanton, (1975:191) defines a product broadly as “a complex of tangible and intangible attributes, including packaging, colour, price, manufacturer’s prestige, retailer’s prestige and manufacturer’s and retailer’s services which the buyer may accept as offering satisfaction of wants and needs”. Kotler, cited in Runyon (1980:16-17) sees a product from three categorical perspectives:

The tangible product: This is the physical product or service that is being offered to the consumer

The extended product: this is the tangible product along with the entire array of services, warranties and psychological overtones that surround it by virtue of the packaging, name, advertising and display that is given.

The generic product: This is not a product per se, but a constellation of the benefits that buyers expect to realize from their purchases.

Based on the foregoing categorical definitions, Runyon (1980:17) maintains that “a product – as perceived by the consumer is more than just a physical object or list of ingredients. It is a bundle of physical and psychological benefits that provide satisfaction or, at least, offer the promise of doing so”.

Osuala (1988:190) defines a product as “something an organization markets that will satisfy a personal want or fill a business or commercial needs”. The definitions above are clear about the need-satisfying attributes of anything that should qualify for a product.

At this juncture, we shall try a conceptual definition of product quality. Ayatunji (2004:124) defines quality as “the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bears on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs”. Similarly, Onyeke and Nebo (2000:184) see product as “the ability of a product to perform as required or expected”. Also, Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler (2009:103) citing Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1998) affirm that quality service or product is usually viewed as a component of customer satisfaction from the dimensions of its *reliability*, *responsiveness*, *assurance*, *empathy* and *tangibility*. The three conceptual overviews above show that product quality heavily relies on the product need-satisfying capabilities. A product must have the capacity which is expressed in some basic attributes to satisfy a want or need for it to be perceived highly by the buyer or consumer as being of quality. It is that quality-perception that drives the buying or purchasing desire. Packaging is a major contributor to that perceptual quality.

Theoretical Framework

In an attempt to explain the factors and processes surrounding human actions, psychologists uphold the important role played by the way we perceive things. As Runyon (1980:318) remarks, “how people behave depends on how they perceive the world around them. For this reason, many psychologists believe that an understanding of human behaviour depends on an understanding of their perception”. By way of interpretation, this means that our actions as human beings are chiefly guided by the picture in our heads – the way we perceive things. It is as a result of perception that we identify a particular action as right or wrong. It is also through perception that we identify something as big or small, long or short etc. It is equally through perception that we describe a particular conduct as good or bad. According to Runyon (1980:319), perception can be defined as “a process through which incoming stimuli are given meaning. Or in colloquial terms, perception is a process through which we make sense out of the world”. Pride and Ferrell (1985:77) also define perception as “the process of selecting, organizing, and interpreting information inputs in order to produce meaning... it is simply the meaning we attach to what we smell, hear, see, taste and feel”. It is equally our way of evaluating or assessing things around us. It is a thought process; it is a psychic expression of behaviour

Onyeke and Nebo (2000:70) observe that “perception influences our behaviour towards what we buy in the market. Thus, consumers’ perceptions are much more important to the marketer than their objective reality”. Similarly, as Runyon (1980:321) notes, “our perceptual categories for products and brands usually extend beyond the generic category such as “washing machine” and include perception of durability, dependability, economy, prestige and so forth”.

Our theoretical premise in this context is that the way a product is perceived, to a great extent, determines the value attached to it. Packaging goes a long way in determining our perception of a product and, to a great extent, gives predictability to the product quality.

This is why success in marketing practice relies much on consumer behaviour because the chances of the consumer to respond positively to the marketer's bait is dependent on the consumer's perception and evaluation of the total product. Without a clear analysis and understanding of the consumer's dispositions and behaviour, the marketer's expectations of the consumer's response is only a conjecture. Consumer behaviour theories therefore form the nucleus and thesis of this paper.

Packaging And Product Positioning

There is a relationship existing between packaging and product positioning. An effort at examining this relationship should start from knowing what positioning is all about. Kleppner (1979:80) defines positioning as "fitting a product into the life style of the buyer". By way of interpretation, this definition views positioning as an activity that involves making a product to suit the taste, desires and other implied needs of the buyer. Simply speaking, positioning means implanting in the customer's mind a clear meaning of what the product is and how it compares to competitive offerings. In the views of Trout and Reis (1979) the originators of the positioning concept, successful companies must be "competitors' oriented," must look for weak points in their competitors' positions, and then launch marketing attacks against those weak points. Reis and Trout (1993) further argue that there are no best products. All that exists in the world of marketing are perceptions in the minds of the customer or prospect. This perception, they contend, is the reality and that everything else is an illusion.

The Toyota RAV4 advertisement earlier mentioned in the beginning of this paper which states: "No matter how you look at it, the all-new RAV4 is capable of anything except being ignored" exposes the close relationship existing between packaging and product positioning and demonstrates the complementary role of one to the other. The evocation of the alluring attributes alongside the visual component in the advertisement complements a packaging effort and aims at positioning the product in the mind of the buyer. As Okigbo (1990:92) notes, "positioning means that advertisers examine their product to determine just what it is offering to what kind of people and through what kind of image".

The inherent objective of every packaging effort is to position the product to suit or meet the needs and tasks of the target market and by so doing lure them to patronize it. Without packaging, a product can hardly "fly" in the buyer's mind and as such suffers serious defeat in the midst of today's myriad of competing brands. This underscores the increased usage and application of packaging today as a foremost positioning and repositioning strategy for corporate organizations, and their products or services in today's highly competitive corporate world.

Relationship Between Packaging and Product Quality

To advance the idea that packaging is an important factor in product quality evaluation is to say that packaging, to a large extent influences our perception of the product quality. Packaging represents the body whereas the quality represents the soul. Both complement each other. For a product, packaging represents the outward appearance or characteristics (i.e. the wrapper) while quality represents the value attached.

The aggressive marketing tendency of current times has as one of its consequences, the desire by manufacturers and marketers to display significant attributes (quality) of their products on the package to generate patronage. The manufacturer or marketer cannot

wholly rely on the advertisement or the sales person to extol the qualities of his or her products but packaging could. In this scenario, packaging represents an evaluative prism that is incidental to any observer and affords one a spontaneous evaluation of the product quality. Supporting this view, Arens (2004:191) notes that “the product package is a component of the product element and is also an exhibitivite medium that can determine the outcome of retail shelf competition”. In line with this thinking, Okoro (1996:308) posits that “effecting a proper packaging also starts from knowledge that the product and its pack ought to be one and the same thing”. In his view, “while purchasing a product, the usual thing is for the consumer to take the packages as a surrogate indicator of the product quality” Arens (2004:192) corroborates this view when he states that “to penetrate consumers’ psychological screens, the package design must reflect the tone, image and personality of the product concept”. In his view “... the package quality determines the consumer’s perception of the product quality”.

Ideally, the quality of a packaging should reflect the quality of the product. But in reality, Onyeke and Nebo (2000:70) observe that a low quality product may appear in a nice and attractive package. That in effect showcases the dysfunctional dimensions of packaging but it is hardly so. The consumer may likely interpret that product as a high quality one as a result of the way it is perceived, whereas in reality, it is a low quality product which buttresses the contention of Trout and Reis (1993). The observation above could lead to a crisis between the perceived quality as chiefly dictated by the quality of packaging on one hand, and the real or actual product quality on the other hand. The same applies if the product quality is believed to be higher than the quality of packaging. This not only explains the place of packaging in relation to product quality, but also indicates the relevance of both in relation to the product concept.

In real terms, packaging as a marketing strategy, remains at the whims and caprices of the marketer that may often use it capriciously on the consumer who, in the context of our Nigeria’s sellers marketing system status, is always at the receiving end. But nonetheless, packaging remains a strong index of product quality which marketers cannot gloss over as it determines a major factor of consumer/buyer purchase decision at the point of sale or purchase (Pos).

Conclusion

Efforts have been made here to establish the relationship between packaging and product quality. It is an undisputable fact that packaging of a product in the face of undiluted curiosity of consumers with respect to product quality has intensified efforts made by manufacturers and marketers at packaging products in a manner insightful of the product quality. This strategy not only takes into consideration the customers’ desires but also gives the consumer an opportunity to predict the product quality. But more often than not, packaging benefits the seller (manufacturer or marketer) more than the buyer (consumer). This is more so in our developing marketing system here that is a sellers world rather than a buyers one. As such the consumer is, regrettably, at the mercy of the seller who merely sells what he produces rather than produces what he sells. Ours is indeed a sellers’ market.

Nevertheless, packaging occupies a central position in evaluating product quality by consumers. Beyond this singular function of determining product quality, packaging plays a number of marketing and merchandising roles as noted by Shimp (2000) and is

central and critical to the overall success and competitiveness of any brand. According to Shimp (2000), packaging performs the following five cardinal functions:

- i. Draws attention to a brand
- ii. Breaks through competitive clutter at the point of purchase
- iii. Justifies price/value to the consumer
- iv. Signifies brand features and benefits, and
- v. Ultimately motivates consumer' brand choices.

Similarly, Arens, Weigold and Arens (2008) contend that “since upwards of 70% of all buying decisions are made at the point of purchase, packages play a major role in both advertising and selling”, adding that “US companies spent close to \$120 billion on packaging in 2005. The strategic place of packaging can thus be more appreciated in this *experiential marketing era* where as Lenderman (2013:114) observes, brands have quickly moved away from being recognized to being experienced, remembered, shared and loved.

In our today's proliferation of supermarkets and street shopping plus other self-service retail outlets, packaging has come to perform a number of marketing functions beyond the traditional role of just containing and protecting the product. In addition, packaging is particularly important in differentiating homogenous or unexciting brands from available substitutes. In short, packages perform a major brand equity enhancing role by creating or fortifying brand awareness and, along with other marketing communications tools, building brand image. Packaging is therefore very indispensable in the overall marketing strategies for enhancing product quality.

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