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Brand recognition influences sensory acceptance positively or negatively, an effect that can sometimes be quite dramatic. SAM Sensory and Marketing has studied this phenomenon by comparing manufacturers' brands with trade name and discount brands in vanilla ice cream.

A brand plays a major role in the interplay of the elements that make up the marketing mix. For the consumer, perception of a particular brand is closely connected to an important and positively assigned world of experiences. Such associations have a strong influence on the buyer's decisions to choose one brand or another.

Alongside this positive external influence under which the specific target group perceives the product, the sensory acceptance of the product as its intrinsic value or 'inner worth' plays a fundamental role in the consumer's buying decision.

As soon as this decision has been made, the buyer will have particular expectations regarding sensory satisfaction when consuming the product. These expectations should be fulfilled at the moment of consumption, especially in the case of foods. If this fulfilment indeed occurs, an essential prerequisite for establishing a pattern of repeated purchases promoting long-lasting product success is achieved.

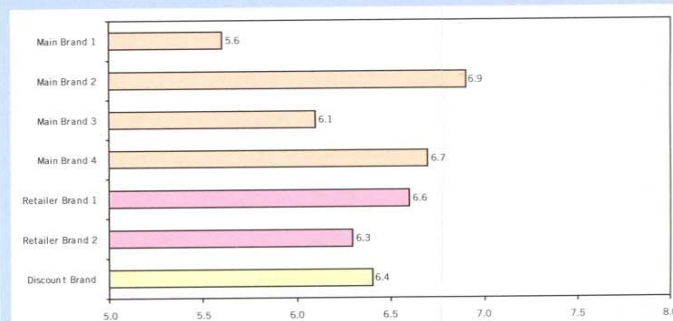
Sensory studio test

In this way, the brand will be supported by a particular sensory acceptance as well as by a positive experience milieu (within specific target groups). This not only sets off the brand in question against other brands, it also makes it possible to successfully implement and sustain higher prices than those of the discount brand and trade name competitors.

However, the image (or extrinsic value) of a brand and the sensory acceptance (or intrinsic value) of the same brand cannot always be clearly separated by its consumers. The positive kick of brand recognition automatically produces an increased sensory acceptance, an effect that can sometimes be quite dramatic, for example, in the ice cream category.

In a quantitative sensory studio test, twelve vanilla ice cream products

Figure 1: Overall acceptance



Source: SAM ASAP



Photography: Reed Business Information

were tested for consumer acceptance. All of the ice creams were available on the German market. A group of 120 test subjects between 18 and 55 years old tested the products in a blind setting. All participants stated that they liked vanilla ice cream; no brand names were given.

At the same time a trained sensory panel examined the products and developed an objective descriptive product profile. In combination with

the results of the blind acceptance test, SAM created ideal profiles for especially high consumer product acceptance.

Brand impact

The results show the enormous sensory variability within the German vanilla ice cream market, especially in the manufacturer brands group, which offer a remarkably wide range of product qualities.

It is also interesting that a discount house brand examined in this study achieved acceptance ratings of 6.4 (see Figure 1) This outperformed the acceptance rates of some of the more expensive manufacturer's brands.

In the second part of the study all of the consumers were asked to assess the products a second time. This test run differed from the first one only in the following additional notice on the questionnaire: "You will now receive a product of brand XXX." No other brand features such as logos, pictures, or packaging were shown; only the brand name and, if necessary, the sub-brand name, was given.

Once again we asked for a general acceptance rating. The results of these 'branded' tests are depicted in Figure 2 together with the blind test results, so that a direct visual comparison can be made. Figure 3 shows the difference between the two acceptance ratings, the so-called 'brand impact'. This is a measure of the potential of a given brand (name) to influence the consumers' sensory acceptance ratings.

Figures 2 and 3 clearly show that, for instance, manufacturer's brand No. 1, which received the lowest acceptance rates in the blind test (see Fig. 1), now received the highest rates. Brand name recognition alone – as there were no other changes in the test design – made the acceptance values rise by 1.7. This equals 21 percent of the scale range.

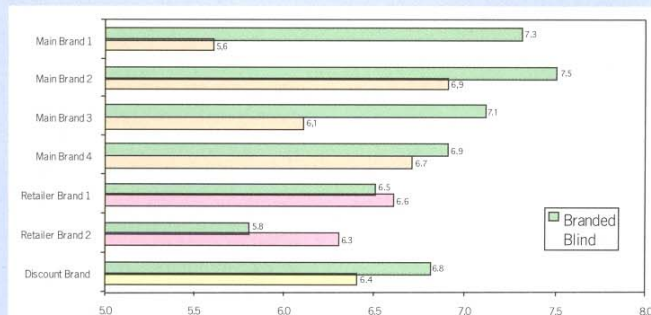
Obviously, the positive influence of the 'outer' world of brand experiences was so high that a low 'inner' sensory acceptance shown by the blind test was completely compensated.

This strong positive brand influence was also seen in other products (e.g. manufacturer's brand 3), including the discount house brand. On the other hand, the opposite effect was also recognisable: trade name brands Nos. 2 and 3 showed lower acceptance ratings in the 'branded' test than in the blind test.

Cluster analysis

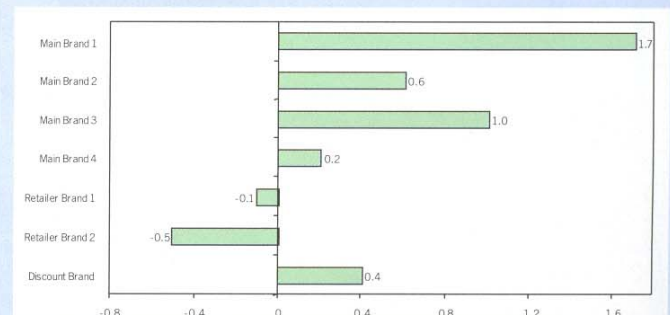
Concluding, the positive and negative influences of the brand environment play a significant role in the consumers' sensory product acceptance. In general, a worthwhile brand should lead to a significant in-

Figure 2: Overall acceptance



Source: SAM ASAP

Figure 3: Brand impact



Source: SAM ASAP

crease in sensory acceptance (around 0.6 points on a 9-point scale).

Thus, a 'good' brand will support the 'inner' quality of a product. It will also allow an increase in product price and strengthen the ability to distinguish the product from competitors and trade name brands.

However, even a generally low acceptance rating does not necessarily mean that a product should be dropped. In such cases it is often worthwhile to conduct a cluster analysis. Indeed, it may well be that the sensory profile of a product has a high acceptance rating among a subgroup of the target group examined. In such cases sensory positioning within an identified taste niche is absolutely justified.

The important advantage of SAM's research methods is that they are not only able to identify clusters that have market potential, but that they can also quantify the size of these clusters. With the help of these methods, SAM can calculate the often very attractive market potential of the particular niche.

If no cluster can be identified, and if the acceptance ratings diverge more than 0.6 points, the product begins to lack the 'inner worth' of

sensory acceptance. The larger the difference between the acceptance ratings in the blind and the branded tests, the more the acceptance rates are founded on 'outer', or imaginary, values, and not supported by true product qualities.

In other words, the sensory acceptance is not based on intrinsic product quality, but is created artificially. This will eventually weaken the product's market position. Such a situation will occur when other manufacturer's brands use similar marketing concepts, or when a cheaper competitor offers a much better quality product, as was the case when the discount house brand was rated higher than manufacturer's brand No. 1.

Loyalty

Last but not least, the increasing divergence of acceptance between the blind and the branded tests is a measured reflection of the increasing inefficiency of marketing expenditures. In order to maintain the product's popularity when inner acceptance (quality) is lacking, a considerably greater investment in marketing strategies will be required. It is as if the consumer is being paid for his loyalty to the brand.

Brand building, brand maintenance, and consumer-oriented product development must be carried out integrally with a view towards brand niches and product popularity. Together with brand perception and marketing mix, distinguishing brand sensory positioning from the competition and differentiating brand sensory quality from the trade name brands are fundamental cornerstones of successful product positioning; such strategies ensure lasting brand profitability in the marketplace. This is especially true when considering the ever-stronger development of discount brands. ■

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