

CHAPTER 4

PRODUCT ATTRIBUTES

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Product attributes are important to both consumers and marketers. The consumer uses attributes as the basis for evaluating a product since attributes provide benefits the consumer seeks when purchasing a product and comparing between competitive brands. He also evaluates attributes more positively or negatively, which is perceived as being important in the decision-making process. The marketer uses attributes to differentiate his brand from competitive brands and as the basis for the development of new products. Attributes are also used in advertising by either stating that a product has a certain attribute or that its attributes provide certain benefits to the consumer.

Recent research (Carpenter, Glazer & Nakamoto, 1994) has shown that although the general view is that product differentiation is done through attributes that are meaningful, relevant and valuable, many brands successfully differentiate themselves from competitors by focusing on attributes that appear to be valuable, but on closer examination, however, are irrelevant (also referred to as meaningless differentiation). An example is where a tea manufacturer may claim that his tea bags are round instead of square. The fact is, the flavour and taste of the tea will remain the same no matter the shape of the bag.

Differentiating a product from competitive products on an irrelevant attribute might be useful when a competitor already focuses on the determinant attribute of a product. The irrelevant attribute is then perceived as an additional attribute (and benefit) to the consumer. The use of an irrelevant attribute can be significant if the consumer perceives the attribute as meaningful and unique.

Chapter 4 focuses the attention on what attributes are and how product attributes are used in developing a positioning strategy. When positioning by attribute or consumer benefit, the marketer has the option of focusing on only one attribute or multiple attributes, depending on the positioning strategies of competitors.

The importance of studying attributes goes beyond the physical features of a product and the development of positioning strategies since attributes can be linked to the consequences of purchasing and consuming a product. This is studied through a means-end chain model, where it is assumed that very specific product attributes are linked at levels of increasing abstraction (Solomon, 1994). A person has valued end states and chooses among alternative means to attain these goals.

The basic means-end chain model consists of three elements: products offer attributes to consumers; consumers experience consequences when consuming a product; and consequences help consumers to attain certain values. A carefully developed advertising strategy can assist the marketer to successfully combine attributes to values attained and convey the message in such a way that consumers will purchase its products.

4.2 PRODUCT ATTRIBUTES

Mackenzie (1986) explains that consumers are believed to seek information, evaluate products and make purchases in part by their perceptions of the importance of various product attributes. As discussed under Section 2.3.3.4, attributes play a vital role when choosing a decision rule since the outcome of a purchase decision is determined by its attributes. Consumers furthermore evaluate products on attributes that are perceived to be important to them. For example, by using a compensatory decision rule, consumers evaluate brands in terms of relevant attributes and a summated score is computed for each brand. In selecting a noncompensatory decision rule, a minimum acceptable performance level is either selected for each attribute (conjunctive rule), or for any attribute being considered (disjunctive rule), or attributes are ranked in terms of importance (lexicographic rule).

Aaker et al (1992) explain that an important attribute is one that is considered an important benefit towards the satisfaction of consumer needs. Aaker (1991) adds that because most product attributes provide consumer benefits, there usually is a one-to-one correspondence between the two. Before continuing the discussion on attributes, it is important to define what an attribute is and to distinguish between attributes and benefits.

The term attribute can be defined as

"The characteristics or features that an object may or may not have."
(Mowen, 1993, p. 771)

Attributes can be classified as being concrete or abstract (Peter et al 1994). Concrete attributes (Aaker et al, 1992 refer to physical characteristics) are the most objective, tangible characteristics of a product and can be measured on some physical scale such as colour, weight or leg-space in a car. Abstract attributes (Aaker et al, 1992 refer to pseudo-physical characteristics), on the contrary, represent intangible, subjective characteristics that are not easily measured, eg creaminess, shininess or the comfort of a car.

According to Aaker et al (1992), benefits refer to advantages that promote the well-being of the consumer. Peter et al (1994) clarify this by stating that benefits represent desirable consequences that consumers seek when buying and consuming a product. Benefits also include the positive affects associated with consumption of a product. Mowen (1993, p.771) defines benefits as

"The outcomes that product or service attributes may provide."

The discussion on means-end chain models will further distinguish between attributes and benefits.

Interesting to note is that in an advertising context, product attributes and benefits are not only communicated by slogans and copy but also by the visuals (eg pictures or images) that accompany the advertising copy (Smith, 1991). Sutherland (1993) adds that both pictures and words are used to highlight the brand's association with a specific attribute and can be used to make the positive attributes of the advertised product more salient.

Kotler (1991) explains that the most salient attributes to the consumer do not necessarily always imply that they are the most important ones. Because of aggressive advertising campaigns (with high repetitiveness) other attributes may be more salient simply because the consumer is more exposed to the attributes mentioned in the advertisement, hence making these attributes "top-of-the-mind".

Bridges (1993) and MacKenzie (1986) emphasise that attributes that are important in the decision-making process are evaluated more positively or negatively than attributes that are perceived to be unimportant. Consumers, therefore, focus their attention on product attributes that are most crucial when deciding which brand to purchase. This is referred to as determinant attributes. Aaker *et al* (1992) conclude that although consumers focus their attention on determinant attributes, decision-making will not be affected by the specific attribute if all brands are perceived to be virtually identical with respect to the determinant attribute.

The following section explains the importance of attributes in developing a positioning strategy.

4.3 ATTRIBUTES AND PRODUCT POSITIONING

Mowen (1993, p. 782) defines product positioning as

"The use of the marketing mix in order to cause consumers to perceive a product in a certain way relative to other brands. A brand's position is usually described in relation to the characteristics of other brands."

Aaker et al (1992) acknowledge that a positioning strategy can be conceived and implemented in a variety of ways. Each approach represents the development of a different positioning strategy, even though all of them have the ultimate objective of either developing or reinforcing an image in the mind of the audience. Peter et al (1993, p. 562) emphasise this viewpoint by providing the following definition of product positioning:

"Positioning the product relative to competing products in the minds of the consumers."

According to Peter et al (1993) several different approaches can be used in creating a product positioning strategy. These positioning approaches are derived from attributes associated with the product, the use or application of the product, the product user, the product class and the competitor. Lamb, Hair & McDaniel (1994) add price and quality as an additional approach, while Aaker et al (1992) add culture symbols as the final approach. Only the attribute approach (also referred to as using product characteristics or consumer benefits) will be discussed.

4.3.1 Positioning by attribute or consumer benefit

The product positioning approach used most often is that of positioning by attribute or consumer benefit. According to Peter et al (1993) this approach is followed by associating a product with an attribute, a product feature or a consumer benefit. The problem usually experienced with this approach is to find an attribute that will be perceived as being important by a major market segment that is not already claimed by a competitor (Aaker, 1991). Wilkie (1994) agrees with the latter statement by explaining that the task of the marketer is to identify the determinant attributes of a product. A marketer is not limited to executing the positioning strategy by only using one attribute. A product can therefore be positioned according to two or more attributes.

Marketers that position their product on only one attribute usually do so by aggressively promoting the particular attribute. Kotler (1991) explains that the marketer develops a unique selling proposition through this approach. Belch & Belch (1990) continue by explaining that the attribute claim that forms the basis for the unique selling proposition should dominate the advertisement and be emphasised through repetitive advertising. Important to consider is that the major selling idea should truly offer a unique attribute. For example, a toothpaste marketer claims as a unique selling proposition that his product "Now contains fluoride" or "Brand X for extra fresh breath". The danger with promoting only one attribute or benefit is that it often limits the potential market either implicitly or explicitly. The consumer may, for example, not know the advantage of fluoride in toothpaste or may prefer a toothpaste that prevents plaque and provides a moderately fresh breath instead of extra fresh breath.

A complicating factor is that in a competitive market a competitor may already express that his product possesses a specific attribute (the determinant attribute). In these circumstances Kotler (1991) suggests a double product positioning approach which is particularly important to consider when two or more competitors are expressing the same attribute. The intention of using two attributes then is to find a niche within the target segment. Two examples are that of toothpaste claiming to prevent plaque and at the same time freshens breath, or diet cola stating: "all the flavour but non-fattening".

Kotler (1991) explains that there are situations where three attributes can be used successfully (referred to as triple benefit positioning). An excellent example is that of Aquafresh toothpaste. Aquafresh focuses on three different attributes: "anticavity protection", "better breath", and "whiter teeth". With such an approach, the challenge is to convince the consumer that the brand actually can deliver all the benefits associated with the attributes. Aquafresh achieved this challenge by creating a toothpaste that squeezed out of the tube in three colours, therefore visually confirming the three benefits. An advantage in following a triple benefit approach is that different (and therefore more) segments are attracted.

Sengupta (1993), supported by Kotler (1991), note as a conclusion that positioning strategies involving too many attributes can result in a confused image. The risk is a possible loss of clear position and a resulting disbelief in the specific attribute claims.

The following section, means-end chain models, focuses the attention on a higher level of attribute importance where it is believed that product attributes, consequences and values are linked in the mind of the consumer.

4.4 THE MEANS-END CHAIN MODEL

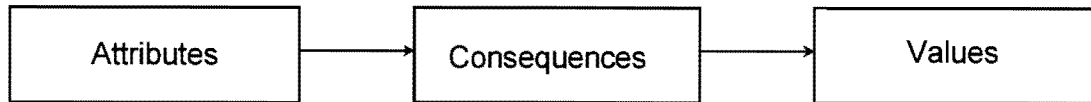
Reynolds & Graddock (1988) explain that according to means-end theory, people have valued end-states towards which they strive and choose between alternative means of reaching those goals. Products and services are valued because they are instruments - means - to valued ends. Therefore, the "means that are in the products" have salience only because they help reach the "ends that are in the people".

Mowen (1993, p. 780) defines the means-end chain model as

"A model that depicts the relation of a level of abstractness of attributes to the consequences of a behavior and to the values expressed by the behavior."

As depicted in Figure 4.1, the basic means-end chain consists of three elements, namely attributes, consequences and values. The meaning ascribed to the attributes is given by the consequences consumers perceive they lead to. The product attribute is seen as a means to an end, where the end could be an immediate consequence or a more abstract value.

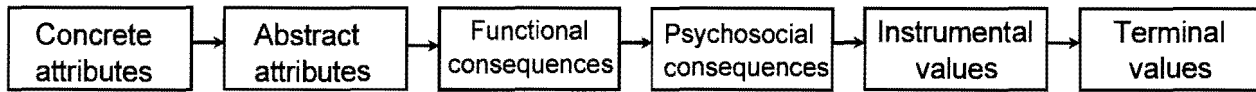
FIGURE 4.1: THE BASIC MEANS-END CHAIN MODEL



Source: Adapted from Wilkie (1994, p.162)

A more detailed means-end chain model can be obtained by dividing each element of the basic model into two separate elements. According to Olson & Reynolds, in Percy & Woodside (1983), the model elaborates from concrete attributes (which are low in abstraction) to product attributes at a higher level of abstraction, that are represented by consequences. At the highest level of abstraction, a product attribute can be represented by a value that can be achieved by the purchase and consumption of the product. The expanded model consists of the following elements: concrete attributes, abstract attributes, functional consequences, psychosocial consequences, instrumental values and terminal values. Figure 4.2 provides a detailed assessment of the expanded means-end chain model.

FIGURE 4.2: THE EXPANDED MEANS-END CHAIN MODEL



Source: Adapted from Wilkie (1994, p.162)

As discussed earlier, attributes can be classified as either being concrete or abstract. Gutman & Reynolds, in Olson & Sentis (1986), distinguish between concrete and abstract attributes by stating that concrete attributes are the characteristics of the product that are literally part of a product (physical characteristics), eg the amount of salt included in flavoured chips or "kilometres per litre". Abstract attributes on the other hand, can be attributed to a product because of the concrete attribute (subjective characteristics), eg tastes good, strong flavour or stylish.

Olson et al (1983) explain that consequences can be divided into functional and psychosocial consequences. According to Gutman et al (1986), functional consequences stem directly from consuming the product. Peter et al (1993) add by explaining that functional consequences are less abstract outcomes from the use of a product and are experienced more directly by the consumer (eg drinking a Lemon Twist eliminates your thirst). Furthermore, functional consequences include the physical, tangible and performance outcomes of using or consuming a product (eg a toaster browns bread evenly).

Psychosocial consequences consist of both psychological and social consequences (Peter et al, 1994). Psychological consequences are less tangible, yet more personal outcomes of product consumption (eg a lady wearing Chanell No 5 perfume may feel more attractive). Social consequences are intangible and relatively abstract (eg a lady believing that her friends will respect her if she wears Chanell No 5). The combination of psychological and social consequences leads to psychosocial consequences (eg not only does a lady feel attractive when wearing Chanell No 5 but her friends also admire her for doing so).

Besides consisting of functional and psychosocial consequences, a distinction also has to be made between positive and negative consequences. Peter et al (1993) explain that benefits represent the desirable, positive consequences of consuming a product (eg if the consumer purchases a microwave oven to save time in preparing food). The negative consequences, referred to as perceived risk (discussed under Section 3.5.1), represent outcomes that people seek to avoid when purchasing and consuming a product (eg physical risk). Reynolds et al (1988) note as a conclusion that if a consumer purchases suntan lotion to avoid sunburn for example, it will not be perceived as being a benefit but rather the avoidance of a negative consequence.

Aaker et al (1992) commence the discussion on values portrayed in the means-end chain model by stating that values represent the desired end states that consumers wish to achieve. Wilkie (1994), supported by Peter et al (1994) clarifies the above statement by explaining that values are the mental representations of important life goals and underlying needs that consumers are trying to achieve.

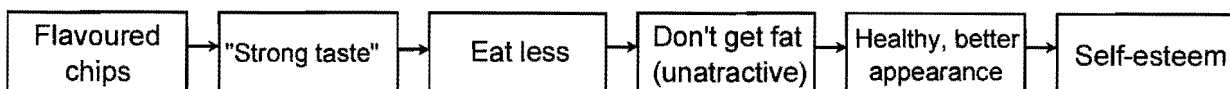
Before turning to the two types of values (instrumental and terminal), it is important to consider that values are more abstract than functional and psychosocial consequences (ie they are several levels away from any physical referent - Olson et al, 1983) and that values change over time and differ from individual to individual (Wilkie, 1994).

Instrumental values (Wilkie, 1994) refer to the beliefs about desirable ways of behaving to assist the consumer in attaining terminal values (ie, they have an external orientation), like being honest, accepting responsibility or feeling accepted. Terminal values represent the beliefs that consumers have about the goals or end-states they strive at (ie, how one views oneself), such as happiness, self-esteem and accomplishment.

The following example (adapted from Wilkie, 1994) may provide more clarity on the means-end chain model by showing how the various levels interrelate (Figure 4.3). A consumer wishes to purchase a pack of flavoured chips (concrete attribute). Since she is figure-conscious and concerned about her health (instrumental value) she will consider buying a pack of chips with a strong taste (abstract attribute) so she can eat less (functional consequence) and not gain weight and become unattractive (psychosocial consequence). By still looking as attractive as she wishes to be, the woman accomplishes a higher level of self-esteem (terminal value). She therefore decides to buy Tango chips.

As can be seen in the example illustrated in Figure 4.3, the chain develops from the physical world on the left to the mental world of values on the right (Wilkie, 1994). The in-between steps represent associations consumers make to go from the so-called "means" (buying a physical product) to the "end" (attaining a particular value).

FIGURE 4.3: AN EXAMPLE OF THE MEANS-END CHAIN MODEL



Source: Adapted from Wilkie (1994, p.162)

In conclusion, Peter et al (1993) note a number of important considerations in developing and evaluating a means-end chain model.

- * A means-end chain model contains the personal relevant meanings consumers create for products and are unique to each consumer's background and personal values.
- * The model is based on the idea that the dominant meaning of a product attribute is determined by the consequences it is perceived to have.
- * A means-end chain model does not necessarily lead to an instrumental or terminal value. The end of a means-end chain model can be a consequence at any level of abstraction, eg a toothpaste that provides fresh breath (a functional consequence), the consumer thinking that his friends would like to be close to him (a psychosocial consequence), the consumer feeling clean (an instrumental value) or the consumer believing that he will be happy (a terminal value). If product attributes have no connection to consequences, consumers will not know what the attributes are good for and consequently they will probably have little effect on their behaviour.
- * Product attributes may have multiple means-end chains that sometimes can be conflicting. Therefore, an attribute can lead to both positive and negative ends.

The means-end chain model is practically executed in developing an advertising strategy. Since advertising is meant to be persuasive, an advertising strategy has to provide a framework for developing advertising that has the ability to communicate with consumers. Gutman et al (1986) explain that the perceptual constructs represented by the means-end chain are used as the basis for the development of a strategy that appeal to consumers. The strategy developed to combine advertising with the means-end chain model, referred to as a MECCAS model (Means-Ends Conceptualisation of the Components of Advertising Strategy), consists of five

different levels and is executed with care so that the advertiser can communicate his message and successfully combine attributes to consequences and values.

Olson *et al* (1983) continue by explaining that strategists must select the end states, ie values or benefits, that are to be emphasised in the advertising campaign and also have to determine how the product attributes will be connected to the desired end states. Finally, the specific characteristics of advertising must be selected and combined to effectively communicate the combination between the purchase and consumption of a product and the achievement of the desired end state.

As mentioned earlier, five levels of advertising strategy development can be distinguished when implementing the MECCAS model.

The first level can be classified as the driving force for the strategy, ie the value orientation or the end level on which to focus in the advertisement. The second level, leverage point, refers to the manner in which the advertisement will activate the value or end level of focus (the specific way in which the value is linked to the specific features in the advertisement). The next level, executional framework, consists of the overall scenario and details of the advertising execution. The executional framework also includes the overall style and tone and provides the vehicle by which value orientation is to be communicated. The fourth level, consumer benefits, consists of the positive consequences for the consumer that are to be communicated explicitly, verbally or visually. The final level, message elements, includes the specific attributes, consequences or features of the product that are to be communicated.

4.5 SUMMARY

Attributes play a vital role in the consumer decision-making process since consumers evaluate and compare competitive products based on attributes. The marketer uses product attributes to differentiate between his product and that of the competitors and also develops a positioning strategy based on determining (or even irrelevant, unique) attributes.

An advertising strategy can also be drafted based on attributes where the marketer can either promote one determinant attribute or two and even three attributes to further distinguish his product from competitors. Important to note is that if the marketer only promotes one attribute he can limit his target market implicitly or explicitly. If more than two attributes are used, the marketer can lose the credibility of his claims.

As discussed, the means-end chain model suggests that it is the associational network involving attributes, consequences and values that really represents needs to be understood in developing message content. Effective advertising should, therefore, be developed to address all levels and not just be concerned with product attributes. The major positive consumer consequences should be communicated verbally or visually, and the value should provide the driving force behind the advertising.