

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 INTRODUCTION

The area of research undertaken in this study, namely to determine consumer perceptions of displayed product attributes in advertising, is a research project that could aid the marketer to differentiate his brand from competitive brands on the basis of product attributes when developing advertisements or drafting positioning strategies.

The research conducted to accomplish the objectives set for this study comprised two phases, namely content analysis and a quasi-experimental design. The rationale for using content analysis was to draft an exhaustive list of product attributes functional to the product category lipstick. The results obtained through content analysis was then used during the second phase of the research project, quasi-experimental design, to compile a questionnaire that was presented to 187 female respondents familiar with the product category. The results obtained from the questionnaires were then used as input variables to factor analysis. Factor analysis was used to reduce the number of variables but still retaining as much information as possible to ensure that the remaining variables were meaningful and easy to work with.

The theoretical overview of the study presented in Chapters two, three and four indicated the difficulty in understanding the consumer perception and decision-making process. Emphasis was also placed on the importance of product attributes from the perspective of the marketer and the consumer.

The consumer perception process, discussed in Chapter three, has been documented as the most significant barrier to effective communication. The explanation for such a statement is that it is believed that it is at this point that the sender does or does not get through to the consumer, since correct decoding of marketing information hinges on the consumer's perception of the communication content.

The consumer perception process consists of five distinct activities. First the consumer has to be exposed to stimuli. Exposure occurs when a stimulus comes within the range of our sensory receptor nerves, ie when stimuli come within the range of our senses. The importance of exposure is that there can be no communication (or a perception process for that matter) without exposure to stimuli.

Secondly, the consumer has to direct attention to the stimuli. Important from a marketing perspective is that no matter how often a consumer is exposed to marketing stimuli the message is of no use if attention did not take place. The attention process can therefore be viewed as an information filter - a screening mechanism that controls the quantity and nature of information any individual receives. Important to consider is that if the consumer does not attend to the product attributes (or the total advertisement for that matter) he is exposed to, even the explicit mentioning of the attributes is to no avail. It is therefore extremely important for the marketer to ensure that consideration is given to methods of attracting attention when developing advertisements. One such method may be to explicitly mention (or place focus on) the attributes that differentiate the marketer's brand from those of competitors.

The third phase in the perception process, perceptual organisation, suggests that stimuli are not perceived as a set of elements but as a whole. This total is believed to have a meaning of its own that is not necessarily deductible from its individual components, referred to as Gestalt psychology. The marketer needs to acknowledge the Gestalt psychology and perceptual organisation in general when developing advertisements since they may ensure that the consumer pays attention to the marketer's advertisements.

Perceptual interpretation, the fourth phase in the perception process, is uniquely individual since it is based on what individuals expect to see in the light of their previous experience, on the number of plausible explanations they can envisage and on their interests and motives at the time perception occurs. A problem experienced with the interpretation process, from a marketer's point of view, is that individuals may interpret the same stimulus differently. The marketer therefore needs to develop an

advertisement with great caution to attempt that a mentioned product attribute is perceived by the consumer as having the same benefit as was envisaged by the marketer.

The final phase of the perception process, retention, is very important for the marketer. Even if the total perception process was successful, it serves no purpose if the consumer is unable to recall the information when he is required to act on it. The message has failed if the consumer cannot remember its content. The marketer therefore needs to ensure that his advertising claims are remembered by the consumer. This is made possible through repetitive advertising by ensuring that attention is captured by the advertisement. The use of differentiating product attributes may assist the marketer to capture attention and thereby "force" the consumer to retain the information when deciding between alternatives.

When deciding between alternatives, the consumer moves through all the major stages of the decision-making process. The process always commences with the recognition of a need, which occurs when a discrepancy exists between the consumers' actual state and the state he desires to be in. Once a need has been triggered (eg through the depletion of current stock, dissatisfaction with his current brand, change in financial status, etc), the consumer enters the second stage, namely information search. The search for information can either be of an internal or external nature or a combination of both. The primary objective of information search is to collect information that could be used as the basis for choosing among alternatives. It is eminent that product attributes play an important role in the information search process since the consumer often has to depend on displayed attributes to differentiate among brands.

Once the search process has been completed, the consumer enters stage three, namely evaluation of alternatives. During the third phase, the consumer not only has to decide what brand he should choose, but also has to consider the criteria (decision rules) he should use in evaluating each brand. The consumer therefore considers the choice alternatives along the evaluative criteria selected. Product attributes often form the basis for evaluating alternatives and are furthermore employed in decision rules.

During the fourth stage, the consumer enters the purchase phase where the selected alternative is purchased for consumption. Interesting to note is that a purchase can either be fully planned, planned or unplanned. A fully planned purchase occurs when the consumer decides precisely which brand within a product category he wishes to purchase. If he only decides on the product category (without a specific brand within that category), the purchase is classified as planned. Unplanned purchases occur when a product is purchased without prior articulation of the purchase (either verbally or on a shopping list). This does, however, not imply that a decision process did not occur. The purchase may be based on product displays, where the display provides a reminder of a need and a purchase is triggered.

In the final phase of the consumer decision-making process, postpurchase evaluation, the consumer consumes the product. If the expectations held for the product are met or exceeded, the consumer is likely to be satisfied with the purchase. Dissatisfaction then, is the outcome of negatively confirmed expectations. The outcome of the postpurchase evaluation, satisfaction or dissatisfaction, has a direct influence on consumer beliefs and attitudes, future purchase intentions, word-of-mouth communications and complaint behaviour.

7.2 CONCLUSIONS

All the objectives set for the study, as indicated in Section 1.2, were achieved. The primary objective, namely to determine consumer perceptions of displayed product attributes in advertising, was achieved through the contributions of the secondary objectives set for the study.

The objective to determine the relevant evaluation criteria (attributes) used to evaluate lipstick, was achieved through the use of content analysis during the first phase of the research project. **Twenty-two attributes were identified which in turn were used as input variables to the second phase of the research project, a quasi-experimental design.** A sample of lipstick users was required to evaluate the

importance of the overall product attributes for the product category and the three advertised brands the users were exposed to. A statistical analysis, factor analysis, was then used to reduce the number of attributes to a more manageable set. **The result was the identification of a number of underlying factors pertaining to the product category and the brands selected for the study.**

In determining the perceived importance of each attribute when evaluating lipstick, it was found that **all the attributes were perceived by the respondents to be important when selecting lipstick.** None of the attributes received a mean value greater than 3,0, where a mean value of 1,0 was considered extremely important and a mean value of 5,0 totally unimportant. The preceding content analysis was therefore considered to be well executed with the exhaustive list of product attributes functional to the study.

With reference to the explicitly mentioned attributes for all three advertisements (Clarins, Ellen Betrix and Maybelline), it is important to note that the **mentioned attributes were perceived more important and therefore received better mean value scores than attributes not mentioned in the advertisements.** It can therefore be assumed that the respondents took definite notice of the mentioned attributes and perceived these attributes to be of greater importance.

This finding is important since each time the mentioned attributes differed, the attributes that were deemed important differed. It can therefore be suggested that **explicitly mentioned attributes in advertising are perceived to be of great importance with reference to a specific product category** (keeping in mind that in this study, the most important attributes identified when selecting the product were given as reference when each brand was rated, with the mentioned attributes receiving better scores each time).

During the second phase of the study factor analysis was used to determine underlying factors pertaining to the multiple evaluation criteria for the product category lipstick when applied to product-specific advertisements. Factors were subtracted from each

of the four sets of data. An interesting finding was that the **factors identified for the product category lipstick, once labelled, differed from the important attributes identified** (in terms of mean values). Colour for example, was rated the most important single attribute when selecting lipstick, but the first identified factor suggested that lip care was the most important feature sought when selecting lipstick. An innovative formula and brand name received relatively poor ratings, yet composition and brand association featured as characteristics considered when selecting a lipstick.

In determining change in consumer perceptions of attributes for the product category lipstick when compared with product-specific advertisements and the change in perceptions as the explicitly mentioned attributes varied, it is important to note that **the level of correspondence between the featured attributes in the advertisements and the identified factors differed with each of the three advertisements**. As more attributes were mentioned in the advertisements, the more the factors identified for the advertisements corresponded with the mentioned attributes.

It can therefore be suggested that **as more attributes are identified in advertisements, the greater the correspondence between the mentioned attributes and the labelled factors becomes**.

A further important finding was that as more attributes were mentioned, the factors identified for the advertisements corresponded to the factors identified for the product category. As the number of explicit mentioned attributes decreased, the correspondence between the mentioned attributes and the identified factors decreased. The correspondence between the factors unaccounted for and the factors identified for the product category increased, leading to the suggestion that **when specific guidelines (attributes) are not provided in advertisements, consumers are "forced" to lean on their previous held beliefs and perceptions**. Acknowledgement is then rather given to the product category than to the advertised brand.

7.3 RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations regarding this study can be applied to the marketer planning to use attributes in drafting a positioning strategy or developing an advertising campaign focusing on product attributes. Attributes can be used by the marketer in an advertisement to position the product in the mind of the consumer according to his product's attributes or to change the perception the consumer currently holds of either the attributes of the product category or of a specific brand. Important to note is that perceptions that consumers hold of attributes often differ from the intended meaning conveyed by the marketer through his advertisements.

It can be suggested that the marketer needs to determine which attributes (characteristics or factors) are perceived to be of value to the consumer for his product category. Once these attributes have been identified, the marketer may benefit by evaluating his brand on these criteria to determine his relative competitiveness. The identified attributes should, if present in the marketer's product, be communicated through the marketer's advertisements.

Besides mentioning the identified attributes, the marketer should also mention his product's differentiating attributes, since attributes that are explicitly mentioned in advertisements are perceived to be of greater importance to the consumer.

The marketer should furthermore note that as more attributes are mentioned in advertisements, the greater the correspondence will be between identified factors and mentioned attributes. As less attributes are mentioned, the consumer is "forced" to lean on previous held beliefs and perceptions. The marketer therefore stands at risk of failing in his intended message (trying to create or change a certain perception in the mind of the consumer) if attributes are not explicitly mentioned in his advertisements.

7.4 SUMMARY

The final chapter provides a short summary of the preceding theoretical overview of the study, referring to the consumer perception and decision-making processes and emphasising the importance of product attributes in both these processes. A short reference is also made to the research methodology applied in the execution of the study.

The final conclusions pertaining to the study are drawn and the acknowledgement that the primary and secondary objectives set for the study have been achieved. The chapter concludes with recommendations to the marketer of lipstick and to the marketer using product attributes in advertising.