BRAND POSITIONING IN A CONSUMER PRODUCTS MARKET

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Consumers and other buyers tend to use images in deciding on purchases. Brands, products, companies and organisations project certain images and marketing, especially advertising, can be used to mould and reinforce an image. The decision as to what kind of image should be developed is crucial to many advertising campaigns. This decision often means selecting those associations to build and emphasise and those to be removed or weakened. A popular definition of an image is the total impression of what a person or group of people think and know about an object [Aaker and Myers, 1982]. The terms 'position' or 'positioning' have been used frequently to mean 'image' except that they imply a frame of reference for the image, the reference point usually being the competition. The positioning construct is one of the more important constructs used to develop advertising objectives.

Marketing management is a multidimensional activity. Marketing managers must deal with complex issues and to do so they vary elements of the marketing mix, such as, product quality, advertising, price and so on. However, it is difficult to assess the value of these multidimensional changes because they interact with each other. Marketing managers rarely manipulate only one of the elements in the mix at a time. Hence, it is important to know how a *package* of changes in the mix affects buyers. By changing a package of marketing ingredients the manager endeavours to position his company or brand in a certain way vis-a-vis competitors. Positioning of brands is a strategic decision and when the manager knows the position his brand holds he is much better informed.

This study demonstrates how the marketing manager of a fast moving consumer brand may determine the brand's position and also indicates what needs to be done to re-position the brand if necessary. The advent of computer based analytical models means that marketing managers now have available to them a range of sophisticated data analysis tech-

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niques. The technique on which the present study is based is multidimensional scaling (MDS) of data and is well documented [Carroll, 1972; Doyle, 1973; Green, 1975; Green and Tull, 1978]. Readers of this journal will have already seen MDS applied in an industrial marketing setting [Bradley, 1982].

Applications of MDS are not confined to marketing. MDS is a set of techniques which may be used in situations where an evaluation of judgements on similarity and preference among items selected by the researcher is the research objective. MDS in marketing is particularly powerful where we do not yet know the underlying evaluative structures used by respondents (buyers) in making a selection from among many products. It is especially useful where buyers are believed to use many latent criteria in their evaluations. Hence, it may be applied successfully in positioning studies of established brands and in new product development programmes.

The Study and its Objectives

In this study we examine the perceptions among Dublin department store buyers of eight well known brands of ladies tights. Buyers responsible for hosiery purchases in Arnotts, Brown Thomas, Cassidys, Clerys, Maceys, Nicholls, Roches Stores and Switzers provided, through personal interviews, the data for the study. Supermarkets and CTN outlets were excluded because they carried only one or few brands and buyers in these stores are not sufficiently familiar with other brands on the market to provide the comparison data required. The background to this study is described in greater detail elsewhere [Mealy, 1982].

The objectives of the research were:

1. to identify the latent structure or underlying evaluative structures used by the eight department store buyers making similarity judgements among a range of branded consumer products;
2. to position the various product brands relative to each other, having regard for the underlying evaluative structures identified, and
3. to position the respondents relative to each other, having regard for the evaluative structures used and thereby determine the relevance of the latent evaluative structures to each respondent.

Research Methodology

The first stage of the research involved, through personal interviews, the development of a set of comparisons of each brand with every other brand on offer. In making the comparison the buyer was asked simply to state the similarity of one brand to another. All eight department store buyers were asked to state how similar the Glen Abbey brand was to Pretty Polly and so on through all possible comparisons. The data thus obtained make no reference to the basis on which the comparisons are made. Finally, the data were analysed through the use of a computer based multidimensional scaling programme [Carroll and Chang, 1981].

A major benefit of multidimensional scaling of respondent data is that the underlying structure of the market is obtained in a manner which does not require the analyst to pre-specify the basis of similarity judgements. Ordinal data are collected and transformed through the computer programme to multidimensional interval scaled data where an attempt is made to reduce the dimensions used as much as possible without much affecting the fit of the model to the data. There is a trade off. Many latent evaluative structures make it very difficult to interpret the results and in any case it is of practical significance to the marketing manager to identify a reduced number of major evaluative structures that buyers use to discriminate among brands rather than attempting to somehow assess performance on each element of the entire marketing mix.

The second aspect of the methodology is to include a facility for interpreting the underlying evaluative structures produced by MDS as part of its output. This is done by working with the marketing manager and through understanding the competitive structure of the market. In this fashion it is possible to interpret the latent dimensions used by the buyers in making their evaluations of the eight brands. By combining the two stages we can interpret the relative positions of the competing brands in the context of a latent but known evaluative structure.

Research Findings

To answer the questions implied in the first research objective it is necessary to refer to the findings of the second stage of the research methodology. Recall that this involved using management experience and a knowledge of the industry to help identify the underlying or latent structure of the brand perception formation process. We do this by analysing the marketing strategies followed by each brand in the Dublin market.

Brand Marketing Strategies

A summary statement of marketing strategy for each brand is presented in table 1. This table was prepared on the basis of discussions with manufacturers and observation of competitive marketing behaviour. As already stated, it is necessary to have this information so that we can

Tabie 1: *Analysis of Competing Marketing Strategies for Eight Consumer Brands*

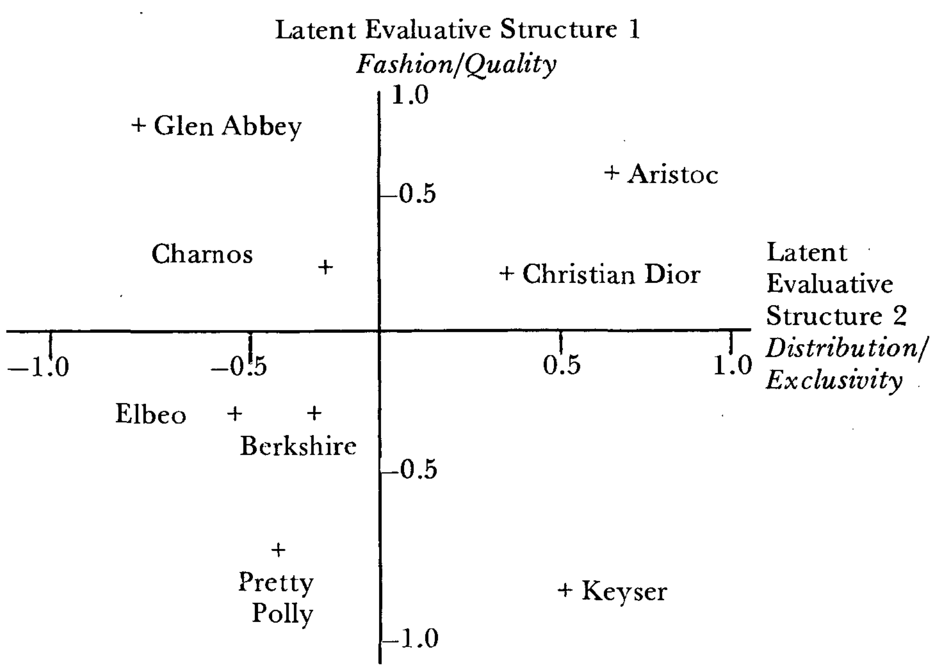
Brand	Awareness Level/Market Segment	Product Range – styles – colours – sizes	Packaging	Price	Distribution Channels	Selling	Advertising Promotion
Aristoc	Exclusive/ up-market Individual brand	yes, styles, colours	superior	medium	dept. stores only	no direct support	low
Berkshire	Low awareness/ Family brand	many sizes/ limited styles/ colours	high quality	medium	drapery stores only	no direct support	low
Charnos	Low awareness	limited/ support tights	good	high	drapery stores only	agent support	low
Christian Dior	High fashion segment/ Family brand	limited	superior	high	dept. stores/ wholesalers	no direct support	none
Elbeo	Individual brand/ Appeal to older group	yes	superior	high	widespread in drapery	agent support	descreet/ exclusive/ selective/ now posters
Glen Abbey	Family brand/ Low awareness	yes	good	low	widespread penetration	weekly calls	sponsorship/ posters/ recent
Keyser	Appeal to older group	limited	good	low	smaller drapery stores	weekly calls	low
Pretty Polly	Family brand/ Fashion emphasis	widest/ new fashion colours annually	good	low	expanding/ now widespread	weekly calls	billboard/ fashion emphasis

interpret the latent evaluative structures used by the buyers. An understanding of the underlying criteria will assist greatly any of the brand managers associated with the brands being examined should he wish to re-position his brand relative to competitors after having obtained the MDS statement on brand positioning. This is the task to which we now turn.

Brand Positioning

The output of the MDS programme provides answers to the second and third research objectives. We are able to obtain a good fit for the brand perception data by using two underlying dimensions only. Buyers were seen therefore to concentrate their evaluations on two major latent evaluative structures. The results therefore can be represented on a two dimensional diagram (Figure 1). It is important to note that with the perceptual maps thus produced it is the relative location of the points representing the buyers and the brands that has meaning, i.e. we are interested in the interpoint distances among the brands and buyers in the final configuration produced by the MDS programme.

Figure 1: *Brand Positioning Among Department Store Buyers*



The information in table 1 suggests that Latent Evaluative Structure 2 should be labelled *Distribution/Exclusivity* as the brands in the left of the figure, especially Glen Abbey and Pretty Polly, are widely distributed and supported by a salesforce whereas the brands in the right of the figure, particularly Aristoc and Keyser, are only marginally supported in this way and are not widely distributed. Where there are other differences, *Distribution/Exclusivity* captures most of the impact so it is now possible to label this latent exclusive structure accordingly.

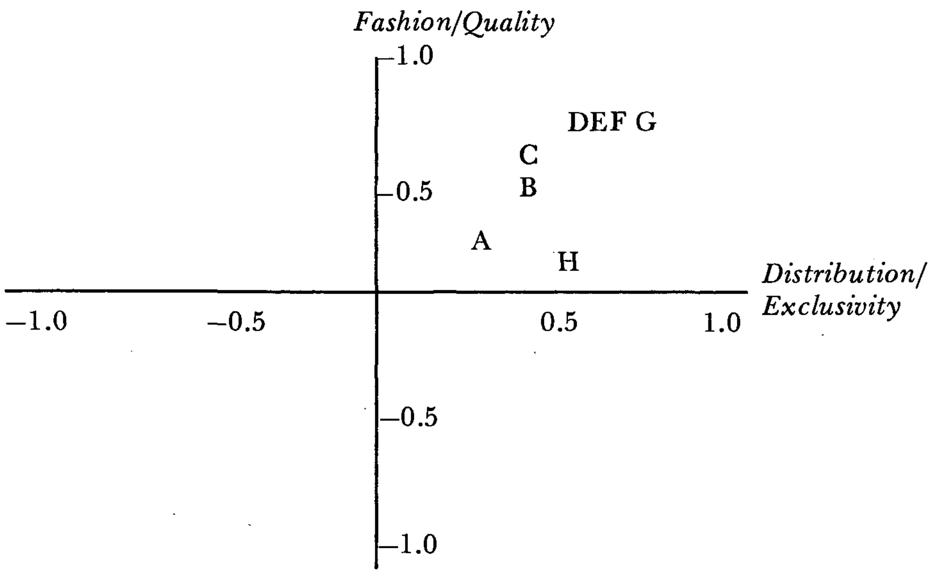
Finding the identity of the other latent evaluative structure is not so easy since there are two low priced brands and two very lightly promoted brands at either end of the dimension. Also, in the centre there are several brands which appeal to an older group of users who are fashion conscious. Nevertheless, by examining the various strategies summarised in table 1 it can be seen that advertising and fashion are two themes which run through the various offerings. A number of brands, especially Pretty Polly, but Elbeo, Berkshire and Christian Dior also, are heavy users of advertising and promotion with special emphasis on the fashion and quality elements. Hence, we conclude that Latent Evaluative Structure 1 is a composite reflecting *Fashion/Quality*. In such circumstances it might be wise to examine additional underlying evaluative dimensions for relevance. In the present instance the two dimensions explain much of the variation in the data which satisfies present research objectives.

In figure 1 note how the competing brands are perceived by store buyers to be scattered over the two dimensional space. For example, on *Fashion/Quality* the Glen Abbey brand is positioned at the opposite end to the Pretty Polly and Keyser brands, but on *Distribution/Exclusivity* the buyers perceive no great difference among Glen Abbey, Elbeo and Pretty Polly (all three brands rate between –0.3 and –0.6 on this criterion). Similarly, no great difference is perceived among Aristoc, Christian Dior and Keyser on *Distribution/Exclusivity* but this group of brands is perceived to be very different on *Distribution/Exclusivity* from the group containing Pretty Polly. These relative brand positions provide answers to the second research objective.

Buyer Segmentation

Here we attempt to judge the importance of the underlying evaluative dimensions as far as the buyers themselves are concerned. A widely scattered result for the position of buyers would indicate that they were a very heterogeneous group in the importance they attached to the dimensions identified above. A clustered grouping of buyers in one area of the diagram would indicate that the buyers were homogeneous in their preference structure. As can be seen from figure 2, all of the buyers are positioned in the top right hand quadrant, thus displaying relatively homogeneous preferences as would be expected from a group of buyers exclusively drawn from department stores. The relative positions are, however, worth noting. Buyers in Store B and Store C are almost identical in the importance they attach to the two underlying dimensions and hence are judged to have identical preferences. While it is difficult to separate some of the buyers, and hence segment this market, it is, nevertheless, possible to see that buyers from Store D, E and Store F have broadly similar preferences. The Store A and Store H buyers are somewhat different from the remainder especially in regard to *Fashion/Quality*. The Store A buyer is different from the others on both *Fashion/Quality* and *Distribution/Exclusivity*. The Store G buyer is also somewhat different, being positioned to the right of the remaining buyers.

Figure 2: *Segmentation Among Department Store Buyers*



Conclusions and Management Implications

For the marketing manager one of the most difficult tasks is that of identifying the buyers' underlying evaluative structures since we know these to be multidimensional in nature. Buyers do not purchase solely on the basis of price, delivery, or heavy advertising support. They buy for a host of reasons and the manager must cope with the multiplicity of criteria which consumers and buyers use in making judgements of competing brands. The analytical method used here attempts to collapse a number of the more important of these evaluative criteria into a small number of critical evaluative dimensions which may reflect a number of other latent perceptions of the brand offering.

The results obtained here are of relevance to managers of consumer products companies, industrial products companies and in situations, where it is desired to have respondent perceptions of any packaged offering. For example, the results show that the ideas discussed in this paper would also apply, in areas where different public policies were being evaluated or different institutions were being examined. A very profitable use of the method is to obtain corporate images with a view to changing a poor image in the marketplace. Likewise, policy makers should be interested in the method where it is important to have user perceptions of the value of publicly funded institutions, support agencies and other programmes. Research insitutes and research houses could make profitable use of the technique by supporting present research methods and extending their present service levels to incorporate more advanced research techniques.

Ultimately the key issue is one of implementation. The major benefit of the results discussed in this article is that managers are not isolated from the decision making process that is frequently found in more traditional research. For example, management is intimately involved in interpreting the results and in particular in identifying the evaluative dimensions underlying buyer responses. This interaction and joint effort between manager and researcher is the major strength of multidimensional scaling as an analytical technique in the manager's armoury.

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