

THE USE OF A NATIONAL IMAGE FOR EXPORT PROMOTION

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A clearer understanding is required of how effective the Irish image can be in promoting sales of Irish goods in export markets. A better comprehension of the role of image would assist in the development of more effective advertising and promotional support for marketing Irish products in other countries, and help to avoid inappropriate and wasteful expenditure. This article examines some of the ways in which a national image can be used to influence consumer purchases of export products in foreign markets. Reference is made to a consumer process model which offers an understanding of the formation of product images, and their influence on consumer purchases. Some empirical research results are noted which help us to understand the effect of national image stereotypes on a country's exports. The achievements of two food exporting countries, West Germany and Denmark, in developing and maintaining a positive national image for their food products in the British market are briefly outlined. An examination is made of the main components of the image of Ireland which have been identified in certain European countries. The results of studies on the image of Irish food in France and West Germany specifically are noted. Finally a number of specific strategy recommendations are made for the use of the Irish national image as a promotional instrument for developing exports of Irish food products in export markets.

Product Image and Consumer Behaviour

In the area of consumer behaviour, attitudes have been identified as playing a key role in determining consumer purchase intentions [Engel, et al, 1978]. More specifically, according to the Engel, Blackwell, Kollat model of consumer behaviour, buying intentions can be predicted through a combination of attitudes towards the act of purchasing, the existence of normative pressures, and a motivation by the individual to comply. Attitude is a function of beliefs, and belief formation is a function of evaluative criteria. On the basis of the inter-relationships described by this model it can be suggested that the primary function of image creation, or association, for a product is to exert a favourable influence on consumer perception of that product. In the case of food

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products, qualities, such as freshness, health-promoting, goodness and naturalness can be regarded as high on the list of preferred attributes by consumers. Linking these products with an image strongly reinforcing these qualities should, therefore, improve their competitive position. This could be achieved by either reinforcing existing favourable beliefs, or creating new favourable beliefs about the product. A potential role for a national image in marketing, therefore, would be to exert a favourable influence on consumer attitudes towards a country's products, through association with existing favourable images of the country. Achieving this favourable influence will depend on the images which are found to be already associated with the country of origin.

Identification of Image

The identification and definition of any existing images is a crucial step in the process of utilizing a national image for international marketing purposes [Darling and Kraft, 1977]. The national image of a country can vary across cultures, as can the influence of a "country of origin" identification. It is likely that differences in information processing between cultural groups may require a variation in advertising and marketing approaches between countries, and possibly between the different socio-cultural groups within a country. The findings of some studies offer encouragement for the efficacy of a national promotional image on consumer attitudes to the country's products [Reierson, 1967; Bannister and Saunders, 1978]. Other noteworthy findings are those relating to the possible variation across cultures of the national image of any one country [Nagashima, 1970]. Evidence has also been found of a resurgence of national identity in Western Europe, which may require multi-national product promotion to be more tailored to individual markets [Dunn, 1976].

It is noted that, in general, impressions of other countries may change over time. This means that constant monitoring of the exporting country's image is necessary in its target markets to ensure awareness of any changes which may be taking place. Perception of the quality of products may be influenced by information about the country of origin, which means that encouraging favourable perception of product quality should be a key objective of national image promotional activities [White, 1979].

EEC Consumer Concerns

In a series of surveys carried out between 1973 and 1983 in EEC member countries, among individuals aged 15 and over, an identical

set of questions, carefully designed to be the same for all countries, was put to representative samples of the population in each of the countries [EEC, 1983]. The surveys are intended to provide a regular guide to the feelings of Europeans on a wide spectrum of matters, including the socio-political climate, attitudes to European unification, opinions on proposed policies, etc. These surveys indicate that shifts in the attitudes of people in one country towards another country are slow to appear. It is concluded that this is due to the complexity of the variables upon which the attitudinal movement is based (geographic, religious, cultural, historic, economic, psychological, etc). The surveys also provide evidence of a relatively high concern with ecological issues on the part of EEC citizens, including unease about the increasing intrusion of artificiality into life, including artificially-produced food.

The relative strength of the “environmental” issues in the consciousness of EEC citizens is of interest in indicating means by which product image could be used to emphasise product benefits directly associated with these issues of concern. The discovery by a country of a positive association of naturally produced, wholesome, concepts with its “national image” could be beneficial for the potential use of this image as part of a marketing/promotional strategy. The task of improving or enhancing a national image can therefore be a major one, and may involve a considerable time span. Much effort can be spared by the identification of the prior existence of a strong and positive image for a country. Identifying the nature and strength of a country’s image in target markets is, therefore, a crucial part of an image-association strategy.

The German and Danish Approaches

The approaches adapted by other food-exporting countries, and their experiences, offer useful guidelines on the usefulness of the national approach to marketing food products. Examples of a national approach to promoting food exports are provided by the activities on the UK market of the West German Central Marketing Association for Agricultural Industries (CMA), and the Danish Marketing Organisation, ESS-Food. West German and Danish food exporters are using separate but similar approaches to food product promotion on the UK market. Of particular interest to this analysis, is the use made in both cases of a national image as a promotional device.

The development of the UK market has been a relatively recent one for West German food exporters and the image of German food among British consumers is still in the process of being created. For Danish bacon exports on the other hand, the Danish image has achieved wide-

spread awareness among British consumers over a period of three decades and can be regarded as well established. The task for Danish promotion, therefore, is largely to reinforce this image.

West German Food Promotion

The CMA closely monitors particular sectors of the UK food market in which German products are, or might be, represented [Super Marketing, 1983]. Heavy emphasis is placed on generic advertising and promotional support for German products. Promotional campaigns are based on the key concepts of quality, variety and the "something different" offered by German food, from meats and cheeses to bread and biscuits. Promotions are tailored to individual retailers' requirements. They are encouraged to display posters and brochures in-store for customer guidance. A key part of CMA's strategy for achieving penetration in the retail sector is its concentration on the speciality delicatessen sector of the food market. Growth in the UK delicatessen market has been dramatic particularly from the mid-1970s onwards. This has been assisted by the incorporation by multiples of delicatessen lines and counters in-store. Imported continental speciality products have spearheaded this growth in the UK, having rapidly gained widespread consumer acceptance. As a core element in its merchandising strategy, CMA recommends that, where possible, German products should be grouped together within their respective product categories for maximum impact at point of sale within stores.

About 55% of all German wine exports take place under the "Liebfraumilch" label. The success of German wines in the UK market owes much to the widespread consumer awareness, and acceptance, of this label as a guide to quality. By association, therefore, other brands, based on the Liebfraumilch label, have attained considerable success with UK customers. Some of the more famous of these brands include "Blue Nun", "Black Tower", and "Crown of Crowns". In this instance it can be argued that the national image of German white wines is based to a large extent on the image of the Liebfraumilch label. Promotion of individual wine brands is carried out under the Liebfraumilch umbrella in much the same way as under a national image umbrella.

The main elements of CMA's general promotional strategy in the UK market can therefore be summarised as follows:

- (a) emphasis on quality and variety as the key elements in the image of German food;
- (b) appeal to the consumers' increasing desire to experiment with new

foods by emphasising the "something different" offered by German food;

- (c) heavy generic advertising and promotional support for German food accompanied by strong back-up support for the retailer, and
- (d) where appropriate, use of existing well-known labels to promote individual brand name products.

Promoting Danish Bacon on the UK Market

Denmark is the world's largest exporter of pigmeat, with total exports amounting to about 450,000 tonnes per annum. The biggest market for Danish exports is the UK, which accounts for almost 44% of exports, almost double the level of the next biggest customer, West Germany. Close to two thirds of the quantity supplied to the UK is bacon. Efficient marketing of bacon is therefore vital to the pigmeat industry in Denmark, particularly in the UK market. The Danish Bacon Factories Export Association — ESS-Food was established in 1950 as a central marketing body for all Danish bacon exports to the British market, and for exports to all other markets of whole and half pig carcasses. ESS-Food is one of a number of commodity export boards which together form the Danish Agricultural Marketing Board.

Bacon promotions take the form of national advertising campaigns on TV, in women's magazines, with posters etc., based on the central "Danish" theme. Assistance is also given to supermarket chains in advertising campaigns, and in-store promotions. All Danish bacon sides are stripbranded with the words "Danish" and "Denmark" between continuous lines. The purpose of this is to enable the housewife to recognise bacon as Danish even on small pieces. Thus the use of a national identification is the core of the advertising activities on behalf of Danish bacon in the UK.

While the Danes have in the past established themselves as the major supplier of quality bacon to the UK market, and are conscious of the rapid changes which have been taking place in the UK bacon sector in recent years, they are anticipating even more rapid changes in the future. These changes were listed by ESS-Food recently as follows [Burchill, 1982] :

- (a) the revolution in the retail sector caused by the emergence of large multiples and the decline of the independents;
- (b) the consequent concentration of purchasing power in the hands of a small group of trade buyers;
- (c) the move away from counter-service within the retail sector, put-

ting a premium on central processing and packaging;

- (d) the increased competitiveness on the British bacon market brought about by British membership of the EEC, and
- (e) changing eating habits on the part of consumers, with traditional meat practices for bacon rashers and bacon joints tending to disappear.

The Danish Image

The reaction of ESS-Food to these changes has been to place strong emphasis on quality as the core of its marketing strategy. The most important elements of the Danish image with both wholesale and retail customers are regarded by ESS-Food as being *quality*, *consistency*, and *reliability*. While price has been shown to be important to the British housewife in the context of value for money, in the purchase of bacon it is not regarded as the most important factor. In general, a considerable amount of care is taken by ESS-Foods to maintain their position of quality leadership.

Advertising, therefore, has been an important instrument for telling the housewife how to identify Danish bacon as well as reminding her of its high quality. Advertising has also helped, and is continuing to help, in a number of other ways, with trade purchasing power becoming concentrated in ever fewer hands. ESS-Food believes that the supplier who has a strong consumer franchise via the quality of his product and the housewife's preference for his product is more able to negotiate on level terms with the large-scale buyers. For the Danes, advertising not only achieves a direct effect on the consumer, but also has an important indirect effect on trade customers [Danish Food News, 1983].

For ESS-Food, identification is regarded as especially important in moving away from commodity marketing to modern branded goods advertising. ESS-Food have continued to feature the stripmark prominently in their advertising. Although their advertising budgets have been quite modest compared with, for example, the level of expenditure on products like canned soups, breakfast cereals and coffee, they feel that they have been particularly successful in getting the stripmark known and understood widely. As an illustration of this, they quote from a Gallup study carried out on their behalf in the UK in 1979 where Gallup found that, when they showed housewives the word "Danish" with the one line on top and the double-line below, some 90% of the respondents spontaneously associated it with bacon (ESS-Food statistical material).

In this context, the Danes played a major part in establishing and finding a general PR campaign for bacon which was launched in the UK in 1981 and extended in 1982. The two objectives of this campaign — extending the usage of rashers and introducing the idea of bacon joints as an alternative to traditional meats — were generic rather than limited to purely Danish interests. But ESS-Foods take the view that with their market share it is in their interest to campaign along these lines. It is what both the trade and the housewife expect from a market leader who intends to go on being a market leader. The approach of ESS-Food on the UK bacon market can be summarised as follows:

- (a) reinforcement of the "Danish-image" among UK consumers through association of the term "Danish" with "quality";
- (b) widespread use of the mass media for advertising and promotional campaign;
- (c) use of a well-known and clearly recognisable brand-mark to identify Danish bacon to wholesale and retail customers;
- (d) close monitoring of trends in eating habits of consumers to create and/or exploit opportunities for Danish bacon products, and
- (e) extensive use of consumer research to maintain awareness of consumer attitudes to their products, and competing products.

Conclusions — The German and Danish Approaches

The foregoing analysis has attempted to show how German and Danish food exporters are using separate but similar approaches to promoting food exports on the UK market. Of particular interest is the use made in both cases of a national image as a promotional device. In the case of West German food exports to the UK, the development of this market has been a relatively recent one, and the image of German food is still in the process of being created. For Danish bacon exports, the "Danish" image has achieved widespread awareness among British consumers, and can be regarded as well established. The task for Danish promotion therefore is largely to reinforce this image. It is noteworthy that both organisations have chosen "quality" as a core element in their promotional strategies.

With reference to the consumer process model discussed earlier it is of interest that UK consumers' beliefs about the quality of Danish bacon appear to play a large part in determining their purchase intentions towards the product. The creation of positive consumer attitudes towards Danish bacon, allied to ease of identification through the "stripmark" logo, appear to have laid the foundation for marketing success. On the other hand, West German food promotion has as one

of its key strategies the segmentation of the food market, using the delicatessen sector as a major market for their products. In addition, individual food products such as certain processed meats and some wines, are designed to take advantage of changing consumer tastes and meal patterns.

The Image of Ireland – Main Components

Effective exploitation of a national image for promotional purposes requires a clear identification of the main components of that image in the target market. To make effective use of the Irish national image as a promotional device, it is necessary to establish the main components of the image of Ireland in target markets. In general, attitudes to Ireland in European countries have been found to be based on beliefs about a natural unspoiled environment, with attractive scenery and pleasant, friendly people. Studies carried out in West Germany, France, Switzerland and Holland on the factors with most appeal for potential holiday-makers in Ireland indicate that "natural environmental surroundings" consistently ranks highest on the list of positive features [Bord Failte, 1982]. Other main features which were spontaneously mentioned included "untouched nature", "landscape and scenery", "relaxed tranquility" and "slower way of life". Anxieties about holidays in Ireland in these countries placed primary emphasis on the doubtful climate as the main spontaneous negative feature.

Promotional activity carried out by Bord Failte in these countries aims, to a large extent, to reinforce the positive images of Ireland found to exist, and to exploit these images to encourage potential tourists to visit Ireland. The objective of Bord Failte in European countries is to market Ireland as a desirable and different holiday destination to pre-defined types of people [Miller, 1983]. Usually these are people who are well educated, widely travelled, young, and from the higher socio-economic groups. The features of Ireland most prominently promoted are its scenic beauty, different rhythm of life and its people. While these are believed to have appeal in most countries, they are felt to vary in different combinations and strength from one country to another.

Earlier studies on the image of Irish food in France and West Germany were carried out by the Agricultural Exports Co-ordinating Group in 1979. These studies suggested that the image of Irish food in these countries is directly associated with beliefs about Ireland [AECG, 1979]. In France, Ireland was identified primarily by respondents as a natural, green, unspoiled country with very little industry, and a

healthy basic way of life. Irish food products, as a result, should be natural and healthy, and unspoiled by modern chemicals and pollutants. It was concluded that the strongest appeal for French consumers buying Irish food products would derive from the "green, natural, healthy" image. In West Germany, consumers indicated that the characteristic features distinguishing Ireland from other countries were its green landscape, unspoiled environment, and the "natural" way of life of the people. Ireland was mainly perceived as an agricultural country, with very little industry. Irish agricultural products were perceived as of high quality, mainly due to the natural methods of production and the ideal environmental conditions.

All of these studies found that the image of Ireland in the countries being studied was stronger in certain regions of these countries than in others. Examples of regions with a comparatively strong perception included the North Rhine Westphalia region of West Germany, the North West region of France, and South Holland region in the Netherlands. The AECG studies found that attitudes towards Irish food products among respondents varied according to individual personality characteristics exhibited in the areas of purchasing and consumer behaviour. Consequently, it was recommended that any promotional or marketing activities on behalf of Irish food products in the countries studied should aim at specific segments of the population, pre-determined and clearly defined.

Exploiting a National Image — Strategic Implications

Establishing the main components of the national image of an exporting country in its target export markets is the first step in attempting to exploit it. Assumptions about the existence of a positive national image can be incorrect, and therefore misleading for promotional and development strategy. The image of a country can consist of largely positive, or largely negative features, or more generally, of a combination of both. The discovery of positive features associated with a national image does not, of itself, guarantee that their use in promotional activities will assist in bringing positive consumer reaction for the products concerned. It is necessary to identify at the same time what the negative elements in the image are, and to assess how strong their detrimental impact on the purchasing decision might be. For example, Darling and Kraft (1977) suggest that exporters' products enter foreign markets with a number of judgements already made about them. They suggest that exporters should enter new foreign markets with strategies designed to emphasise the positive aspects of existing images, and offset or correct negative aspects of the image. Therefore,

in the case where a strongly negative association with a national image is found to exist in a particular target market, it may be necessary to base a promotional campaign on a theme designed to counteract these associations, and reinforce any more positive associations which are found to exist. The identification of existing clearly held positive attitudes to a country of origin is therefore likely to be a considerable advantage in the task of exploiting a national image of a country for marketing purposes.

Conclusions

The image of Ireland promoted by the tourist industry is likely to play a large role in increasing awareness of Ireland generally in export markets. Food exporters to these countries should pay close attention to these image promotion activities. Where possible, promotional material should be designed to exploit those features of the image of Ireland shown to have the widest potential appeal.

Evidence has been found, for example, of a link in the beliefs of West German and French consumers between the image of Ireland and the image of Irish food. Both images have been found to be inter-related, and to have largely positive elements among certain segments of the population. Exporters of Irish food products to these countries, therefore, would appear to be in a position to secure favourable consumer reaction to their products by associating them with some of the components of the Irish image perceived by these consumers. In addition, the potential benefits from association with the image of Ireland may be stronger for some food products than for others. It was found that whiskey, beer, lamb and smoked fish rank highest on the list of products spontaneously associated with Ireland by French people [AECG, 1979]. Irish food products best known to West German consumers were found to be whiskey, Guinness, butter, fish and lamb. It is of interest that the surveys indicated that beef did not have a strong spontaneous association among West German and French consumers with Ireland. The main reason given was that the distance to Ireland would impede access to fresh meat for these consumers. In addition, country of origin was not given as an important factor in the consumer purchases of beef.

As described earlier, the image of Ireland varies in strength between different geographical areas of certain European countries. The Irish image has been shown to be stronger and more widely perceived in particular regions of West Germany, France, Switzerland, Holland and Italy than in other regions. In addition, it has been found that certain

segments of the populations of these countries have a stronger and more positive image of Ireland than others. The Irish image therefore appears to be more suitable for promotional uses among certain segments of the populations of these countries, rather than indiscriminately throughout the general population.

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NOTE

The *Agricultural Exports Co-ordinating Group* was established in November 1978 in accordance with the Government's Election Manifesto to co-ordinate agricultural export promotion activities. The terms of reference of the group were:

"To keep under review and co-ordinate the activities of the various bodies represented on the group in regard to export promotion of agricultural products and to make recommendations either on its own initiative or at the request of the Minister for Agriculture on issues referred by him to the Group for the improvement of such activities".

The Group was chaired by a Deputy Secretary to the Department of Agriculture and was comprised of the Chief Executives of An Bord Bainne, Coras Trachta, Comhlucht Siuicre Eireann Teo, Coras Beastoic agus Feola, the Pigs and Bacon Commission, An Chomhairle Olla, Irish Potato Marketing Ltd., and the Principal of the Trade Division of the Department of Agriculture.