Brand Revitalization: Exploratory research

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Extended Abstract

1 Theoretical background

Brands get established, they grow, expand and are successful, or they wane in popularity of their users. Through the entirety of their existence in the market environment, brands are surrounded by other brands, with which they constantly compete for the client’s affection. Is brand vitality synonymous with powerful brand names, or is vitality dependent on certain external conditions? Numerous brand managers who wish to sustain the successfufness of a given brand, very often meet with the problem of brand aging. A brand is indeed considered to be of age as soon as it starts being neglected or shunned by the consumer (Aaker, 1991). So the question becomes the following: Can brand managers, through a revitalization process, reverse a brand’s aging process and make it attractive to the consumer once again?

The definition of brand revitalization in professional literature is anything but consistent. Numerous authors (Zhang and Sun, 2009; Keller, 1999; Müller, Kocher and Cretaz, 2013; Lehu, 2004) write about brand rejuvenation, which predominantly encompasses the idea of refreshing the visual aspects of a specific brand. With this in mind, we can claim that a change in the consumer’s understanding of the brand is produced and thus, a change in the consumer-product relationship is achieved. Babu (2006) equates brand revitalization with brand rejuvenation and considers it a sort of revamping of a brand, a process which also encompasses the regeneration of the brand’s identity. Kapferer (2008) molds and upgrades the definition of brand revitalization into a coherent whole. “Brand revitalization in the narrow sense consists of recreating a consistent flow of sales, putting the brand back to life, on a growth slope again. When the brand is made up of many products, we shall see that this typically entails two actions in parallel: keeping the old typical product globally as it is (to keep its franchise) and reinventing it for new and younger consumers (that is to say asking the question, what would this product be today, if we had to invent it from scratch for the needs of modern consumers?)” (Kapferer, 2008, p.438). In combination with the before mentioned elements of brand revitalization, the author also expresses the need for the rejuvenation of a brand’s visual aspects, with the distinct purpose of maintaining and/or re-establishing the competitiveness of said brand. Brand revitalization therefore de-
mands a re-establishment of the basic aspects of the brand, which includes a rejuvenation of the entirety of the brand’s overall graphic design.

It quickly becomes apparent that, the definition of brand revitalization in professional literature differs greatly from author to author. All of the afore-mentioned authors agree on one thing though – the need to review the general state of the brand before attempting the revitalization process. It is important to confirm the reasonableness of intervening with a given brand, from a financial point of view, as well as the current positioning of the brand in the market place and its reputation (Haig, 2003). Lehui (2004) is of the opinion, that brand managers must be able to recognize the signs of brand aging, specifically by paying attention to the product offer, targeted group(s) of consumers and the brand’s ability to communicate with its consumers.

In this paper we focus on three important elements of brand revitalization: the analysis of acute and latent signs of brand aging (Lehui, 2008); the identification of revitalizing elements (Lehui, 2008) and a range of different strategies for brand revitalization (McLellan, 2006; Simmons, 2006; Gobe, 2007; Morrison and Crane, 2007; Sherry and Kozinets, 2003).

A) According to Lehui (2008), we can differentiate between acute and latent signs of brand aging, according to their area of influence, that encompass three specific criteria: the brand’s offer of products, the target group of consumers and the brand’s ability to communicate with its clients. In the area of the brand’s offer of products, are placed acute and latent signs of brand aging, which are intimately connected with research and development (ex. slow launches of new products), the characteristics of the product (ex. the correlation between promised and real-life results) and with the competitive standing of a brand (ex. constant depletion of market share). The criteria of targeted groups of consumers is comprised of all acute and latent signs of brand aging, that are in one way or another connected with consumers (i.e. constant decline of customer loyalty). The last criteria, that of the brand’s ability to communicate, is composed of all signs of aging, that influence advertising (i.e. obsolete, unclear communication), corporate communication (ex. the brand’s reputation diminishes in the eyes of the public/consumers) and public relations of a brand (ex. highly publicized negative situations involving the brand).

B) Using the methods that were described above, to determine the latent and acute signs of brand aging, we can logically proceed to discovering elements, that are going to have a revitalizing effect on the said brand. For the purpose of attaining the best and most direct results, they should be incorporated into one of the long-term brand revitalization strategies. Elements of brand revitalization, that influence the brand’s external or visual aspect, are re-inventing of the identity of the brand, brand re-positioning, innovative advertising, refreshing of the visual aspects of the brand and the expansion of the brand’s portfolio of products.

C) The different strategies of brand revitalization may consist of emotional branding, retro-branding and storytelling. Storytelling, according to McLellan (2006), is one of the basic aspects of human intelligence and imagination, and is a powerful communication tool, that requires complete attention and, quite often, the listener’s direct involvement. Simmons (2006) claims that storytelling gives brands and their products a personality and a deeper meaning. Emotional branding indicates the establishment of a relationship between the consumer and the brand which is based on the emotional and sensual level, the end goal being a long-lasting, deep and meaningful interconnection between the two (Gobe, 2007). The importance of emotional branding, especially with service brands, is further solidified by Morrison and Crane (2007). All of the elements of emotional branding are potentially present in the customer’s loyalty to a specific brand, which consequently influences the visibility of the brand and the success of its revitalization. Retro-branding indicates a resurrection of specific attributes
from the brand’s past, attributes which are adapted to a more modern market place and the current aspirations of the consumer (Brown, Sherry and Kozinets, 2003). In short, retro-branding means returning of a brand into the market place with the use of certain revitalized elements of the brand’s heritage (Brown et al., 2003).

2 Research methodology

The purpose of this paper is the analysis of three important brand revitalization elements, using the example of two Slovenian brands. We decided on the two brands because they were both launched into the market place between 1950 and 1957, and are still present in the market today. They both obviously survived the socialist era, when constant developmental work on brands was generally non-existent. In their lifetime, they survived many different periods; but lately it has become apparent, that they used some of the revitalization strategies, that we described in the previous chapter by use of professional literature.

The first brand operates in the beverage market. Its product is known for being a unique blend of 11 different herbs, it is devoid of caffeine and does not contain orthophosphoric acid. The drink is suitable for all generations of consumers. The second brand makes a part of the savoury spreads/pate market. It is specifically recognized for its excellent taste and superior quality. The savoury spreads/pates are made from the highest quality meats and prepared with all natural spices.

Apart from analyzing the secondary data of the mentioned brands, we also invited both marketing directors, who are responsible for the brand’s systematic development, to cooperate with us. With them, we performed an interview on the importance and method of revitalizing the before mentioned brands. A part of the interview focused on the completion of a questionnaire about recognizing and evaluating latent and acute signs of brand aging (Lehu, 2004) for the two specific brands.

3 Results

The careful analysis of the brands has shown, that both marketing directors attribute more importance to those signs of brand aging that are the most intimately connected with the targeted groups of consumers. They both were also of the opinion, that more importance should be placed into aging signs that express themselves through the offer of products and the brand’s communication abilities. The marketing director of the soft drinks company expressed their revitalization strategy was based on presenting the quality of their product to clients, and that special emphasis was placed on signs of brand aging that were directly attributable to a specific product. Into this category, we can place aging inside the research and development department, aging of the characteristics of the product and aging of advertisement techniques and communication on the corporate level. The second marketing director however, was mainly focused on the level of consumer content, which also reflected in a high importance given to signs of brand aging that are connected with the consumer aspects of a given brand. The acute and latent signs of brand aging are also, apart from the knowledge of marketing directors, inherently dependent on the personal style of brand managing.

Concerning revitalization elements and revitalization strategies, we can claim that, in the case of the soft drink brand, several revitalization elements were used. Revitalization elements such as growth of the product portfolio (addition of more flavors to the classic soft drink), innovative advertising (use of creative illustrations) and a rejuvenation of the visual aspects of the brand (a change in the brand’s slogan). The revitalization strategy used by the brand can be said to be that of emotional branding, because what we are seeing is a direct and emotional approach to consumers. The second brand, the one working in savoury spreads/pate market, the revitalization strategy uses two very distinct revitali-
zation elements – innovative advertising (very interactive concept, a choice of women candidates, mothers, who later became the brand’s ambassadors) and a rejuvenation of the brand’s visual aspects (a complete change in the way of communicating with consumers). The revitalization strategy used by the second brand, can be said to be that of storytelling – through the use of the brand’s ambassadors and their unique stories about the quality and excellence product.

Further analysis of the interviews also points to a couple of points of shared interest, as well as opposing approaches. The similarity between the two is best shown in the common understanding of the term revitalization, which both marketing directors understand as a strategic process, which is an indispensable part of a long term brand strategy. At this point we can draw a correlation with Kapferer’s definition (2008). Both marketing directors were of the same opinion that the questionnaire on brand revitalization could contribute immensely to the insight and tracking of the brand’s successes. They were both also of the opinion that market place surveys were one of the key activities that divulge the need of revitalizing a given brand.

The in-depth interview, combined with a relaxed conversation, also shed light on some subtle signs of expression which, together with the results of the survey, contribute to a completely personal approach to marketing of a brand. The marketing director of the soft drinks brand is a proponent of the shock principle, or as he expressed it, of “shock therapy”, a quick and efficient response to changes in the market place. He is of the opinion that the immediate implementation of changes is obligatory. The second marketing director, the one working for the brand of savoury spreads/pates, swears on the principle of continuous work on a brand. He is focused on customer happiness; the brand’s revitalization strategy is there for customer oriented as well. He is a proponent of gradual implementation of changes. The results of the surveys can also be linked with their non-verbal communication that indirectly influences their respectful approaches to brand managing. Another contributing factor that influences the work of a marketing director is the dynamics of a specific market place of which a given brand or its product are a part of. Both marketing directors, through their approaches and managing styles, work in accordance with the market place, in which their brands and their products are active participants.

Future surveys into brand revitalization could be made more comprehensive by including the opinions of the consumers and by analyzing the successfullness of a brand’s revitalization process. Surveys could consider including more brands, even though we have to be conscious that, the number of brands that have gone through the revitalization process, is in fact limited.

After reviewing numerous practical examples, it became quite apparent that brand revitalization is present specifically on the geographic area of the former Yugoslavia. The revitalization process is there for implemented on so called socialist brands, which have a strong base that is synonymous with product quality and the quality of the ingredients, but also with brand work that lacks in consistency. One of the reasons might be a less competitive market environment when compared with the global market. With bigger, more well-known brands, the revitalization processes, based on the models presented in this survey, were not as apparent. The process of brand revitalization can there be considered as an immediate measure of re-establishing the competitiveness of the brand, especially if the work on the brand thus far has been unsuccessful or non-consistent. It is an obligatory measure when there is a wish to re-establish the brand’s power, its visibility and other signs of its vitality. In these cases, we recommend to the respected marketing directors that they make an analysis of the acute and latent brand aging signs and that, after completing the survey, they implement a combination of appropriate revitalization elements and strategies in order to revitalize their brand.
References and literature