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UNCOVERING MARKET POSITIONING COORDINATES USING IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS. EVIDENCE FROM THE ROMANIAN MODERN RETAIL

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Abstract:

Market positioning is not anymore just an outcome of the marketing endeavour but actually the essence of it. Organisations must develop and implement proper market positioning plans if they want to pursue an enduring existence. In this direction, an organisation must perform a brand situation analysis, its results being the starting point of a successful market positioning. This analysis entails collecting data about the brand and its competitors being performed through various qualitative and quantitative research methods. The current study focuses on the use of in-depth interviews, a very important qualitative research instrument, in collecting data necessary to build a market position in the form of inconspicuous consumer behaviour factors, such as perceptions, attitudes and motivations. The peculiarities and advantages of this tool are detailed in an analysis of the Romanian modern retail. The findings through their richness made possible configuring market positions for several companies under study. There is no doubt about the effectiveness of this tool in collecting essential data for an effective market positioning. However, in some instances an organisation might need data of quantitative nature in making market positioning decisions, situations in which the use of the in-depth interview should be complemented with a survey.

Key words: *market positioning; in-depth interview; modern retail; Romania*

1. Introduction - The Importance of a Well-defined Market Position

Nowadays organisations face fierce competition (Dumitrescu, Fuciu, 2015), fast product life cycles, proactive communities, tighter regulations and above all a better informed and educated consumer with varying tastes and preferences which are constantly driven by the great number of choices available to them (Trout, Rivkin, 2010). In order to thrive in such dynamic and demanding conditions, an organisation should be perceived in a particular way and appraised favourably by every public of interest. This can be accomplished through market positioning. A market position, in a focused way, entails being remembered in a particular way by the market (Ries, Trout, 2001) while in a broad approach it refers to be recalled in a desired way by all the groups the organisation is interest to target. The latter approach is the outcome of a multidimensional market positioning endeavour in which a company should try to relate profitably with its publics, the most important one being comprised of its actual customers and prospects (Edu, 2013). To achieve this type of performance the marketing effort must be focused on creating, delivering and communicating value to these groups (Levis, 2006; Scherer, Palazzo, 2008). A position acquired within the publics of interest can lead to the consolidation of the position a company has occupied in the customer's mind (Fishburne, 2010).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Market Position - The Goal Of Any Organisation

The concept of market positioning is closely connected with the process of achieving a competitive advantage. A company has a competitive advantage if the market believes the company is special in a particular regard (Manhas, 2010). Conversely, if a company is considered special by the market for a particular issue, it means that the respective company has acquired a market position.

An organisation can be special in the prospect's and/or customer's mind by being different or unique, better or cheaper, catering for rational and emotional requests (Dumitrescu, Cetina, Pentescu, 2014). These positions can be acquired by acting on the constituents of the customer experience, meaning all aspects customers would consider important and assess when making a buying decision. These constituents could lie within the traditional marketing mix (product, price, placement and promotion), staff, organisation's accomplishments and endowments (Edu, Negricea, Nicolaica, 2012).

From a practical perspective, an organisation should pursue several steps in building a market position entailing the brand situation analysis, the competitive advantage configuration, the competitive advantage communication, the competitive advantage support, the implementation of the positioning element/elements and the positioning effort appraisal (Edu, Negricea, 2011).

2.2. In-depth interview- an essential qualitative marketing research instrument

The qualitative marketing research techniques aid the researcher explore experiences (Corbin, Strauss, 2014) not easily exposed by respondents and provide insights about the meanings attached to such experiences (Sharan, 2009). The significance of the qualitative marketing research is best described through its input in understanding very important issues pertaining to the consumer, especially values, beliefs and attitudes (Marshall, 1996). Narrowing down to the in-depth interview, most definitely one of the prominent qualitative marketing research tools, it can be stated that this instrument allows the researcher to comprehend why and how the interviewee sees the research problem in a particular way (King, 2004). From another perspective, when using in-depth interviews to gather data, the generalisation of the findings to the entire population is not an aim but the richness of the findings (Ritchie, Lewis, Elam, 2003). This perspective has important consequences on the sample size and sampling procedure. The sample size is small. It depends on the research goal (Patton, 1990) but from a practical perspective a sample size of 30 respondents is considered adequate in the extant literature (Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, Fontenot, 2013; Morse, 1994; Bernard, 2000; Creswell, 1998), while the sampling procedure is a non-random one, the researcher including in the sample the respondents thought to be the most appropriate ones (Malhotra, 2010; Coyne, 1997). Another aspect worth mentioning is that the in-depth interviews are conducted based on a guide outlying the themes to be approached in the discussions (Legard, Keegan, Ward, 2003), the researcher's aim being that of probing into the interviewee's mind in order to surface thoughts not readily revealed. The researcher has an essential role in generating a high volume of data, this depending heavily on the way in which the discussion is channelled and stimulated.

3. Purpose of the study

The present study represents an implementation of the first stage of the market positioning endeavour, the brand situation analysis, through the use of in-depth interviews for data collection, the purpose being that of showing the effectiveness of this tool in delineating market positioning constructs in a particular market.

4. Research methodology

This study is focused on proposing a market positioning tool based on in-depth interviews being centred on the marketing mix. In the present study the tool was tailored for and tested on the Romanian modern retail and pursued objectives connected with the buying experience and identifying perceptions, attitudes and motivations about the marketing mix (product, price, distribution and promotion) in order to delineate market positions.

The data were collected through a semi-structured in-depth interview comprising 22 open questions referring to the following topics pertaining to the large surface stores visited at least once in the previous 12 months:

- shopping venues/store types
- accessibility of the stores

- parking facilities
- transport provided by the stores
- types of product-carrying devices provided by the stores
- product weighing procedure/s inside the stores for various types of products
- “ready-meals” sections inside the stores
- pastry and bakery sections within the stores
- private (store) brands
- product-return store policy
- shelf-cash desk price discrepancy
- discounts offered by the stores and if they targeted especially the store brands
- the use of store websites and social media web pages
- in-store sales promotions and loyalty instruments
- store catalogue availability
- in-store staff support
- delivery/transport policy for large products
- online shopping from these stores
- in-store product warranty and check service

Considering the qualitative nature of this research and the envisaged objectives, no hypotheses could have been formulated.

The sample used in this study comprised 30 individuals living in Bucharest selected based on age and gender (considering the structure of the general population (National Institute of Statistics, 2015)) and at least one purchase from a large surface store made in the previous 12 months (table no. 1).

Table no. 1 Sample structure

Sample structure	Male	Female	Total
18-40 years old	6	7	13
41-60 years old	5	5	10
61+ years old	4	3	7
Total	15	15	30

5. Data analysis and preliminary conclusions

The data analysis was performed based on content analysis, the findings being summarised below for each of the 22 questions.

Concerning the retail stores visited in the last 12 months, the respondents mentioned Kaufland, Carrefour, Auchan, Cora, Penny, Lidl, Mega-Image and Billa. Carrefour’s “aggressive” promotion policy and its presence on radio and TV were well noticed, placing Carrefour at the top of their preferences amongst the large surface stores followed by Auchan, Kaufland and Cora. Regarding the smaller surface stores, Mega-Image ranked first, one of the reasons being that these supermarkets and their smaller “Shop and Go” stores are found in significant numbers in Bucharest. Mega-Image is followed by Lidl, Penny and Billa.

Referring to reaching large or small surface stores and the envisaged transportation means, most of the respondents either preferred their own car or public transportation to travel to large surface stores or opted for the stores close to their homes, either large or small, that they could reach on foot.

Regarding the parking facilities provided by the retail stores, with a focus on accessibility and the number of places, the customers were content with the number of lots. Some respondents mentioned that certain large surface stores had both underground and regular parking with a sufficient number of places. Mega Image and Carrefour, with their “shop and go” and “express” stores stood out by not providing parking places for customers.

With regard to parking payment, one respondent mentioned Carrefour Vitantis as a venue charging for parking on some days in case of purchases below a certain amount.

Carrefour, Auchan and Cora are the only stores mentioned for offering free transport to customers. This service can be used either on the way to the store or on the way home through the buses made available by the stores on pre-established routes. Some respondents, not owning or using a car for shopping, underlined that regularly used this service and were content with the bus routes and schedule.

In connection with this topic, Kaufland was pointed out by two respondents for providing free taxi call service..

Depending on the products purchased in one day, the respondents either chose a shopping basket or a trolley, Kaufland being the only store offering just shopping trolleys to its customers.

With reference to product weighing, especially vegetables and fruits, in most stores the respondents recalled they did it on their own, the products being weighed based on a code or on images. Many of the respondents preferred this method because they could control the product quantity and weighing was easy. On the other hand, Mega Image, Lidl and Penny were highlighted distinctively as the products were weighed at the cash desk, while in Carrefour employees weighed the products. It was concluded that using staff for weighing speeded up the purchase process but most often it generated queues and customers could not change product quantities.

Regarding the product aspect, some respondents mentioned that in Kaufland, Auchan, Lidle, Billa, Penny and Mega Image, the products were neat and nicely displayed on the shelves.

As for the purchase of bulk products, the respondents said that Cora and Carrefour were the only stores where they received assistance and only in Mega Image the products were weighed directly at the cash desk.

The respondents that visited and purchased from the cooked food section said that there was a wide range of products in Auchan, Carrefour and Cora. In Kaufland, the product diversity was medium, and in Mega-Image it was small.

Regarding the bakery, pastry and confectionary products, most of the respondents mentioned they bought bread, pastry, cookies, birthday cakes, doughnuts, waffles or sweet bread. Auchan, Kaufland, Carrefour, Billa and Cora were prompted for offering both bakery and pastry-confectionary products, while Mega Image, Penny and Lidl mainly bakery and pastry.

With reference to the private/store brands, Kaufland and Mega-Image were the stores highlighted by the respondents. The respondents stated they were very satisfied with K-classic (Kaufland) and satisfied with 365 (Mega-Image). Although all stores were recalled for offering discounts, Auchan and Carrefour were mentioned for discounts for both private brands and other brands. In Mega Image a 50% discount was applied to products that expired the next day, the respondents mentioning they didn't see big discounts very often, with the exception of products due to expire. In Kaufland, most discounts were noticed for being applied to the private brands.

The respondents who returned the products said the procedure was easy, as they only had to present the slip and the product in most situations. Cora, Mega Image, Lidl, Penny and Billa were the stores in which the respondents pursued this procedure.

Regarding the correspondence between the shelf price and the cash desk price, the respondents noticed problems in each store, except for Penny and Billa.

Referring to the store websites, Kaufland, Carrefour, Mega-Image and Lidl sites were accessed by the respondents to a small extent, searching for information, specials or catalogues.

The social-media pages were accessed to a small extent in the cases of Kaufland, Carrefour, Mega Image and Lidl stores. The respondents stated they were not influenced by the information displayed there.

About loyalty instruments, some respondents mentioned they benefited from them in most of the stores as Auchan and Carrefour offered raffle coupons mainly, and so did Kaufland. Bonus points were offered by Carrefour, Kaufland and Penny, and gift-vouchers by Carrefour. Cora and Billa stood out through a loyalty card with points while Mega Image offered stickers.

There were specials in all stores, while Auchan, Kaufland and Carrefour diversified their sales promotions greatly during the Christmas and Easter seasons. The respondents stated they were satisfied with the discounted offers found in the stores.

Referring to the availability of store catalogues, some respondents mentioned they received catalogues from Kaufland, Auchan, Cora, Carrefour, Mega Image, Lidl and Billa.

Assistance by the store staff was offered only upon request. Sometimes it was difficult to find an employee when needed. In a nutshell, the discussions revealed that store staff operated in the meat, dairy, fish and cooked food sections and the stores recalled operating such sections were Auchan, Kaufland, Carrefour, Cora, Mega-Image and Billa.

Auchan was the only store in which the respondents used the free transport service for large products, while Carrefour was the only store in which products were purchased online with home delivery. The respondent was satisfied and said would continue to use this service.

With regard to in-store product warranty check service, Auchan, Carrefour and Kaufland were highlighted by the respondents.

Preliminary conclusions

As it can be observed based on the findings, various views were uncovered for each of the 22 topics under investigation. These results are actually understandings, emotions and reasons prompted by the respondents in some situations for a certain number of stores or in others just for one store. These understandings, feelings and motives, as consumer behaviour coordinates, are attached to store features, making one store or several stores being remembered by customers in particular ways, either as being unique regarding one or more features or special by being better, based on an emotional appraisal, or cheaper, based on a rational evaluation. Based on this connection between consumer behaviour coordinates and store features, competitive advantages can be inferred for the large surface stores under investigation as there is a direct link between the way a business is recalled by the customers and prospects and the actual market situation of the company.

In conclusion, these findings can provide valuable input for delineating market positioning constructs for these stores and further for proposing strategic approaches in this regard.

6. Configuration of possible market positions

Considering that positioning is the outcome of customer perceptions and attitudes, and these two reinforced by motivation, based on the findings prompted through the use of the in-depth interviews, strategic positioning elements can be uncovered. These positioning elements pertain to single stores in some instances or several in other situations, companies being able to make use of them in their positioning endeavours.

Regarding single store positioning elements, two stores stood out. Kaufland was mentioned as being the only store with a free taxi call service while Carrefour was praised for its online shopping service and home delivery. Also, Carrefour was highlighted as being the only store in which the purchased produces were weighed by employees. It can be concluded that these two stores are different in comparison with the other six through these services as they are the only ones recalled providing them, rendering strong market positions in their cases. Also, in their situations, it is advisable to continue focusing on them in their future market positioning endeavours.

Regarding multi-store positioning elements, interesting situations were unveiled. Carrefour, Auchan and Cora were recalled by customers for providing free transport for customers and a wide range of cooked products. Auchan, Carrefour and Kaufland were appreciated for their in-store product warranty and check service and sales promotions during the Christmas and Easter seasons. The private (store) brands were broadly pointed out in various instances but clear market positions were configured for a few of them. Mega Image's "365" private brand, for example, was valued for its high quality (to be understood as ingredients), while Kaufland's "K-classic" private brand for its high quality and discounts and Auchan's "Auchan" private brand and Carrefour's "No. 1" private brand for their discounts (see Figure 1).

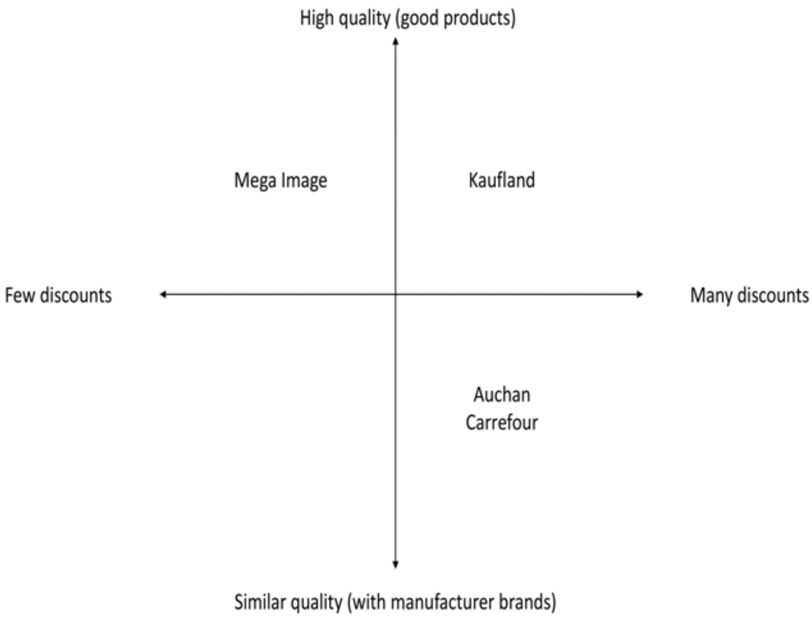

Figure 1. **Market positioning elements uncovered for the private brands belonging to Auchan, Carrefour, Kaufland and Mega Image**

The online communication instruments (websites and social media) were linked with Kaufland, Carrefour, Mega Image and Lidl although with a limited impact on the buying decision. An interesting situation is detailed for the loyalty instruments used by the stores. The figure below (see Figure 2) describes the tools recalled by the respondents.

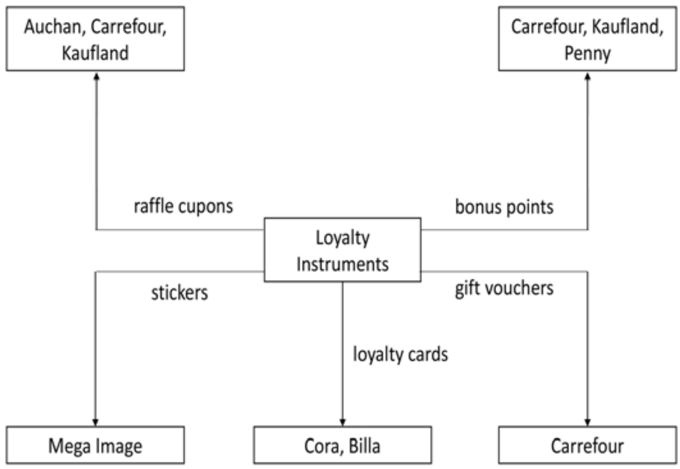

Figure 2. **Loyalty instruments recalled by the respondents to be used by the large surface stores under study**

These multi-store positioning elements rendered market positions but for groups and not single stores. As it can be noted, a few groups were configured in a number of instances and the respondents did not differentiate between the group members, treating them equally. Having in mind this reality, one can conclude that these market positions are not as desirable to a store as the ones prompted for single cases. However, they can be beneficial to a store if the positioning construct is an important one for a significant number of customers and prospects. Also a group member can focus its future market positioning strategy on such an element pursuing to improve it in such a way as to become better than the other members in the consumers' minds.

7. Conclusions

As final remarks, the present study reveals the implications of using a qualitative marketing research tool (the in-depth interview) in market positioning endeavours. The use of such a tool leads to the uncovering of inconspicuous consumer behaviour factors, such as perceptions, attitudes and motivations, extremely valuable to an organisation in comprehending strengths and weaknesses as they are "seen" by the market and selecting appropriate elements for building around them long-lasting positioning constructs. However, in some instances an organisation might need data of quantitative nature in making market positioning decisions, situations in which the use of the in-depth interview should be complemented with that of a quantitative marketing research tool, for example, a survey.

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