Defining Primary Brand Associations for the Strategic Positioning of Certified Organic Products

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ABSTRACT
Defining a coherent brand positioning strategy requires conceptualizing, communicating and managing brand associations that are strong, unique and favorable. Defining primary brand associations is especially difficult for certified organic products due to the apparent lack of a theoretical framework that thoroughly analyses consumer perceptions and behavior towards organic products. The purpose of this article is to identify primary brand associations specific to certified organic products that can serve as brand positioning bases. The authors identify how these elicited primary brand associations are correlated to consumers’ attitude towards organic products and to specific socio-demographic variables. Based on these correlations, authors develop a strategic framework useful for selecting relevant brand associations in the positioning of certified organic products. The research was conducted on a sample of 763 respondents and is nationally representative for Romanian urban residents.

KEYWORDS
Brand Associations, Brand Positioning, Consumer Attitude, Organic Products

INTRODUCTION
Although organic production has been developing in a regulated framework for less than three decades, thus being a relatively new field, consumer interest in organic products has increased significantly. According to the latest report published by the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (Willer & Lernoud, 2015), world sales of organic products have experienced a healthy growth, reaching a total value of 72 billion dollars in 2013. Thus, the value of organic sales is almost 5 times higher than at the end of last century (2000). However, the market share of organic products is still low, even on the developed markets of USA or Germany. Therefore, the organic market still has significant development prospects.

Even though there are numerous studies on consumers of organic products, most are focused on consumers’ buying intentions and behaviors. A small number of studies have focused on identifying and analyzing the factors which influence consumer attitudes regarding organic products. Most of these studies have an exploratory character, using small samples (Chinnici et al., 2002; Hjelmar, 2011; Zander & Hamm, 2010; Zanoli & Naspetti, 2002).

Lee and Yun (2015) believe that, in order to react appropriately to the continuous market growth, manufacturers should identify those attributes that offer organic products an advantage over conventional products. In addition, companies need to understand the mechanisms through which consumers form their buying intentions. Lee & Yun highlight the lack of a theoretical framework that...
analyzes consumers’ underlying motivations for buying organic products. They propose a theoretical model based on the main product associations which influence consumers’ attitudes towards organic products, as resulting from their research: nutritional value, sensory qualities and ecological welfare.

There are several viewpoints regarding the factors that influence consumers’ motivation for purchasing organic products. The most common benefits perceived by consumers are related to health (Olbrich et al., 2015; Stolz and Schmidt, 2008; Zanoli & Naspetti, 2002), lack of chemicals (Cranfield et al., 2009; Stolz et al., 2009; Tsakiridou et al. 2008) superior quality (Zander & Hamm, 2010; Zanoli & Naspetti, 2012) and environmental concerns (Padel & Foster, 2005; Zagat, 2012). Therefore, using such product associations in positioning organic brands can prove extremely useful.

Consumers’ attitudes and behaviors towards organic products are influenced by their perceived positioning of the organic product category and of the specific organic brand. The positioning process involves conceiving and communicating a brand’s image, so that it occupies a distinct place in the minds of the target public (Kotler & Keller, 2012). Brand image is composed of all the mental associations consumers have about the brand. For successful brand positioning, marketers should create unique, strong and favorable associations regarding their branded products (Keller, 2013). The end result of positioning is a customer-focused value proposition, which explains how the brand satisfies consumer needs in a significant manner (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2007).

It is essential to establish a frame of reference for the positioning process, which involves defining the product category in which the product competes. Thus, organic products should consider the indirect competition with conventional products, but also the direct competition with other brands from the organic category. Our study analyzes the manner in which organic products can be positioned in relation not only to conventional products, but also to other organic products. Even though many national organic markets are not very developed yet, it is essential to address the direct competition of other organic brands.

Once the frame of reference is defined, marketers should establish their product’s points of parity (common elements) and points of difference (unique associations) in relation to the product category and to specific competitors. Therefore, organic producers should focus on communicating relevant and credible differentiating attributes of their products in relation to conventional products, but also to other organic products. Moreover, organic products should fulfill the relevant category points of parity expected by consumers in the organic category.

Next, organic producers should identify and select on the chosen market attractive consumer segments – groups of consumers who behave similarly or have similar needs. Segmenting consumers according to the relative importance they give to different product benefits is a common practice (Kotler & Keller, 2012). Therefore, each desired benefit should be connected with the relevant psychographic characteristics of the target segment who appreciates it. Thus, our study analyzes the salience and perceived importance of various organic product attributes and benefits. We further analyze how these desired benefits correlate with several socio-demographic variables of the respondents.

Consumption motives can have different levels of abstraction and complexity. Complex motives - of which consumers often aren’t aware – can be revealed through the laddering technique, which identifies the logical consequences of a product attribute on its perceived benefits and further on consumer values (Phillips & Reynolds, 2009). Optimal brand positioning requires identifying brand advantages at the different abstraction levels of consumers’ means-end-chain (Vriens & Hofstede, 2000). Depending on the abstractness level of the means-end chain on which positioning is achieved, brands can use several positioning bases, related to: product attributes, functional benefits, symbolic emotional benefits or to surrogate associations (using external brand associations which create inferences on the brand’s nature) (Fuchs, 2008).

Marketers should consider both functional and emotional positioning bases for organic products. On the one hand, it should be clearly communicated that organic products satisfy the same fundamental needs as conventional products, but at higher (or at least equal) quality standards regarding product safety and sensorial properties. On the other hand, organic products can be positioned on their ability
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