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New trends in international marketing: Focus on branding and its connection with the consumer

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Abstract

This article analyzes from an analytical-descriptive-documentary perspective the approach to branding and its connection with the consumer. The process of creating and managing a brand consists of achieving the positioning, recall, and recognition of the product. Currently, market conditions, globalization in its various dimensions, and fierce competition have made brand management more important in a global and interconnected world economy. Thus, it is considered that one of the main results and contributions of this research is to understand the characteristics of the consumer and achieve a positioning not only in the mind of the target market but also in the consumer's sentiment.

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1. Introduction

The present research effort has as its general objective to carry out an analysis of the definition, characteristics, and current trends of branding and its link with consumer behavior. Currently, and particularly since the last decades of the 20th century, the global productive apparatus has undergone important changes as a result of transformations that have occurred in microelectronics, information technology, production methods, the business organizational model, forms of insertion in international markets, among others [1]. This metamorphosis produced relevant changes in different areas that have had a global reach and that have impacted the set of new industries and technological systems, whose growth is one of the main drivers of the world economy and, therefore, also of international trade and marketing.

To understand the importance of branding and its evolution in global markets, it is worth noting that in 2009 the world faced one of the largest economic and financial crises in history, an event that undermined the global economy, but amidst all this financial debacle, commercial brands reported a growth of 2%, which represents an important call to attention for companies [2].

The resilience of brands in a time of economic and financial crisis has helped national and international companies implement new strategies focused on the consumer's point of view, from perception to reputation and experience, through to product positioning in the mind and heart of the consumer to sell more and sell better.

Thus, it is relevant to indicate that for those small or large companies that have brands that are not very well positioned in either national or international markets, it is necessary to start creating that value, in order to guarantee local, regional or global success.

For this purpose, there are branding programs that allow you to create the brand, revitalize it from scratch, and generate positioning in the mind and heart of the consumer. When we say in the heart of the consumer, we want to express that this term refers to the fact that the consumer must feel the product as their own, with such identification that in their mind they feel it as their own and that they identify with the product from the image to its benefits and usefulness.

In order to achieve the general objective of this research, it has been divided into two parts. The first part addresses the new approach to branding and its connection with consumer behavior, current trends and relevance within global markets, and the second part presents some final considerations on the subject.

2. The New Approach to Branding and its Connection with the Consumer

In the dynamics of the market, the consumer and their consumption process have currently given rise to what has been called the marketing war in companies, the objective of which is to mark (position) a concept in the mind of the social subject (consumer), symbolized in a logo (brand).

Since the second half of the 1960s, marketing scholars have become interested in studying consumer behavior; thus, "the marketing perspective replaced the sales approach in the company" [3]. The study of consumer behavior covers each of the social subjects that make up society, who, in one way or another, are consumers at some point in their lives.

Studying how and why consumers buy is a fundamental aspect of today's marketing analysis. For Rivera et al. [3] this act of consumption has implications in other disciplines such as psychology (study of the individual), sociology (study of groups), social psychology (the way in which an individual interacts within the group), anthropology (influence of society on the individual), and economics.

To expand the explanation of consumer behavior, these authors highlight that:

Applied to marketing, we define consumer behavior as the decision-making process and physical activity that individuals engage in when they search for, evaluate, acquire, and use or consume goods, services, or ideas to satisfy their needs. However, the study of consumer behavior goes beyond simple individual behavior. An individual or group of individuals can influence the perception of one product or the decision-making regarding another.

For branding managers from a behavioral perspective, man not only reflects external reality but inevitably questions and recreates it through a complex representation of symbols.

In this way, they are creating categories on a daily basis that have a significance in the consumer's perception; it is about spreading the idea that the brand has of itself.

With the brand mania, a new kind of entrepreneur has appeared, who proudly informs us that brand X is not a product but a lifestyle, an attitude, a set of values, a personal appearance and an idea. And this seems really something splendid, very different from when brand X was a corkscrew or a chain of hamburger restaurants, or even a successful brand of sports shoes [4]. These signifiers intervene in the subject of a reality that is culturally and ideologically more complex every day.

In this sense, branding is defined as the process of creating and managing a brand [5] and consists of achieving many things at once, including positioning, maintenance, recall and recognition. In recent years, market conditions, the difficulty of rising and staying afloat, globalization in its various dimensions and fierce competition have made brand management more important, since competing in the closed or quasi closed economies of a few decades ago is not the same as competing in today's fierce, global and Internet enabled economies.

From a business perspective, branding is very similar to branding cattle. The design of a branding program should aim to differentiate your own cow from other cattle, even if all cows are very similar (and they are becoming more so). A good branding program is based on the concept of uniqueness. It should create in the customer's mind the perception that there is no other product like yours on the market [5].

To highlight the importance of branding, it is worth noting that in 2009 the world faced one of the largest economic and financial crises in the history of international markets, an event that undermined the global economy, but amidst all this financial debacle, commercial brands reported a growth of 2%, which represented a wake-up call for companies and economic actors [2].

In this regard, it should be noted that:

The resilience of brands in precarious times has helped companies implement a new strategy focused on the customer's point of view, from perception to reputation and experience; through to the positioning of the product in the consumer's mind to sell more and better. To achieve this process of increasing the future value of the brand and gaining customer loyalty, companies must first perform an analysis of their perceptual value (customer purchase intention) and financial value (royalties, among others).

This measurement strategy was taken up again to give life to Capital Brand, a platform created by Levin Global and BrandQuo, designed to grow brands through a strategy of increasing the value of their products or services in large brands, but which can also be applied to second brands of small and medium-sized companies (SMEs) [2].

In this way, Levin Global and BrandQuo developed branding programs at a regional and international level for brands such as Pfizer, Petrobras, Avon, Mitsubishi, Pepsico, Telmex, among others, while their joint platform, Capital Brand, is in the launch phase and already has some brands on the way to increasing their value, such as Kiddies, La Zarza, and Sancor (Argentine company), among others.

Companies wishing to use so-called strategic branding must consider the following factors:

- Determination: optimization process, which includes improving the value or a better communication strategy, that influences the positioning of the product in the mind of the consumer.
- Recognition: analysis of the brand's reach and potential.
- Obtaining: balance of the financial value of the project.
- Result: parameters to increase the future value of the brand.

Regarding the requirements that a company must have to enter into the brand growth project, some experts, such as Kotler and Armstrong [6] and Ries [5], among others, consider that it has nothing to do with the size of the company, but rather its positioning. There are small companies (due to their number of employees and level of turnover) that have very powerful brands [7].

In this sense, it is important to mention the importance of strategic branding, which works by analyzing a positioned brand, that is, one that already has clients, financial projection, and capital. For companies, and especially small and medium-sized companies, the use of brand marketing can be an option, since it focuses on the advertising that is done about a brand, thus creating an image of the company that allows customers to identify with it; a fundamental step for success and successful insertion in national and international markets.

This type of positioning makes use of digital marketing, which specializes in creating a consumer-oriented website, leveraging search engines, purchasing keywords, correctly using e-mail, social networks, viral diffusion, and designing mobile applications.

Gaining a place in the mind of the consumer is no easy task, neither for those who make headway with a good idea, nor for the successful organization that launches it. A brand must reflect the sales power of the product, and extend over time the effectiveness that will place it in line with the competition.

Being in the position of market leader or at a lower level will depend on how value strategies are applied that reinforce the loyalty of a market segment. This is where positioning strategies acquire an important value in the business world.

The process of selecting a trademark must take into account the selling power of the sign in relation to the products or services offered to the public. This strength is not always perceived by the entrepreneur, beyond the immediate advertising impact, sometimes forgetting that trademarks (like the products or services they identify) aim to extend their distinctive effectiveness and power of recall over time, so that they become unique within their commercial category.

In this vein, Klein [4] highlights that "for the past fifteen years, brands have their origin in a single, seemingly harmless idea that management theorists came up with in the mid-1980s: that successful companies must first produce brands and not products" (p. 31). Hence, the choice of a weak sign, frequently used to designate products or services of the same kind, should be avoided, since a brand of this nature must allow coexistence with other similar brands.

The strength of a brand through its distinctive effectiveness is not static, as market dynamics can cause a normal or even strong brand to weaken, especially when the defense of the sign is not supported by an effective marketing strategy. The useful life of a brand is linked to the success of the product or service it identifies and to the results of a policy of strengthening and monitoring its use in different advertising campaigns and media that are developed over time.

According to Ries [5] the brand is expansion, concentration, communication, advertising, credentials, quality, category, shape, color, borders, coherence and security. These are some of the designations that accompany a term that in its market dynamics is nothing more than a name. Generations advance, new consumer demands arise and it seems that staying in time is a war between those who have the expansion of the business in their hands.

A brand is the representation of a product, a service, or an investment opportunity. As such, it requires a concept, a shape, and a color that impact the audience's senses to express its presence and create a captivating image for the consumer. All of this must be coherent in order to effectively position it in the consumer's mind.

In this sense, the image of a brand is the result of the daily actions of its promoters: be it a corporation, an advertising agency or a product of globalization and the competition for investment capital between national markets, a government, or the inhabitants of a country. The goal is to give value to that perception that distinguishes it from others, that makes it competitive and successful, to the point of marking moments in history.

In its basic sense, an image is the mental representation of a being or an object. Consequently, it will never be purely rational or objective.

But why is the image projected by a brand and perceived by consumers so important? First of all, it is inevitable to have an image; 83% of decisions are made through the eyes. The brain processes the stimuli that it encodes in just a few seconds. The incredible thing is that the mind decides mostly based on feelings (branding). That does not mean that when creating an image, the essence of the issuer is not respected. To develop it, a completely rational methodology is needed.

The efficiency of an image will be directly related to the coherence of the stimuli that cause it. To create it, a considerable amount of time is required from the beginning, so it will be difficult to reconstruct a deteriorated image.

To recap the above, branding is presented as the new marketing strategy, appealing to the consumer's feelings and not to their rationality when making purchasing decisions. The consumer does not acquire products, they adopt brands in such a way that they become part of their existence, a complement to their personality [8].

In this sense, Aaker and Fournier [9] argue that there are three elements to consider when thinking about a brand: the brand, the performance of the brand concept and the branding experience. The first refers to a great product, service or company that provides a unique offer and experience to the consumer. The most successful brands in the world are based on something simple, that is, a powerful emotional philosophy that is integrated into all brand communications.

A brand can go further and, of course, define the company's culture. Branding is the art of creating winning and recognized brands, which is accompanied by creating a sensory experience for the consumer, involving sight, sound, touch, smell, and intuition. Nowadays, advertising and communications agencies have focused their work on building brands. Both the client and specialists in the area have understood the importance of good branding development. Countless names that are phonetically just that have made history and generated feelings, customs, and even a lifestyle of their own in the consumer.

It is therefore essential for every company to invest in the branding of its products, in the process of creating and managing brands. It is about developing and maintaining the set of attributes and values in such a way that they are coherent, appropriate, distinctive, capable of being legally protected and attractive to consumers.

Today, the strategic importance of brands is such that for many of their owners they are considered assets in themselves: they are subject to investment and evaluation in the same way as other assets of any company.

Successful brand development is achieved through a combination of specialist talent and long-term vision. It is based on a brand strategy that understands and reflects a company's functional, expressive and core values and its vision.

Branding, unlike marketing, makes or manages to sell brands, rather than the products themselves, because it seems to be an existing reality that people do not buy products, they buy brands. And the secret of this is to ask yourself: How does this brand make me feel? Therefore, brands must awaken feelings in their users.

The positioning will no longer be top of mind but top of heart; although a brand is positioned in the consumer's mind, it is not necessarily the one that they will consume, but rather the one that they really want, desire, gives them security, a sense of belonging, status, social rank, etc.

etc. The brand translates into a promise in the mind of the consumer and is what causes it to be desired, because being known is not the same as being loved. Developing branding as a strategy implies mastering a new category or definition of the business; the challenge is to achieve such differentiation that it is practically impossible to stop recognizing it [8].

For this reason, it is essential to reflect on branding within a company that exists in a highly competitive market, where the challenge is ever greater when it comes to launching a new brand. It is not enough to have a good product, but it must be made distinctive.

If a brand is good, then consumers will go for it, and it will become a valuable asset. But this is not only due to its ability to attract sales, but also to consumers perceiving it as having a set of values that attract them; this means that they will reject names that do not present these values.

Hence the importance of taking care of products through a branding process. Although products may change, the brand will always remain; in fact, markets are in dynamic and constant movement.

However, it can be observed that some brands, despite time and changes, remain and continue to produce large amounts of profits for the companies that own them. In this order of ideas, it is worth noting that:

A strong brand has the advantages of maintaining profit margins, reducing the risk of price volatility, significantly improving sales, and becoming an attraction for recruiting, maintaining and retaining talent within the company, helping and facilitating the introduction of new products into the market, facilitating the adaptation process in the event of economic crises and finally opening up the opportunity to sell the brand through franchises, licenses, the stock market, intellectual property, etc.

The brand speaks through a simple, clear, and understandable dialogue, such as the slogan that functions as the brand's surname. With it, people can develop an affectionate relationship, to the point that you can hear phrases like "Has anyone seen my Levi's?", "You took my Nike's?", "Whenever I go out, I carry my Kleenex in my bag," etc.

The slogan reinforces and consolidates the brand; it must appeal to emotions, like the one that says “...with the love of always... Bimbo.” It should motivate direct action, such as “Just do it,” offer advantages and benefits, and launch... no Vel Rosita? It must also mention the name of the product or the company, etc.

Nowadays we are faced with an overexposure of images everywhere, on the street, on vehicles (advertising on wheels), in parking lots, squares, truck stops, telephone booths, etc., which is why in some cases it is necessary to use simple and memorable symbols and icons that convey what the company wants to convey. “For an oversaturated society, a simplified message.”

The image is what will put a consumer at the doors of a company, the reputation is what will make the customer come back [8].

Companies spend large amounts of money to position their brands in the minds of consumers. The practice is not new. However, a brand remains the means by which a company differentiates its goods and services from those of its competitors.

Many of the world's powerful brands were created by marketing, but with the explosion of media it is increasingly difficult to generate the kind of advertising that builds a brand, says Ries [5] the first to formalize the discipline of branding.

For the consumer, a brand is a chain of experiences generated over time; for the entrepreneur, it is the relationship that creates and ensures the company's future profits by retaining the customer's preference. Over time, brands became associated with elements such as quality, recognition, value, distribution, image, prestige, social status, among others, and became the way in which manufacturers differentiated their goods as a sign of their reputation.

Today, they are one of the most important assets of companies. As such, they must be carefully constructed and developed to achieve their objectives and keep the public captive.

For this reason, strategies have been developed to target brands, gain attention, interest, awaken desire, stimulate action and especially maintain consumer loyalty. It is much better to possess the heart and mind of the consumer than to manufacture it.

Brands and brand owners are guaranteed success because with more and new options to choose from, greater complexity and less time, consumers will be more inclined than ever to place their trust in the strongest brands because they will do what they have always done best: simplify choice.

As people's lives become increasingly fragmented, and paradoxically, people themselves have become better connected and informed, brand management will therefore have to rely less on traditional mass marketing vehicles to create a coherent mosaic of brand experiences, with messages whose content reflects the different contexts in which brands make contact with their target customers.

Managing a brand's character will become a strategic imperative and the best brand opportunities will be created from multiple disciplines and vantage points, not only from advertising, but also from experiential branding, corporate identity, MRC, promotions, reputation management and everything that influences the way consumers think and their experiences [10].

In view of the above, a brand can be defined as the identity of a company or a product that is made up of three components. The first of these is the graphic symbol, the second refers to the reputation that this graphic symbol represents, and the third is the relationship that the company and the product establish with their consumers. In this last case in particular, it is essential to know and apply the psychosocial factors of the consumer.

Brands influence our tastes, what we eat, what we wear, and our way of life; they affect the way we look at products and our purchasing decisions. When a person identifies a brand, they are recognizing a set of attributes and values that they find in it. Building a brand consists of developing and maintaining these characteristics, which in themselves provide the identity of the product, making it unique.

This factor, distinction, is key in a brand management process; the customer must perceive the product as different from others, different from the competition, even different from imitators.

A brand is a complex symbol; it is the intangible sum of a product's attributes, its name, packaging, and price, its history, reputation, and the way it is promoted. It is also defined by the perception of consumers, of the people who use it, and their own experiences. Brands are symbols, something that the consumer identifies with and feels a part of.

It identifies itself and feels part of it. Thus, nowadays, the development of a brand has become a fundamental objective for companies and economic agents for two basic reasons. The first of these is that they find themselves in a globalized world, with increasingly competitive markets.

Local and national markets, while important for the development of products and services, have become small segments in the face of the challenges and opportunities generated by global markets. Today, given the liberalization of trade, growing economic integration agreements, and increasing global productivity, companies must think about positioning their products and brands globally.

The second reason is that brand development can make a difference in goods and services in the market and achieve effective positioning, not only in the minds of consumers but also in the hearts of economic agents, which generates feelings of belonging and makes the product global.

3. Final Considerations

In market dynamics, the consumer and their consumption process have given rise to what is known as a marketing war in companies, the objective of which is to mark a concept in the mind of the social subject (consumer), symbolized by a logo (brand).

Pto, symbolized by a logo (brand). The study of consumer behavior covers each of the social subjects that make up society, who, in one way or another, are consumers at some point in their lives. Studying how and why consumers buy is a fundamental aspect of today's marketing analysis.

Branding managers, from a behavioral perspective, therefore consider that man not only reflects external reality but inevitably questions and recreates it through a complex representation of symbols. Thus, they are creating categories daily that have meaning in the perception of the consumer; they try to spread the idea that the brand has of itself.

Companies spend millions to impress their brands on the minds of consumers. The practice is not new. A brand remains the means by which a company differentiates its goods and services from those of its competitors. Many of the world's most powerful brands were created through marketing, but with the explosion of media, it is increasingly difficult to generate the kind of publicity that builds a brand.

For the consumer, a brand is a chain of experiences generated over time; for the entrepreneur, it is the relationship that creates and ensures the company's future profits by retaining customer preference. Today, the strategic importance of brands is such that for many of their owners they are already considered assets in themselves: they are subject to investment and evaluation in the same way as other assets of any company.

Brands influence tastes, what people eat, what they wear and, in general, people's way of life, and they affect the way products are viewed and the purchasing decisions of economic agents.

When a person identifies a brand, they are identifying a set of attributes and values that they find in it. Building a brand consists of developing and maintaining these characteristics, which in themselves provide the identity of the product, making it unique. This factor, distinction, is key in the brand management process. The customer must perceive the product as different from others, different from the competition, and even different from imitators.

A brand is a complex symbol; it is the intangible sum of a product's attributes, its name, packaging, and price, its history, reputation, and the way it is promoted. The brand is also defined by the perception of consumers, the people who use it, and their own experiences. They are symbols, something that the consumer identifies with and feels a part of.

Thus, nowadays, brand development has become a fundamental objective for companies and economic agents for two basic reasons. The first of these is the globalized environment in which they participate, and the second is that the development of a brand can establish the differentiation of goods and services in the market and achieve effective positioning, not only in the mind of the consumer but also in the heart of the consumer, which generates feelings of belonging and makes the product global.

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