

DETERMINING THE MOST RELEVANT CHARACTERISTICS OF A PRODUCT AS PART OF A BRAND POSITIONING ANALYZE

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Abstract:

Product characteristics or attributes along with brand meanings are a mix of features ascribed to a brand that are meant to create brand associations and a resulting brand image in the mind of the consumer determining in this way the brand position on the market. This paper is based on a qualitative study (observation followed by questionnaires applied on a restrain group of students) and its aim is to identify which are the most relevant attributes for a book designed for learning a foreigner language. The results of this analyze can be utilized in further studies regarding how to establish the position of this product on the market.

Keywords: brand attributes, brand positioning, observation, qualitative analyze.

JEL Classification: M30.

1. The context of the research and the product choice

The brand positioning is often analyzed in terms of perceptual maps. They provide an easy way to present the results when the research means to identify the market position of competing brands by one or more data features. Perceptual maps lose their usefulness when you want to position a new product on the market. In the latter case, when the brand is in the process of creation, the research will focus on identifying characteristics or associations considered the most favorable on the market and then based on that will be determine which parity and differentiation items will underline the positioning strategy.

This paper aims to identify the most relevant features for a book for the study of English as a foreigner language and aims this type of products present on Barcelona's market.

In order to define the product a set of basic product characteristics were chosen for this study:

- Language: English
- Level: A1-C2 (beginner - advanced)
- The consumer profile: young people (18 - 25), students
- The book structure: a complete course (grammar, vocabulary, reading, writing) with audio files included

The product was chosen because after consultation with local teachers we concluded that it may be a product of interest to students. Also, talking to young Spanish and Latin, it was found that many did not reach the level they wanted for a foreign language (probably due to excessive translation practiced in Spain / Latin America - doubling foreign films and programs, use of Software translated into Spanish). Although it is expected that among international students segment the level of a foreign language ability (mainly English) is a high one, it will alleviate this issue by providing full range of courses, with options from beginner to advanced. Also it is possible that in this segment most of the students have advanced level of Spanish and not necessarily the English language (such as Latin for example but not only).

2. The research method

The research conducted was a qualitative one and targeted a selection of the most important variables for the chosen product and the relevant values for each of these variables on the target market. The research is based on observation followed by questionnaires applied on a restrain group of students.

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3. The observation

In the first phase of qualitative research an observation method was used. The purpose of the observation was to identify associations present in the current brands on the market.

3.1. Population and sample

The population is represented by all the books accompanied by audio files destined to young people who want to learn or to perfect a foreign language present in Barcelona in both online and in traditional bookstores.

In selecting the sample the most spacious libraries were considered (in order to meet a more diverse offer) and also the most popular among young people: the ones in El Corte Inglés and FNAC malls. From the online environment were analyzed the first 3 pages of the search results on Google España following the keywords: “libro Inglés (English book)”, “CD con libro Inglés” (English book with CD), “aprender Inglés” (learning English).

All results that did not present the product in itself but showed alternatives for it were removed, such as:

- English courses online
- English books that did not included audio files (CD or DVD)
- English books for children
- Dictionaries
- Books in electronic format only, which can be downloaded from the website

Three sites in the online environment were included in the sample:

- www.casadellibro.com
- <http://www.uylibros.com>
- <http://www.espirallibros.com/1.-ingles.html>

The unit of analysis for the observation was each package type "book + audio file" that were found in traditional bookstores and online in the sample.

3.2. Data collection

The observation aimed to achieve two main objectives:

- To identify the characteristics of the product - brand attributes and benefits
- To identify the recorded levels for each of these features

The observation was structured. It was constructed based on the brand associations structure proposed by Keller in order to shape the categories that will fit the associations observed in the units of analysis. The research instrument was the observation sheet and it included the following fields:

- Product-related attributes items
- Levels of product-related attributes
- Features that are not directly related to the product: price and price level recorded; identified attributes related to the package and their registered levels; identified attributes related to the consumer perception and their levels; identified attributes related to consuming conditions and their recorded levels.

At this stage no distinction between attributes and benefits was made. All features identified were registered and divided into two categories: instrumental and symbolic. In the observation were included only books that respected the chosen basic product characteristics with the exception of the characteristic “availability for any level”. This was because each level requires another book and the unit of analysis was the book and not the set of 3-6 books per level from beginner to advanced.

3.3. The results of observation

The observation aimed at getting a more diverse and broad palette of features present in the brands on the market. In conclusion a data reduction was not chosen, but a record of all identified characteristics. After eliminating duplicates 23 features were retained and validated.

The same principle was maintained for the recorded values of these features with two exceptions however: for the price and for the number of pages.

The price value 89 euro was eliminated since it was considered an extreme value (only one of the 11 entries submitted this value and the offset to the next value recorded was 40 euro, the distance between the two being considered very large). It was also not taken into account a differences less than 3 euro (19,5 euro was considered 19 euro, a value of 33 euro was considered 32 euro, because there were already two records with this amount and a new category for 33 was not created).

For the number of pages has not been taken into account a difference of less than 20 pages, which was considered insignificant. When they appeared, were averaged between values to create a single category.

As a result of the observation a number of 23 relevant characteristics were identified with 83 levels (each of the features having from 2 to 5 levels). These are shown in table 1.

It can be seen that the table contains 87 levels for the 23 characteristics (and not 83 as mentioned above). This is because two levels are ways of evaluating specific to online courses and not to books. These appear in italics in the table (*the possibility to send homework to a teacher and the opportunity to discuss the topic on a forum moderated by a teacher*). Also for the situation of consumer feature - *where you can use the book*, two levels were added: *the subway / train* and *waiting at any time*. These were introduced in the analysis after discussion with other researchers. They will be kept as the purpose of this stage is to explore as much as possible, the most relevant will be selected at the next step.

Table 1. Characteristics identified through observation and recorded levels of these

No.	The characteristic	Levels				
1.	Type of the book	General English	Exam Preparation Book (Cambridge / TOEFL)	Business English	Conversation Guide	
2.	The way of presenting the levels	Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2)			General reference (beginner, intermediate, advanced etc.)	
3.	Audio files	1 CD	2 CDs	3 CDs	1 DVD	
4.	Number of pages	96	128	160	189	220
5.	Time necessary to achieve the level	during the summer break	7 days	3 weeks	52 days	3 months
6.	Exercises	Included in the book	Included in a special copybook		Without exercises	
7.	Evaluation method	Simple Key Answers	Key Answers with explanations	<i>Sending the homework to a teacher</i>	<i>Discussing the homework on a forum moderated by a teacher</i>	
8.	Publication year	1998	2004	2006	2009	2010
9.	Edition	first / not mentioned	second	third	fifth	
10.	Place of publication	Spain - Barcelona	Spain -Madrid	Cyprus	England	USA
11.	Publishing House	Oxford	Burlington Books	Cornelsen	Longman	Assimil
12.	Authors	Spaniards	English / Americans			
13.	Title and content	Exclusive in English	English + Spanish			
14.	Title	Book objective (ex: Improving Your English)	Time required (ex: Learn English in 3 weeks)	User profile (English for Adults)	Other title	
15.	Price	19 €	29 €	32 €	46 €	49 €
16.	Book binding - color	blue	red	orange	green	yellow

No.	The characteristic	Levels			
		17.	Book binding - type	hardcover	glossy hardcover
18.	Book binding - images	the user	the country	the user + the country	abstract image
19.	User image - sex	female	male	female + male	
20.	User image - presence	one person	two persons	a group of at least 3 persons	
21.	User image - ethnicity	persons from one ethnic group		persons from different ethnic groups	
22.	Usage situation – place	<i>the subway / train</i>	at home / in the library	in a park	<i>while waiting at any time</i>
23.	Usage situation- objective	studies / job requirements	travels	self improvement	

3.4. The limits of observation

A limit to the observation comes from the observation sheet structure that aims to identify the important elements, which leads to loss of detail. One such example is related to the color. We identified only one dominant color and shades have been eliminated. Another limitation is related to the subjectivity of the researcher's observation. There is a possibility that some items may have escaped her attention.

4. Survey on a small sample of students

The second phase of the qualitative research consisted of a mini-survey. The purpose of this step was to narrow the set of 23 features (variables) with 87 levels (identified in step one) to a set of six variables with two levels each.

The main objectives of the research were:

- to establish an order in terms of the importance of the characteristics listed
- to select the most important six features
- to limit each feature selected to only 2 levels

4.1. The sample

The research was conducted on a group of 12 graduate students from the University of Barcelona that were in an advanced academic training program. Students in the sample were those who opted for the optional course in market research.

4.2. The research tool

The research instrument used was a questionnaire, which was written in Spanish. Given that the researcher is not a native language speaker of the language in which the questionnaire was written, to remove the problems of "translation equivalence" the following aspects were analyzed following Burca (2004):

- lexical equivalence - if it fits exactly the dictionary translation
- idiomatic equivalence - the language commonly used by native
- grammar equivalence - sentence construction and ordering of words
- experiential equivalence - how the words are associated with subjects experiences.

In a first phase the questionnaire was constructed by the researcher, ensuring compliance and lexical equivalence. Terms unknown were searched in Romanian - Spanish - Romanian dictionaries. Then, in a second phase, the questionnaire was checked by a native speaker of that language to ensure the idiomatic, grammar and experiential equivalence. Where ambiguities arose they were discussed to arrive at a more accurate expression of the concepts and as close to the local one.

The questionnaire followed the observation results. The students were asked to order the characteristics of the product by the importance they ascribe to each of them and then to chose the most relevant two values from their point of view for each characteristic presented.

The 23 characteristics were grouped into two categories. This for two reasons:

- To determine the relative importance of each feature, the subjects had to order them, and assigning an order from 1-23 is an extremely difficult task, which can cause confusion and lead to obtaining different results from the actual ones
- In a future positioning analyze the product characteristics or attributes can be treated differently based on their role: symbolic or functional (instrumental)

Based on the literature [Keller 1993, Bhat & Reddy 1998, Lievens & Highhouse, 2003] two categories have been outlined (table no.2):

- Symbolic attributes – subjective and usually intangible features of the product that attract consumer attention due to their expressive value
- Instrumental (functional) attributes – objective and usually tangible features of the product that attract consumers attention due to their utility

Table 2 - Attributes with symbolic role and functional role determined on theoretical bases

Symbolic attributes	Instrumental attributes
1. Price	1. Type of the book
2. Book binding - color	2. The way of presenting the levels
3. Book binding - type	3. Audio files
4. Book binding - images	4. Number of pages
5. User image - sex	5. Time necessary to achieve the level
6. User image - presence	6. Exercises
7. User image - ethnicity	7. Evaluation method
8. Usage situation – place	8. Publication year
9. Usage situation – user objective	9. Edition
	10. Place of publication
	11. Publishing House
	12. Authors
	13. Title and content (language)
	14. Title – message

4.3. Data collection

Data collection took place in the first part of the seminar on market research. The students were then asked to rank from 1-9 the first category of attributes and from 1 to 14 the second category, depending on the importance given to each of them and then select each two levels for each feature they considers the most appropriate from their point of view.

4.4. Data analysis and survey results

All questionnaires were validated.

As symbolic attributes are considered to have a higher influence than functional ones in the mind of the consumer, four attributes were extracted from the symbolic category and two from the instrumental one.

The hierarchy of symbolic variables in order of importance was based on the average rank calculation. The first four positions fall to: the price, the goal (or objective of using the book), the material the cover is made from and images featured on the cover. For these variables the multiple response analysis was performed in order to identify the levels of each variable most popular with students. The results showed that 83.3% of the students (41.7% of responses) consider the price of 29 euro as the most adequate to the product,

followed by the price of 32 euro (50% of the students and 25% of the responses). Most of the students were interested in learning English for their self development (45.8% of responses), but also due to the fact that they considered it as a requirement for completing their studies or for having access to a better job (41.7% of responses). For the cover of the book all the students expressed their preference for a glossy paperback (100% of the cases) and the most appropriate images were considered to be the ones that represent the country where the language is spoken (England or USA) with a percent of 37.5% of responses and the ones that represent both the country and the user (33.3% of responses).

For the instrumental variables the first two ranked variables were "the kind of book" with the preferred values "Exam Preparation Book" (41.7% of responses) and "General English Book" (33.3% of responses) and the level "the language used in the title and for explanations in the book" for which the students made no level choice.

4.5. The limits of investigation

Research limitations are mainly related to the volume and structure of the sample and also to the language equivalence. As a consequence the results of this study can not be treated as relevant for the market, but can be used in further quantitative studies for designing a reliable research instrument.

5. Conclusions

The most relevant attributes for a book designed for learning English as a foreign language, on the analyzed market, are represented by the type of book (general English and exam preparation books being preferred by the consumers), the price of the book (the middle price values were considered the appropriate ones – 29 euro and 32 euro were the prices selected by students against the lower value of 19 euro or the higher values of 46 or 49 euro), the objective of the book (most of the subjects being interested in self-development and the opportunities of obtaining a better job due to their English language knowledge) and the book cover (the respondents inclined for a glossy paperback cover with the image of the country where the language is spoken on it).

The characteristics identified in this study for the selected product can be used to guide a further research regarding the positioning of this product on the specified market, but the results shall be treated in the limits of an exploratory research.

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What is the role of a clear brand positioning within your branding strategy? Here is a definition of the concept with simple words. In other words, brand positioning describes how a brand is different from its competitors and where, or how, it sits in customers' minds. A brand positioning strategy therefore involves creating brand associations in customers' minds to make them perceive the brand in a specific way. Why is brand positioning important? By shaping consumer preferences, brand positioning strategies are directly linked to consumer loyalty, consumer-based brand equity and the willingness to purchase the brand. Effective brand positioning can be referred to as the extent to which a brand is perceived as favorable, different. Comprehensive understanding of customers. 8 Important characteristics of most successful brands. A brand's strength lies in the minds of customers. Brand knowledge installed in their minds is the foundation of brand equity. Managers must seek to maximize performance in specific attributes. 8 Important characteristics of most successful brands. Most successful brands enjoy unique positions in the market. They create product differentiation and gain an edge over their competitors. Brands like Sony and Mercedes compete in the areas of advantage to neutralize the superiority of competitors. 5. Right balance between change and continuity. Though successful brands are consistent in their marketing activities, they create changes to remain relevant with the times. Positioning refers to the place that a brand occupies in the minds of the customers and how it is distinguished from the products of the competitors and different from the concept of brand awareness. In order to position products or brands, companies may emphasize the distinguishing features of their brand (what it is, what it does and how, etc.) or they may try to create a suitable image (inexpensive or premium, utilitarian or luxurious, entry-level or high-end, etc.) through the marketing mix. Once Brand positioning "how a brand is perceived against its competitors. Brand promise "a brand's unique selling proposition (for Volvo, it's "safety"). Brand values "what guides your company's decisions and behaviors? Brand equity is the brand's value (determined by consumer perceptions of a brand). A healthy part of the most renowned companies' market value (Apple, Amazon, etc.) is tied to their brand equity. Chapter 2. Creating Your Brand Strategy. Your brand has to be more than a box of brownie mix on a shelf that momentarily captures passing interest. Brownie mix is a product that has tangible, practical attributes, but a brand conveys both emotional and practical characteristics. A brand has to establish an image, personality, and reputation before a customer buys into the physical manifestation of it, i.e., the products. I opted for the organic brownie mix instead of the commercial version because the organic brand tapped into what I value and expressed it in the products it produces. In 1980, Al Ries and Jack Trout published a seminar