

The exploration of negative brand image attributes

Maxwell Keith Winchester

B.Sc (Psychology) (Social Research Methods), Grad Dip in Eval, M.Bus (Marketing)

Supervisors: Dr. Byron Sharp and Dr. Jenni Romaniuk

August, 2005.

Ehrenberg-Bass Institute for Marketing Science - University of South Australia

Abstract

The aim of the thesis is to better understand the negative brand associations that consumers express in brand image surveys and the relationship between these associations and brand usage.

Brand image research is one of the key market research studies marketers undertake to assess consumers' perceptions of their brands in comparison to competitors. This thesis explores the inclusion of negative brand image attributes in such surveys. It investigates the propensity for consumers to respond to negative information in brand image studies and aims to understand the relationship between this propensity to respond and their brand usage. While considerable research has been conducted to understand positive (e.g., "reliable") and neutral attributes (e.g., "Australian"), there is limited research available to assist marketers to understand how to utilise responses to negative image attributes (e.g., "unreliable") (East 1997) and there have been calls for further research in the area (Hoek, Dunnett et al. 2000; Romaniuk 2000).

Many models of consumer behaviour assume that negative information is utilised by consumers to remove brands from their consideration set (e.g., Moorthy, Ratchford et al. 1997). Understanding response patterns to negative image attributes should allow a better understanding of how negative information may be used in the consumer decision making process. For example, the popular view of the role of negative information in the decision making process outlined by compensatory and non-compensatory decision models (e.g., Lussier and Olshavsky 1979; Reed 1996) would lead a marketer to expect higher response levels to negative attributes for brands that are not chosen. The few studies conducted that have investigated negative attributes (e.g., Bird and Channon 1970; Bird, Channon et al. 1970) have discovered that negative attributes tend not to receive a high level of response as would be predicted by the compensatory and non-compensatory models. Inconsistencies like this require further investigation and explanation.

This thesis explored negative image attributes with two key objectives:

- 1) To understand what response patterns to expect when negative image attributes are included in brand image surveys
- 2) To interpret these patterns in the context of respondents' purchase behaviour

Seven hypotheses were developed, where possible including competing alternatives within the hypotheses. In line with requests for further replication of findings (e.g., Amir and Sharon 1990; Hubbard and Armstrong 1994), this thesis tests findings in up to 20 commercial market research studies across a range of industries, repertoire and subscription markets and a range of different measurement conditions.

The key findings of the thesis are outlined in the following bullet points:

- Generally there was a low proportion of respondents nominating negative attributes
- The greatest influence on responses to negative attributes appear to be current or past experience with a brand
- The results of this research suggest responses to negative attributes increase when a consumer has recently ceased using a brand, or is about to cease using a brand

The following bullet points highlight the key implications of the thesis:

- The low response level to negative attributes suggest that negative information about a brand (for example, through word-of-mouth or negative publicity) probably has little effect on those consumers who have never used the brand
- The low level of response to negative attributes by those who have never used a brand provides no support for compensatory or non-compensatory theories of the consumer decision making process.
- Negative attributes may be useful in repertoire markets for identifying current users of a brand who are likely to cease using it