

Strategic Marketing Insights For Small Business Meat Retailers

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ABSTRACT

Branded meat of consistently high quality has earned a reputation worldwide as a means to increase beef consumption. The feedlot industry is the main beef producer in South Africa and falls in the category of 'Small Businesses.' For these small business meat retailers to be successful in an industry subjected to fierce competition, it is necessary to be innovative in a market where high quality beef serves as just another commodity. This study explored the marketing efforts of meat producers in Middelburg, Mpumalanga, by drawing tangent planes between effective marketing and the knowledgeable consumer. The research approach that was used included both quantitative and qualitative research. The population consisted of consumers buying meat products at three different retailers in Middelburg, Mpumalanga. A sample of 612 was conveniently selected for the study. A total of 588 questionnaires were completed. The results of the study provide insights into the measures that influence brand equity for branded meat products. The importance to establish a link between brand variables and consumers' perception regarding the importance of these variables is thus critical in the success of branded meat products. These marketing insights make a significant contribution to the competitive marketing strategies of small business meat retailers.

Keywords: Small Business; Meat Retailers; Consumers; Feedlot Industry; Branded Meat Products; Branding

INTRODUCTION

The marketing challenges for the producers in the meat industry in South Africa are quite unique and require an innovative perspective. Developing a marketing communication strategy for a small business requires systematic planning. Because each business is unique, the advertising strategy must be developed to meet specific requirements. Small business owners may feel that they cannot afford the expense of advertising their goods and services because of limited financial resources. Such an approach has the potential to significantly lessen the business' probability of success. Marketing should be considered an investment rather than an expense. Owners should realise that marketing on a continuous basis will increase profitability and subsequent growth of the organisation. In a highly competitive business environment, a well-planned marketing communication strategy is one of the most effective means of increasing sales (Pickle & Abrahamson, 2000, p. 556).

The average individual is subjected to hundreds of advertisements every day. In most instances, the advertisements have been purchased by large organizations; however, small businesses also advertise because they, too, know that advertising can increase market share. It is unusual for a small businessperson not to make use of some form of advertising to promote the business and its products. When a salesperson greets a customer who enters a store, the salesperson indirectly contributes in advertising the shop. When a satisfied customer tells a friend about how excellent the service is, this, too, constitutes advertising (Hodgetts & Kuratko, 2000, p. 459).

For many years, the marketing communication purpose in most organisations was dominated by mass-media advertising. The majority of marketers used additional marketing communication tools, but sales promotion and direct-marketing agencies, as well as package design companies, were generally viewed as supporting services and often used on an impromptu or a per-project basis. These companies failed to recognise that the wide range of

marketing communication tools available should be coordinated to communicate effectively and present a consistent image to target markets (Belch & Belch, 2007, p. 9). For the small business meat retailer to be successful in an industry subjected to fierce competition, it is crucial to be innovative in a market where high quality beef serves as just another commodity (Prinsloo, 2006, p. 1).

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Small business meat retailers have to implement strategies of branding and positioning to maintain and enhance their competitiveness. Furthermore, small business meat retailers need to develop a competitive advantage based on a set of unique brand attributes. The small business meat retailers in Middelburg, Mpumalanga, face the challenge of differentiating their products from the competition. From this, the analogy, it can be drawn that the small business meat retailers need to establish how to market the meat brand attributes to achieve brand equity, as a prerequisite for differentiating the brand from competitors and developing a competitive advantage.

AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of the study was to postulate an IMC strategy for small business meat retailers to effectively market branded meat products. In order to achieve the aim of this study, the following three investigative questions were formulated:

1. How can the various elements of the promotional mix be combined into an effective marketing program for branded meat products?
2. How can a small business meat retailer effectively use marketing communication within a limited budget?
3. What is the most effective positioning strategy for small business meat retailers?

CONCEPTUALISATION

Marketing decisions play a vital role in establishing a new business enterprise. Not only does an organisation need a market focus in its strategy, there must be a level of marketing expertise to put together the best total package consisting of the product, price, distribution, and promotion for a small business enterprise. Successful small business enterprises know their markets, their market segment needs, the demographics of the market, and how to communicate effectively in the market (Nieman, Hough & Niewenhuizen, 2003, p. 18). Small business entrepreneurs often have some advantages that can be exploited. Small businesses usually know their customers better than do large bureaucratic businesses. The small business owner can have personal contact with customers and keep in touch with their product or service needs. A small business can respond quickly to change and can follow a hands-on approach in the management of the business (Machado & Cassim, 2007, p. 19).

One of the major variables for success in a small business is to be noticeable in the market place. This requires careful planning and a well thought-out IMC strategy (Clow & Baack, 2007, p. 438). According to Arens (2004, p. 16), integrated marketing communication (IMC) is the process of building and reinforcing mutually profitable relationships with employees, customers, other stakeholders, and the general public by developing and coordinating a communications strategy that enables them to have a constructive encounter with the company/brand through a variety of media or other contacts.

Marketing communications create sales for the organisation by implementing various supportive media tools, such as billboards, the internet, SMS, direct mailing, brochures, special events, photography, television and radio commercials, press releases, corporate social responsibilities, pricing strategy, and product information. Gone are the days when someone opened a shop, erected a signpost and expected customers to crowd in. In modern business organisations, IMC has taken the centre stage. IMC plays a vital role in today's competitive marketplace where people are constantly exposed to all sorts of commercials; hence, the marketing communication must be unique, timely, informative, usable, creative, and memorable.

The marketing communications effort of an organisation becomes effective when their advertising campaign attract sales, when their website provides an intended effect, when their bulk SMS campaign keeps the

phone ringing, and when their sales representatives make huge sales with little effort. The small business owner should, therefore, focus on his business demeanour - how the organisation communicates, interacts, persuades, informs, relates, publicizes, and promotes, and how it chooses and uses its words in sales pitches (Bankole, 2010).

According to Scharborough & Zimmerer (2006), a well-developed IMC plan is essential for every small business to ensure that money invested in its marketing communications efforts is not wasted. Although it does not guarantee success, it does increase the likelihood of achieving positive results. Some small business owners believe that limited budgets deprive them of the luxury of marketing communications. This mind-set views the process as an expense they undertake only when their budgets permit – a leftover expense, something to spend money on if anything remains after paying the creditors. The reality is that communicating with customers is not just an expense; it is an investment in the small business's future. A mega-budget is not a prerequisite for building an effective marketing communications campaign. With a little creativity and ingenuity, a small business can make its voice heard above the clamour of its larger competitors and it can do this within a limited budget. The marketing communications program must be efficient, effective, and consistently reach the people who are most likely to buy a company's product or service (Scharborough & Zimmerer, 2006, p. 30).

Consumers have an extensive set of purchasing options. This means that consumers can try products with specific advantages or attributes. Effective positioning, by whatever tactic chosen, increases sales and strengthens the long-term positions of both individual products and the total organisation (Clow & Baack, 2007, p. 54). The marketer must understand potential needs and attitudes when planning marketing strategies. If customers treat different products as substitutes, then a business has to position itself against those products too. Customers won't always be conscious of all the detailed ways that an organisation's marketing mix might be different, but careful positioning can help highlight the unifying theme or benefits that relate to the determining dimensions of the target market (Perreault, Cannon, & McCarthy, 2008, p. 79).

One of the key reasons for the growing importance of integrated marketing communications is that it plays a key role in the process of developing and sustaining a consistent image in the market. With more products and services competing for consideration by customers who have less time to make choices, well-known brands have a major competitive advantage in the marketplace (Kitchen, Bridgenell & Jones, 2004, p. 19). Integrated marketing communication is a strategic business process used to plan, develop, execute, and evaluate coordinated, measurable, persuasive brand communication programs over time with consumers, customers, prospects, employees, associates, and other target relevant (external and internal) audiences. The goal is to generate both short-term financial returns and build long-term brand and shareholder value (Belch & Belch, 2007, 11). In communicating with consumers, branded products make it easier to identify products. Brands also reassure consumers that they will get consistent quality. The reputation of a brand influences customer loyalty among buyers of consumer goods (Miller & Layton, 2000, p. 308).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research method used included both quantitative and qualitative research, which is descriptive (where the objective was restricted to describing current practices) and explanatory (where existing theory was used to understand and explain what was happening) in nature. For the purpose of this study, exploratory research was used to obtain information about the consumer preferences on attributes for branded meat. The population relevant to this research consisted of consumers buying meat products at the different outlets in Middelburg, Mpumalanga, which include only those retail shops that sell branded meat products within the mentioned region. Within this population group, the effort was to obtain a sample size that represents the chosen population.

A sample of 612 was conveniently selected for the study. The sample size imitates and exceeds the recommendation by Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson (2010, pp. 707-708) in that the number of respondents should be a ratio of 14 observations to each variable in order to perform factor analysis. When the 12 variables identified in three categories are multiplied by the suggested 14 observations, a sample of 504 is recommended.

For this research paradigm, the semi-structured interview type was used, which generally starts with a few specific questions and then follows the individual's tangents of thought with interviewer probes. This research

classification is qualitative and the reasoning is inductive. This study focused on three meat retailers in Middelburg, Mpumalanga; namely, meat retailer A, meat retailer B, and meat retailer C. The unit of analysis used in this study, is represented by these three small business branded meat retailers and their consumers.

In the initial phase of the research study, semi-structured interviews were done with the brand owners of the three identified retail outlets - meat retailer A, meat retailer B, and meat retailer C. After establishing, inter alia, the brand variables as portrayed by the brand owners, this data were then used as scaled questions in a quantitative questionnaire. Respondents could then rate the indicated variables which were used as feedback during the perceptual positioning stage of the empirical study. The questionnaire was first pilot-tested; then modifications were made to this data collection instrument to increase its ease of use. The final questionnaire was issued at different retail outlets where consumers buy the branded meat products. A total of 588 questionnaires were completed, of which 24 were not taken into consideration due to incomplete or inconclusive questionnaires.

Reliability and Validity

Since factor analysis was used to validate the questionnaire in this study, reliability of the scale was required to ensure that the questionnaire reflects the construct it is measuring. It is for this reason that Cronbach alpha was used. The justification for using Cronbach coefficients was based on the general acceptability in the marketing literature for the use of this type of analysis (Hair et al., 2010, p. 118). Cronbach's alpha determines the internal consistency or average correlation of items in a survey instrument to gauge its reliability (Lund, 2012, p. 1). For this study, the minimum reliability coefficient is set at $\alpha \geq 0.70$. However, in cases of lower reliability coefficients, a lower coefficient may be sufficient for analytical scrutiny. An acceptable minimum coefficient for attitudinal and behavioural constructs on ratio scales is 0.7 (Field, 2007, p. 668).

To examine the appropriateness of factor analysis in this research study, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy is utilized. The KMO measure of sampling adequacy provides an index (between 0 and 1) of the proportion of variance among the variables that might be common variance. Values between 0.5 and 0.7 are mediocre and values between 0.7 and 0.8 are good, values between 0.8 and 0.9 are great and values above 0.9 are superb (Field, 2007, p. 647). The KMO value for this research was > 0.8 , which is acceptable as a good value.

DATA ANALYSIS

Consumers were asked to indicate their meat buying pattern. The perception exists that consumers in the lower income category tend to buy meat only once a month and that consumers in the higher income category will buy meat on a more frequent basis (Bruwer, 2002, p. 8). As illustrated in Figure 1, most of the respondents (31%) prefer to buy their meat only once a month, but still a very high percentage of the respondents (26%) indicate that they buy meat once or twice a month. In this research 25% of the respondents prefer to buy meat more than four times a month.

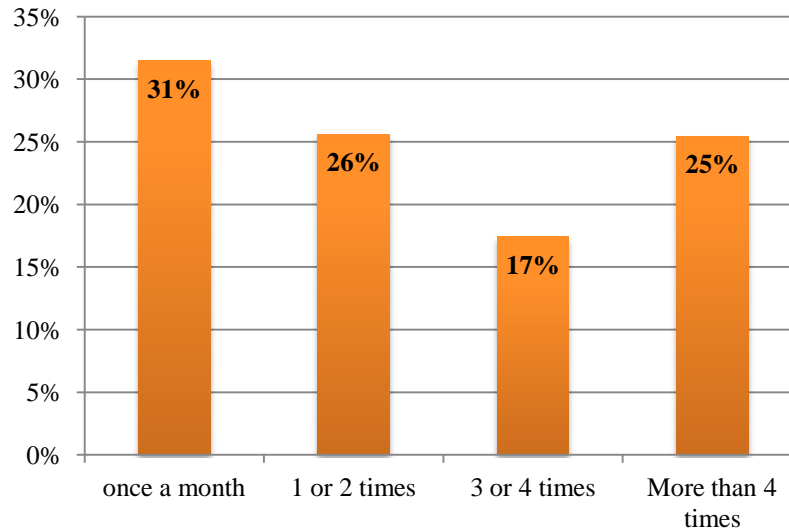


Figure 1: Household Purchasing Frequency of Meat

Cross-tabulations were done between household income and question one in the questionnaire - “how often do you buy meat?” The Chi-square test p-value was < 0.001, which was statistically significant. To see if it was practically significant, the Cramer’s V-test (0.037) recorded a medium effect. The results are shown in Table 1. For this study, the lower income groups (households earning less than R10,000 per month) indicated that 35.1% buy meat only once a month and only 16.9% buy meat more than four times per month. The higher income groups (households earning from R10,000 to more than R60,000 per month) indicated that 34.1% buy meat more than four times per month. This can be very useful information for the retail owners when they plan their marketing communications effort.

Table 1: Household Income/How Often Do You Buy Meat?

			How Often Do You Buy Meat?				Total
			1/month	2-3/month	3-4/month	More than 4 times	
Household Income	<R10,000/month	Count	87	74	45	42	248
		% within Household income	35,1%	29,8%	18,1%	16,9%	100,0%
	R10,000 – >R60 000	Count	68	60	44	89	261
		% within Household income	26,1%	23,0%	16,9%	34,1%	100,0%
Total	Count	155	134	89	131	509	
	% within Household income	30,5%	26,3%	17,5%	25,7%	100,0%	

The respondents were requested to identify the type of marketing that influences them to buy a specific brand of meat. Figure 2 demonstrates the results of the marketing influences on consumers.

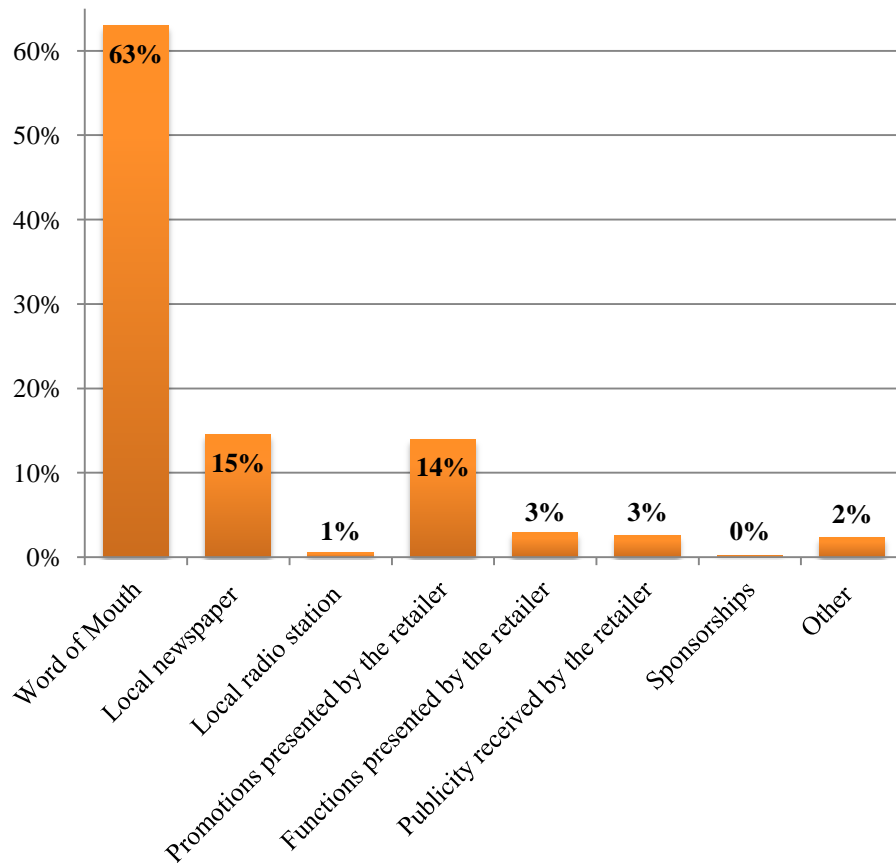


Figure 2: Marketing Influences on Consumers

According to previous studies, word-of-mouth was revealed to significantly impact on customers' attitudes and purchasing behaviours. Personal sources of information provide greater confidence to consumers prior to purchase and thus influence their brand choices (Sundaram & Webster, 1999, pp. 668-669). It is also very important for the small business meat retailer to know which type of marketing will influence the consumer in his decision-making. When respondents were asked what type of communications they would prefer, they indicated, by a large margin, (44%) advertising in the local newspaper, followed by special events (29%) and in-store promotions (19%), as shown in Figure 3.

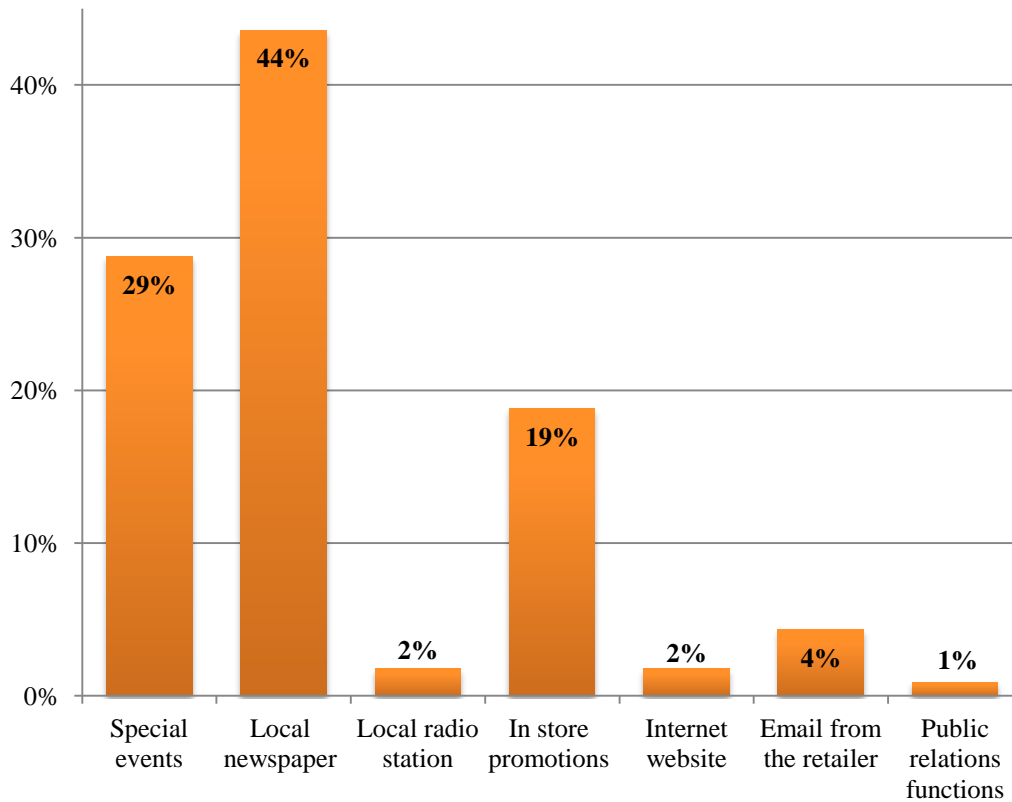


Figure 3: Consumers' Preferred Method of Communication

Respondents (44%) indicated that advertising in the local newspaper is their preferred method of communication. This is information that can be of value to the small business meat retailers. Conventional media wisdom holds that newspaper and magazine readers may be more attentive to advertising than television viewers. For this reason and for the fact that it is the preferred method of branded meat marketing by most of the respondents, local newspaper advertising can be used for more rational content and more detail in advertisements.

The other advantage for using local newspapers is that their readers often share particular demographic characteristics of age, social status, and income. This renders specific local newspapers as useful media vehicles for particular brand advertisements. Another advantage that local or regional newspapers offer is the opportunity for advertisers to reach local consumers within the context of local news and events. This, too, is an opportunity to present the brand in a setting that makes it more accessible for potential consumers (Hackley, 2010, p. 153).

The meat product attribute and variable question consisted of 12 statements on a 5-point Likert scale. Variables that proved to be reliable measures for the different clusters were combined into scores that can be regarded as presenting these attributes. Table 2 shows the mean and standard deviation for these scores as well as items that are reported individually because of lack of reliability for the total group.

Table 2: Grouping of the Respondents' Attribute Preferences in Clusters

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	P-value
Q1 Competence Cluster	564	4.4591	.53924	0.184
Q1 Convenience	545	3.84	1.126	1.000
Q1 Price	560	3.84	.925	0.534
Q1 Traceability	545	3.32	1.517	0.699
Q1 Value For Money	563	4.13	.963	0.007
Q2 Quality Cluster	564	1.8001	.54576	0.014
Q2 Added Product Value Cluster	564	2.7142	.97192	0.125

The results are based on the Likert scale method that was coded for Question 1 as follows: 1 - Strongly disagree, 2 - Somewhat disagree, 3 - Neutral, 4 - Somewhat agree, and 5 - Strongly agree. Question 2 was coded as follows: 1 - Very high, 2 - High, 3 - Medium, 4 - Low, and 5 - Very low. As indicated in Table 2, the most important score was measured for Question 2 ‘Quality’ cluster where the mean and standard deviation was 1.800 ± 0.546 , indicating that ‘Quality’ is more important than ‘Added product value’ as attributes in the consumer’s decision-making process when buying branded meat. The most important score measured for Question 1 ‘Competence’ cluster, where the mean and standard deviation was 4.460 ± 0.540 on a 5-point Likert scale with ‘Value for money’ as the second highest mean of the meat product attributes and variables accessed by the consumer of their favourite meat retailer. ‘Traceability’ was the variable reported as least important, with a mean score measured at 3.32 ± 1.517 .

Cluster analysis (see Table 3) on the variables using Ward’s method on Euclidean distances yielded two main clusters. Internal consistency of the data was assessed by calculating Cronbach’s alphas and, in addition, inter-tem correlations were calculated. In Question 1, the first cluster - named competence - consisted of the following variables: competent staff, service, value-added products, consistent quality, healthy wholesome products, quality products, variety of products, and a clean store. This cluster groups the variables that consumers find important when they consider the process of delivering the meat to the consumer. The second cluster - named valuable - consisted of the following variables: traceability, value for money, price, and convenience. This cluster groups the variables that consumers find important to consider the value of the product.

Table 3: Reliability Analysis of Cluster Data

Construct	Cronbach’s Alpha	Mean Item Correlation
Question 1 - Competence Cluster	.86	.42
Question 1 - Valuable Cluster	.58	.28
Question 2 - Quality’ Cluster	.79	.31
Question 2 - Added Product Value Cluster	.75	.43

In Question 2, the first cluster - named quality - consisted of the following variables: packaging, tasty meat products, quality products, hygienic products, healthy wholesome organic products, good service, price, and convenience. This cluster groups the variables that consumers find important when they consider the quality of a product. The second cluster in Question 1 - named added product value - consisted of the following variables: traceable origin, marbled meat, unique customized product, and added value.

Using qualitative research (interviews with small business meat retail owners), the important attributes that consumers use when choosing between brands were identified. In Figures 4 and 5, the three brands were plotted on a two-dimensional map. From the data obtained, it was possible to display (in Figure 4) customer perceptions of their preferred brand with relation to ‘Price,’ ‘Value for money,’ ‘Traceability,’ and ‘Convenience,’ and Figure 5 is an illustration of customer perceptions of their preferred brand with relation to ‘Quality’ and ‘Added product value.’

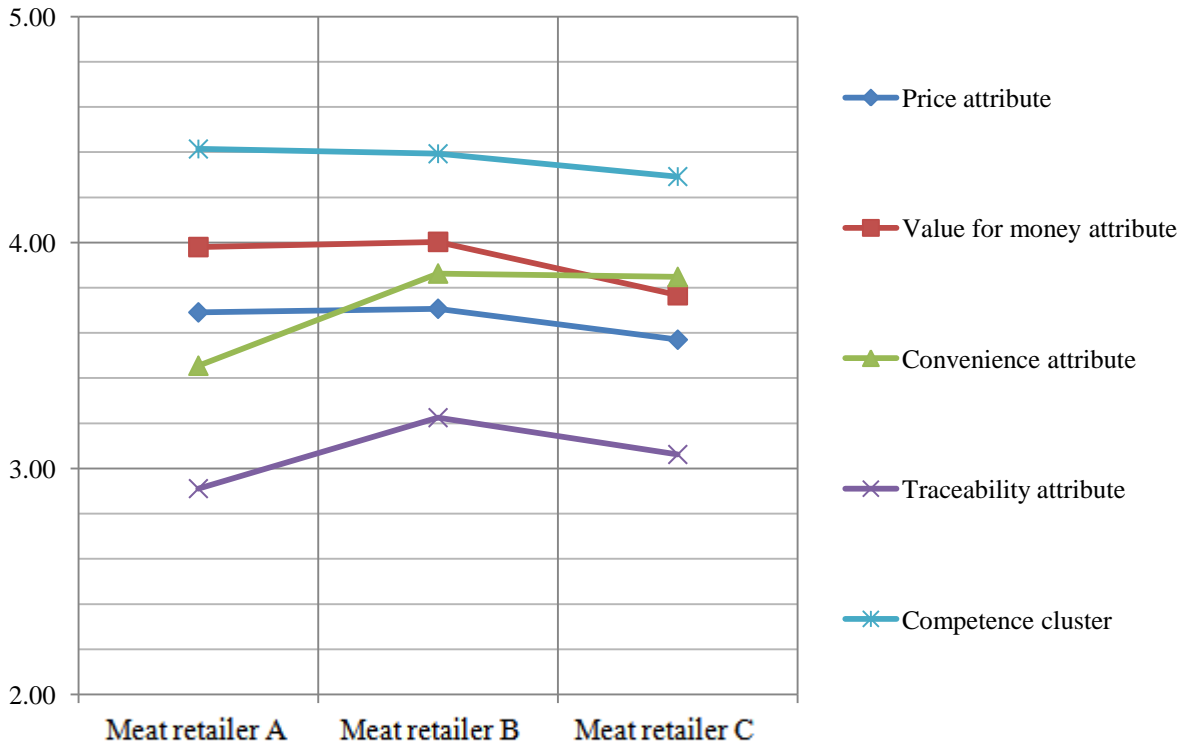


Figure 4: Customer Perceptions of their Preferred Brand

From Figure 4, it is evident that ‘Competence’ is the attribute that is rated the highest for all brands, and ‘Traceability’ attribute has the lowest rating and measured ‘average’ for all brands. The other three attributes - ‘Price,’ ‘Convenience,’ and ‘Value for money’ - differ slightly from one brand to another, but the overall ratings are between 3.5 and 4.

In order to determine the different brands’ position in relation to ‘Quality’ and ‘Added product value’, this research is used to illustrate data with the use of a perceptual map, as shown in Figure 5. From Figure 5, it can be seen that the respondents rated ‘Quality’ as the most important brand attribute significantly more important than ‘Added product value’ for which average ratings were reported. It can be noted that respondents feel quite neutral about ‘Added product value’ as a brand attribute.

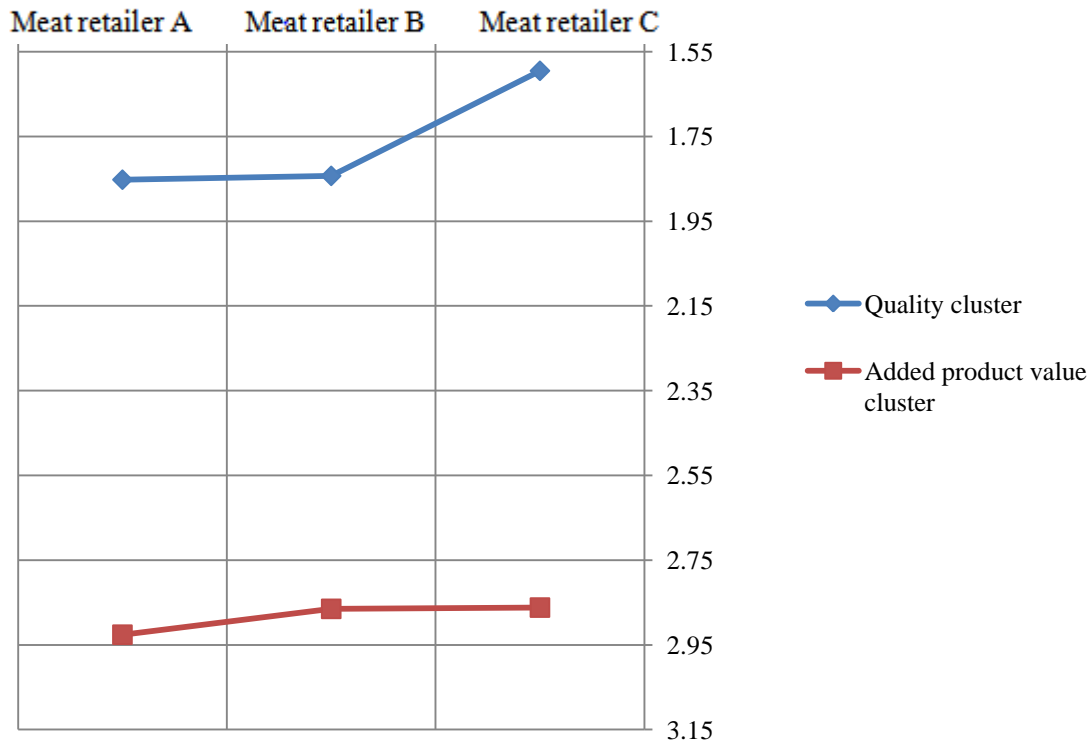


Figure 5: Consumer’s Assessment of ‘Quality’ and ‘Added Product Value’ Attributes

The Investigative Questions Re-Visited

The investigative questions that were researched in support of the research are analysed as follows:

1. How can the various elements of the promotional mix be combined into an effective marketing program for small business meat retailers?

In this research, 63% of respondents indicated that they are influenced by ‘word of mouth’ and the only other marketing influences worth mentioning are advertising in the local newspaper (15%) and promotions presented by the small business meat retailer (14%).

2. How can a small business meat retailer effectively use marketing communication within a limited budget?

When respondents were asked what type of communications they would prefer, they indicated, by a large margin - (44%) advertising in the local newspaper, followed by special events (29%) and in-store promotions (19%).

3. What is the most effective positioning strategy for small business meat retailers?

When the data had been reduced and clusters identified, the respondents rated the ‘Quality’ cluster as the most important attribute and ‘Competence’ of staff and small business meat retailer was the second most important cluster. The third highest score was the ‘Value for money’ attribute.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations, if implemented, can assist the small business meat retailer to develop a competitive marketing strategy and enhance its brand:

Recommendation 1

It is important that the small business meat retailer focus the marketing program on one or two key attributes. The small business meat retailer can further concentrate on attributes that makes its brand different from the competitors. Focus on these key associations and reinforce it across the marketing program over time.

Identify and partner with a non-competitive brand name, like Windhoek Lager, Castle Lager, or Simonsberg winery, that targets the same consumers and combine marketing or advertising campaigns that will benefit both parties by creating exposure and increase consumer revenue.

Recommendation 2

In this research, 63% of respondents indicated that they are influenced by ‘word of mouth,’ advertising in the local newspaper (15%) and promotions presented by the small business meat retailer (14%). Due to the growing aversion to advertising, the increasing importance of channels, such as ‘word of mouth,’ Facebook, and consumer blogs, is opening up an entirely new world of practical marketing possibilities for the successful marketers of the future.

The small business meat retailer can design creative brand-building push campaigns - Motivate consumers to use favourable ‘word of mouth,’ create unique brand associations and build on good public relations. Create something extravagant, cheeky or courageous to get radio show hosts and journalist to talk about the brand. Get involved in social responsibility programmes where the community can benefit and see the brand as ‘caring for the community.’

Advertising in the local newspaper is expensive for small business meat retailers, but if it is done in partnership with another non-competitive brand name, it may become more affordable. In-store promotional efforts can be a less expensive option and with a little creativity and well-known individuals, it can be an exciting event that will attract customers to the brand.

Recommendation 3

Maximise the contribution of each brand attribute preference used to build brand equity. It is important to focus on the areas where respondents rated values indifferent; for example, in this study - attributes like ‘added product value’ and ‘traceability’ because it is in these areas that improvements can be affected to ensure a better understanding and building of a stronger meat retail brand.

Recommendation 4

A small business meat retailer can leverage as many secondary associations as possible. As such, small business meat retailers must make use of an entity with potential relevant associations that can signal quality and credibility. Finally, it is required that the small business meat retailer establish branding strategies that will focus on the brand’s image, striving to occupy a distinct and valued place in the minds of its consumers and competitors by reinforcing the important attributes like ‘quality’ and ‘competence’ of the brand.

CONCLUSION

Branded meat of consistently high quality has earned a reputation worldwide as a means to increase beef consumption. The feedlot industry is the main beef producer in South Africa and falls in the category of ‘Small Businesses.’ For these small business enterprises to be successful in an industry subjected to fierce competition, it is necessary to be innovative in a market where high quality beef serves as just another commodity. Most research on brand attributes has been done on large multinational brands and comparatively little research has been done on meat branding (Wong & Merrilees, 2005, p. 157). This study sought to gain a better understanding of what role brand attributes play in the consumer’s decision-making process when buying branded meat.

Branding is about being different and for a branded product to be considered superior, it is necessary that small business meat retailers focus on the attributes that can make their product different and better than the competition. The challenge that small business meat retailers face in building a strong meat brand name is to ensure that customers, first and foremost, have a positive experience when the product is purchased and, secondly, that their marketing programs create the desired knowledge structures for the brand. The importance to establish a link between brand variables and consumers' perception regarding the importance of these variables are thus critical in the success of branded meat products.

Although various other areas of research are probable, the hope is expressed that this study serves as a point of departure in meat brand preference and the effect on small business meat retailers and that it will encourage future research.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Mrs. Anita Groenewald obtained her Bachelor's degree from North-West University, Potchefstroom in 1988 and completed a Master's degree at North-West University, Mafikeng in 2013. She also successfully completed a Certificate in Public Relations Practice at The Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa in 1992. She has more than 15 years' experience in the field of Integrated Marketing Communications. She received the SANDF National Award Silver for Excellence in Communication in 1997. More recently she worked as a Consultant on the development of two new meat brand names. Her interest is in Small Business Communication strategies.

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