METHODS OF ASSESSING THE IMAGE OF COSMETICS INDUSTRY RETAILERS

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Abstract: *Image elements have an extremely important role in differentiating the company into a market, especially from the competing firms, being essential to render the identity and uniqueness of a brand. Even more so for the companies in the cosmetics and personal care industry, where, currently, it is difficult to bring a novelty item and to generate public interest. In this paper I had in mind to study the assessment ways of the image of retailers in the cosmetics industry, taking as an example the Sephora company. This is one of the most popular companies on the cosmetics market, with a strong and well-devised image, both globally and nationally.*

Keywords: *retail, brand, cosmetics industry, quantitative research*

1. Introduction

Cosmetic and personal care products play a very important role, even more so in the current period, when the beauty products market is gaining ground, being in a prominent expanding and developing process.

Elements such as the design of the retail space, as well as the outside of the store, the range of offered products, the promotional offers, the charged prices, all these have a great influence on consumers, as they make the difference in a saturated market. An extremely important element is given by the presence and attributes of the employees, as well as by the quality of the serving process, these representing, judging by the visual elements, the first contact of a possible client with a company. By its employees, a company mirrors the principles and values it wishes to convey, and first impression is very important.

I have chosen to study Sephora which is one of the most popular companies on the cosmetics and personal care market, being a well-known brand both globally and nationally.

The purpose of this paper is to establish the impact that a general image of a company, especially of those in the cosmetics and personal care industry, has on consumers.

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The main objectives of the paper are: to identify the component elements in the formation of the overall image of a retailer, to get to know Sephora and to establish the effects that image elements have on consumers as well as how they are perceived by consumers.

2. Literature Review

In making a decision with respect to creating an image, the companies must take into account the correlation of the image with the expectations and exigencies of the target market. All the aspects that contribute to the creation of an image of the retailer (location, assortment of traded goods, services offered, physical facilities, prices, promotion) must be in accordance with the expectations of the target market, especially when considering a shop with a luxury store image, located inside the big shopping centres and selling top quality products and brands. The growth, but especially the maintenance of a good image of a trading company, is conditioned by the implementation of a complex process, which takes place in several stages. This process has a permanent character. It is equally important to maintain a unitary and consistent image in all the stores that the company owns (Bălăşescu, Bălăşescu, 2010).

The image of a company depends to a large extent on the created atmosphere, on the psychological comfort obtained by customers when they visit a merchant's shop. The atmosphere, in a broad sense, contains more than the communication aspects that a trader uses to position itself. The image, sound or smell in a store, as well as other physical attributes contribute to the formation of the buyer's perception, and for that shopping that is not made in the physical store, the atmosphere is reflected by the characteristics and aspect of the catalogues, of the site, etc. To a great extend, the first impression of the trader is formed before the person steps into the store due to the location, exterior facade, but also immediately after having entered the store, due to the layout and interior design, posters or corridors width. The brand's visibility inside the store is equally important as to availability and easiness in finding the products, as well as their attractiveness on store shelves. For the loyal consumers who can easily find a certain brand in a commercial space, the placement of products in stores is important, because this aspect has a decisive role in the buying process (Hariharan, Desaim Talukdar, Inman, 2018).

The analysis of the place where the retail store will be set up is a long-term strategic decision, both in terms of customer satisfaction and the company's profitability in a changing market and intense competition circumstances, being a long-term, costly and difficult to change investment. (Erbiyik, Ozcab, Karaboga, 2012).

In order to differentiate the company from the competitors, the companies must implement unique actions in terms of the services they offer as they reflect in the competitive advantage they have to provide to the buyers, by comparison to competitors and, on this basis, to differentiate the image of the company by appropriate techniques for the favourable perception by consumers of some special attributes that express the characteristics of the services offered (Olteanu, 1999).

Traders' efforts to focus on high-quality products and services as a source of consumer satisfaction and as a means of establishing lasting relationships with them as well as a competitive advantage in a highly competitive market is important (Giovanis, Athanasoupoulou, 2018).

Durable and successful relationships with customers can be created and maintained only when certain basic requirements are met: getting to know the customers who are interested in the company's information and their correct handling, the personalization of the information in accordance with consumer preferences, effective communication, encouraging customer visits. Thus, instead of offering products and services, a company should provide a solution to a problem, need or desire of the consumer (Londhe, 2014).

In the image of a company, an important role is played by the shop windows' fitting, as they have two main purposes: shop and offers identification and new customers' attraction. Products arrangement destined to sale as well as traffic management in stores is also very important. Parking facilities also play an important role because they can increase or decrease the attractiveness of the store. The use of a visual identity - logo, slogan, colour scheme, font, style - as part of promotional efforts, being an essential element in the creation and promotion of a sales venue is also important. (Boisen, Terlow, Groote, Couwenberg, 2017).

The staff of the company can be an element of differentiation, being of great importance as companies realize the determinant role of the human factor in the organisation of the activity. The appreciation of the staff and the quality of the services offered is done by means of the behaviour in the client communication process (courtesy, adaptability, ease of communication, credibility, responsibility taking). The staff is extremely important because they can offer advice to customers who ask for information about the location, availability or use of a product, and consumer satisfaction and loyalty can be influenced by both employees and quality of a product. (Mou, Robb, DeHoratius, 2018).

3. Brief description of Sephora company

Sephora is a beauty, cosmetics, care products and perfume shop. The Sephora brand has belonged to the Louis Vuitton-Moet Hennessy (LVMH) luxury brand group since 1997. The company was launched in France in 1970 by the Frenchman Dominique Mandonnaud and, currently, Sephora is present in 29 countries around the world, by operating a chain of about 1,900 stores worldwide, of which 600 are in Europe.

On the Romanian market, Sephora has been present since 2000, at the beginning of 2018, counting 32 stores nationwide and since 2016, the company being present online, too. The stores are dispersed throughout the country, in large cities: Arad, Bacău, Braşov, Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, Constanţa, Craiova, Galaţi, Iaşi, Piteşti, Ploieşti, Suceava, Timişoara. (www.sephora.ro)

The activity object of Sephora is the retail sale of cosmetics, care and perfumery products. The Sephora store offers customers various categories of cosmetics including skin, body and hair care products, perfumery products, make-up products and

accessories. Similarly, it offers brands that are found exclusively in Sephora stores and their own brand with the same name.

4. Methodology

With a view to identifying the opinions and attitudes of the Braşov women on the general image of Sephora shop, a quantitative marketing research was carried out on a sample of 200 women from Braşov. The research was conducted between January 25th and March 25th 2019.

The objectives of the research are: to identify the behaviour of women in Braşov as for the purchasing of cosmetic and personal care products; to get to know the opinion of the Braşov women about Sephora's position towards competitors; to identify the frequency with which women in Braşov buy cosmetics and personal care products from Sephora stores; to know the respondents' attitudes, perceptions and opinions about Sephora shop general image; to measure the attitude of the women in Braşov regarding the influence of certain elements of general image, on the process of purchasing, in a Sephora store. I have also tested the following statistical hypotheses:

H0. There is no connection between the monthly income of the respondents and the fact that they have visited a Sephora store this year.

H1: There is a connection between the monthly income of the respondents and the fact that they have visited a Sephora store this year.

H0: There is no connection between the last graduated school of the respondents and the fact that they are influenced by promotional offers when purchasing products.

H1: There is a connection between the last graduated school of the respondents and the fact that they are influenced by promotional offers when purchasing products.

H0: There is no connection between the last graduated school by the respondents and the fact that they buy cosmetics from specialized stores.

H1: There is a connection between the last graduated school by respondents and the fact that they buy cosmetics from specialized stores.

H0: There is no connection between the respondents' income and the influence of Sephora's prices on the purchasing process.

H1: There is a connection between the respondents' income and the influence of Sephora's prices on the purchasing process.

The research framework is represented by the map of the city of Braşov, and for sampling a random method was used, stepping sampling. Thus, the city of Braşov was divided into neighbourhoods, then 30% of the total number was considered, in the end having a sample of 5 neighbourhoods. By the help of the RandBetween function in Microsoft Excel, the five neighbourhoods that formed the sample were randomly selected. Then, the questionnaire containing 25 questions was applied.

After collecting the information with the help of the questionnaire, the statistical data processing was done by the SPSS system (Statistics Social Sciences Package). The first step was to define the relevant variables of the research. Afterwards, the response options were encoded to facilitate the introduction of the data into the computer. The coding was done depending on each question and the scale used for this question. The

SPSS database was completed after all the questionnaires were introduced and, in the end, the data were centralized as tables and graphs of frequency (Neacșu et all, 2017).

4. Results and Discussions

As a result of the quantitative research that was carried out, I found out that a large part of the respondents purchase cosmetics and personal care products from specialized stores. Thus, compared with the main competitors, Sephora is ranked among the first positions in the preferences of the respondents, as they consider that the products offered by the company, the ways of promotion, the kindness of the staff and the exterior, the interior design and the design of the shop are much better set in the Sephora store. Equally, the respondents are not entirely satisfied with Sephora's prices, considering that they are slightly high, but somewhat justified by the high quality of the offered products. As for the image elements, the respondents are not very interested in the shop design, or in the signalisation elements, but they pay great attention to the availability of testers, to the range offered, and to the location of the products. Similarly, the attitude and the behaviour of Sephora employees is of great interest for the respondents, as well as the quality of the serving process as they consider these elements as essential in the appreciation and formation of an opinion about the store itself as well as the influence on the serving process.

After the testing of the hypotheses, the following results were obtained:

In order to test the next hypothesis, I used the t-Student test for the differences between the averages. Hypothesis H_0: There is no connection between the last graduated school of the respondents and the fact that they are influenced by promotional offers when purchasing products versus the hypothesis H_1: There is a connection between the last graduated school of the respondents and the fact that they are influenced by promotional offers when purchasing products.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics at the level of the two groups

Group Statistics					
	The last graduate school	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
How much are you influenced by promotional offers in purchasing products?	>= 4,00	58	3,6724	1,09845	,14423
	< 4,00	20	3,6000	1,23117	,27530

Source: own research

In Table 1 it can be seen that the averages of the two groups, people with secondary education and people with higher education, are calculated. What results is an average of the answers given by people with average education of 3.67 points and an average of 3.60 points according to the answers of the respondents with higher education. (It

needs to be mentioned that 1 is "very little" and 5 "very much"). It can be noticed that the averages of the two groups are different at the sample level. Furthermore, the statistical significance of these differences in the population surveyed will be tested.

Table 2

Testing the difference between percentages in the two groups

Independent Samples Test

| | | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | | | | | |
| | | F | Sig. | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Differ-ence | Std. Error Differ-ence | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
									Lower	Upper
How much are you influenced by promo-tional offers in purchasing products?	Equal variances assumed	,224	,637	,246	76	,806	,07241	,29382	-,51278	,65761
	Equal variances not assumed			,233	30,106	,817	,07241	,31079	-,56222	,70705

Source: own research

In this table, the Levene test (Datculescu, 2006) shows a value of the significance level Sig = 0.637 which means that we will accept the null hypothesis H_0 according to which the variants of the two groups are not different. Furthermore, I will read the results from the first row where t_{calc}=0,246 < $t_{(0,05;76)}$=1,99, thus, the hypothesis H_0 is accepted, namely, it cannot be guaranteed with a 95% probability that the averages of the two groups at the level of the population investigated are not different. The same decision can be made based on Sig signification level, which is higher than 0.05, which means that the hypothesis H_0 is accepted. According to the hypothesis H_0, there is no connection between the last graduated school of the respondents and the fact that they are influenced by the promotional offers when purchasing products.

After testing the hypotheses specified in the methodology, by using the t-Student test for the differences between the percentage and the Chi-Square test for the connection between the research variables, the following results were obtained: the hypothesis H_0 is accepted according to which there is no connection between the last school graduated by the respondents and the fact that they buy cosmetics from specialized stores. Equally, the hypothesis H_1 is accepted, according to which there is a connection between the respondents' income and the influence of Sephora's prices on the purchasing process.

Limits of the quantitative research:

For organizational reasons, the maximum acceptable error level of + -6.4% was chosen, namely, 200 respondents, where the statistical representativity was assured at a relatively high level of error and, thus, the sample is not representative;

There may be errors in the interview for the situation when some questions were not answered or inconsistent answers appeared.

5. Conclusions

When making a decision about creating an image, companies must take into account the correlation of the image with the expectations and exigencies of the target market.

As a result of the quantitative research, the following general conclusions were highlighted:

Most young women in Brașov visit a Sephora store at least once a month.

A great number of respondents appreciate Sephora's implemented promotional techniques as being fairly interesting.

An important part of respondents choose Sephora as the favourite destination when it comes to purchasing cosmetics.

Generally, the respondents are strongly influenced in the purchase process by the existing promotional offers.

The age of the women who buy from Sephora stores is on average 25 years.

After testing the hypotheses, the following conclusions were drawn:

There is no connection between the last graduated school of the respondents and the fact that they are influenced by the promotional offers when purchasing products.

There is no connection between the last school graduated by the respondents and the fact that they buy cosmetics from specialized stores.

There is a connection between the income of the respondents and the influence of Sephora's prices on the purchasing process.

The forthcoming directions which ensue from this research refers to conducting more far-ranging marketing research, at a national level, on the influence of the general image elements of cosmetics and personal care products companies with a view to improving their action on the market, as well as studying market developments over the next 5 years.

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