

Wooden Household Furniture: Does Brand Matter?

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ABSTRAK

Pengguna menilai sesuatu keluaran berdasarkan kepada pelbagai atribut apabila membuat satu keputusan pembelian. Atribut yang diambil kira berbeza di antara individu serta keluaran. Makalah ini melaporkan penemuan daripada satu kajian penerokaan terhadap kepentingan jenama dalam keputusan pembelian perabot kayu isi rumah dalam kalangan pengguna di Malaysia. Satu soal selidik berstruktur digunakan untuk mengumpul data daripada responden. Keputusan menunjukkan pengguna tidak menitikberatkan jenama malahan lebih mementingkan harga serta atribut ketara perabot kayu isi rumah berkenaan. Kebiasaan jenama dalam kalangan responden adalah rendah. Makalah ini membincangkan bagaimana pembuat perabot kayu isi rumah boleh menjenamakan keluaran mereka dengan berkesan.

ABSTRACT

Consumers evaluate a product based on various attributes when making a purchase decision. The attributes considered and their importance varies among individuals and differs between products. This paper reports the findings from an exploratory study on the importance of brands in wooden household furniture purchase decision among Malaysian consumers. A structured, self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data from the respondents. Results indicated that the respondents are not concerned about brands, but are instead price-conscious and placed more importance on the tangible attributes of the wooden household furniture items. Brand familiarity among the respondents was low. This paper discusses how the wooden household furniture manufacturers can brand their product in an effective way.

INTRODUCTION

The wooden furniture-manufacturing sector in Malaysia has experienced an impressive growth in recent years. The impetus and priority given to the sector in the national industrial development programs during the past decade saw more than 3,500 wooden furniture manufacturing mills established in the country (Jegatheswaran, 2002). These manufacturing mills, which range from small cottage operations to large automated plants with sophisticated machinery, sell their products both to the local and export markets.

In addition to the large number of manufacturers, there are also some salient characteristics of the sector that contribute to

the intense competition among the manufacturers serving the local market. There is a common practice in Malaysia whereby some popular designs are continually being made by many manufacturers, plus their tendency to copy designs from one another. Furthermore, a large number of furniture workshops/dealers obtain their supplies of unfinished furniture from the same manufacturing mills, thus resulting in products sold in the market being of similar designs.

As competition intensifies, the wooden furniture manufacturers have to find ways of differentiating their products from each other. There is an emerging trend among these manufacturers to give and promote the brands

of their products, using either the company's name or specific name for a particular furniture design. An evaluation of a brand's influence on consumer decisions to purchase wooden household furniture is therefore helpful to the furniture manufacturers in marketing their products in the local market. This paper reports the results of an analysis on the importance of brands in consumers' wooden household furniture purchase decision. The following section discusses the importance of brands to consumers. The methodology adopted in the study is explained in the third section. The fourth section presents and discusses the results from the study. The paper concludes with a discussion on implications of the findings for marketers of wooden household furniture in the Malaysian market.

IMPORTANCE OF BRANDS TO CONSUMERS

Many products found in the market are not only offered with problem-solving functions sought by the consumers, but also with other forms of tangible attributes such as color, size, style and quality. These products would also carry other less tangible features like product warranty and after-sales services. Thus, seemingly similar products with a similar core benefit may become differentiated to the consumers with these augmented features.

Consumers employ criteria such as price, tangible and intangible product attributes, and place of purchase when evaluating product alternatives (Buell, 1985). Consumers vary with regards to which attributes they consider relevant, and they will pay most attention to those attributes connected with their needs (Kotler and Armstrong, 1997). Effective marketing, therefore, begins with an understanding of the needs and wants of the consumers. In essence, to provide a product that meets the needs of the consumers, marketers must assess the importance of various attributes of the product from the perspective of the consumers.

However, the consumers may not be fully aware of all the attributes of the various alternatives to help them make an evaluation during a purchase. They would normally use search features as indicators of benefits, of which brands have been commonly used as the primary indicator. Marketers believe brands are important because they shape customer decisions, and have been reported to be a key factor in purchase decision in both consumer and business-to-business markets of the US, Europe and Asia (Court and Freeling, 1996).

Brands are used to communicate a single or a range of positive attributes about a product or service (Betts, 1994). Brands tell the consumer something about the quality of a product, as a brand's reputation is normally used as a proxy when consumers are not adequately informed about the quality of a product (Sullivan, 1998). In addition, consumers buying the same brand know that they will get the same quality each time they buy (Kotler and Armstrong, 1997). Consumers can also reduce the risk they would face when buying something they know little about by buying branded products (Montgomery and Wernerfelt, 1992). Furthermore, consumers buying branded products often think that they are getting a special guarantee that the product meets their needs better than other similar products (Seperich *et al.*, 1994). And it would be quite difficult to change consumers' brand preference once they are convinced of the quality and value of a particular brand (Crispel and Brandenburg, 1993).

METHOD

Survey Instrument

A structured questionnaire was used to collect the responses from the respondents on the importance of a product's brand, and several other attributes, in their wooden household furniture purchase decision. The questionnaire used a five-point numerical scale in which the respondents were asked to indicate the importance of each attribute. The

scale ranged from a score of 1 (not at all important) to a score of 5 (very important) responses.

Sampling Frame

A convenience sampling approach was adopted with a goal to include both gender, and a broad range of age and income groups. Seventy-seven personnel of a public university who indicated their willingness to participate in the survey were given the questionnaire at their workplace. The questionnaires were self-administered and the interviewer was present to clarify any doubts or queries. All responses were collected on the spot. Demographic information was also collected. Respondents were asked to indicate their gender, age and income in the questionnaire. A summary of the demographic profile of the respondents is shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Demographic characteristics of the respondents

Characteristics	Frequency (%) (n = 77)
Gender:	
Male	66.2
Female	33.8
Age:	
Young (< 30 years)	5.2
Middle (30 - 40 years)	49.5
Matured (> 40 years)	45.5
Monthly gross household income:	
Low (< RM2,000)	13.0
Middle (RM2,000 - 4,000)	49.4
High (> RM4,000)	27.6

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Relative Importance of Brands

The following analysis concerns the evaluation of the relative importance of several wooden household furniture attributes, based on their mean scores. The list of attributes was by no means exhaustive, as the main objective is to determine whether brand is an important

factor influencing consumer purchase decision. The mean score was calculated as $\sum Si/n$, where Si is the observed raw score for the i th individual in a sample of n respondents. As the scale used in the study ranged from 1 to 5, a score above 3 (the midpoint) indicates that the attribute is important, while a score below 3 indicates that the attribute is not important. Table 2 shows the relative importance of the different wooden furniture attributes, as perceived by the respondents. While Table 3 shows the relative importance of brands for sub-samples of the respondents.

Evidently, brand was not considered an important attribute in the respondents' wooden household furniture purchase decision. The unimportance of brands is also prevalent for the various sub-samples of the respondents as shown in Table 3. Even though brand is not an important attribute to purchase decision of the respondents, the low household income and mid-aged groups of respondents in the study placed a relatively higher importance on brand compared to other groups in their respective sub-samples. The results show that the respondents are more concerned about price and the tangible attributes of the furniture. Owners of household furniture in Malaysia are reported to consider factors like quality, design and colour; and price in their purchase decision (Anon, 1998). There is, therefore, a need to study the consumer's perception on the association between these attributes and the existing wooden household furniture brands in the market. Further studies can consider the consumer psychographic variables (Lin, 2002) in explaining their brand preference as brand, and price, are normally used as expressions of self and/or to indicate prominence and status (Wickliffe and Pysarchik, 2001).

Brand Familiarity

The respondents were also asked to identify the brand or names of wooden household furniture companies they knew to gauge their familiarity of the various brands existing in the

TABLE 2
Distribution of respondents' responses (in percentages of total respondents)
and mean importance scores

Attributes	Level of importance					Mean importance score ^a
	5	4	3	2	1	
Price	64.9	11.7	19.5	5.2		- 4.34
Design	41.6	37.7	19.5	1.3		-4.19
Wood material	23.4	42.9	16.9	13.0		-3.69
Finishing	33.8	26.0	16.9	10.4	13.0	3.56
Brand	2.6	7.8	24.7	33.8	31.2	2.17

^aScale of 1 (not at all important) to 5 (very important)

TABLE 3
Relative importance of brand in wooden household furniture purchase
decision for sub-samples of respondents

Sub-sample	Mean importance score ^a
Gender ^b	
Male	2.22
Female	2.08
Age ^b	
Young	1.50
Middle	2.32
Matured	2.08
Monthly gross household income ^b	
Low	2.44
Medium	2.22
High	1.93

^aScale of 1 (not at all important) to 5 (very important)

^bNot significantly different (X^2 test at $p = 0.05$)

local market. The results of the study indicated that brand familiarity among the respondents is low, as only 35 percent of them were able to identify several common brands or company names of wooden household furniture existing in the local market. Most of them (89.5%) even indicated that the furniture items owned do not carry any brand or names of the manufacturer. This is reflective of the fact that brand is not considered an important attribute in the purchase decision of the respondents.

CONCLUSION

The results indicate that Malaysian consumers did not consider brands when deciding on a purchase of wooden household furniture items. Instead, they placed higher importance on price and, to a relatively lesser importance, on the other tangible attributes of the product. A casual observation of the many advertisements on wooden household furniture posted in local newspapers attest to the greater emphasis on price, and sometimes with minimal details on the other attributes of the furniture items. However, this does not

preclude the importance of branding in marketing of wooden household furniture to Malaysian consumers.

Although choosing an appropriate name for a product is important (Rooney, 1995; Kohli, 1997), branding goes beyond deciding on the name. It must be noted that the ultimate aim of branding is to build a level of awareness and knowledge in consumers, so as to create confidence in their purchase decision (Betts, 1994). Except the name is only for identification purposes, it should then move through several phases before a bond is finally created between the name or brand and the consumer.

Repeated advertising and promotion will introduce the name to the consumers (Kotler and Armstrong, 1997; Alreck and Settle, 1999). Consumers, up to this point, would be familiar with the name, and should be able to associate the name with its content —*name recognition*— (Court *et al.*, 1997). Name recognition, however, will not necessarily attract consumers especially when the product is not readily differentiated from those they are currently using or have used before.

The next step is to build preference for the name, or to be precise, for the product which the name is attached to. Alreck and Settle (1999) suggested several strategies for building consumer tastes and preferences, which range from linking the name to a particular consumer need to providing attractive models for consumers to emulate. For durable, large-ticket consumer products like furniture, where consumers are highly involved in the purchase decision process, the use of cognitive processing preference-building strategy is suggested. Whichever strategy is adopted, a link between the product's attributes with the benefits looked for by the consumers has to be established.

The name would then turn into a brand once the consumers associate a set of tangible or intangible benefits they obtain from the product (Court *et al.*, 1997). A brand is, thus, everything that a customer gains when purchasing a product or service; both the

tangible aspects of the brand including product features and physical attributes as well as the intangible dimensions of the brand, which include the associations with the product (Zajas and Crowley, 1995). Marketers should then make a conscious effort to ensure that what they tell about their brands is what they actually deliver, if a bond is to be created between the brand and the consumer.

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