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Conveying conscientiousness: Exploring environmental images across servicescapes



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ABSTRACT

The study explores how conscientiousness gets conveyed across servicescapes in two specific retail contexts: a supermarket and an organic food store, both of which claim an environmentally oriented branding strategy. Data collected from a qualitative approach and a photo elicitation technique consist of 20 semi-structured interviews with consumers of organic food products. The present study contributes to extant retailing literature by demonstrating that a conscientious corporate brand image requires long-term, comprehensive dedication by retailers. Moreover, this study contributes to research into retailer branding by uncovering a nostalgic dimension of conscientious branding, which in this setting means acknowledging the effects of the past.

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1. Introduction

Conveying conscientiousness constitutes a retail challenge, especially as customers grow increasingly aware of sustainability and responsibility issues and express growing demands for environmentally sustainable products and services (Loussäief et al., 2013; Park and Ha, 2012; Tsarenko et al., 2013). This managerial challenge is manifested through the retailer brand image, which is constructed through “dynamic relational processes based on a multifaceted network of earlier images from multiple sources over time” (Rindell, 2007, p. 162), which have both affective and cognitive influences (Hu and Jasper, 2007).

Research into conscientiousness in retail brand images is relatively new though (Magistris de and Gracia, 2008; Park and Ha, 2012; Rindell et al., 2011; Tsarenko et al., 2013), so various questions remain. Retailers often seek to establish or promote a particular brand image by designing a particular mix of offered products, namely, their product assortment (Ailawadi and Keller, 2004; González-Benito and Martos-Partal, 2012). The product assortment can attract customers to the store; for retailers, it serves as a strategic differentiation method (Ailawadi and Keller,

2004; Bauer et al., 2012). Accordingly, a sustainable product assortment, featuring a range of environmentally sustainable offerings, could promote a positive, environmentally oriented retailer brand image (e.g., Bhaskaran et al., 2006). But is including a few or many environmentally sustainable products in a store's assortment enough to convey a retailer image of conscientiousness? We also consider persistent questions about the physical store, because the physical setting is part of the retailer's strategy to convey its brand image (Ailawadi and Keller, 2004), through non-verbal communication (Finne and Strandvik, 2012) that influences customers' beliefs and perceptions about the retailer and its service (Bitner, 1992; Turley and Milliman, 2000). Current trends focusing on environmental aspects suggest the need to consider whether the physical setting can establish a retail brand image of conscientiousness. The physical setting is complex, involving a wide set of issues (beyond just the product assortment), and various conceptualizations seek to capture this multifaceted setting. We turn to the servicescape, which offers a holistic perspective on grocery retail settings and highlights the influence of various dimensional aspects, including social and symbolic elements (Bitner, 1992; Rosenbaum, 2005; Rosenbaum and Massiah, 2011).

In turn, this study seeks to explore customers' views on how conscientiousness can be conveyed across servicescapes, using two specific retailing contexts: a supermarket and an organic food store, both of which claim an environmentally oriented brand

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image and strategy. With this qualitative study, we seek to address two main research questions:

1. Can the inclusion of environmentally sustainable products in the product assortment convey an image of being environmentally inclined?
2. Do other aspects in the physical grocery retail setting contribute to an environmentally inclined retailer brand image?

A foundational premise of this study is that conscientious corporate branding must be considered holistically and over time (Rindell et al., 2011). The study highlights the importance of acknowledging that as the corporate brand image develops over time, each action taken by the company can have an effect, not just those that are environmentally oriented (Rindell, 2013). As a main contribution to retailing literature, we emphasize that a conscientious corporate brand image in a retail context requires long-term, comprehensive dedication. Moreover, this study contributes to research into conscientious retailer branding by uncovering a nostalgic dimension that suggests the need to address the effects of the past.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Conscientiousness in branding

Conscientiousness is a topical issue, an emerging research area, and a global trend. It also takes many forms, such as ethics, sustainability, transparency, responsibility, and environmental issues. In general though, conscientiousness is an ethical matter, which customers increasingly are aware of Park and Ha (2012). Trudel and Cotte (2009) find that modern customers move beyond a positive attitude toward ethically produced products and also demand discounts from companies that produce unethically. As a megatrend, conscientiousness relates to the behaviors of not just customers but also businesses (Rindell et al., 2011), particularly as a potential source of competitive positioning (Ind and Ryder, 2011). Rindell et al. (2011, p. 710) argue that conscientious corporate brands are those for which “ethical concerns and values are embedded in the company’s entire business strategy, in its value and supply chain, as well as in its vision and culture over time.” That is, conscientious corporate brands focus on long-term, consistent, and holistic socially responsible behavior as core elements of their corporate branding strategy.

A related concept, ethical branding, refers to moral principles that define right or wrong behavior in branding decisions and how the brand contributes to the public good. Fan (2005) calls for research that defines ethical branding, as opposed to unethical branding, and clarifies the relationship between the brand and society (Abela, 2003). Werther and Chandler (2005) argue that strategic corporate social responsibility (CSR) offers insurance for global brands, as long as that CSR is a mind-set throughout the organization. As exemplified effectively by Patagonia, for which the mission statement is to “Build the best product, cause no unnecessary harm, use business to inspire and implement solutions to the environmental crisis” (www.patagonia.com), CSR can represent a keystone for companies that defines how the corporate brand image develops over time and influences the company’s reputation (Fombrun, 2005). A lack of conscientiousness, anywhere in a retail supply chain, thus can have significant consequences, as H&M learned in relation to child labor issues (Doward, 2012).

2.2. Conscientiousness among consumers

Customers are more environmentally conscious than ever before; they consider environmental issues in not only their everyday practices (e.g., recycling) but also their consumption behavior and choices (Barber, 2010; Tsarenko et al., 2013), such that they might prefer environmentally sustainable products. Magistris de and Gracisa (2008) explain that organic food production accounts for environmental practices, biodiversity, preservation of natural resources, and animal welfare. In addition, customers perceive organically produced products as healthier and safer, tastier, and of higher quality (Makatouni, 2002; Zakowska-Biemans, 2011). Demand for organically produced food has been constantly increasing, resulting in expanded organic production (Magistris de and Gracisa, 2008), which allows retailers to include more of these products in their assortments to meet customers’ demands. Organic food products thus can be found at farm shops, food cooperatives, farmers’ markets, health food stores, and organic food stores, as well as in traditional supermarkets.

2.3. Retailer brand images and the influence of consumers’ past experiences

As Martineau (1958, p. 50) noticed quite early, “retailers everywhere are sensing the vital importance of the many non-price components of their operations which contribute to their store character,” such that “many corollary meanings emerging from the corporate image can play a role in the actual purchase decision at the moment of sale” (p. 58). Following from this assertion, various influential articles have considered the role of corporate brand images, for both retailers and customers, in terms of store choice and loyalty. For example, Ailawadi and Keller (2004, p. 332) note that “since most retailers’ revenue and profit comes from selling manufacturer brands which many of their competitors also offer, building their own corporate image is particularly challenging, but one with big potential rewards.” These authors consider several dimensions of store image, but we focus on the in-store atmosphere, which we define according to a servicescape perspective. That is, a retailer can influence its retail brand image through its in-store choices, such as the design of the store, lighting, layout, music, atmosphere, and social features. From a branding perspective, an appealing in-store servicescape also offers unique possibilities (Ailawadi and Keller, 2004; Rayburn and Voss, 2013). In particular, offering environmentally sustainable products in the assortment might help retailers differentiate themselves, as well as promote a positive retail brand image of being environmentally oriented (e.g., Bhaskaran et al., 2006).

Several studies also affirm that corporate image depends on customers’ past experiences with the retailer. For example, Woodside and Walser (2007) propose that a retailer’s brand strength depends on customers’ past experiences with it. In studying retail brand images, Rindell (2007, 2013) argues that customers’ relevant past experiences offer direct, influential input into real-time corporate brand image formation. Rindell also has introduced two new theoretical concepts, image heritage and image-in-use, to distinguish images based on the past from those that consumers construct in real time. Because the company’s past influences customers’ interpretations of its present corporate image, retailers’ branding strategies should be informed by systematic efforts to identify likely components of those historical perceptions. In turn, customers’ retailer-specific image heritages likely influence their perceptions of the existing in-store atmosphere—that is, the servicescape for organic food products.

The retail brand image reflects how the customer perceives the retailer, and previous research suggests several effects, though as

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