

Branding: An Adolescent Sun Protection Perspective

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Abstract

Australian adolescents are consistently found to exhibit low levels of adherence to sun protection guidelines, resulting in high levels of skin cancer incidence in later life. Given the importance of image, appearance, and peer approval factors in adolescent sun protection, this study sought to examine adolescents' perceptions of the "sun protection brand," its competing brands, and possible complementary brands. A series of 14 focus groups were conducted with adolescents in Years 9 and 10 (junior high school), and the results are examined in the context of potential branding-related marketing strategies to overcome some of the barriers to sun protection.

Introduction

A brand is a "name, term, sign, symbol or design, or a combination of these, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors" (Kotler, Adam, Brown and Armstrong, 2003; p 631). Brands can offer intangible benefits that go beyond the functional benefits of a product (Schuiling and Moss, 2004), and thus differentiate it from functionally identical products in the eyes of the consumer. The dimensions of brand equity are willingness to pay a price premium; brand loyalty and satisfaction; perceived quality; leadership or popularity in comparison to other brands; perceived value; organizational associations; brand awareness; market share; and market price (Aaker, 1996).

Adolescents and Branding

An analysis of brand attitudes and expectations in the US found that brand equity is the key driver of customer loyalty and that youth aged 16 to 20 years have higher brand expectations than the population in general (Passikoff, 2005). While branding has traditionally been seen as the domain of commercial marketers, in recent years social marketers have begun to recognize the importance of branding, particularly when targeting children and adolescents. For example, in the very successful Florida Truth (anti-smoking) campaign, "branding was seen as a key strategy to meet the Legacy Foundation's goal of reducing prevalence of smoking by removing its appeal and thereby changing the social norm..." (Evans, Wasserman, Bertolotti & Martino 2002, p. 18).

There is considerable evidence that brands are one of the tools that people use to create and communicate self-concepts (Chaplin and Roedder John 2005), and that this is facilitated by the range of brands and differentiated brand images within product categories (e.g., Fournier, 1998). As children's self-concepts change during the transition from childhood to adolescence, the role of brands in communicating self-image and group membership becomes increasingly important (Chaplin and Roedder John 2005). For example, the use and salience of brands has been noted as a principal factor in the adoption of fashion product and trends;

particularly the importance of purchasing and wearing brands that are perceived by peers to be ‘cool’ (Grant & Stephen, 2005). In a US study of over 1,000 high school students, Beaudoin et al (2003) found that “brand sensitivity is an increasing function of fashion ‘adoptiveness’ among adolescents” (p23). Other studies have reported that this fashion/brand sensitivity is particularly evident among ‘tween’ (Grant & Stephen, 2005) and teenage girls (Taylor and Cosenza 2002) with the latter study finding that adolescent girls perceive inherent ‘risks’ associated with making an incorrect fashion purchase decision (Taylor & Cosenza, 2002).

Adolescent Sun Protection

Australia has the highest rate of skin cancer incidence in the world, with approximately 270,000 new cases of non-melanocytic skin cancer being diagnosed each year, increasing at a rate of 4- 5% per year (Cancer Council Australia, 2006). While actual occurrence of melanoma in childhood and adolescence is rare, between 50 and 80% of an individual’s lifetime sun exposure occurs during this period (NSW Health Department and Cancer Council NSW, 2001). It has been estimated that reducing sun exposure during childhood and adolescence, could significantly decrease an individual’s lifetime risk of developing nonmelanoma skin cancers (Stern et al., 1986).

Despite good knowledge about the general principles of sun protection (Livingston et al., 2001), Australian adolescents are consistently found to exhibit low levels of adherence to sun protection guidelines (e.g., Fritschi, et al., 1992; Summerville & Watt, 2003; Dobbinson et al., 2005). There are a number of factors that have been identified as contributors to the lack of adequate sun protection among adolescents, including attitude to tanning (Richards, McGee & Knight, 2001) having friends that tan (Geller et al., 2002), the Australian culture (Heartbeat, 2003; White, 1997), the desire for a tan associated with media exposure (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003), and perceptions of body image and appearance (Shoveller et al., 2003).

There are three key (groups of) brands that are central to adolescent sun protection behaviour:

1. The “sun protection” brand – that is, the behaviour that we wish young people to adopt (“protecting yourself from the sun”) which consists of a combination of tangible products such as sunscreen, hats and protective clothing, and intangibles such as staying in the shade/ out of the sun. This category also incorporates organizations which develop and disseminate products and messages designed to increase sun protection, such as Cancer Councils.
2. Competing brand(s) – the primary competing brand is often seen as the desire for a suntan; however, there are a range of other factors including inconvenience and forgetfulness.
3. Potential complementary brands – these are branded products/services which could *either* facilitate or hinder sun protection. For example, popular clothing brands which could potentially produce and market beachwear that provides adequate sun protection or cosmetic companies that could include sunscreen in their products.

Given the importance of image, appearance, and peer approval factors in adolescent sun protection, this study sought to examine adolescents’ perceptions of the ‘sun protection brand’ (i.e. sun protection behaviours); its competing brands (e.g., tanning), and possible complementary brands; and to identify potential marketing strategies related to the interaction

between these three components with the aim of overcoming some of the identified barriers to sun protection.

Method

The target group for this research was male and female students in grades 9 and 10,¹ residing in coastal regions of major cities as well as affluent suburban areas. Three coastal regions were selected (Wollongong/Illawarra, Sydney and North Sydney) to represent a large portion of the NSW general population; encompassing both the first and ninth largest cities in Australia (Sydney and Wollongong respectively); and including a range of SES classifications.

A total of 14 focus groups were conducted (7 all-male and 7 all-female). Previous research suggests that for topics which relate to attractiveness and appearance concerns single-gender groups are more conducive to open discussion (e.g., Peterson-Sweeney, 2005; Heary and Hennessy, 2002); and it is clear that sun protection practices differ between genders (Summerville & Watt, 2003; Lowe, et al., 2000; Livingston, et al., 2001). Therefore, it was decided to conduct single-gender groups, using a same-gender facilitator. Prior to the research commencement, ethics approval was obtained from the University's Human Research Ethics Committee, the NSW Department of Education & Training, and the relevant Catholic Dioceses.

Results

The Importance of Brands

During focus group discussions participants clearly identified the integral role that brands play in influencing their consumer behaviours. General discussions regarding preference for different sun protection products highlighted the 'brand' of the product as taking precedence over other features. The preference for branded products was so strong that a product with no label was deemed unsuitable to wear, but the identical product with a visual (and preferable) brand label was perceived as acceptable:

"Just put a logo on it"

"I reckon brands, just say like the Target brand... teenagers would rather go for the Billabong. If you had them both there they will obviously go for the Billabong because it's more appealing to teenagers"

Attitudes to the 'Sun Protection' Brand

The focus groups incorporated discussions regarding attitudes towards the sun protection 'brand' (i.e. attitudes towards sun protection behaviors). This included exploring awareness of different ways people can protect themselves and specifically exploring the behaviors and products the focus group participants currently utilized (such as sunscreen, hats and other protective clothing). Participants confirmed high levels of brand awareness (i.e. their knowledge regarding sun protection behaviors was high). However, the 'sun protection brand' was considered to be unattractive by most adolescents. It was perceived as unfashionable or

¹ This specific group was selected following an extensive process of evidence reviews and expert consultations as the most important age group to target for the development of effective interventions.

'uncool' to be seen to protect yourself and was also associated more strongly with younger children and/or older people. While they know that they should be protecting themselves from the sun, the embarrassment of being seen in something that is considered unfashionable or 'uncool' is a major motivation for the decision not to wear sun protection:

"No, I couldn't wear it, too embarrassing"

"It's for a two year old. That's what my little brother would wear if my mum puts it on him"

"I guess it would be weird (wearing appropriate sun protection), especially with your friends... they might make a joke out of it, that's it"

Many of the negative attitudes were related to perceived limitations with the actual products associated with the 'sun protection brand', especially clothing which was perceived as unfashionable and therefore unacceptable by many in the adolescent target market. In contrast to other more visible products, sunscreen was seen as the most acceptable product that could be used by the adolescents, as long as it was 'invisible' to their peers.

"I want to protect myself from the sun because I know it's harmful for you, but it's pretty daggy to turn up to school with a white sunscreen face and a wide-brimmed hat!"

I don't think it matters about the sunscreen, but the clothes he was wearing, like the hat, you wouldn't judge him on the sunscreen, only the clothes"

Brands identified as linked with sun protection products such as the 'Cancer Council' were associated with being high quality, reliable and trustworthy, particularly for sunscreen products. However, trustworthiness of brands did not appear to influence participants' opinions of sun protective clothing which they saw as unappealing and not designed with adolescents in mind

"It's from The Cancer Council, so its gotta be good"

"The Cancer Council like its trustworthy ... yeah, trustworthy"

"I would choose a Cancer Council product over a surf brand if it was a sunscreen but if it was like a rashie or boardies, I would probably choose the surf brand"

Possible facilitators to improving the likelihood of the increased use of sun protection strategies (i.e. increased sun protection 'brand loyalty') were explored. Participants felt that the 'sun protection brand' needed to be made more fun, appealing and fashionable. Participants suggested improved marketing strategies, for example the use of role models or the use of health messages specifically targeting adolescent concerns and preferences:

"You need something that people are going to recognise.., celebrities that kids our age look up to"

"Keira Knightly, she's really fair skinned. She was an actress."

"Yes those ads that say 20 years time, is like you don't listen, but where they say if you've been sunburned 7 times in your life it doubles your chance of getting skin cancer, it makes you think"

There were also numerous suggestions regarding improving the appeal of particular products though product modification, particularly in relation to sunscreen e.g. small packaging, making it less greasy and messy.

Attitudes to Competing Brands

Competing brands such as fashion and tanning were highlighted during group discussions, demonstrating the teens' obsession with their image and their perceptions of tanning as being healthy and something to aspire to:

“People our age are just so obsessed with self-image – we have to have a good tan so we don’t think about the cancer or anything. We’re just worried about getting brown.”

“Yes, if you look at someone who is really, really pale..., you think they look sick, or they don’t look happy, but you see someone with a tan has a more happy atmosphere around them”

Increasing the Appeal of the ‘Sun Protection Brand’ and Complementary Brands

Suggestions from group participants to assist in making the ‘sun protection brand’ more fashionable included branding sun protection products with accepted fashion labels such as ‘Billabong’ or ‘Roxy’ to make products more ‘cool’. Some participants even raised the possibility of co-branding, such as the Cancer Council combining with another brand to increase its appeal to their age group:

“Maybe if the Cancer Council brought out a hat and gave the style to Billabong and said put your brand on it and put in association with The Cancer Council”

Discussion

This study sought to examine adolescents’ perceptions of the ‘sun protection brand’ and its competing brands. Qualitative results confirm that, despite high brand awareness, the ‘sun protection brand’ is not appealing to the adolescent target market. Barriers to brand loyalty for this segment include perceptions that the brand is ‘unfashionable’ and ‘uncool’ and associated with children. The importance of image, appearance, and peer approval were confirmed as strong influences over adolescent sun protection behaviors, with the brands of ‘tanning’ and ‘fashion’ appearing as strong competitors for the ‘sun protection’ brand. This paper also explored possible complementary brands and identified potential marketing strategies with the aim of overcoming some of the identified barriers to sun protection. Results highlighted the need for the ‘sun protection’ brand to be made more fun, appealing and fashionable. Focus group participants suggested that improved marketing strategies (e.g. product development, targeted advertising appeals or the use of role models) may be useful in increasing “sun protection brand’ equity with the adolescent market. Other potential strategies include the potential for the development of complementary brands, including: persuading designers/manufacturers/retailers to make their products more effective for sun protection; and/or the possibility for co-branding. Also worth exploring is the development of a more teen-friendly sub-brand (or brand extension) for the Cancer Council (similar to Truth campaign). To be successful, the development of such strategies will require in-depth formative research with the adolescent target market to ensure that messages and products are designed to carefully target sub-segments within the adolescent market that may be more amendable to change.

Conclusion

Despite high brand awareness, the ‘sun protection brand’ lacks sufficient equity with the adolescent target market, primarily due to the strong competitors of ‘tanning’ and ‘fashion’ in the image conscious adolescent market. Due to the power of its competitors, increasing loyalty to the ‘sun protection brand’ will require carefully targeted marketing which repositions sun protection as both appealing and fashionable. Further research should seek to identify segments within the market to allow the development of effective messages and products for sub-segments that may be more amendable to behavioral change.

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