Consumer perceptions of wine brand names

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New Zealand researchers attempted to link types of brand names with consumer attitudes and purchase intensions. While their findings provide some support for the notion that brand names matter to wine consumers, the researchers were surprised to learn how well and how poorly some of the brand name categories performed.

INTRODUCTION

Some time ago, we were approached by a Maori-owned wine company and asked, 'What does a Maori brand name mean to wine consumers?' We had to admit that we didn’t know the answer to this question, and we couldn’t find one in the academic literature either. This lead to the formation of a project team to (a) categorise the wine brand names in New Zealand; and (b) examine consumer perceptions of these brand name categories in terms of quality and price, as well as their purchase intentions and their ability to pronounce and ask for the brand by name.

LITERATURE

Consumers attach important meanings and imagery to brands when they are making a purchase decision. A brand name influences consumer perceptions of a brand, and these brand perceptions, in turn, influence buying behaviour. There is evidence that brand names are associated with consumer perceptions of quality and their purchase intentions (e.g. Dawar and Parker 1994, Wilson and Huang 2003). So, what makes a good brand name? Successful brand names should be unique or distinct in terms of sound, pronunciation, spelling and meaning, as well as simple, distinctive and meaningful. Successful brand names should:

- be easy to understand and use
- reflect the benefits provided by the product
- elicit a mental image
- arouse pleasant emotions and strong symbolism.

Consumers form perceptions because good brand names convey meaning to them.

As with other products, the brand name of a wine can either help to bring it success or cause it to struggle. A boring name may be easy to forget, whilst a distinctive one can connect with the story or place behind the wine. In fact, the brand name has been identified as one of the most important attributes evaluated by consumers when making a wine purchase decision (e.g. Johnson and Bruwer 2007, Lockshin et al. 2006, Thomas and Pickering 2003). A recent study of German consumers reported that brand evaluation was one of the strongest drivers for informed liking of wine (Mueller and Szolnoki 2010). These results suggest that the brand name is a particularly important quality indicator and a significant influence on wine purchasing decisions.

Sherman and Tuten (2011) described the naming convention in the wine industry as following either traditional, contemporary or novelty variations and suggested that traditional brand names may be based on the winemaker (e.g. Robert Mondavi or Rodney Strong), whilst a recent trend with contemporary names is to name a wine after a 'critter' (e.g. The Little Penguin, Black Swan or Three Blind Moose). Franson (2006) also noted the prevalence of animal brand names in the wine industry (e.g. Frog's Leap, Bored Doe, Toad Hollow), as well as the use of cartoon-like character names and brands based on dead celebrities. Novelty brand names are based on humour and tend to surprise the consumer (e.g. Frog’s Piss, Fat Bastard or Cardinal Zin). Wilson and Huang (2003) suggest that wine brand names are generally derived from six major sources: those based on a personal name (e.g. Torres or Gallo), a place name (e.g. Mateus Rose), a descriptive (e.g. St Michael English Wine), an associative name (e.g. French Connection) or an invented name (e.g. Blue Nun).

The wine market is a particularly crowded one and this adds to the complexity of wine purchase decisions for many consumers. This suggests that building a brand is very important in the wine market and that successful wine brand names stand out from competing brands. In this research, we have tried to link the type of brand name with consumer attitudes and purchase intensions.

FIRST PHASE – CLASSIFYING NEW ZEALAND WINE BRANDS

The brand names utilised by New Zealand wine companies were identified through searching the wine aisles of physical stores and the inventories of online wine distributors. The subsequent list of 600 brand names were then classified into seven categories:

1. Regional – the brand name contains reference to an official wine-growing region
2. Geographic – the brand name refers to a land feature, or a real or fictional place
3. Indigenous – the brand name is based on a Maori word or name
4. Animal – the brand name contains reference to an animal
5. Humorous – the brand name is quirky, novel or comical
6. Personal – the brand name is based on a person’s given or surname
7. International - the brand name is based on a foreign sounding language.

It should be noted that most, if not all, wine labels include a mention of the wines' region of origin. In this study, the regional category included wines where the region of origin had been incorporated into the wines' brand name.

SECOND PHASE - BRAND PERCEPTIONS AND EVALUATION QUESTIONNAIRE

An online questionnaire was developed and distributed to consumers through the websites of established specialty wine stores in New Zealand. Respondents were only provided with the brand name of a wine and were asked a series of questions about their perceptions based solely on the brand name (i.e., they were not provided with other information such as price or label design). The questionnaire provided examples of wine brand names from each of the seven categories and the example brand names clearly fitted into just one of the categories and not into multiple categories. Three different example wine brand names were used in various versions of the questionnaires (e.g., the three indigenous brand names were Te Whare Ra, Te Mata and Tohu). Respondents were asked to indicate how likely they were to purchase the wine brand (from 1 'very unlikely' to 5 'very likely') and to rate their perceptions of quality of the wine brand (from 1 'very low' to 5 'very high'). Respondents were also asked to indicate the price they would be willing to pay for the wine brand (from 1 'less than $9.99', 2 '$10-149.99', 3 '$15-19.99', 4 '$20-29.99' to 5 '$30+'). Other scales were developed to measure the respondents ability to pronounce the brand name (from 1 'not confident' to 3 'confident') and to measure how comfortable they would be asking for the brand name in a store or restaurant (from 1 'not comfortable' to 3 'comfortable').

Although 218 respondents completed the online questionnaire, only the 141 respondents who had no previous purchasing or consumption experience of the example wine brand provided were included in the analysis. This meant that their perceptions of the various brand name categories were not influenced by prior brand experience or loyalty. Each respondent was asked the same questions about the seven brand name categories resulting in a maximum of 990 distinct cases (roughly 141 respondents by seven brand name category examples with variations due to pairwise deletion).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The sample of 141 respondents consisted of 56% male and 44% female. The largest age frequency was 25-34 (27%) followed by 45-54 (26%), 55-64 (20%), 35-44 (18%), 65+ (7%) and 18-24 (2%). Almost half of the sample consumed wine 'most days'; (49%) followed by 'weekly' (31%), and 'Daily' (10%). Many of the respondents purchased wine 'most days' (41.8%) followed by 'weekly' (28%) and 'fortnightly' (20%).

A series of one-way ANOVAs were performed across the brand name
categories examining variation across respondents' likeliness to purchase, perceptions of quality, the price they would be prepared to pay, their ability to pronounce the brand name, and their comfort in asking for the wine by name in a store or restaurant. All the ANOVAs were significant, indicating that the brand names had an important influence over consumer perceptions and likely behaviours.

Post-hoc tests were then performed to examine specific differences across the dependent variables. Figure 1 illustrates that examples of indigenous brand names had the highest likely to purchase score, which was significantly higher than all other brand categories. Personal and international brand name categories were second, followed by geographic, regional, and animal. Examples from the humorous brand name category were significantly lower than all others.

Figure 2 shows that for quality expectations, the indigenous brand name category was again rated significantly higher than the others, followed by personal brand names in second, then a grouping of international, geographic and regional brand name categories in third place. Significantly lower was animal, followed by a lower still humorous category.

Personal brand names claimed the highest price prepared to pay rating, significantly different from all but the indigenous brand name category (Figure 3). This result suggests that consumers have positive price and quality perceptions toward wines that are named after a particular person. It may be that an implied level of trust is involved when a personal brand name is used; in other words, consumers are likely to think that only someone who is proud of their product would put their name on it. Indigenous and international brand name categories formed the second group, with a grouping of geographic and regional categories in third. Animal was distinct from all but regional was in fourth place, with the humorous category alone as the lowest ranked.

Respondents rated their ability to pronounce equal highest across regional, geographic, animal, humorous, and personal brand name categories (Figure 4). Indigenous brand names were second and international brand names had the lowest score. Although the Maori language is recognised as an official language in New Zealand, only four percent of the total population has an understanding of it; this is likely to have affected consumers' ability to pronounce wine brand names that are based on Maori names or words. Similarly, it could be expected that New Zealanders would not necessarily be confident in their ability to pronounce wine brand names which have originated from a foreign language.

When at a store or restaurant,
ability to pronounce the brand names. Whilst indigenous and international brand name categories were those which the respondents' were least able to pronounce, they were nonetheless comfortable to ask for these brands in a store or restaurant.

**CONCLUSIONS**

This research provides some support for the notion that brand names matter to wine consumers. This is not surprising, as throughout the wine industry, building brands and brand equity is often key to a firm’s sustainable competitive advantage. What is very surprising is how well and comfortable to ask for these brands in a store or restaurant.

This research has attempted to use multiple examples for the brand categories, multiple waves of data collection, and multiple wine retailers to achieve a realistic coverage of the market, but the data collection was limited to New Zealand consumers, using an online sample was limited to customers from specialty wine stores and, therefore, it was likely that these respondents would have higher than average product involvement. Conservatively, the results may only be generalisable to online and high involvement wine shoppers in New Zealand.

**REFERENCES**


