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Copycat Brands Influence on Consumer Behavior Tomsk Polytechnic University

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Abstract

The article provides the information about nowadays increasing popularity of copycatting strategy among supermarket chains and the types of copycatting used by brands. To show the usage of copycatting in practice the author gives the example of the well-known supermarket chains throughout Australia called “Coles”. The article provides the arguments of using copycat strategy. The author suggests three responses from consumers on such a strategy, which may be positive or negative. Furthermore, the explanation of the influencing mechanism on consumers’ attitudes by classical conditioning application gives the possibility to understand the copycat strategy in depth. As the result, it gives the conclusion whether to use copycatting strategy or not.

Keywords: copycat, consumer behavior, classical conditioning, brand;

Introduction

Nowadays it has become common for store brands to imitate distinctive perceptual features of brand leaders in any way. It may be packaging shape, depicted objects, color, and font of product name, which can even sound similar. It must be said that this strategy definitely works, if it didn’t why would that stores copycat? Copycat brands try to gain acceptance from consumers by imitating the trade dress of a leading, incumbent brand and the crucial question thus is which conditions determine the perceived similarity between a copycat and a leading brand and how consumers will react on this strategy. Current article provides investigation on this issue by using the example of well-known Australian supermarkets chain.

Discussion

It is certainly true that the outer shell is extremely important in the process of creating a product. From marketing perspective it is one of the most important stages of developing a new product which can lead either to success on the market or to a complete failure. More and more supermarket chains start manufacturing their products under their own brands and one of the most popular strategies of the product appearance among them is strategy of copycatting.

The discussion should be started with the idea of differences between various types of imitation. Brand similarity may be literal while imitating distinctive perceptual features of leader brands like visual characteristics, text or sounds. Another type of similarity is semantically which may be a modification of literal similarity through direct imitation of distinctive perceptual features such as letters, colors, shapes, and sounds. For example, the brands “Rome” and “Paris” are semantically similar, they show low literal similarity because they share only one letter, whereas the brand names “Rome” and “Orme” show high literal similarity: they share all four letters but are not semantically similar. Theme copycatting is a type where the copycat and the leader brand show commonalities with each other not through a display of identical features but instead through the higher-order meaning, theme, or relationship derived from these features. Themes are displayed through various arrangements of perceptual features. Feature imitation can occur through imitation of the letters of the leader brand's name (e.g. by replacing one or more letters of the name or by rearranging them) or through imitation of the distinctive perceptual features of the leader brand's package design (e.g. the lilac wrapper of Milka chocolate). Because these distinctive features are exclusively associated with the leader brand, feature imitations are *directly* linked to the leader brand and will immediately activate a clear representation of the leader brand [3]. Theme imitation can be effected by copying the semantic meaning of the brand name, by copying the global scene of the package of a leader brand (cows grazing in a meadow in the Alps) for Milka chocolate but presenting it in a visually different way. In contrast to feature imitations, theme imitations are not exclusively associated with the leader brand and will only activate associations that are *indirectly* linked with the leader brand via a higher-order semantic meaning or an inferred attribute.

To prove the definite influence of copycatting on the easiest level of understanding a classical conditioning learning theory may be used. Beforehand there must be given some explanation of the classical conditioning mechanism. Classical conditioning is a form of associative learning; a neutral stimulus (e.g., a new brand) acquires the ability to produce a specific reaction because of its association with another independent-unconditional stimuli. Before conditioning there is a conditioned stimulus which refers to a neutral stimulus, the unconditioned stimulus which is biologically causes the reflex of unconditioned response. After repeating pairing several times the learning occurs and subject exhibits a conditioned response to the conditioned stimulus even if conditioned stimulus is shown without the unconditioned one. It is normal when conditioned response is similar to the unconditioned response, but unlike the unconditioned response it requires experience and usually repetition.

It takes years for well-known today brands to create a conditioned response [4]. The thing is that while they make good impression of their brand by connecting it with unconditioned stimulus, copycat brands use this already created strong impression to promote their look-alike products. In biology there is an attitude called mimicry when animals and insects become similar to the hazardous or non-edible species in order to not be eaten while brands, on the contrary, use mimicry to be “eaten”.

For this article the Australian supermarket chain called “Coles” was chosen. Today this chain operates 762 stores throughout Australia and owns five levels private label brands.



Fig.1. Kellogg's vs. Coles cereals

Under its own brands Coles provides wide range of copycat products. The most significantly look alike products are cereals that look very similar to famous brand Kellogg's (Fig.1.). Kellogg's used a lot of effort to create a funky happy image of its brand, while Coles is just using this image as an unconditioned stimulus to get the same conditioned response as Kellogg's receives.

More and more people notice that interesting fact, and even some of them shoot the videos, where they compare "Coles" and other brands [1]. After reading the comments for one of those videos the author made a conclusion that in this case of copycat products consumers may act in different ways. First of all, they may accidentally buy a look-alike product instead of their preferred leading brand. Secondly, consumers may project main features of brand leader to a copycat one and buy it because of the cheaper price. The last and most interesting in author's opinion consumers' reaction on copycat product is that they may get suspicious of the copycat brand and react negatively on it.

The research made by Horen and Pieters (2012, p. 252) revealed that theme copycats are more positively responded and are bought more often than feature copycats or differentiated products. Somehow people consider theme adoption more fair and acceptable and an example of Coles using theme imitation with Cancer Council sunscreen proves it.



Fig. 2. Coles vs. Cancer Council sunscreen

There is a high dependence on the connection of the brand leader with the feature copycat as it may be successful in the case when there is no strong association with it. As it was explained before with classical conditioning learning theory it is easier to understand how consumers can identify the copycat brand.

Conclusion

To sum up, there is no doubt that copycatting strategy is successful, but, as there are many conditions to make it work, it must be used in a smart way in order to create a positive association and make people want to buy it instead of brand leader. The example of "Coles" supermarkets provides acknowledgments on successful using copycatting techniques on practice. According to author's own investigations there are three types of responses that may be revealed by copycat brand, one of which can be defined with negative reaction or emotion, another one has a positive outcome and the last one can be described as an accidental purchase which is neutral and can provoke whether negative or positive reaction. The copycat issue is currently emerging as more supermarkets start producing products under their own brands. Current article

provides the essential information about copycatting and gives an understanding of primary principles of copycatting.

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