

Assessment of the Trends in Coca-Cola's Unique Selling Proposition (USP) from 1904 to 2022



Faustinus Ginikanwa Nwachukwu*
&
Grace Legbrosi Ikue♥

Abstract

This study aims to find out if the Coca-Cola Company has maintained its Unique Selling Proposition (USP) over the years on its key product "Coke" irrespective of the fact that the company has kept changing its advertising catchphrases for over a century of the products' existence. This is in view of the fact that establishing and maintaining a USP for a product sets it apart from competitors. Considering the number of years Coke has existed in the soft drinks market and the various advertising campaigns on the product, it would be of research interest to find out if the Company has maintained the product's unique selling proposition. The study adopted the means-end theory as the theoretical foundation and the qualitative survey research methodology. The findings revealed that despite the many advertising campaigns and the use of 104 catchphrases in more than a century of Coke's existence, the products have maintained the same Unique Selling Proposition - "Coca-Cola refreshes"

Keywords: Advertising trends, Coca-Cola, Unique Selling Proposition, consistency, campaigns, Persuasion

Introduction

Advertising is one driving force behind most successful products. It creates an image for a product which makes the product iconic and distinct in the minds of consumers. The Coca-Cola Company has taken advantage of advertising as part of its marketing strategies in promoting its brands especially the company's flagship brand "Coke" popularly branded Coca-Cola. In advertising the product "COKE", the Coca-Cola Company has created persuasive catchphrases in which are imbedded the unique selling propositions of the product since the emergence of products to date. It is observed that the company over the years carried out several campaigns aimed at promoting Coke. These campaigns come in seasons sometimes throughout 4 years intervals. Each of these campaigns has distinct catchphrases.

* Faustinus Ginikanwa Nwachukwu, Department of Linguistics and Communication Studies, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria. Email: faustinus.nwachukwu@uniport.edu.ng

♥ Grace Legbrosi Ikue, Research Fellow, Department of Linguistics and Communication Studies, University of Port Harcourt

According to McCana Erickson, Inc. (cited in Bovee and Arens 2012); the advertising agency that develops Coca-Cola national campaigns, advertising is 'truth well told'. Coca-Cola was already in wide distribution with its Soda fountains before the name became a household word. Thus, it was an attractive and interesting association for Coke to be illustrated in its advertisement. Coca-Cola discovered the benefits of merchandising very early that in 1934 it came up with pictures of famous movie stars Maureen O'Sullivan and Johnny Weissmuller (Tarzan) in their advertisement, which proved appealing to their fans (Bovee and Arens, 2012). While many advertisements of Coca-Cola in the 1930s showcased movie stars, later advertising such as the 1943 advertisement reflected life during wartime. In one of Coke's advertisements, it demonstrated how Coke followed the troops, with a total of 64 bottling plants shipped abroad during the war and an order from Coca-Cola's president gave the assurance that "every man in uniform gets a bottle of Coke for 5 cents wherever he is and whatever it costs the company (Bovee and Arens, 2012).

As Coca-Cola spread around the world, advertisements and news coverage continued to echo different themes and its availability. In the 1950's Coke was described as the world's 'friend' drink. In 1969, consequently, Coca-Cola advertisements changed to reflect current lifestyles. The commercial featuring children from around the world singing the Coke song atop a hill in the first two frames reads:

I'd like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony.

I'd like to buy the world a Coke and keep it company (www.historyofcocala.com)

In the 90s Coke told us, 'You can't beat the feeling'. This catchphrase was used in a variety of settings in both print and television advertising. The advertisement was later combined with a beautiful musical score that played off the historic jingle of "I'd like to teach the world to sing".

Presently, Coca-Cola advertising trends play a vital role in communicating different messages and feelings through its catchphrases such as;

"The Great National Temperance Beverage"

"Thirst knows no season"

"The pause that refreshes"

"Enjoy Coca-Cola" etc.

Coca-Cola has come of age and has been confronted by many competing brands. With expanded markets, changing tastes and the emergence of many competing beverages in its class, Coke has remained a force to reckon with in the soft drinks industry. Coke has become a global product and the company has built many bottling plants around the globe. These developments were equally marched with aggressive marketing efforts in which advertising is central (Bovee and Arens 2012). Because the unique selling proposition (USP) of a product plays a great role in setting a product apart from its competitors and considering that in advertising Coke over the years, each new campaign usually comes with a different catchphrase, it would be interesting to find out if Coca-Cola has been consistent with its USP all through the years from 1904 to 2022.

Stemming from consumer studies' perspective, it is believed that choice is usually precipitated by certain stimulants. Consumers do not suddenly turn from being uninterested to interested people with a preferential choice for a particular product but rather they are stimulated by some persuasive elements (Bryant, 2011). In advertising,

the unique selling proposition of a product sets the product apart from the competition and is always a major consideration in the consumers' effort in deciding which brand of products to patronize. No product can survive the competition without making a bold statement about its unique offer to prospects. For this reason, the unique selling proposition of a product is usually maintained to keep reinforcing its value in the face of competing brands. It is in line with this, that this study seeks to find out if the Coca-Cola company has maintained its USP over the years on its key product "Coke" irrespective of the fact the company has kept changing its advertising catchphrases from time to time. The crux of the matter then is: Has Coca-Cola Company remained consistent in the use of its Unique selling proposition in its advertising catchphrases over the years 1904 to 2020?

Objectives of the Study

- i. To ascertain the central theme that runs through Coca-Cola company advertising catchphrase within the period under study.
- ii. To establish the predominant central theme in the various catchphrases within the period under study.
- iii. To identify the Unique Selling Proposition (USP) that can be drawn from Coca-Cola's various advertising catchphrases within the period under study.

Theoretical Framework

This study is premised on the **Means-end-theory** of Communication.

This theory was propounded by Reynolds Gutman in 1982. The theory assumes that relevant cognition is organized in the minds of consumers as a mental/associative link between means (product/product attributes) and ends (goals). The theory also states why consumers do what they do and how they think about purchase alternatives. It shows that consumer behaviour in decision-making requires a diversity of approaches to produce valuable and useful insights. It explains the motivational antecedents of consumer behaviour as well as their organization of product knowledge and brand meanings.

This theory suggests that an advertisement should contain a message, or means, that leads the consumer to a desired end state. These end states include the following personal values: Comfortable life, excitement, fun, happiness, pleasure, equality, and personal accomplishment etc. The purpose of the means-end chain is to start a process in which viewing the advertisement leads the consumer to believe that using the product will help him or her reach one of these personal values. According to Clow and Baack (2010), Means-end theory is the basis of a model called the means-end conceptualization of components for advertisement strategy (MECCAS). The MECCAS model suggests using five elements in creating advertisements:

- The product attributes
- Consumer benefit
- Leverage values
- Personal values
- The executional framework

This theory is relevant to this study in that, it suggests that every advertisement should have a central theme embedded in the catchphrase. The message specifically should contain product benefits or attributes that can lead consumers to a desired state. For the

fact that the theory stresses the idea that consumers arrange their needs in their mind in a mental hierarchical value, and it climbs a ladder till their needs are fulfilled by that product. This shows that Coca-Cola catchphrases help in product knowledge, as such the catchphrases go a long way in helping in product recall because consumers have a cognitive ability to arrange information in their minds.

Brand/Branding Management

According to Arens and Arens (2011, p.211) brand is "that fundamental differentiating device for all products - name, words, symbols, or design that identifies the product and its source and distinguishes it from competing products" the American Marketing Association defines a brand as a "name, term, sign, symbols or design, or a combination of them intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those competition". Without brands, consumers couldn't tell one product from another, and advertising then would be nearly impossible.

Shimp (2000), states that branding is that distinctive feature that differentiates a product from another. Burnett and Moriarty (2000) describe it as the use of claim of a superiority or distinction based on extrinsic factors such as psychological differences in the minds of consumers. Brand offers instant recognition and identification, it enables manufacturers to gain leverage vis-à-vis retailers and other marketing intermediaries. To the consumer, a brand offers an assurance of consistent performance and provides a signal of whatever benefits that consumers seek when purchasing particular products and brands.

In advertising, nothing is more important than being able to tell consumers the key benefit that differentiates one's company offering from competitive brands. Heavy advertising about a particular brand can create barriers e.g. Coca-Cola, Nokia, Samsung, MTN etc. Coca-Cola Advertising has helped the brand to be so popular and memorable that the catchphrases are always on the minds and lips of consumers. Advertising helps stimulate purchase irrespective of price change or other intervening variables. To buttress this idea, Ohiagu (2014) explains that beyond brand awareness, advertising helps create brand loyalty and stimulates repeated purchases of a brand at the exclusion of other brands. According to Ohiagu (2014), the brand Coca-Cola has been so popularized that many consumers confuse the brand name Coca-Cola with the product name - soft drink. Branding has to differentiate a brand from other brands in the same product category.

Product Management and Advertising Product Positioning

O'Guinn, Allen and Semenik (1998) purport that product positioning is "the act of designing and representing one's product or service so that it will occupy a distinct and valued place in the consumer's mind" (p.157). Product positioning managers select key themes or concepts that the organization will employ in communicating this distinctiveness to the consumer.

Arens and Arens (2011) state that once an advertiser understands its product stage in the life cycle, how it's classified, and how it's currently perceived by the marketplace, the first strategic decision that can be made is how to position the product. Thus, they defined product positioning as an owing word that ranks the product in consumers' minds. Moriarty, Mitchell and Wells (2009) maintain that "product position is a place in

consumer minds where the product or brand stands in comparison to it on a particular feature or attribute" (p.248).

Clow and Baack (2010) add that product positioning is the process of creating a perception in the consumer's mind regarding the nature of a company and its products relative to competitors. Product positioning is created by many different variables: products, differentiation, prices charged, distribution packing, image, competitive advantage and other factors.

In product positioning, consumers ultimately determine the position a product holds. Based on the aforementioned variable, they decide which product is worth buying. Therefore, it is necessary that in product marketing and advertising, advertisements should reinforce what consumers already believe about a product, and its brand name or shift consumer views toward a more desirable position. This is because of the consumer's view that successfully positions that product.

According to Belch and Belch (2000), a brand can be positioned alongside the following: product attribute and benefits, price/quality use, product class, user and competitor. These strategies can necessitate the trends in advertising messages. The product can also be strategically positioned to either the consumer or the competition. In such positioning, the needs are associated with product benefits, by associating the product with the benefits the consumer will derive or create a favourable brand image. The product can be positioned by comparing it and the benefits it offers to the competition.

Advertising and the unique selling proposition

There are no magic potions or wands that help to create advertisements that sell. Advertising gurus have said that some pointers are a must in every creative work of advertising; one such pointer is the unique selling point (USP). USP can also be known as emotional value point ESP, or value selling point (VSP). USP is that competitive advantage promotional strategy that enhances the successful sale of the product. Thus, for any product to enjoy successful advertising that unique benefit and qualify which cannot be claimed by any other product must be highlighted. Unique selling proposition as a marketing concept was developed by television advertising pioneer Rosser Reeves of Ted Bates and company.

According to Inyang-Oku (1997), the distinct quality is the value mystique. E.g. distinctive taste in beer, Kodak, does not sell cameras-it sells memories. Rolex watches are not timepieces per se but invaluable companions sometimes life-savers. Coca-Cola is not just a soft drink, it unifies the world through a shared zest for life. Inyang-Oku further stated that the value mystique is the 'memory bites'. The memory bites or magic moment "is that thing that will stamp its imprints on the brand, that quality that will be remembered and used to differentiate your brand from others" (p.85). Memory bites stay in the minds of consumers and act as valuable mnemonics at the moment of truth when the consumer is confronted with a brand and a competing brand.

Every product USP must be identified in other to 'clothe' the brand and endow it with an added value that is irresistible to its perspectives users. It can also be found in the brand's appearance, packaging, manufacturing process or even its ingredients. As Moemeke (1997) citing Malickson and Nason (1977) rightly noted, "determining a USP is an essential first step in preparing any advertising" (p.67). This involves the following questions:

- What makes your product different from, and presumably better than all, all those other products it is competing with?
- If you were on the other side of the fence, the buyer rather than the seller-what would you be looking for in this type of product or service?

Therefore, if the sole aim of advertising is the shifting off of goods from the shelves as fast as advertisers would like them to, then the penultimate objective must be the communication of the competitive advantage of the brand. Krugman, Reid, Dunn and Barban (1994) emphasizing Neil Borden put forward that the product's unique selling proposition (USP), has three parts:

- i. Each advertisement must make a proposition to the consumer. Not just words, not just product show-window advertising. Each advertisement must say to each reader, "Buy this product and you will get these benefits".
- ii. The proposition must be one that the competition either cannot or does not offer. It must be unique either in the brand or the claim.
- iii. The proposition must be strong enough to move the mass millions, that is, pull new customers to your product.

Moemeke (1997) avers that the concept of a unique selling point must successfully position the brands for definite segments of the market. Some advertising slogans that come from the free use of unique selling points include:

Xerox taught the world to copy

First Bank: Truly the First

Union Bank: Big, Strong and Reliable

MTN: Everywhere you go

Glo: Rule your world

Etisalat: Now you are talking

Methodology

This study adopted the longitudinal research design. This involved scanning through documentation of the advertising campaigns of the Coca-Cola company from 1904 to 2022. The aim was to assess using observation techniques and a review of literature to qualitatively analyze how the Coca-Cola company has used various catchphrases to express its Unique Selling Proposition (USP) over the years. According to Lindolf and Taylor (2002), qualitative research seeks to preserve and analyze the situated form, content and experience of social action, rather than subject it to mathematical or other formal transformations.

The population of this study is not related to human beings but rather, it studies Coca-Cola company's advertising catchphrases from 1904-2022 which are one hundred and four (104) in number (www.cocacolacompany.com). The probability sampling techniques were used in selecting a sample of forty catchphrases through a simple random sampling method. The document analysis method was used where the researcher developed a category scheme to analyze the USP that ran through Coca-Cola advertising catchphrases within the study period. The categories of catchphrases developed for analysis in this study include;

catchphrases emphasizing:

- the nature of the product;

- Building product knowledge;
- thirst satisfaction;
- flavour or taste of Coke;
- refreshing nature of the drink "Coke".

Data about the catchphrases were obtained through Coca-Cola's website using the Google search engine.

Discussions were done through the explanation-building and interpretation process.

Data Presentation/Analysis

The data presentation and analysis were based on the categories of catchphrases presented above.

A. Catch Phrases with the central theme revolving around the "Product" Coca-Cola. These include;

"Coca-Cola ... satisfies"

"Coca-Cola revives and sustains"

"Whoever you are, wherever you may be, when you think of refreshment think of ice-cold Coca-Cola". (1939-1941)

B. Catchphrases related to building product knowledge such as;

"Coca-Cola makes good things taste better" (1956)

"Coca-Cola...real" (2003)

From the presented data, it shows that in the above-listed phrases *Coca-Cola* which is the company's name is found in all the catchphrases. This to a greater extent helps to register the product in the subconscious mind of consumers. We observe that these catchphrases focused on the company itself, thus, presenting the product and its producer to consumers.

C. Catchphrases concentrating on thirst satisfaction as its central theme such as;

"Coca-Cola ... satisfies"

"Coca-Cola revives and sustains"

"Coca-Cola enjoy"

"Thirst knows no season"

"Enjoy thirst"

"Refresh yourself"

"The best friend thirst ever had thirst asks nothing more" (1920 to 1929)

The above catchphrases tried to present the product as what the consumers need to satisfy their thirsts, This central idea is to capture and lure consumers into drinking Coca-Cola because it leads to the fulfilment of the need to satisfy thirsts at all times.

E. Catch phrases emphasizing the good flavor or taste of Coke including the following;

"Coca-Cola ... makes good things taste better"

"Sign of good taste"

"The cold, crisp taste of coke"

"We've got a taste for you"

"Real taste, uplifting refreshment" (2013, 2014, 2016-17)

The catchphrases above are aimed at promoting Coke as a product with very unique flavour capable of satisfying the desires and pleasure of the consumers. The founder of Coca-Cola, Dr Pemberton stated that the product consists of sweet-tasting brown syrup mixed with soda fountain water to give the drink a remarkably sparkling taste. This issue of taste tends to be a regular feature of most of Coke's advertisements.

F. Catch phrases emphasizing the refreshing nature of the drink "Coke". These include;

"Bounce back to normal"

"Delicious and refreshing" (1904)

"Coca-Cola revives and sustains" (1905)

"Refresh yourself"

"The pause that refreshes"

"...when you think of refreshment think of ice cold Coca-Cola"

"Be refreshed"

"Real thirst uplifting refreshment"

"Coke adds life"

"Coke refreshes you best"

"Be really refreshed" (1939, 1955 - 1962)

The above catchphrases are aimed at presenting the product "Coke" to consumers as a drink that refreshes and bounces consumers back to life.

Discussions

What is the central theme in Coca-Cola catchphrases within the period under study?

Data generated from examining and analyzing the ad catchphrases of Coca-Cola throughout the study (1904- 2022) identified the themes of refreshment, satisfaction, taste/flavour, building friendship, and product uniqueness. The concept of refreshment indicates that Coke refreshes, revives and sustains an individual's lost energy after an energy-sapping activity. Thus "Be refreshed!" "Pause for coke!" "Only Coca-Cola gives you the cheerful lift that is bright and lively... the cold crisp taste that deeply satisfies!" "No wonder coke refreshes you best!" Again, the emphasis on "Flavour" and "Taste" implies and reinforces the idea that Coke refreshes. The idea of building friendships is impliedly targeted at youths who are at the centre of carrying out energy-sapping activities and enjoying life. The advertisements urge them to enjoy and refresh their lives at every given opportunity with some bottles of Coke, thus, we have "Coke goes with good times!"; "Coca-Cola...the pause that brings friends together!"; "The happy symbol of a friendly way of life!" etc.

What is the predominant central theme in the catchphrases within the period under study?

Findings from examining closely the various catchphrases of Coca-Cola advertising over the years indicate the predominant idea is the continuous promotion of Coke as a beverage capable of refreshing the consumers of the products. This no doubt may have been instrumental to the success of the other brands produced by the same company as noted in Nwachukwu's (2004) finding, that 80% of the respondents believed that Coke

advertising influences the consumption of other Coca-Cola brands like Fanta, Krest and Sprite etc. – which are seldom advertised.

In relation to the above, we observe that although the name Coca-Cola is observed in most of its catchphrases under examination, the idea is to give identity to the product to effectively bring out the product's benefits and promises. This finding supports David Ogilvy's assertion that "every advertisement should be thought of as a contribution to the complex symbol which is the brand image" implying that the predominant central themes are symbols which Coca-Cola represents. These ideas promote Coca-Cola's personality and its brands and may be a major reason behind the large market share of the soft drinks market enjoyed by Coca-Cola today.

What is the unique selling proposition that can be identified in Coca-Cola's various advertising catchphrases within the period 1904 to 2022?

Assessing the various advertising catchphrases of Coca-Cola between 1904 and 2022, it could be observed that every communication about the product's benefits revolved around the fact that the soft drink refreshes and satisfies the consumers. This idea is evident in the catchphrases following every advertising campaign of the Coca-Cola company over the years. This fact when viewed from the lens of the means-end theory provides an insight into the result. The means-end theory provides that advertising messages should contain tips that could lead consumers to a desired end/state which includes fun, excitement, pleasure, satisfaction etc. implying that consumers get satisfaction from the product. This theory corroborates the result of the findings because satisfaction which is one of the end-state of advertising is one consistent product benefit and attribute portrayed in almost all advertising campaigns for the product Coke. The Coca-Cola Company was consistent with the idea that one is always satisfied and refreshed after taking a bottle or Can of Coke. The fact is, that Coca-Cola uses these central ideas to make the advertisements more appealing to consumers. In the face of competition, it was of great necessity for Coca-Cola to say to their consumers "Drink Coca-Cola and get refreshed"...since a unique selling proposition is what other competitors either cannot or do not offer. Thus, Coca-Cola decided to tie a unique claim of refreshment and satisfaction to its advertisements.

This finding supports Krugman, Reid, Dunn and Barban's (1994) emphasis on a product's unique selling proposition, stating that the proposition must be strong enough to move the mass millions, that is, pull new customers to one's product implying that these predominant ideas in the advertising trends of Coca-Cola has been consistent over a long period and has helped position Coca-Cola to remain vibrant and consistent in the market. Also, Belch and Belch's (1998) view, supports the result that a unique selling proposition which is the product attribute, claim or benefit should dominate the advertisement and be emphasized through repetitive advertising. This research has shown that refreshment which is Coca-Cola's strong claim is constantly repeated in most of its catchphrases. The assertion by Agwu (2014) that, advertisements must be run continuously to elicit such curiosity that will motivate consumers to try the product also supports the findings of this research.

Conclusion

It has been established through our research in this study that Coca-Cola Company advertising from 1904 through 2022 has little or no deviations in the central theme which

is that the product refreshes and satisfies the consumers. The different promotional phrases employed by Coca-Cola were merely repetitions of the same central ideas (refreshment and satisfaction) by simply playing on words. The forty Coca-Cola USPs analyzed following the categorization process adopted, indicated a dovetail of continuous and consistent repetition of the same ideas (that Coca-Cola refreshes and satisfies) by playing with words to keep the message fresh and interesting and the brand popular and memorable. The study showed that Coca-Cola uses these USPs to retain product knowledge, to keep consumers favourably disposed to the brand and to build brand loyalty.

References

- Arens, W. F. & Arens, W.C. (2011). *Contemporary advertising and integrated marketing communications*. McGraw-Hill Higher Education.
- Belch, A. M. & Belch, E.G. (2001). *Advertising and promotion: An integrated marketing communications perspective* (5th ed.), McGraw-Hill Company.
- Clow, K. E. & Baack, D. (2010). *Integrated advertising, promotion and marketing communications* (4th ed), Upper Saddle River.
- Krugman, D.M.; Reid, E.M, Dunn, S.W. & Barban A.M. (1994). Advertising: Its role in modern marketing (8th ed.). *Journal of Business Research*. Vol.37:3
- Inyang-oku, J. (1997). Creating advertising that sells. In Bel-Molokwu (eds). *Advertising in Nigeria; some fundamental issues* Apcon pp. 81-86. Amanda Communication LTD.
- Malickson D.K. & Nason, J.W. (1977). *Advertising: How to write the kind that works*. Cenagage Gale.
- Moemeke, I.S. (1997). The role of advertising in business promotion *Bel-Molokwu (eds)*. In Bel-Molokwu (ed). *Advertising in Nigeria: some fundamental issues* Apcon pp.227-234. Amanda Communications LTD.
- Moriarty, S., Mitchell, N. & Wells, W. (2009). *Advertising principles and practice* (8th ed.). Pearson Prentice Hall.
- O' Guinn C.T., Allen T.C. & Semenik, J.R. (1998). *Advertising*. Cincinnati, International Thompson.
- Ohiagu, O.P. (2014). *Fundamentals of advertising and public relations*. Accuracy prints.
- Shimp A.T. (2000). *Advertising promotion supplementary aspects of integrated marketing communications* (5th ed.). Nike Roche.
- Wells, W. Burnett, J. & Moriarty, S. (2000). *Advertising: Principles and practice* (5th ed.). Prentice-Hall, Inc