
UTILISING A MINORITY LANGUAGE TO DEVELOP BRAND IDENTITY: AN EVALUATION OF CURRENT PRACTICE USING THE IRISH LANGUAGE

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This article examines current practice in relation to the use of the Irish language for branding within the manufacturing and internationally traded services sector. It identifies the motivations for the use of a minority language (Irish) and the benefits and limitations associated with its use. Data was collected in two stages. Firstly, a survey was conducted to examine the views of companies that use the Irish language. Secondly, in-depth interviews were conducted to explore the key issues arising from the questionnaire. The interviews were conducted with seven companies and an industry expert.

The companies believe that although customers do not often use Irish they value companies that use the Irish language. The respondents indicate that using Irish can promote customer loyalty and help to develop consumer awareness. However, companies need to be cognisant of the potential for alienation and misinterpretation of the company brand by customers who are unfamiliar with the language.

Introduction

The *Official Languages Act* (Government of Ireland, 2003) and supporting government policies aim to achieve a bilingual society by 2026 in Ireland. The Irish Constitution states that the Irish language (Gaeilge) is the first official language. Places where Irish is used as the standard language of discourse are termed 'An Ghaeltacht', and are located mainly along the western seaboard. The 2006 census listed the population of the Gaeltacht as 91,862, of which 64,265 were classified as Irish speakers. Northover and Donnelly (1996, p. 36) explain that despite its status as the national and official language, Irish is used mainly for communicative purposes in the Gaeltacht areas, otherwise chiefly as a symbol of national identity on ceremonial occasions.

In this context we explore the motivations for the use of a minority language (Irish) and the benefits and limitations associated with its use. Brands are the core asset of a company (Muzellec et al., 2003) and corporate identity and branding according to Hatch and Schultz (2003) increases visibility, recognition and reputation in more ways than possible with product branding alone. Other authors (Aaker, 1992; Lee et al., 2008; Kohli et al., 2005) have examined the importance of branding

and corporate identity, and authors including Kelly Holmes (2006), Cunliffe and Roberts-Young (2005) and Roberts et al. (2007) have examined minority languages and their position in society.

Branding with a minority language

Why do consumers develop a preference for domestic brands? The theoretical foundation for domestic preference can be found in patriotism or what is known as ethnocentrism (Pecotich and Rosenthal, 2001). Consumers favour domestic goods for many reasons including familiarity and the belief that purchasing domestic brands helps the economy and provides jobs (Pecotich and Ward, 2007). The language a brand name is written in can impact on the views a consumer has of the brand and can influence their purchasing decision. Communication is culturally bound (De Run, 2007) and minority languages form part of cultural and ethnic identities and impact on marketing communications. Marketers can create an identity for their brand in an ethnic niche (Larsen et al., 2007) by considering the cultural embeddedness of the product category to which the brand belongs and the way people in the market segment use the brand to construct their identities.

Lewis and Stubbs (1999) highlight the need for companies involved in the international marketing of brands to be aware of the importance of language, especially regarding translanguing homonyms; examples include Zit, which is a brand of French ice-lolly or Craps, a German chocolate brand. Vida and Reardon (2008) provide evidence that local brands are in fact gaining larger market shares in many emerging markets. Differentiating a brand based on local characteristics can have very positive effects for the company and for marketing communications. Language is becoming an increasingly important element in marketing communications in the global marketplace (Marcella and Davies, 2004). Cunliffe and Roberts-Young (2005) refer to the importance of the branding of a company especially in a bilingual context. De Run (2007) states that advertising makes up a large part of a company's marketing budget and that communication is culturally bound and as a result of this advertising needs to be closely scrutinised before a decision can be made to adopt a standardised or adapted advertising strategy. Cultural differences are an important aspect of international marketing research as cultural norms and beliefs are major forces in shaping the perceptions and behaviours of customers, influencing loyalty to products (Yeniyurt and Townsend, 2003).

Statistics from the European Bureau of Lesser Used Languages (www.eblul.org) indicate there are *circa* forty million people who use a minority language, e.g. Irish, Welsh. The status of many minority languages has risen recently, especially within Europe, and demands for their use in the public sector are increasing (Roberts et al., 2007). This trend has implications for the business community in relation to marketing communications. Pitta and Franzak (2008) argue that global brands do not have as much power as people may assume, especially in terms of *seducing* customers away from local brands. Customers, it would seem, develop a loyalty to their local products and remain loyal so long as the product meets their requirements. Vida and Reardon (2008) identified in their research that the attachment a consumer has for their country, people, and the symbols of the nation can influence consumers' preferences for domestic vs. international products, brands and institutions. Atkinson and Kelly Holmes (2006) refer to commercial advertising and how it

is of interest in a multilingual context. Companies must be aware that the use of a minority language in advertising or other methods of communication can impact on the brand and the consumers opinion towards it. A regional language can be used by a company in order to highlight to customers and potential customers the regional origin of the product itself (Lewis and Stubbs, 1999), and this can be used effectively to identify the product and build a loyal customer base within a region. An example provided by Lewis and Stubbs (1999) is the heather-flavoured Scottish beer 'Fraoch', which is the Gaelic for heather.

Lewis and Stubbs (1999) explain that language issues in regional markets are as important as in international marketing. However, they are an issue for branding in minority language regions. When selecting a domestic product/brand, various factors can affect product consumption and these include perceptions of quality, the consumer's opinion of domestically produced goods and patriotism, especially in the context of new European Union member states (Vida and Reardon, 2008). The impacts of cross-cultural marketing on unintended audiences have not been assessed: it is possible that audiences could be alienated, leading to negative feedback among consumers (De Run, 2007). Cunliffe and Roberts-Young (2005) refer to the complexities involved in designing websites for bilingual communities and how poor design can marginalise the languages even further. Therefore, careful consideration must be given when using a minority language in branding and marketing communications.

Methodology

The starting point for this research was the compilation of a list of companies using an Irish language company name or product/brand name. No list previously existed. The following sources were used to compile the list: Kompass Online directory; an Internet search was performed and 29 companies were identified; and the following agencies were contacted by post to request information: 34 County Enterprise Board offices, 12 Enterprise Ireland offices and 5 Údarás Na Gaeltachta offices. The objectives of the data collection process were to: identify the current practices of companies in relation to branding using the Irish language; identify the benefits companies associate with using the Irish language in brand-

ing; determine the limitations associated with using the Irish language in branding; ascertain the use of Irish in marketing communications; explore in depth the reasoning and motivations behind the use of the Irish language and their position in relation to the benefits and limitations; and explore the use of the Irish language in marketing communications and customer relationships.

In this research data was collected in two stages: firstly, a survey was conducted to examine the views of companies in Ireland that use the Irish language. The respondents came from three main regions: North West (37 per cent), West (32 per cent) and South West (21 per cent). The remaining regions of Dublin, Midlands, North East, South East and Mid West had a combined response of 10 per cent. Of the 374 questionnaires posted, 98 valid responses were received; a response rate of 26 per cent. The questionnaire examined three key issues: the usage of the Irish language; the benefits and limitations associated with using the Irish language; and the support systems, i.e. funding, that influence the process. Secondly, depth interviews were conducted to explore the key issues arising from the questionnaire. Judgement sampling was used. Seven companies and one expert were selected. The interviews explored the following topics: the reasons for using the Irish language, the importance of branding in Irish, the benefits and limitations of branding in Irish, funding, and marketing communications in Irish. The interviews were taped, transcribed, and superfluous material such as digressions and repetitions removed to assist the analysis. Narrative structuring (Kvale, 1996) was used to create a coherent story of the respondent's experience of using a minority language (Irish) when branding.

Current practice in relation to Irish language branding

Six main reasons for using a minority language in marketing are identified in the literature. They are supporting the language; obtaining funding; relevance to the company's image and developing the company's image; appealing to customers; use of a family name; and the use of the language by competitors. Additional reasons identified by respondents in this study included: access to grants; relevance to the area; named after a local landmark; and the use of an acronym. In this study the two

most important reasons were support of the Irish language and the ability to obtain funding with 60 per cent and 51 per cent respectively citing these reasons. Thirty-six per cent of respondents indicated that using the Irish language was important for company image and 24 per cent indicated the importance of the appeal to customers. The interviews revealed a strong level of support for the Irish language, with the majority of companies highlighting this as their main reason for choosing to use the Irish language:

I suppose you have an inner satisfaction ... I love the way it [the Irish language] looks. I love the form of the words and I love hearing our name in Irish. That's who we've come from and that is who we are. You would want to be showing and be seen to be Irish.

(Interviewee E)

However, the importance of funding was in evidence in the interviews. One company stated that:

I think if I'm being honest it had a lot to do with the fact that we could get funding. It would be nice to be able to say we were doing it because we want to use Irish but it was mainly to do with the funding ...

(Interviewee A)

Of the companies that selected the support of the Irish language as a response, 46 per cent were manufacturing companies (domestic only) and 55 per cent trade in international markets. One interviewee pointed out that:

in international markets I feel that a lot of people are drawn to the product and are full of encouragement ... they want to support an Irish company that uses the language.

(Interviewee C)

Another reflected that:

It makes customers curious about who you are and what you do and what you sell. This happens outside the Gaeltacht areas too. I think the name makes us more interesting to people, we're not maybe as forgettable as some of our competitors.

(Interviewee G)

The literature identifies the benefits associated with branding and the companies experience two of these benefits, specifically the increase in cus-

customer loyalty and customer awareness. The companies did not see the use of the Irish language in branding leading to increased sales volumes or resulting in the ability to charge a premium price. However, increase in loyalty and awareness *should* have a positive effect on sales and reduce the importance of price as a selection criteria. One interviewee identified that the advantages associated with using a minority language were being eroded. He explained that:

There was a time probably that you could have got an advantage from using Irish ... but not nowadays. Every job you do has to be turned around so quick and price-wise it's so competitive ...

(Interviewee B)

Hornikx et al. (2007) explain that foreign languages are used based on the assumption that the associations carried by the foreign language are transferred to the product that is advertised. In the case of the Irish language the 'positive' image of Ireland is supplemented by the numbers of expatriates living around the world. The Emigrants Advice Network (2008) estimates that there are 800,000 Irish-born people living abroad, mainly in the UK, USA, Australia and Canada. This figure does not account for the sizeable undocumented population living in the USA.

Fifty-five per cent of respondents agreed that branding in Irish is important within their business. Thirty-one per cent of companies chose to select 'neither agree nor disagree' in relation to the necessity for a strong Irish language brand to succeed in business. Sixty-four per cent of respondents agreed that Irish is important in their corporate identity. However, there was conflict in the views of the interviewees, as evident in the following quotes:

Having the company name in Irish was very important to us because of our views on the Irish language.

(Interviewee F)

The name of the company doesn't mean anything to people so at the moment even we are looking at changing ... and giving it a different trading name.

(Interviewee H)

Forty-eight per cent of the respondents indicated that the translation of the English name and 44

per cent the image it would portray to customers as important considerations when branding. Having a name that was easy to pronounce was important to 30 per cent of the companies and this is a challenge that is faced when using a minority language, especially when trading in international markets, which is the case for 63 per cent of respondents. This view was supported by one of the interviewees:

We were aware of the problem surrounding confusion in foreign names and this played a part in our choice of name because we wanted something that would be easy to pronounce ...

(Interviewee C)

The literature explores the importance of brand image (Kayaman and Arasli, 2007) and in this study 44 per cent of the companies had given consideration to the image the name would portray to customers. The literature highlighted the importance of marketing communications and that branding should be taken into consideration and used in the marketing strategy (Wong and Merrilees, 2007). Other considerations that were identified included: refusal by the company's head office to allow the local office to choose the name; complications associated with dual working names; and the brand being named by the company founder.

Discussion

There are only a small number of companies operating in Ireland in the manufacturing and internationally traded services industries using the Irish language. This research identified 384 companies using Irish in their company/brand names. Despite the fact that Irish has seen resurgence in recent years with the introduction of an Irish language television station (tg4) and an Irish language newspaper (Lá Nua), the same cannot be said for Irish named companies or brands. Kelly Holmes (2006) identified that English is still the main language used in business and the evidence collected in this research supports this. Ninety-four per cent of companies using Irish are located in Gaeltacht areas where the availability of funding has a strong influence on the decision to use Irish in the company or brand name. It is evident that companies make the initial decision to use Irish when setting up the company, and only three per cent of the companies surveyed in this study

had changed to using Irish once they were established.

The majority of companies use Irish in order to support the language. Seventy-nine per cent of companies indicated that they had received funding from Údarás na Gaeltachta (the national authority with responsibility for the development of the Gaeltacht, www.udaras.ie) and over half the companies agreed that the availability of funding influenced their choice of name. The need for strong corporate identity and strong brands is highlighted throughout the literature and this view is supported by this research. However, the need to have a strong Irish brand to succeed in business is not viewed as important by many of the companies. Having a corporate identity available in the Irish language was identified by 64 per cent of respondents as being important. The interviews highlighted that it is important to the companies to support the use of the Irish language and the companies indicated that they would have selected an Irish language name whether there was funding available to them or not.

The majority of companies indicated that Irish can alienate customers who do not comprehend the language. Furthermore, 78 per cent of companies indicated that they believe the Irish language is not often used by their consumer base. Many of the companies interviewed felt that although there are limitations associated with using the Irish language, these can be overcome, but that the ability of companies to do this depends on the level of passion the company has for the Irish language. Fifty-six per cent of companies expressed the view

that Irish customers value companies that use the Irish language. Despite highlighting the importance of using Irish in branding and corporate identity, the companies recognise that there are limitations associated with the use of Irish. Seventy-one per cent of respondents have had international customers who have been confused by their use of the Irish language and this belief is evident in the limited use of Irish only in marketing. English is seen as the common language in order to communicate with customers, and companies have a preference for using English only or a mixture of English and Irish in their marketing communications.

Conclusion

The Irish government has the stated aim of achieving a bilingual society by 2026. However, there are only a small number of companies operating in Ireland in the manufacturing and internationally traded services industries using the Irish language. The authors feel that further attempts could be made to support businesses in their use of Irish by offering assistance for its use in marketing communications. The funding agencies supporting the use of Irish could offer additional assistance and guidance in the development of promotional materials leading to the eventual use of bilingual materials. Companies need to be aware of this and, as appropriate, incorporate the Irish language into their marketing communications. The need for strong corporate identity and strong brands is highlighted throughout the literature and this view is supported by the research. However, the need to have a strong Irish brand to succeed in business was not viewed as important by the majority of respondents.

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