



Research on the Application of Emotional Marketing Strategy in the Brand Development Process of Nongfu Spring

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Abstract. With consumption upgrading and the saturation of the Chinese drinking water market, the production technology and quality assurance of the major brands have developed. In this context, consumers are not only pursuing the practicality of products but more about achieving the resonance and personality of emotional needs. Nongfu Spring now occupies the leading position in China's drinking water industry, the brand reputation and consumer engagement are also improving year by year, which is closely related to its application of emotional marketing strategies. This study intends to conduct an in-depth analysis and investigation of the emotional marketing strategy used by Nongfu Spring in the process of brand development and explore the reasons for its success. The author adopted a qualitative method and a case study approach to collect 6 cases related to the emotional strategies of Nongfu Spring from Sina Weibo to study the emotional marketing strategies adopted by Nongfu Spring since 2015. The research results show that Nongfu Spring realizes emotional brand image strategy and establishes emotional interaction and communication with consumers through making full use of social media and emotional advertising strategy, that is, skippable advertisements and micro-documentaries, as well as the emotional packaging strategy such as regional and interactive packaging design. The findings of this study can help other brands, especially Chinese drinking water brands, to win loyal consumers through effective emotional marketing strategies.

Keywords: Emotional Marketing Strategy · Brand Management · Nongfu Spring · Qualitative Research · Case Study Approach

1 Introduction

Emotional marketing strategy, also called as emotionally inspired marketing strategy. This kind of strategy combines the characteristics and uses of commodities with the psychological feelings of consumers and expresses them in an emotional way in advertisements, so as to give consumers psychological and emotional satisfaction [1]. Consumer actions may often be governed by emotion, once the advertisement stimulates people's product emotion, they are likely to then produce purchase action. Nongfu Spring, also

known as Nongfu Spring Co., LTD., is one of the top 10 companies in China's beverage industry and one of the largest suppliers of drinking water in China. It is also one of the successful companies using emotional marketing strategies. In the process of brand development, Nongfu Spring was once greatly affected by the water quality crisis in 2013. Since April 2013, Nongfu Spring has been reported by the media as having "drinking water standards inferior to tap water", which has aroused consumers' strong concern about drinking water [2]. The high attention of the media magnified the public relations crisis of Nongfu Spring, and the management of the enterprise and the reputation of the brand were greatly affected. Since 2015, Nongfu Spring has applied a series of emotional marketing strategies to effectively solve the negative impact of the water quality crisis. Its video advertising and packaging design made headlines on the Internet in June 2015, winning widespread praise on China's well-known social media website, Sina Weibo, and entering the international market with its design award-winning drinking water bottle packages [3]. Subsequently, Nongfu Spring also launched a series of micro-documentary advertisements and cooperated with various brands, creating psychological resonance with consumers through emotional marketing strategies. Through brand planning in recent years, Nongfu Spring has not only resolved the subsequent impact of the previous water quality crisis but also returned to the leading position in the industry. It can be seen that emotional marketing strategies can promote the development and reputation of enterprises in the market, as well as build emotional connections with consumers.

2 Literature Review

According to Scott and Claire, emotional marketing strategy is a marketing method used by a company or brand to target specific human emotions and persuade consumers [4]. Emotional marketing can persuade people to buy certain products, connect with a brand, share content, or increase their loyalty. Researchers found that the effectiveness of emotional marketing includes the following specific reasons. First, it is more likely to generate memory points. Stefano mentioned in his book that emotional content is tied to consumers' personal experiences, and consumers are generally more likely to remember advertisements or stories that relate to their own experiences [5]. Second, Emotional marketing can produce immediate responses. Consoli proposed in his research that consumers will form an opinion about a company within a short time of interaction and are more likely to react if their immediate response is something emotionally relevant to it [6]. Third, emotional marketing can help brands stand out among similar competitors. An emotional connection may influence customers to buy a certain product rather than other similar brands. Fourth, emotional strategies can inspire action. In addition to buying, emotional marketing can persuade consumers to participate through sharing, reviews, and recommendations according to Rytel's research [7]. According to the author's investigation, brands that are good at engaging consumers' emotions, especially fear, anger, happiness, belonging, and greed, are more likely to be successful in their marketing campaigns. Firstly, it is an effective way to arouse consumers' fear through marketing messages. For example, playing on FOMO (fear of missing out), emphasize that the price of an item is time limited. Second, to cause anger and make people realize

that something needs to be done or changed in order to achieve justice or solve a pressing problem [8]. Third, create a happy atmosphere and use “happy marketing” strategies to help the brand associate with positivity [4]. Fourth, according to Maslow, belonging is one of the most basic needs that motivate behavior [9]. That’s why many brands now form communities, create special names for their customers, and encourage user-generated content to create a sense of belonging. Finally, according to Valentin Saitarli, keeping customers happy is one of the main goals of marketers, and often consumer satisfaction increases when brands make consumers feel like they are getting more than they are paying for, which comes down to greed [10].

To identify gaps in existing research, the author conducted a quick review of previous studies related to this subject. There are 1,302 academic articles on “emotional marketing” in China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI). However, the research mainly focuses on the emotional marketing strategy of book publishing in the new consumption era. For example, Wei made an analysis of how the marketing of books in the new consumption era completes the brand construction through the emotive link [11]. Li and Cai studied the emotional marketing strategy of digital publishing in the post-modern context [12]. At present, there is little meaningful research on how traditional brands, especially drinking water brands, use emotional marketing strategies to connect with consumers. When the keyword “Nongfu Spring” was entered into CNKI, there were 1128 relevant literature articles, among which 9 articles analyzed the brand development strategy of Nongfu Spring. However, the research direction is usually limited to the brand positioning of Nongfu Spring in the process of brand development. For example, Wu and Sun took Nongfu Spring as an example to study the positioning process management method of local brands in China [13]. Currently, the research on the emotional marketing strategy used in the brand development of Nongfu Spring is still limited.

This study intends to conduct an in-depth analysis and investigation of the emotional marketing strategy used in the brand development process of Nongfu Spring, explore the reasons for its effective marketing strategy, so as to understand the success of Nongfu Spring in winning the position of China’s leading brand of drinking water, so as to fill the above research gaps. Nongfu Spring’s success story can help other brands, especially Chinese drinking water brands, cope with crises and gain loyal consumers through effective emotional marketing strategies. In order to conduct this research, the author will analyze the emotional advertising, product packaging, and brand image strategies of Nongfu Spring in the recent five years, so as to determine the emotional marketing strategies used by Nongfu Spring in the process of brand development.

3 Methodology

3.1 Qualitative Method

According to David Silverman, qualitative research can be used to gather insight into an issue or generate new ideas for research, often attempting to retain the voices and perspectives of participants and can be adapted as new research questions arise [14]. This study aims to explore the emotional marketing strategies used in the brand development process of Nongfu Spring. Therefore, this study is more suitable to adopt the qualitative

method as the methodology. Fossey and other researchers mentioned in their research that qualitative research involves the collection and analysis of non-digital data, such as text, video, or audio, to understand concepts, perspectives, or experiences [15]. The author will use the content posted on social media by Nongfu Spring as the main research text of this study. Then, use these texts to explore the emotional marketing strategies used in the brand development of Nongfu Spring.

3.2 Data Source

Due to the limited time, the author will select the 6 most representative contents about Nongfu Spring's emotional marketing published on China's famous social media, Sina Weibo, in the past five years, namely from 2017 to 2021, to explore the emotional marketing strategies used by Nongfu Spring in the process of brand development. According to the 2022 Statistical Report on the Development of the Internet in China released by the China Internet Network Information Center, the number of Sina Weibo users in China has reached 582 million by the end of December 2021 [16]. According to Hitwise's 2021 Annual Ranking of Total Time Spent Online, Sina Weibo ranked third behind Baidu and Taobao.com, accounting for about 2.3% of total time spent online, making it the social networking platform with the longest login time [17]. Due to its huge number of users and good user adhesion, Sina Weibo has become a powerful tool for enterprises and brands to build their image. It can strengthen the mutual understanding between enterprises and users, expand the influence of enterprises, and prevent and deal with public relations crises [18]. This means that the author can explore the complete brand development process of Nongfu Spring and analyze its marketing strategy on Sina Weibo.

3.3 Case Study Approach

According to Kendra Cherry, case study research is a detailed study of a specific topic, such as a person, group, place, event, organization, or phenomenon [19]. The research design for case studies often involves qualitative methods that help describe, compare, evaluate, and understand different aspects of the research question. Therefore, the author chooses the case study approach as the methodology of this research. The first step in case studies is to select specific cases to focus on according to the formulated research questions. The author will collect the contents related to emotional marketing published by Nongfu Spring on Sina Weibo as the analyzed cases. The second step is to establish the theoretical framework to ensure that the case analysis has a solid academic foundation, according to key concepts and theories to guide the analysis and interpretation. This study will base on the Emotional Marketing Theory of psychologist Patrizia Principi and illustrate how this theory explains the 6 cases of Nongfu Spring. The third step is to collect data, and the author will focus on qualitative data using the methods of observation and analysis of secondary sources, namely official records, to understand the cases and the context as thoroughly as possible. Finally, the cases will be described and analyzed, in which the author will provide background details about the cases, relate them to the literature and theory, and discuss how it fits into a broader model or debate.

4 Results and Discussion

According to the data selection criteria, the author collected 6 cases about emotional marketing strategies published by Nongfu Spring on Sina Weibo from 2017 to 2021, including the micro-documentary advertisements, “A Story You Never Knew”, “From Water Source to Product, the Unknown Nongfu Spring”, and Nongfu Spring 20th anniversary micro-documentary advertisement series; the advertisement form that can be skipped; Nongfu Spring high-end water series bottle packaging; and Nongfu Spring with NetEase Cloud Music cooperation limited edition drinking water packaging. The author divides the above 6 cases into 3 aspects: emotional advertising strategy, emotional packaging strategy, and emotional brand image strategy for analysis and discussion.

4.1 Emotional Advertising Strategy

- Micro-documentary advertising form

The purpose of advertising is to build a mimicry environment of commodity intention, shape the corresponding brand meaning, and transfer it to the psychological needs of the audience, so as to stimulate the audience’s inner desire for consumption [20]. As a new form of advertising, micro-documentary advertising can create real power through documentary lens language and hide the traces of persuasion of traditional advertising forms [21]. In 2015, Nongfu Spring released a three-minute commercial titled “A Story You Never Knew”, followed by “From Water Source to Product, the Unknown Nongfu Spring” in 2016. These two commercials were presented in the form of micro-documentaries. In these advertisements, Nongfu Spring focused on the introduction of Nongfu Spring’s water source, production technology, and factory design. In the advertisement “From Water Source to Product, the Unknown Nongfu Spring”, Nongfu Spring showed the beauty of nature. Through the real scene shooting of the Nongfu Spring water source, it reflected its propaganda slogan “We don’t produce water, we are just the porters of nature”. Then, through the introduction of the factory designers and their design concept of environmental protection, combined with the harmonious frame of the factory and nature, it showed the awe of Nongfu Spring for nature and the importance of environmental protection. In 2017, Nongfu Spring released a series of four advertisements specifically for the brand’s 20th anniversary. The annual series of advertisements also followed the form of micro-documentary. Based on the introduction of the water source, the main characters of the advertisement became ordinary employees of various positions in Nongfu Spring. By telling their ordinary but not mediocre stories, Nongfu Spring expressed the brand concept to consumers that the quality assurance of Nongfu Spring comes from these ordinary employees. While other rivals still continue to use gorgeous but empty advertising copywriting to market their goods, Nongfu Spring differentiates itself from other competitors with the use of micro-documentary advertisements and forges an emotional bond with customers.

- Skippable advertising form

With the development of the Internet, consumers have entered the new media era of information overload. People’s leisure time is occupied by a variety of fragmented information, among which the most likely to cause audience disgust is mandatory advertising.

At present, video advertisements on the network can be roughly divided into “skippable advertisements” and “unskippable advertisements”, the difference between them mainly lies in the different degrees of user initiative and coercion. “Skippable advertisements” means that users can choose whether to skip or turn off the advertisements when they are exposed to the advertising, giving them the right to make their own choices [22]. “Unskippable advertisements” refers to the fact that users cannot choose whether to skip or close the advertisements when they come into contact with the advertising content [22]. These kinds of advertisements that force audiences to watch by technical means are easy to arouse audiences’ antipathy. Nongfu Spring began releasing micro-documentary advertisements in June 2015 on major Chinese video platforms. The duration of the micro-documentary advertisement surely tested consumers’ tolerance for the length of the advertisement when compared to other video advertisements at that time that lasted for several seconds. However, at the time, the bulk of video commercials was non-skippable, which was disapproved of by online users in general. The micro-documentary advertising for Nongfu Spring was a little bit longer, but viewers could choose to skip them. Many Internet users commended the humanized setting of Nongfu Spring and were even willing to spend time watching the complete video commercial since this setting gave the viewer a feeling of intimacy and respect. Nongfu Spring returned the independent choice to consumers, as a result, consumers are willing to understand the brand, so as to achieve the purpose of advertising and realize the follow-up publicity strategy. With the development of the times, only through a large number of repeated and mandatory broadcast advertising communication has been unable to achieve the expected publicity effect. In order to establish a harmonious and stable relationship with the audience and strengthen user loyalty, enterprises should give consumers more independent choices. The video advertisement of Nongfu Spring re-establishes a harmonious and equal relationship with consumers through the setting of “skippable advertisements”, which attracts consumers’ attention to the brand and establishes an emotional connection, laying a foundation for the subsequent brand publicity strategy and corporate image building.

4.2 Emotional Packaging Strategy

- Nongfu Spring high-end water series bottle packaging

With the development of society, consumers’ demand for products is not only on the functional aspect but also on the pursuit of aesthetic value and humanistic feelings, such as regionalism. In a broad sense, regionalism refers to the scope of geography, which has obvious natural attributes, but it is mainly a display of regional culture, carrying the material and spiritual symbols of a region, and inheriting the aesthetic appeal and emotional resonance of the people [23]. The packaging design of Nongfu Spring’s high-end water series bottle presents regional symbolic patterns in the form of figurative images on the packaging. Its creation inspiration comes from the natural elements of Changbai Mountain, one of the water sources of Nongfu Spring. This series of packaging designs have a total of 8 different design forms, respectively selecting different regional characteristics of species to depict, such as ferns, pinecones, Siberian tigers, Chinese merganser, etc. Regional plant patterns are used to decorate purified water, while animal

patterns are used to decorate sparkling water. The shape of the glass bottle is like a drop of water, with soft and elegant lines, and its purpose is to show the purity and clarity of the product. In addition to winning first place in the non-alcoholic beverage category at the Dieline International Packaging Design Awards 2018, Nongfu Spring's high-end water series packaging design is a perfect combination of art and business, with humanistic feelings as the dimension, blending the regional spirit core into the design. Regional design expression is an important trend for the development of Chinese local design, which will promote the development and dissemination of Chinese regional culture at home and abroad. As an outstanding national enterprise in China, Nongfu Spring not only sets up its own brand image but also shows the beautiful scenery of China with humanistic feelings. Through this regional spiritual core, consumers can feel the ecological concern of Nongfu Spring, as well as a strong humanistic atmosphere. Nongfu Spring starts from the emotion of consumers and then rises to realize the spiritual needs of people so that the brand ranks in the international industry.

- Nongfu Spring with NetEase Cloud Music cooperation packaging

According to Cousins, the interactive design strives to establish a meaningful relationship between a person and a product, service, or brand, forming the interaction and communication needed to achieve the corresponding needs [24]. In August 2020, Nongfu Spring announced the cooperation with NetEase Cloud Music, a well-known music platform in China, to select 30 user comments of NetEase Cloud Music and print them on 400 million natural drinking water bottles of Nongfu Spring to make limited edition drinking water packaging. Featuring NetEase Cloud Music's vinyl record pattern on these limited-edition bottles, users can jump to NetEase Cloud Music's playlist by scanning a QR code on the bottle. After scanning the pattern on the bottle body, the virtual sky realized by AR technology will appear on the mobile phone, so as to realize an interactive connection with consumers. Nongfu Spring's limited-edition packaging accurately captures the emotional needs of the public, integrates emotional and contemporary elements in the design, and stimulates the emotional resonance of consumers. AR interaction and copywriting not only add interest and freshness to the packaging design of bottled water but also capture the emotional needs of consumers and promote emotional communication between the audience and the brand. In addition, consumers can use limited-edition packaging to express their inner thoughts. With the improvement of consumption level, people's desire to express and meet emotional needs will be more and more intense, emotional packaging design is also one of the future packaging design research focuses. The design of Nongfu Spring with NetEase Cloud Music cooperation starts from feelings and stimulates the emotional resonance and deep communication of consumers by conveying the public's perception of life. This combination of social hot topics and AR technology creates a more vivid consumption situation and emotional experience atmosphere for consumers and expresses the brand concept of Nongfu Spring more intuitively.

4.3 Emotional Brand Image Strategy

In the era of new media, social media can make a brand more vivid. The regular update of an enterprise's official Sina Weibo account is meaningful to both consumers and other

audiences. Nongfu Spring's marketing activities and related news are released through its official Sina Weibo account. Through the use of Sina Weibo, Nongfu Spring can more effectively establish the brand image and spread relevant information about the brand. Nongfu Spring's high-end water packaging won an international design award in May 2018. At first, ordinary consumers did not notice the news of Nongfu Spring's award until mid-June, when netizens began to widely discuss Nongfu Spring's "skippable advertisements" setting on Sina Weibo. Since then, the public began to pay attention to and discuss Nongfu Spring's micro-documentary advertisement and the international award-winning packaging design began to be widely discussed and spread. In an era when emotional needs are increasingly valued by consumers, brand war is also a psychological and emotional war. When the industry is mature, both large enterprises, as well as small and medium-sized enterprises, can produce high-quality products. Brands that can make full use of the emotional strategy well and enter the hearts of consumers can really attract consumers.

5 Conclusions

The market for drinking water in China at the moment is flooded with many brands. To differentiate themselves from the competition, the major brands should employ emotional marketing techniques effectively. Production technology and quality assurance among big companies have advanced and matured along with societal growth. Consumers are more interested in the realization of emotional demands' resonance and personality than only the items' utility. Nongfu Spring realizes the emotional brand image strategy through the effective use of social media with emotional advertising strategy and packaging design and builds emotional interaction and communication with consumers. The setting of "skippable advertisements" quickly gained a good impression on consumers. The audience's emotional resonance was created through the micro-documentary stories about the water supply, manufacturing technology, design concept, and staff. At the same time, Nongfu Spring's packaging design by utilizing regional elements reflects a strong humanistic atmosphere, as well as the ecological care of the brand. The packaging series cooperated with NetEase Cloud Music to arouse the emotional response of consumers through AR technology and touching copywriting, creating a more vivid consumption situation and emotional experience atmosphere for consumers. It can be seen that the emotional marketing strategy is one of the main factors for Nongfu Spring to maintain its leading position in the industry. The success of Nongfu Spring is inevitable. Nongfu Spring integrates the brand vision into every detail, and then conveys it to consumers, leaving a deep impression on their hearts of consumers.

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