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# **Key success factors in health-related food marketing: A case study approach**

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**Paper prepared for presentation at the EAAE 2011 Congress**  
**Change and Uncertainty**  
Challenges for Agriculture,  
Food and Natural Resources

August 30 to September 2, 2011  
ETH Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland

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## **Abstract**

Every now and then, astonishing success stories can be observed on the food market. Many of the recent examples make reference to health characteristics and arguments. In order to analyse the possibly underlying success factors, an empirical case study approach was chosen. 27 successful European Union food marketing cases were purposively sampled from the database of renowned marketing effectiveness awards as well as following a series of food market expert interviews. Success factors were analyzed in a two-step approach, first for each case and then in a case-by-case comparison structured with a card sorting method. Six groups of success factors emerged from the analysis and named "data and knowledge", "emotions", "endorsement", "media", "community" and "why and how". Several success factors appeared to be of specific importance for the issue of health characteristics and arguments. It is concluded that considering the applicability of these case derived success factors might be a recommendable way of improving food marketing campaigns, especially when referencing to health in the communication.

## **Introduction**

The high failure rate in new food product launches (Stewart-Knox and Mitchell 2003) shows how difficult it is to develop successful food market campaigns in a complex and changing market environment. Every now and then, however, some success stories as e.g. 'Actimel' (Mellentin 2007) astonish the public and even food market experts. In the last ten years, the increasingly acknowledged societal burden of obesity (WHO 2007), but also the growing consumer interest into taking their health into their own hands by choosing healthy foods and diets have marked a trend towards communicating health characteristics and health arguments in food marketing. The development of a considerable market for functional foods (Bech-Larsen and Scholderer 2007; Verbeke 2005), but also the growing organic market sector (Willers and Kilcher 2010) are symptoms of this consumer food trend.

While one way of improving the success of food marketer's efforts is to predict consumer food trends and arguments more accurately by market research, another is to recapitulate lessons that can be learnt from successful recent examples that could actually be observed in the market environment. The objective of this paper is to present the respective key success factors identified in an empirical case study of recent successful EU food and beverage marketing case, with the aim of enabling their potential consideration when future food marketing campaigns are planned. The unique contribution of this work consists of selecting an empirical approach to this research question, as well as focusing especially on cases in which health or health-related well-being plays a role in the product characteristics or the communication.

## **Methodology**

Key success factors have a share in enabling a company to differentiate itself from its competitors and to offer a 'unique selling proposition' to customers or consumers (Batra, Myers and Aaker 1996; Ketelhöhn 1998). Key success factors have been described as stemming from different sources, as for example sources related to 1) the macro environment of the industry such as societal trends, 2) the industry in question as e.g. food industry, 3) the competitive strategy of the company, 4) temporal factors of influence within the company and 5) the managerial structure of the company (Grunert and Ellegaard 1993). This view implies a distinction between the external factors one does not have an influence on, but can only monitor and eventually act upon, versus internal factors that can be built on or developed further. It also shows that key success factors can be looked at on different levels, for example comparing the food industry with the tourism industry, or different business areas within the food industry. The key success factors are furthermore interrelated with each other as well as "embedded in a network of other relevant skills and resources" which contribute to the factor that exerts the greatest impact on success (Grunert and Ellegaard 1993, p. 263). Apart from scientific research on key success factors in areas such as mature markets and industrial products (Sousa de Vasconcellos 1991), new product development (Lynn et al. 1999) and food markets (Biström and Nordström 2002; Stewart-Knox and Mitchell 2003), detecting success factors is also an important issue with respect to monitoring effectiveness of communication and advertising (Tellis 2005). An analysis of this kind of information has

been carried out, for example, by institutions organizing advertising award such as the European Association of Communications Agencies and the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising (the latter published as Binet and Field 2007).

Case studies are often used in social sciences and have their strength in the fact that they gather and generate knowledge and experience about complex phenomena that are closely connected to a particular context (Merriam 2009; Yin 2008). In business education they are also argued for because “by looking at many cases, one develops an understanding, an intuition for business ecology, which, in future problem-solving situations, will improve the ability to look at the right cues in the environment and come up with the right strategic decision” (Grunert and Ellegaard, 1993, p. 250). In order to secure the quality of the research process regarding validity, reliability and reflexivity, similar procedures are suggested for case studies as for qualitative exploratory research in general (Carson et al. 2001; Flick 2009; Flyvbjerg 2006; Malterud 2001; Yin 2008).

Marketing and advertising effectiveness awards, especially the rigorous ones among the awards, are typically awarded based on 1.) the submission of data proving the consumer behaviour change outcome (e.g. change in market share, sales, attitude or awareness), and 2.) a vote from a jury of professionals from the sector. This kind of awards is therefore comparable to the peer-review process in science, and based on this rationale were selected as the main source of cases. Documents were drawn from the European EACA Euro Effie award, the national Polish Effie award, the UK's IPA effectiveness award, the Spanish Eficacia award and the European IMC award for Integrated Marketing Communications. Furthermore, seven interviews with food market experts were conducted in order to access cases that were too new to have been represented in awards, or not represented for other reasons. Keywords on possibly interesting brands or campaigns were entered into Internet search engines in order to gather further hints from online media reports and into YouTube for an impression of the popularity and the content or format of TV advertisements. Purposive sampling among the cases gathered based on the awards and interviews was based on good availability of information from at least two different sources and in consideration of achieving a distribution of cases across different regions, target groups, product categories, company sizes and types of marketing activities. The selected products had to have favourable healthfulness characteristics when compared to other foods of the same kind, or the campaign had to focus on health-related characteristics as possibly perceived by consumers. 19 Personal interviews were conducted to complement information for the 27 cases selected for inclusion in the analysis. All interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The cases were first analysed one by one by summarizing the information into a concise description by at least two of the researchers involved, including a list of preliminary success factors. As a second step, a comparative case analysis was carried out during a joint two-day workshop of the researchers and invited communication experts. The cases were discussed and possible success factors were reduced to the key success factors in a procedure structured by a card sorting method. The key success factors were each elicited from several of the cases. Finally, the success factors were grouped under higher level categories and finally presented in the time-wise sequence in which they affect a

marketing activity. Groups were formed because several factors appeared to be related closely enough to allow summarizing them into a meaningful category, but they were also different enough in type and application to be regarded as independent constructs.

## Results

Six groups of key success factors emerged from the analysis. The sequence of the groups illustrates the fact that the clusters can be regarded as important in first, the design of the marketing activity, second, the actual composition and implementation of the marketing approach, and third, the consumer dealing with the message and converting it into action.

### *Design of the marketing activity*

The success of several of the cases and their campaigns appeared to be based on obtaining or possessing substantial **“data and knowledge”**. Such knowledge could either be scientific nutritional evidence justifying nutrition or health claims, or market and consumer behaviour insights, thus these success factors were called “nutritional evidence” and “consumer insights”. These types of data are typically actively sought by conducting or commissioning research. Superior knowledge could, however, also be more intuitive knowledge and awareness about emerging trends that allowed ‘doing the right thing at the right time’. Swedish Skåne Dairy for example is marketing the “ProViva” probiotic juice successfully. It was developed on the basis of extensive nutritional research, and was the first product officially granted a health claim in Sweden. Danone conducted thorough consumer research to prepare the relaunch of its ‘Activia’ yoghurt in the UK. On the basis of this research, the communication focused on the yet un-tackled insight that most women complain about feeling ‘bloated’ from time to time. The producers of the innovative German-based organic soft drink “Bionade”, in contrast, had insufficient financial resources to afford such research, but appear to have sensed the right timing with the macro-environmental trend for organic and natural food and the right approach to the young, urban and educated target group. A further success factor representing this observation was called “trend awareness”.

### *Composition and implementation of the marketing activity*

Several of the examples derived their success from a communicational approach that in complementation of the factual information, largely focused on the **“emotions”** and thus the emotional side of the message. The success factor of “emotional engagement” thus allows for more emotional involvement of consumers with the product or message. TV spots for “Ricola” cough drops originating from Switzerland featured humour: the actor personifying the Swiss was trying to catch other nations claiming to be the inventors, with both sides portrayed with an exaggerated stereotype. The spots for the Polish “Fortuna” juice – a brand that was the first to introduce juices without added sugar on the Polish market - incorporated a fear appeal (“bad” but funny sugar-cube characters trying to seduce the fruits to mingle with them). Furthermore, a characteristic that repeatedly appeared was the emotional appeal to modern citizens’ wish for ‘simplicity’, ‘naturalness’ and ‘back to nature’, and this issue was thus called a success factor of “simple naturalness”. A campaign that highlights this success factor was an impactful

campaign for the Polish water brand 'Kropla Beskidu' belonging to the multinational company Coca-Cola. In these spot, simple moments of happiness in everyday urban life were shown linked to water and enforced by an emotional song called "touch of joy".

Another characteristic of the approach observed in several cases was using different forms of **"endorsement"** to create trust and credibility. In a number of cases, this endorsement is granted by involving respected or well known celebrities, role models or heroes on a commercial basis. Therefore, this key success factor is called "vertical endorsement". Examples include the actor who formerly played 'Captain Kirk', William Shatner, in a series of humorous TV advertisements encouraging consumers to try Kellogg's 'All-Bran' cereal as part of a 'two-week challenge'. An endorsement could, however, also be an integral part of the company itself and its history that adds credibility to the message, thus this success factor was called "credible company". The latter was the case with the UK-based start-up company 'Ella's kitchen': Ella is the daughter of the founder himself, who is a father wanting to produce healthy and tasty Smoothies for his children.

A further characteristic observed in the cases was a reference to social **"communities"** that the consumers belong to. This could mean that the underlying message addresses or appeals to general social values, interests and responsibilities and evokes a sense of 'common grounds' in consumers that encourages them to 'appropriate' the campaign. For example, in the TV advertisements for the 'Aquarius' sports drink brand in Spain, humans are portrayed as being unpredictable, extraordinary and creative, thus celebrating a characteristic which is often used to differentiate humans from animals. This underlying message is an example of a success factor that was called "common value". Another example is the UK 'Test the nation's heart' campaign for Unilever's 'Flora pro-active' margarine brand, in which a medical team toured the country performing heart health tests in front of supermarkets. The message of the campaign underlined the notion that it is the nation's problem and hence a shared responsibility with a notion of 'we're in it together'. Another aspect of "community" refers to local regional tradition or valuables, and as such unites consumers on the grounds of "local relevance". The water brand "Kropla Beskidu", for example, relates to the Polish mountain region of the Beskides. A more direct version of the appeal to social communities involves triggering active participation of, or even interaction between, consumers and the campaign, often in connection with the use of new media and social network sites. An example of this success factor called "participation" is Nestlé's baby food brand launch 'Natures' in Germany and Sweden. Mothers who had tested the products were encouraged to share their experiences on the website, and could even connect to each others and follow up on news via Facebook.

Choosing the best match of main media or the right combination of media for communication activities is obviously crucial in marketing, and thus this kind of success factors stemming from **"media"** were also observed in the cases. TV was the main and even the only medium in a number of cases, as e.g. in the case of the humorous 'Ricola – Who invented it?'- campaign where the use of TV was justified by the rich possibilities to appeal to emotions. In other examples, a combination and often massive use of various media aiming at a '360 degree' approach seemed to be important for the success, as for

example in the case of the re-launch of Danone's 'Activia'. Thus, success factors "matching media" and "combined media" were listed to highlight these two distinct observations. Media type and extensiveness of use might however not exclusively be a matter of financial investment, as communication can also be approached in alternative ways. The communication of "Bionade" was until recently entirely built on sampling at events and word-of-mouth among the trend-setters in Germany. Of great help for creating success was among others favourable "media coverage" that yielded positive publicity and non-funded mass media communication, triggering the interest of possible resellers in the food market.

#### *Consumer message processing and behavioural reaction*

The **"why and how"** group of success factors deals with conveyance of the marketing message as well as the facilitation of the consumer's capability to understand the main message and the motivation and ability to act accordingly. Three aspects were common to the investigated cases. First, messages were simple and clear enough to be understood by an 'average' consumer thus this success factor was called "clear message". Second, motivation to act was encouraged by presenting long-term benefits like improved health combined with short-term benefits such as good taste, wellness or good looks that are closer to today's consumer concerns, thus reflecting a success factor called "close benefits". Third, how to achieve these benefits step by step was clearly explained, thus called "achievability". One example highlighting these three success factors is Kellogg's 'Special K' cereal brand campaign. The 'Drop a jeans-size'-campaign focused on the related well-being and satisfaction of slimming as a benefit rather than stressing the health outcome. The use of the product was easily understandable and benefits could be achieved in a foreseeable time by following the formula 'two bowls – two meals – two weeks'.



## **Discussion**

To our knowledge, no other empirical study on key success factors in food marketing with a special focus on healthy characteristics or using health-related arguments has been conducted so far. We suggest that the importance of several of the success factors in our study might be attributed to this focus on 'health'. The success factors for which this can be especially argued for are the observation that success of commercial food marketing relies on well-founded nutritional evidence, can also derive from alertness to trends, might be based on appealing to emotions and specifically to the modern citizens' wish for simple naturalness or is rooted in using endorsement and relating to common values. Nutritional evidence is a factor of obvious importance for health-related food arguments. Health as well as different types and tones of health arguments are furthermore a recent and fast changing trend in the food market. Emotions can of course be of importance for all kinds of consumer goods. Food, however, is a product that is especially linked to the combination of 'longing' for simplicity and naturalness alike. Linked to this, it can also be argued that food's cultural value and importance for social interaction suggest the success of an appeal to 'social communities'. The 'health' characteristics as a benefit that can usually neither be searched nor experienced might need endorsement in order to achieve credibility.

Concluding from the study, it has to be noted that a better and empirically-based understanding of what might have determined success in earlier examples will not guarantee food marketer's efforts to be fruitful. However, following the case approach, empirical learning from success stories might improve the right intuitive approach. It is thus suggested that considering the applicability of these case derived success factors might be a recommendable way of improving food marketing campaigns, especially when referencing to health in the communication.

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