

2/2000

planung & analyse

Zeitschrift für Marktforschung und Marketing

Irene Hubertz

The brand on the couch: The essence of the brand and how it can be measured

Translated Reprint



Dr. Irene Hubertz is the Commercial Director of the company Infratest Burke Marketingforschung in Frankfurt. She studied at Heinrich Heine University in Düsseldorf and at the Sapienza in Rome. She then received her PhD in Psychology at the University of Witten Herdecke, where she worked as a scientific researcher with a research assignment from the Federal Ministry of Research and Technology in the area of cancer research. She worked as a qualitative market researcher at MTC, Düsseldorf in the area of consumer goods and was employed as Marketing Manager at Drugofa in Cologne, a Bayer company. Irene Hubertz has been with Infratest Burke since 1996 and is responsible for the area of Fast Moving Consumer Goods, especially dealing with image and brand equity research and volume prognoses as well as price research.

Irene Hubertz

The brand on the couch: The essence of the brand and how it can be measured

One of the two purchase motives evaluates the **functions of the purchase object**, the brand or the product. Included here are such functions as taste, price, value-for-money and quality; objectively measurable, haptic, sensitively ascertainable attributes that satisfy the physiological needs. These functions are very easy to evaluate and to describe, as well, as they are perceived consciously, take place on the conscious level, and are also easy to assess in market research terms: They can be verbally ascertained through questions. This can obviously take place with a higher or lower degree of validity, reliability and objectivity. Measuring the evaluation of the functions of the purchase object should not pose a problem, however, when certain market research skills are applied.

The second purchase motive evaluates the emotional **aura of the purchase object**, the product or brand. These attributes are perceived intuitively and assessed instinctively. We cannot describe these attributes or give examples of these, because precisely *the absence of the ability to verbalise* is an integral part of these attributes. There is no kind of verbalisation that can accomplish this. Non-sensory perception, that is, non-haptic, non-visual, non-acoustic, non-olfactory perception, also contributes to this lack of ability to verbalise. The perception of these attributes primarily takes place sub-consciously or unconsciously and is carried out by brain structures which are not located in the more recently evolved cerebrum, which comprises our consciousness,

but rather in the much older brain stem and interbrain, which steer unconscious processes that are much more holistic than the consciously perceived sensory perception processes.

This holistic perception on an unconscious level therefore creates a problem for market research, since we cannot depict these implicit attributes of a brand with our usual questionnaire technology. Due to these difficulties in measuring and assessing *the gut feeling* many marketing departments have not considered these unconscious attributes and the aura in their far-reaching decisions involving brand strategy and the composition of their portfolios.

The perception of the unconscious brand personality appears to be much more constant and resistant to change than functional attributes. This holds especially true for brands that we know from our childhood, or have known for a long time. This also means that a brand *personality* requires time (and investment) in order to establish itself. The evaluation of the personality, the soul of a brand or a product, proceeds automatically and cannot be controlled. We instinctively recognise a brand and how we relate to it. We feel if the aura of a brand signals warmth or coolness, activity or quiet, social integration or individuality.

The process of making purchase decision

Even though the two levels of a brand are assessed by different evaluation mechanisms located in different centers of the consumer's brain; the functional

Why do consumers buy brands? Why do consumers buy anything at all? There are basically two completely different motives for this, but both are of fundamental importance for the purchase action. This means that the purchase action will generally not take place if one of the motives remains unfulfilled. An overfulfillment of one of the motives cannot compensate for the underfulfillment of the other motive.

When a consumer decides for (or against) a brand, the rational involvement with the brand („What do I get from the brand?“) is equally as important as the spontaneous – emotional relationship with the brand („Do I feel comfortable with the brand?“)

by the cerebrum and the emotional by the brain stem and interbrain, we are able to tie both attribute clusters together. The brain joins the different aspects together into one, firstly through a mutual exchange of information in both directions, and secondly through the influence on the cerebrum by the unconsciously functioning, autonomous brain stem and interbrain. The reverse influence of the cerebrum on the interbrain, that is, the influence of the unconscious mind on the conscious, proceeds extremely slowly, however, and is not very defined. Thus the unconscious mind strongly determines what we consciously perceive. **We feel before we think** (Daniel Goleman, 1998).

Although the unconscious mind greatly determines our thinking, and even though the unconscious side of a brand strongly determines our interest, the emotional-intuitive evaluation of a brand personality is not by any means always the criterion for decisions regarding brand purchase. The importance of the emotional and functional spheres in the purchase decision varies greatly from person to person and category to category.

For example, if a consumer does not expect a product to be more than a commodity, to fulfill generic attributes that the category offers, if the consumer is therefore *not demanding*, the price will be a more important key driver for him than the psychology of the brand, even if he knows and recognises the psychological differences between the brands, and even if he would choose a different brand, namely the brand he feels most comfortable with, if the brands were priced the same. The prices in our ex-

ample and in market reality are not identical, however, and our consumer will therefore choose a product in the lower end of the price segment. In this case he will not choose at random, however, he will choose whatever he feels relatively most comfortable with. The importance of the factors determines the purchase and the consumer will automatically create a ranking of these factors for his purchase, and will choose the brand or product that offers the best fulfillment of the weighted factors.

According to our observations, we can assume that in the fast moving consumer goods or packaged goods categories the price is the most important decision-making factor for 10 – 30 percent of consumers. This share has not changed since the 70s and 80s, where the appearance of store's own labels and brands led to hysteria among manufacturers of brand-name products, who envisioned the continued growth of store's own labels and brands. The trade industry – especially in Germany – used only the marketing mix factor of price to steer consumers and thus suffered heavy losses. In the 90s we were concerned about the image growth of Aldi, a synonym for smart shopping, and consumer test publications whose ratings were based solely on functional criteria and who thereby degraded brands to an unnecessary cost-incurring attribute.

Nevertheless the brand plays a very important role in purchase decisions. The marketing process has become more difficult, however, as competition has increased and thus also the consumer's relevant set. Producers can no longer distinguish themselves through better

quality products, since an increase in quality is often hardly possible. The large range of offers encourages the consumer to continue making trial purchases to determine if there is a brand that might be better than the one he usually buys. Or he decides to add a further brand to his relevant set. Brand loyalty is defined by the number of repeat purchases, the time in which a certain brand continues to be purchased. The increase in the number of products in a category and its advertising must lead, on average, to an inevitable decrease in brand loyalty. It has become more difficult to tie a consumer to a brand.

Market shares are determined by the best possible positioning, especially when it is almost impossible to distinguish a brand through product quality. As a rule the largest possible consumer group must be satisfied as accurately as possible. Successful niche products may aim at a smaller target group, but these products are also committed to clarity and precision with regard to satisfying consumer needs.

The problem of conventional image research

Up to now companies have been spending large sums of money to analyse functional brand attributes, often with poor results, since brands with similar test results vary greatly with regard to their market success. Most importantly, brands with good test results lag behind their expectations, they do not achieve their targets and consequently pose a problem for the companies concerned. In many of these cases distribution and the level of awareness (advertising budget) cannot explain the discrepancy in expectations.

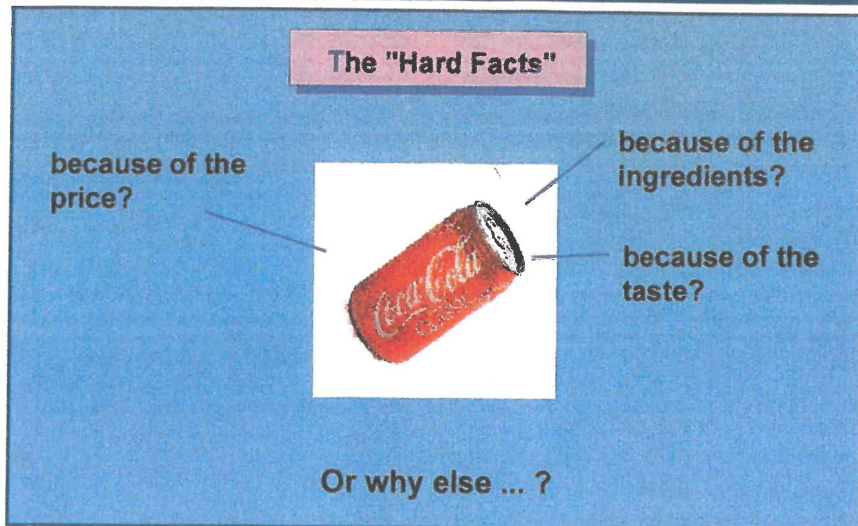
In the area of market research we continually encounter findings which contradict market reality. This practically proves that we cannot validly measure everything with the usual methods. Conventional image research depicts only a part of reality, namely that which occurs at a conscious level. Unconscious or sub-conscious perception is being ignored, although in many markets and brands it determines the identity of the brand much more than the functions, which all products, even those in discount and price-oriented

ABSTRACT

The article discusses the difficulty of measuring unconscious thoughts and feelings

and the weaknesses of conventional market research in cataloguing a brand holistically. The brand value is perceived by the customer as an entirety with which he identifies himself. Purchase and customer loyalty result from this identification, which can occur for any number of reasons, mostly at a subconscious level. The brand is assessed by Infratest Burke using the Implicit System (Impsys). This system can characterise the unconscious brand personality using validated pictures, and the conscious brand identity using (usually more than 100) attributes, as well as being able to characterise both aspects of the brand in a reference system. Strategic recommendations derive from a comparison of the market with market segmentation, communication and new concepts, all of which can be similarly characterised in the same reference system.

Diagram 1: Why do people buy it...?



markets, can fulfill in similar ways. What is being said here is basically **what a brand means** and **what a brand does not mean**.

The essence of a brand is not determined by the fulfillment of functions, which store's own labels and brands can also provide today. A brand is made by conveying the personality, which develops and becomes established and forms into an image in the mind of the consumer.

Most image research methods are not able to diagnose holistic brand images. We need holistic measuring methods, however, to uncover brand problems, particularly with brands that send out different, in themselves contradictory messages. For example, if the explicit brand positioning describes a family product and the intuitively perceived brand personality radiates a status-oriented aura, the function and the emotion of a brand will contradict each other. We can describe such a brand as being diffuse and incongruent. We would not recognise this discrepancy with conventional image research. Our brand would be considered a family brand, and we would wonder why it steadily continues to lose market shares.

Why do people buy Coca-Cola? What differentiates strong brands from weak ones?

With the exception of those consumers who cover the largest part of their carbohydrate consumption with cola

drinks, the remaining category users will have difficulty in a blind test in tasting the differences in the products that are established in Western Germany. The temperature of the drink is possibly a better explanation for the variance than the taste (see diagram 1).

On the other hand, when brand aficionados are asked why they prefer this brand over another, the first reason they give is that it tastes better to them. The given, verbalised reason, which – as so often – depicts a rationalisation, is thus not identical with the real motives. We can assume that the brand contributes twice as much to the variance of the taste experience as the taste itself – without us being aware of this, or this awareness being easy to achieve.

Rationalisation is an unconscious mechanism that serves to explain our behaviour to us, which in turn conveys emotional security. We can assume that the level of rationalisation is an indicator for the level of emotional movement. Therefore the greater the rationalisation, the more unconscious emotions there are which must be explained and are being concealed by it (Iceberg – Syndrome).

What characterises strong brands

Strong brands:

- ... are not only distinguished by a single word, rather they embody a strong idea, a world which is connected to a cluster of associations. These associations are part of a con-

tinuum, are very clear and unmistakable and pose no contradictions or mental puzzles for us.

- ... utilize the entire marketing mix to expand their world, always use the same testimonials, logos, icons, images, slogans, et cetera in all advertising media to convey a uniform message.
- ... are based on a cluster of actually existent (not imaginary) consumer needs.
- ... offer for these needs a holistic solution that contains emotional relevance and agreement.
- ... therefore have a relatively large spread.
- ... emerge through a vision which is firmly anchored in the values of the organization, meaning that they are not of peripheral interest to a company.
- ... are process-oriented and dynamic in a systemic, consistent and creative sense, whereby these processes are always oriented towards consumer needs.
- ... realise consistent strategies in brand leadership and develop their solutions using founded consumer and brand knowledge.
- ... distinguish themselves through perfect product engineering and a perfect concept-product-fit, so that the generated expectations are fulfilled or overfulfilled.

In this context and with all activities involving the brand, we must keep in mind that a **brand** is that which exists in the **minds of people**, not that which has been brought to paper as a positioning in our marketing plans. If we use the latter as our basis, we will most likely overburden our consumers, and communicate and advertise right past them.

How does the consumer profit from the brand, the brand personality (not the product)

- The brand makes it easier to express one's own personality. A brand represents characteristics with which the consumer attributes himself and which belong to his self-image or which depict his ideal, or with which he compensates for what he himself is not or cannot afford.

- The brand helps one to differentiate oneself, it helps the individual to become an individual, to stand out from the rest and to identify himself as a member of a certain reference group (peer group) respectively.

A brand must have an identification potential (for the largest possible target group) in order to be able to perform this function. As soon as basic needs are satisfied, the desires for individuality, self-realization and the expression of one's own personality come to bear (Maslow, 1956).

Self-Expression: The expression of one's own personality, self-realization

The brands that we use tell us something about ourselves. Objectively seen, the attributes of the brand are not identical with the attributes of the target group, which means that we find only a moderate correlation between the profile of a brand and that of its target group. The brand can be a mirror image of the consumer. For example, people who are active in sports often consume products that can be connected to athletics. *Nike* shoes are also worn in activities outside of the area of sports. The same holds true for *Isostar* and *Corny* muesli bars. A housewife who sees herself as lady of the house will use *Bad Reichenhaller* salt in her household, whereas a housewife who takes pride in economising will buy the corresponding product from Aldi. The demanding woman feels herself drawn towards *L'Oreal* products, the down-to-earth woman prefers *Nivea* products.

On the other hand a brand can also depict a hero, a compensation medium that helps the consumer to bridge his or her own discrepancy between an ideal image and the real one. Porsche drivers often are not young, dynamic racers, rather they are staid and steady drivers over fifty years of age who are perhaps regaining a small piece of their lost youth when they drive a Porsche, or think their Porsche might link them to others who have these attributes. The young and attractive dynamic represents an ideal image that this person can no longer achieve, or which he regains to a certain degree through compensation. The testimonials of the

LaPerla lingerie brand are significantly older than the consumer group. When the company recognized this, it changed its communication strategy and used younger models in its advertising, which led to a decline in sales. The mature woman signalled the status symbolism of this lingerie, since a younger woman cannot afford to buy expensive lingerie. This shows that a young model is not credible with this brand.

Dishwashing detergents are primarily used by women, yet the brands that we use do not all have female personalities. *Palmolive* represents the gentle, female, care-oriented personality, while *Fairy* in comparison represents the powerful, performance-oriented male personality. Both are strong brands with totally different positionings and different target groups.

We as human beings generally tend to have illusions with regard to our own images; this helps us to deal with life. Disillusionment in the sense of *looking at yourself through the eyes of your surroundings* undermines our self-confidence.

Market segmentation in the sense of brand segmentation is therefore not a depiction of the target group segmentation.

Distinctiveness: To stand out from the rest, differentiate oneself, individualisation

A brand helps us to differentiate, to let us stand out from the rest, so that we subjectively upgrade our personality with the brands we utilize. A brand helps us to experience our own increased value, a value that is at least different than the values that surround us.

Seen subjectively (not objectively), to be different always means to be something special. To be special gives us self-confidence, and this in turn makes our life more valuable.

Young people do not wear jeans because their parents do; 40 years ago young people wore jeans because their parents rejected these. Selective cosmetics and pharmacy brands are undoubtedly bought primarily for reasons of distinctiveness. In our striving to be different we nevertheless orient ourselves toward a group, often a minority, with which we identify, meaning that we usually make certain we are not alone and that our being different is understood.

The degree to which these two benefits are present varies according to consumer, category and brand. Self-realization probably plays a larger role with *Nivea*, whereas with *L'Oreal* it is distinctiveness.

The measure of the brand as a holistic image in the heads and hearts of people

We have made it our task to analyse the conscious (explicit) and sub-conscious (implicit) brands contents and to integrate these into a coherent brand image. At this point I would like to outline the results of our research over the last 20 years which has led to an internationally validated method already used in over 300 studies (internationally as well).

We feel before we think

The analysis of more or less rational, consciously flowing images which are processed in the cerebrum – that involve **thought** – creates no problems

KURZFASSUNG

Der Beitrag diskutiert die Schwierigkeit der Messung von unbewussten Inhalten und die Schwächen der herkömmlichen Marktforschung bei der Erfassung von Marke als ganzheitliches Gebilde. Marke wird als ganzheitlicher Wert gesehen, der zu Identifikation und in Folge zu Kauf und Käufertreue führt. Die Identifizierung kann aus unterschiedlichen Gründen erfolgen, läuft aber größtenteils unbewusst ab. Die Messung der Marke wird bei Infratest Burke durch das Implizite System (Impsys) vorgenommen, das in der Lage ist, über validierte Bilder die unbewusste Markenpersönlichkeit und über (meist über 100) Attribute die bewusste Markenidentität darzustellen und beide Markenseiten in einem Referenzsystem abzubilden. Die strategischen Empfehlungen erfolgen durch den Vergleich des Marktes mit der Marktsegmentation sowie der Kommunikation und neuen Konzepten, ebenfalls im gleichen Referenzsystem darstellbar.

fore receives different positionings, this means that the *cheerful* position on the map could be a generic item for orange juice, while it might have a unique meaning in connection with men's fragrances.

The three examples in charts 4-6 show us very different brands of a category, even though the examples presented are more or less on the same price level. Brand 1 embodies competency and status, offers a world of associations that are grouped around the emotional evaluation of the brand. A large percentage of respondents (who are always category users) spontaneously formed an image in their minds and therefore decided to assess the brand.

This image is very clear in terms of thinking, as shown in the number and size of the depicted attributes. Emotional classification is very diffuse, however, and the assigned images are not clear, because the brand itself does not land too far from the center. The attributed dimensions and feelings are contradictory. This often occurs with brands which are represented in too many categories and where diversification was carried out at the cost of brand coherence. Frequent changes in communications strategies can be a further cause of this. This was not done intentionally, however, because the mental contents remain constant, but are shown in psychologically completely different worlds. Such changes can remain unnoticed unless the appropriate measuring instruments are used. Only a few respondents showed a qualified awareness for brand 2; most respondents could not imagine anything at all about the brand. The respondents who made an assessment had the same emotional image, which shows that the brand has clear-

ly made its mark. The mental world is located in the same segment, but it is very closely limited and very few terms are used to represent it. Here we have a distinct niche product for a small target group whose communication could use a more versatile boost. Established niche products that are able to perfectly satisfy their target groups have their own justification on the market. In other words: a small brand is not automatically a niche product.

Brand 3 is practically the counter product to brand 2 with regard to emotional aura, but not a niche product like brand 2, because it was evaluated by most respondents. Here also the rating of emotion was clear and distinct. We can assume that this is a relatively large brand which is very inexpensive in price. The mental aura, – also strongly distinct – embodies the conservative, older personality with everything that this encompasses. Certainly not an *in-product*, but possibly successful, when we consider the age structure in Germany and other European countries. On the other hand, age is a relative attribute, and *older* always means *older than I am*. If *older* is already brand imminent, this could also mean distance for the target group. The target group is basically saying: this is not a product for me, this product is for persons who are older than I am.

We cannot evaluate which positioning is desirable until we have compared the brand with the market segments, in

Diagram 4: Brand 1: Sporty, luxurious, masculine stereotype

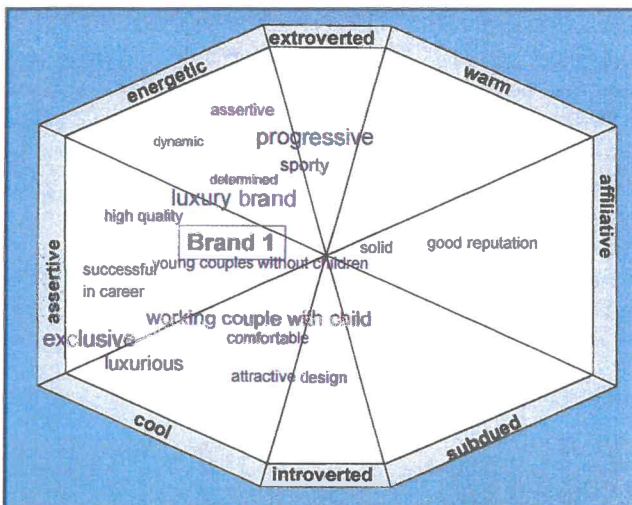


Diagram 5: Brand 2 – The modern niche product

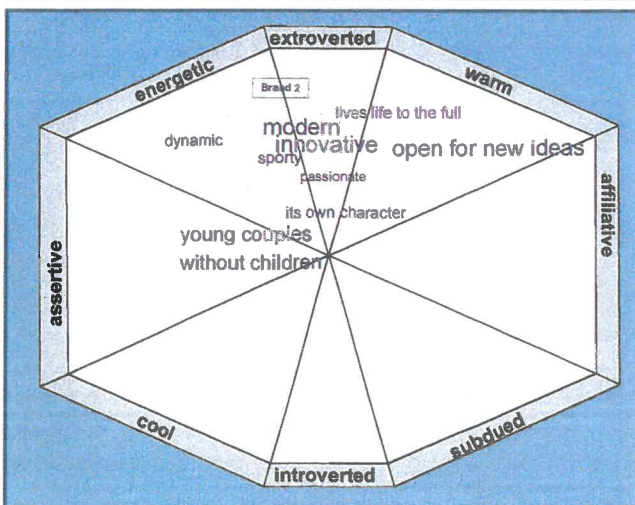


Diagram 6: Brand 3 – Conservative and safety-oriented

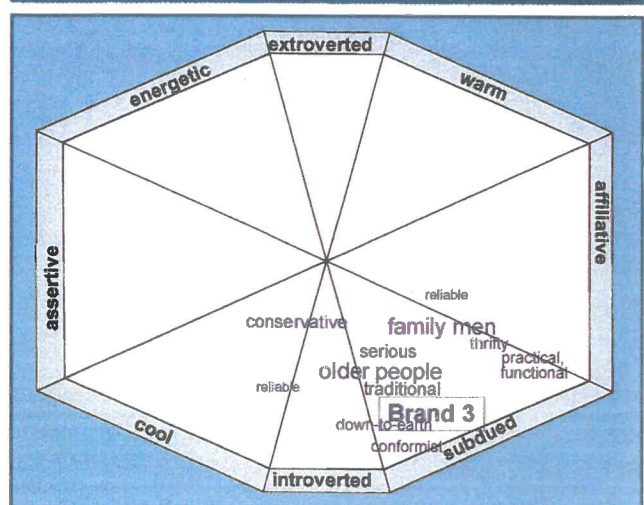
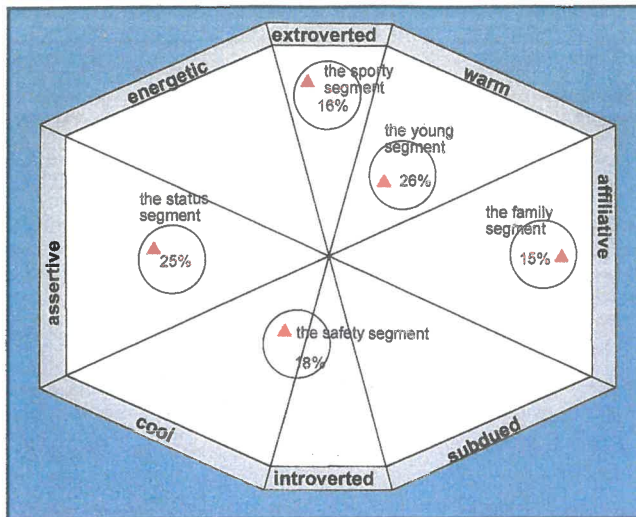


Diagram 7: Market segmentation



other words, with the market's requirements. The segments vary in number and size from market to market and must be quantified (see diagram 7).

Whether a recommendation can be made for a repositioning of a brand depends on the competitive pressure, on the brand's own emotional and mental profile and on the size of the brand's segment and the interest competitors show for it.

In order to determine if a change in communications strategy can be rec-

ommended, we must look at the communication strategy positioning that is depicted in the same reference system as the brand itself. Does it support the brand or even advance it, is it on or off strategy, is it emotionally or rationally coherent?

To see if a brand stretching is at all feasible, we calculate fitting coefficients to the relevant categories, which we are equally able to map. The same is true for a new positioning concept. More than 300 studies have been carried out with the Implicit System, most of these in the area of fast moving consumer goods, but several were also conducted in the durables and services categories. Most studies were carried out in Europe by Infratest Burke, but we have also successfully used the Implicit System (Impsys) in North and South America, as well as in Asia and Australia.

Impsys can be used as a qualitative method within focus groups and explorations as well as a quantitative approach whereby on average approximately one-half of the studies are carried out on the qualitative level and one-half on the quantitative level. Focus groups are often used as preliminary or follow-up studies. We feel this method excels because of its integrated and valid analysis of brand contents, its ability to be used holistically with all marketing mix tools and its flexibility with regard to the markets, in spite of standardisation, which guarantees reliability.

Impsys can be used as a qualitative method within focus groups and explorations as well as a quantitative approach whereby on average approximately one-half of the studies are carried out on the qualitative level and one-half on the quantitative level. Focus groups are often used as preliminary or follow-up studies. We feel this method excels because of its integrated and valid analysis of brand contents, its ability to be used holistically with all marketing mix tools and its flexibility with regard to the markets, in spite of standardisation, which guarantees reliability.

REFERENCES

- M. Tracy/F. Wiersema: Marktführerschaft: Wege zur Spitze, 1995
- A. Ries/L. Ries: Die 22 unumstößlichen Gebote des Branding, 1998
- J. Aaker: Brand Personality, a path to differentiation, 1970
- P. Heylen: The implicit way to people's mind, 1970