Influence of Product Attributes on Mobile Phone preference among university students: A Case of Undergraduate students

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Abstract

This paper examines the influence of product attributes on mobile phone preference among undergraduate university students. This paper presents a study that explores whether the varied product or brand attributes of mobile phones influence the students’ decision making and empirically evaluates their preferences in design, different colour themes and packaging. A descriptive research design was used for this study. The study used stratified random sampling method to select the elements of the population. The students were stratified according to their majors. Every third student from the majors to be studied was considered for the study. To collect primary data, questionnaires were administered to the respondents during classes of their majors. Data was analyzed using the SPSS software and results were presented in figures and tables. The descriptive statistics used were percentages and mean. The study indicates that varying the product attributes’ has an influence on the undergraduate students’ preferences on mobile phones. Various aspects of product and brand attributes were considered such as color themes, visible name labels, and mobile phone with variety of models, packaging for safety, degree of awareness on safety issues, look and design of the phone. Finding of this study indicates that these attributes have a significant influence on the student’s preference of mobile phone. Although, most of the respondents would not consider these attributes to be important when making the decision of which mobile phone to purchase. This paper concludes that students are at position to differentiate between the mobile phone offerings hence they decide which best suits their needs using the attributes.

Keywords: Mobile phone, Consumer Behavior, Consumer preference, Product attributes

Introduction

Consumer needs and wants are changing as technology advances. Therefore, developing highly successful new products is important through the integration of abilities of both upstream and downstream knowledge workers, made up of design engineers and manufacturing engineers respectively. Firms’ superior product development capabilities are derived from their ability to create, distribute and utilize knowledge throughout the product development process (Hong, et al. 2004). The most pervasive and influential thing in consumer behavior research is that purchases are preceded by a decision process. Researchers in this area seem to agree that two
or more alternatives usually exist and thus choice occur and evaluative criteria facilitate the forecasting for each alternative consequence. Consumers therefore have alternatives to pick from and the decision to pick any of the alternatives is based in individuals’ goals and objectives. The objectives range from personal to profit satisfaction. Consumer purchases are generally made by individual decision makers or decision-making units, either for themselves or for others with whom they have relationships (Kotler et al. 2009).

Kenya is a developing country and has witnessed fast growth in mobile telecommunication penetration since the year 2002. Kenyan population according to the 2009 census released by the Kenya Central Bureau of Statistics was recorded at 38.6 million people. The population growth rate is estimated at 2.69% per annum. It is also estimated that 63.2 percent of Kenyan households owned at least a mobile phone during that year (GoK, 2009). Worldwide mobile communication device sales to end users totaled 427.8 million units in the first quarter of 2011, an increase of 19 percent from the first quarter of 2010 (Gartner, 2011). In addition, Kimilog, Nasir and Nasir (2010) noted that as mobility becomes an increasingly prevalent force shaping the lifestyles of consumers, the market for the technologies and devices accompanying this trend also improves at a fast pace. Any product that offers individuals the ability to work, communicate or entertain themselves in a location-free manner captures immediate acceptance and diffuses rapidly into consumers’ lives. Mobile phones are one of the most conspicuous examples of such innovations achieving a large penetration rate in many markets. The dynamism of the mobile phone market can be observed both in consumer and business contexts.

Literature Review

Faced with competing products, it is important for companies to understand how buyers go about choosing between alternatives. According to Palmer (2000), a product is any tangible and intangible item that satisfies a need. Consumers do not buy products as an end in themselves. They buy products for the benefits which they provide. Products therefore comprise of complex bundles of attributes which must be translated into benefits for customers. The main challenge facing marketers today is how to influence the purchase behavior of consumers in favor of the product, service and experiences which they offer.

Product features are the biggest competitive tool for differentiating from competitor’s products. Being the first producer to introduce a needed and valued new feature is one of the most effective ways to compete. Companies should carry out periodic survey to help in identifying new features and decide which one to add to its product. In this way, the company can assess each feature’s value to customers versus its cost to the company. Kotler et al. (2006) noted that another way to add customer value is through distinctive product style and design. They indicate that design is a larger concept than style. Style simply describes the appearance of a product. Styles can be eye-catching or yawn producing. A sensational style may grab attention and produce pleasing aesthetics, but it does not necessarily make the product perform better. Unlike style, design is more than skin deep. This is to say it goes to the very heart or core of a product. Good design contributes to a product’s usefulness as well as to its
looks. Good style and design can attract attention, improve product performance, cut production costs, and give the product a strong competitive advantage in the target market.

Gwin et al. (2003) define product attributes as the characteristic or features that an object may or may not have and includes both intrinsic and extrinsic features. Benefits are the positive outcomes that come from the attributes. People seek products that have attributes that will solve their problems and fulfills their needs. Understanding why a consumer chooses a product based upon its attributes helps marketers to understand why some consumers have preferences for certain brands.

Both tangible and intangible attributes of a product are equally important in choosing a product or brand. It was found that more the attributes (non-negative) associated with a brand more loyal the customers are. Romariuk and Sharp (2003), suggested that marketers should focus more on how many attributes the brand should be associated with. However, the study did not specify what sort of attributes (relevant or irrelevant, tangible or intangible) marketers should associate the brand with. This is because it is important that consumer accurately learn about product attribute performances since it would influence their interpretations of product performance by causing memory encode and retrieval bias. Unfounded product attribute relationship beliefs can mislead them into expecting something that is not there. Hence if products fall short of customer expectations, then dissatisfaction would result. It was also found that though irrelevant, some attributes may still be important in influencing consumer choice.

Persistent preferences for product attribute occurs when there is low ambiguity in the initial potential choice for salient attributes coupled with experience, although those attributes maybe irrelevant that is an attributes usually not associated with favorable brand outcomes. According to Mason and Bequette (1998), perceptions on product performance based on salient attributes are more important in influencing the consumer purchase behavior than actual product attribute performances. For low-involvement products, consumers have more objective view of the nature of the attributes for example food and cosmetics, because they are constantly being advertised and promoted. We can say that consumer evaluation of a product can be broken down into evaluation related to product (tangible or physical attributes) and brand name (intangible attributes, or images added to the product due to its brand names).

However, perception of product performance on the salient attributes is more important than actual performance. The attributes that consumers expect in a product and how positively or negatively they rate these attributes to help develop and promote a successful product. Retailers need to be knowledgeable of the product attributes perceived as the most important by each individual consumer group in order to build and maintain market share. It is the consumer who determines which attributes matter to them. Different consumer groups place different importance on different attributes. Thus the study is justified as most of the past researches are either done on considering the handset or about the service providers, which does not extract the complete and true picture of consumer buying behavior of mobile phone.
Methodology

The research employed a descriptive research design for the study. This type of research attempts to describe such things as possible behavior, attitudes, values and characteristics. The descriptive research design was found to be appropriate for this study, because the purpose of the study was to determine the factors that influence mobile phone preference among university students when they are purchasing mobile phone or mobile phone related products. Mobile preference decision making was the dependent variable while the factors influencing the decision that is product and brand attributes were the independent variables.

Findings and Discussion

The findings indicate that actually product attributes significantly influences decision of university students when they are making the choice of mobile phone. The analysis revealed the following major findings; 29% of students prefer mobile phone with varied colour themes with mean score of M=2.5, while 27% of the students prefer mobile phone with visible labels with a mean score of M=2.5. Also students preferred mobile phone that come in wide variety of models and consider safety to be very important before making a purchasing decision at mean of M=2.3 and M=2.2 respectively. These findings agree with Gwin at el, (2003) who indicated that attributes are the characteristic or features that an object may or may not have and includes both intrinsic and extrinsic features. Benefits are the positive outcomes that come from the attributes. People seek products that have attributes that will solve their problems and fulfills their needs. Understanding why a consumer chooses a product based upon its attributes helps marketers to understand why some consumers have preferences for certain brands.

Kotler and Armstrong (2006) noted that another way to add customer value is through distinctive product style and design. He indicated that design is a larger concept than style. Style simply describes the appearance of a product. Styles can be eye-catching or yawn producing. A sensational style may grab attention and produce pleasing aesthetics, but it does not necessarily make the product perform better. Unlike style, design is more than skin deep. This is to say it goes to the very heart or core of a product. Good design contributes to a product’s usefulness as well as to its looks. Good style and design can attract attention, improve product performance, cut production costs, and give the product a strong competitive advantage in the target market. This premise has been confirmed by the study as according to the research, the students were influenced largely by look, design or style when choosing the preference of the mobile phone.

Conclusion

For most of the students mobile phone preference was significantly influenced by the attributes of the product or brand. They considered various product attributes as key in determining the nature of mobile phone they would like to purchase before considering price.
Product or brand attributes such as quality, data storage features, style and design are the benefits communicated and delivered. Therefore it can be concluded that the product features are a competitive tool for differentiating the company’s product from competitor’s products. Further it can be concluded that, being the first producer to introduce a needed and valued new feature is one of the most effective ways to compete thus enhancing consumer decision making process.

Way Forward

Product and brand attributes are significantly important to consumers when making their purchasing decision. Therefore mobile phone companies should carry out periodic survey to help in identifying new features and decide which ones to add to its product. In this way, the company can assess each feature’s value to customers versus its cost to the company. Moreover by determining which combination of these features match the current trends and consumer needs would be cost effective to the mobile phone companies.

Recent years have proved that in the mobile communication world technological innovation can either leave users totally disinterested, or lead to amazing market success. It’s important to conduct further research to understand why usage benefits are more important than technical performance of the mobile phone.

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