

Branded litter - marketing tool or turn off? (25 August 2006)

Manchester academics have been researching rubbish, and looking at the effects of litter on the reputation of the discarded product.

Big Manc: Macdonalds was one of the major brands covered in the study, but what can market leaders do to break the link between big sales and their product becoming synonymous with littering?

In their award winning study, *How (and Where) the Mighty Have Fallen: Branded Litter*, retail researchers Cathy Parks and Stuart Roper found that the more common the product, the more it is associated with litter and this connection was particularly strong for fast-moving consumer goods like snacks, cigarettes, drinks and fast food.

The study acknowledges that easily-recognisable packaging has increasingly become a primary medium for communicating brand messages, but questions if and how these brand messages alter if the packaging becomes litter.

Ms Parker, of Manchester Metropolitan University Business School (MMUBS) and her co-author from Manchester Business School, also suggest that in future the huge burden of clearing up litter might have to be shared by the large food and drink companies.

"Companies spend huge amounts of time and money constructing messages about their products but what of the potentially negative brand messages conveyed by tonnes of litter?," she said.

"Has the impact of such potentially negative messages been considered by brand owners and the packaging industry?"

She told edie that for the study 20 students recorded the litter they saw on their journeys between their lodgings and the university over a two week period, totalling 352 separate trips.

Walker's Crisps topped the list with any city centre visitor having an 83% chance of seeing a discarded packet. Coca Cola and Diet Coke came second and third respectively.

Marlboro Lites came top of the tobacco brands, Stella for alcohol and McDonald's for fast food.

But the study provides more than just an insight into the spending habits of the average Mancunian litter lout.

"It's not surprising to see fast moving consumer goods being so prominent when it comes to litter," said Ms Parker.

"The biggest offenders reflect the status of the brands. Coke, Walker's, Marlboro, Stella and McDonald's are all leaders in their respective categories.

"We argue that brands are still able to communicate a message when they are litter on the street, but we are not sure what message this is. If it is negative, it could significantly alter the way they do business."

She said that at this stage the study did not look at how litter might affect perceptions of a product and it was still unclear whether discarded packaging could help with a product's brand recognition after the product itself had been consumed.

"We only found one other research article that suggested that litter could damage a brand's image," she told edie.

"The rest of the marketing literature builds on the "more you see it the more you like it" principle. Nevertheless, all these studies assume that the brand is being seen in a pre-purchase context, like on a supermarket shelf or in an advert.

"We really don't know how a post-purchase litter context may affect a consumer's perception of a brand."

The team plans to begin a follow up study in September, looking at whether litter can turn people away from a brand.

Around 300 people will be quizzed on whether they think litter reflects badly on the company that produced the packaging.

"[The experiment] has been designed to test whether there is a link between the context in which a brand is seen - ie litter - and perceptions of that brand and purchase intentions," said Ms Parker.

"If a litter context is shown to have a negative effect that we can start to quantify this and provide this evidence to CSR departments.

"For example, it may be more cost effective for a company to spend less on traditional forms of advertising their product pre-purchase and spend the money educating consumers to put the litter in the bin or co-funding litter collection, if the negative effect of seeing a brand as litter is stronger than the positive effect of seeing it in a pre-purchase context."

How (and Where) the Mighty Have Fallen: Branded Litter won the best paper award at the annual Academy of Marketing Conference in London this month.

Sam Bond



A paper co-authored by Cathy Parker, Director of the Retail Enterprise Network, looking at the impact of branded litter on consumer perception won the best paper award at the annual Academy of Marketing Conference in London this month.

The paper, 'How (and Where) the Mighty Have Fallen', introduces a new area of marketing related research – how consumers perceive branded packaging, 'post-consumption'. While recognising that packaging has increasingly become a primary medium for communicating brand messages, Cathy along with co-author Stuart Roper of Manchester Business School, question if and how these brand messages alter if the packaging becomes litter.

Cathy and Stuart ask: 'What happens to this carefully constructed message once the contents of the package have been consumed? What of the potentially negative brand messages that are displayed when packaging is not properly disposed of and ends up as litter on the streets? Has the impact of such potentially negative brand messages been considered by brand owners and the packaging industry?'

The paper presents a study undertaken by students of MMUBS in Manchester City Centre which identified the brands that most frequently occurred as litter. Walker's Crisps topped the list with any city centre visitor having an 83% chance of seeing a discarded packet. Coke & Diet Coke came second and third respectively. Marlboro Lite came top of the tobacco brands as did Stella for alcohol and McDonald's for fast food.

'It's not surprising to see fast moving consumer goods being so prominent when it comes to litter,' says Cathy.

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There is a strong prospect of further research in this area.

Cathy and Stuart say: 'We argue that brands are still able to communicate a message when they are litter on the street, but we are not sure what message this is. We plan to investigate the attitudes of consumers to branded litter. The positive, negative or indeed ambivalent attitude of consumers and the subsequent impact upon brands and their image needs further research.'

The findings of future research are likely to have huge consequences. It was recently reported that around 300 tonnes of rubbish is discarded per day by people in Manchester City Centre alone which is a burden on the taxpayer. If it is revealed that litter could trigger negative decision making from consumers then social responsibility for keeping the environment clean would become a much higher corporate priority for some of the world's most well known brands.

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FURTHER INFORMATION

For more information on the paper contact Cathy Parker on 0161 247 6056 or c.parker@mmu.ac.uk

NOTES TO EDITORS

1. About 'How (and Where) the Mighty Have Fallen: Branded Litter'

This paper appears in the Journal of Marketing Management, Volume 22, 5/6, pages 473-487 for 2006.

It won the award for the best paper presented at the Academy of Marketing Conference in July 2006. The award is sponsored by the Journal of Marketing Management.

This year's conference was hosted by the Middlesex University Business School (<http://mubs.mdx.ac.uk/am2006/>).

2. About Cathy Parker

Cathy Parker is a Principal Lecturer in Retailing at the Manchester Metropolitan University Business School and Director of the Retail Enterprise Network. She has published in international journals such as the International Journal of Service Industries Management, the European journal of Marketing and the Journal of Marketing Management. Her research interests include the independent retail sector and town and city centre management and marketing.

3. About Stuart Roper

Stuart Roper is Lecturer in Marketing at Manchester Business School, UK. His main teaching interests focus on branding, marketing strategy and services marketing. His PhD involved research into corporate branding and reputation in the business-to-business sector. He is co-author of the book Corporate Reputation and Competitiveness and his main research area is branding. Prior to working in academia Stuart gained marketing management experience in business-to-business markets, notably in the telecommunications sector.

4. About the Academy of Marketing

The overall objective of the Academy of Marketing is to further marketing education and research and; to pursue activities and policy which further the professional development of marketing education; to encourage and promote academic research in marketing; to support marketing academics and associated staff as they develop their careers; to provide for regular liaison between marketing academics and associated organisations with related aims and activities for the benefit of members and the discipline; to foster a positive relationship between the requirements of practice and the academic discipline; and to seek representation on the issues arising in these activities at the highest levels of government, education and industry, to secure recognition and action, where required. (<http://www.academyofmarketing.info/>).

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