COUNTRY IMAGE AS A MARKETING COMMUNICATION TOOL

IMAGINEA ȚĂRII CA INSTRUMENT DE COMUNICARE ÎN MARKETING

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Abstract: *The importance of the chosen topic of the current paper is being justified by several facts. Since the middle of the '90s we can experience that emotional and moral approach of the food quality has been increasing. The consumer evaluates not only the percent points or the measure of mg/kg but he also demands that the product shall give the same pleasure according to his experience since generations. Tradition, landscape, culture are attached to the food quality. Specialities differing from the others, high-toned products representing an area are being suggested to offer along with proper/relevant marketing ways. In the years 2010-2011primary research were conducted on consumers of traditional horticultural products. Consumers view clearly the special and uniqueness of the regional horticultural products and they know their specific properties. From a marketing point of view this is important because consumers will make a decision to purchase based on these properties. In the European Union, most people are no longer interested in the quantity of food as they already have it. Rather, more and more, product specification is becoming relevant. The most influencing factors are reputation, tradition, safe ingredients and their communication to the consumers. The normally price sensitive consumers are not affected by the higher price of Traditional horticultural products. During the examination of the purchase process, besides the problem of recognition, information gathering and evaluation of alternatives, the shopping environment also helps determine the purchase decision. Hungarian shoppers prefer stores with more expertise (specialist shops) because they take for granted the (safe) place of origin and the (guaranteed) consistent high-quality.*

Key words: *willingness to pay, regional products, added value*

1. INTRODUCTION

The direct determining factors in the food consumption behaviour of consumers are the following: biological, psychological, sociological, anthropological, demographic, economic and political. It is impossible to understand the purchase decision-making process and a hopeless undertaking to assess, as well as forecast the impact of marketing tools and the marketing environment on consumer purchasing decisions without first exploring the reasons behind the consumer's behaviour (Haas, 2008). The production, preservation and processing of the food ingredients, the food preparation tools, and methods all have a significant impact on consumer behaviour. Psychological factors determine whether an individual accepts or rejects a certain food, and the role or importance of the accepted food (Harri, 2007). Economic factors include consumer income, the price and the structure of consumer spending. The anthropological factors are chiefly the visible and invisible elements of a culture. Applied principles, habits and rules are a culture's invisible parts (Anholt, 2010). One's value system is an important part of the cultural factors and helps shape long-term consumer behaviour. Lakner et al (2004) also dealt with consumer decision-making in their work. It is of primary importance what the consumer is concerned about emotionally or intellectually in the decision-making process. Going forward, the new trends seem to be moving towards non-material components in the gathering of information and confidence (manufacturer, sourcing, specialized technology) (Guerro et al, 2004). The key and cornerstone of the Hungarian food industry is the native consumer. It is expected that they make their selection not only based on the price but also on the basis of origin and thus would be willing to pay a little bit more for the Hungarian food product (Lakner et al., 2004). To achieve this, it would be necessary to create a much higher customer awareness than the current level. (Herche, 2004).

2. MATERIAL AND METHOD

In the years 2010-2011 we carried out primary horticulture research in food regions among producers and consumers of traditional products. Our goal were to establish a representative sample. Before examining the attitudes toward regional, traditional products of consumers and customers

by means of a questionnaire, we set up a sampling plan in order to have the necessary data categorized, weighed and processed in accordance with the Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2010-2011 records. 1100 questionnaires were prepared and distributed. Into the system, 872 pieces of questionnaire data was entered. We gave conditions for the SPSS program (select variable). This provided the opportunity to filter out from the mass any unnecessary data. In this way the composition was in line with the population register's composition of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office. The sample was representative, and based on the evaluable sample's element a number of conclusions can be drawn concerning the entire Hungarian population.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. COSTUMERS' KNOWLEDGE OF REGIONAL PRODUCTS

The Fig. 1. demonstrates that the majority of respondents (from 4.0) know the Hungarian special agricultural products. The results not only highlight the notoriety of the uniqueness of the regional, traditional products, but also reveal that important information can be provided with respect to marketing and communication. It is necessary to adapt to the differentiated demands of the markets with specialized, unique products and it is also necessary to communicate well the high added value of these products which could help consumers become aware of their uniqueness. Money needs to be sacrificed in advance in order to achieve this, and only later could it be recovered.

3.2. SPECIFICITY RATE OF REGIONAL HORTICULTURAL PRODUCTS

The Fig. 2 shows (based on the questionnaire responses) that consumers view clearly the special and uniqueness of the regional horticultural products and they know their specific properties. From a marketing point of view this is important because consumers will make a decision to purchase based on these properties. In the European Union, most people are no longer interested in the quantity of food as they already have it. Rather, more and more, product specification is becoming relevant.

In the oversupplied markets, a particular segment of consumers are looking for the individual specialized product. The traditional specific characteristics

of the food are the properties which originate with the traditional raw materials, the traditional technologies and the composition used in the course of manufacturing. It is assumed that buyers of the unique and specialized products have more than average knowledge of the typical characteristics of these products, as this forms the basis for their decision to purchase them. The vast majority of respondents thought that the regional, traditional products have specific, unique features, which allow for clear distinction. In the case of the traditional special products, the quality difference is mostly in the mode of production as compared to the standard products.

3.3. ADDED VALUE OF THE REGIONAL HORTICULTURAL PRODUCTS

Each country has an important task to perform in building up and developing its own horticultural and food industry strategy. To help increase the added value of the regional horticultural products, a direct sales system can be implemented as well. Farmers are aware that consumers are increasingly seeking reliable proof of origin as well as healthy products, which – in the case of appropriate marketing communication - buyers are willing to pay more for. The Fig.3 shows that respondents believe that in Hungary the availability of regional horticultural products are convenient.
In our research examining the consumer's behaviour, two problems should be mentioned:

- The food consumer's shopping and consuming decisions are taken under an imperfect supply of information. All the necessary information is not available for the product related and consumer-related decisions.
- The consumer is unable to process all of the available information and integrate it into the purchasing decision.

During the examination of the purchase process, besides the problem of recognition, information gathering and evaluation of alternatives, the shopping environment also helps determine the purchase decision. It is possible in the specialist stores to couple professional expertise with a professional appearance, not to mention convenience with respect to time. Hungarian shoppers prefer stores with more expertise (specialist shops) because they take for granted the [safe] place of origin and the (guaranteed) consistent high-quality. The problem is that there are an insufficient number of such stores in the country, the majority of the existing ones can only be

found in Budapest. It would be worthwhile to establish a commercial network, because then the consumer could turn with more confidence toward the products, as they face the determinants of value judgments related to the quality of the product. It is an extremely important task to negotiate in favour of the consumer these detected values and to increase the notoriety of the product in order to enhance competitiveness.

4. CONCLUSIONS

All of the world's developed countries recognize that food consumption will eventually reach the biological limit of saturation. Then the special, unique products with higher added value content can realise a major breaking-point. In the exploitation of an environment's inherent values, and in terms of increasing value-added production and job creation, the small and medium-sized food enterprises play an important role. They will be successful if they can:

- exploit the local opportunities (eg traditional products, "rediscovery" of the production cultures);
- identify the products which one's production - for example, because of economy of scale – prove deficit for large companies (such as specific product fabrication);
- be able to produce higher value-added products;
- be able to provide outstanding service next to their products, which are extraordinary.

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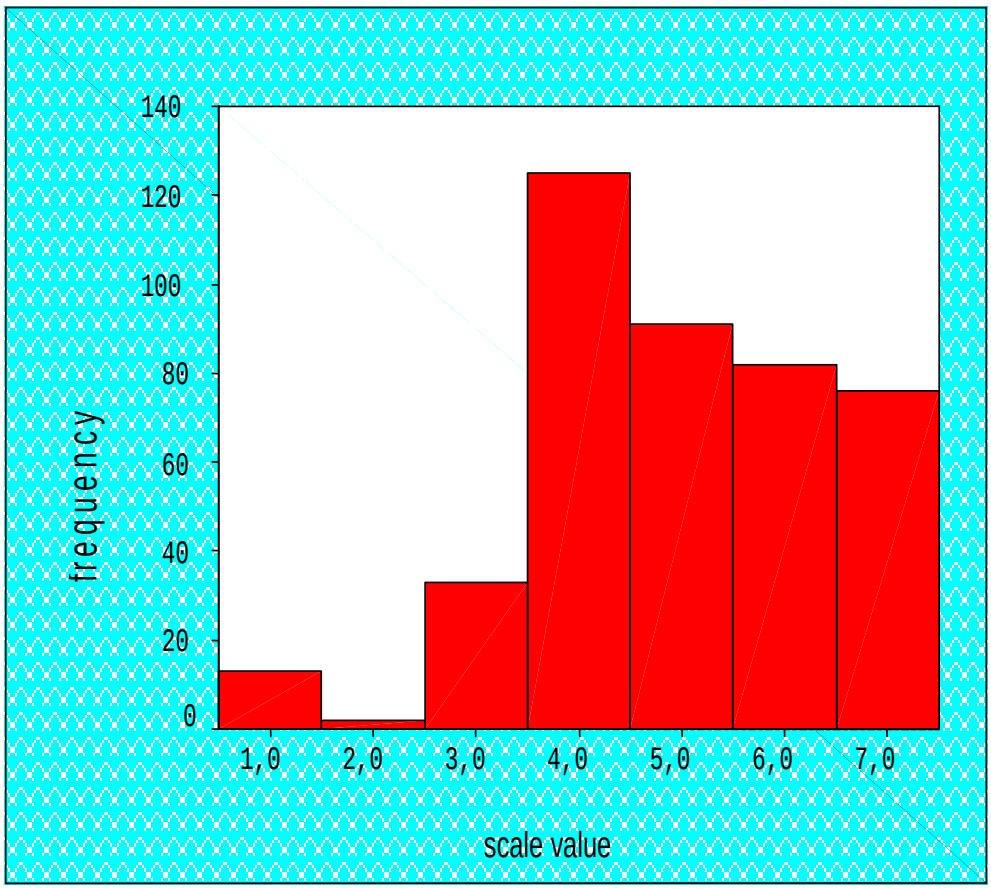


Fig. 1. Respondents knowledge about the specific characteristics of the regional, traditional products

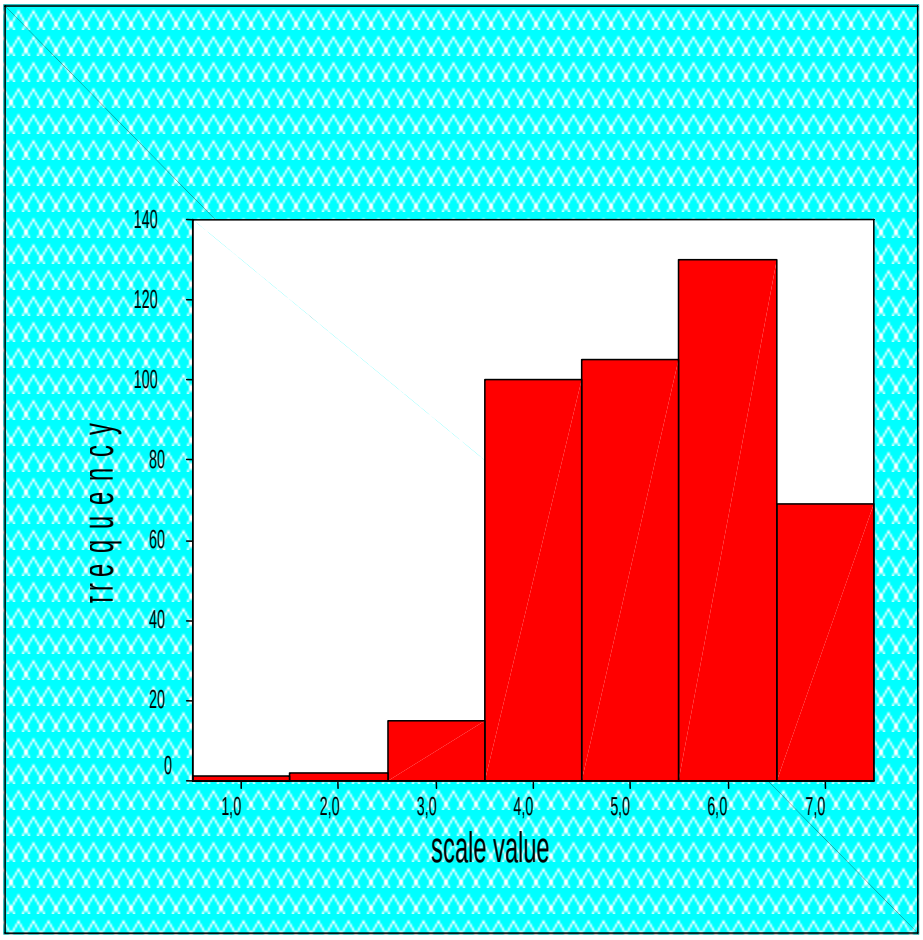


Fig. 2. The specificity rate of regional Hungarian horticultural products

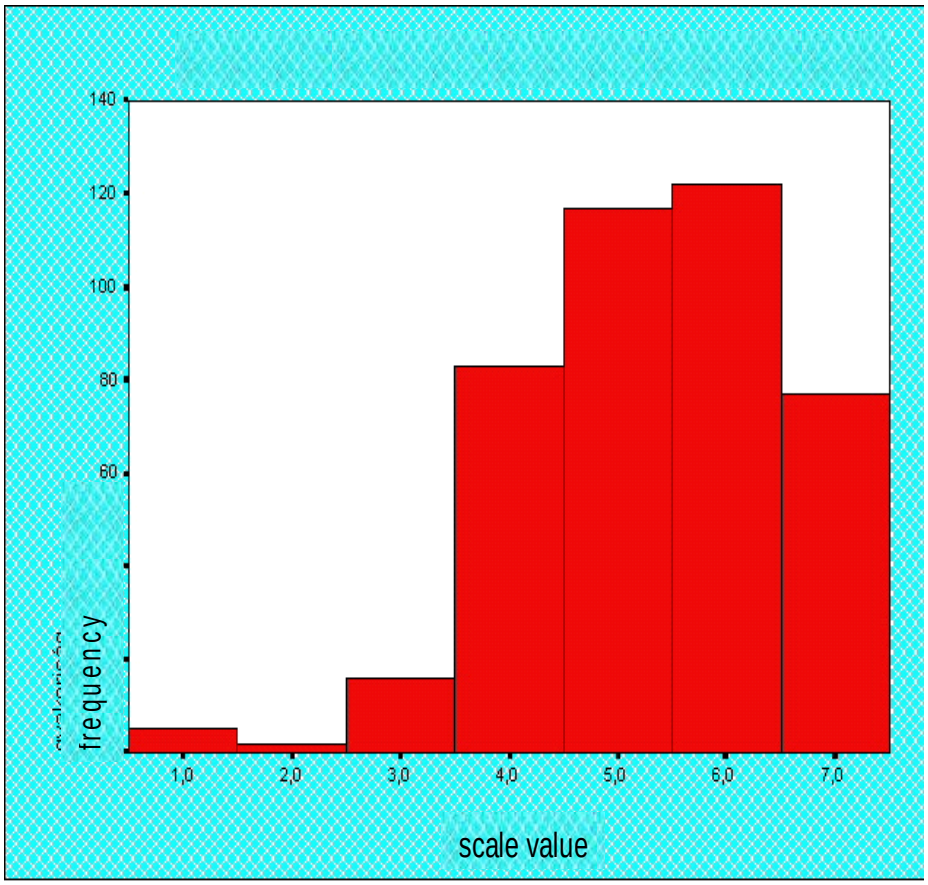


Fig. 3. How well do you know the Hungarian traditional horticultural products?