Spatial Positioning: the Value of Center-Stage

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT - Does placing a product in a central, peripheral, or extreme-end position systematically affect consumers' attitudes toward the brand? Surprisingly, this issue has not been investigated by consumer psychologists despite the importance of shelf placement in a consumers' brand choice decision, a manufacturer's distribution decision, and a retailer's shelf space pricing decision. Other than isolated studies in psychology with inconsistent position effects (e.g., Taylor and Fiske 1975, Study 1 versus Study 2), the effect of visual placement on attitudes and preferences does not appear to have been systematically researched by psychologists. While psychological Apositioning@ is a well-known concept to marketers, oddly, the literal, spatial analogy on which it is based, is under-researched (except for Hotelling type models of store location with a distance cost to consumers, see Eppli and Benjamin 1994 for a review). This paper introduces the important and novel concept of Aspatial positioning,@ in a literal sense, with psychological overtones to marketing.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Does placing a product in a central, peripheral, or extreme-end position systematically affect consumers’ attitudes toward the brand? Surprisingly, this issue has not been investigated by consumer psychologists despite the importance of shelf placement in a consumers’ brand choice decision, a manufacturer’s distribution decision, and a retailer’s shelf space pricing decision. Other than isolated studies in psychology with inconsistent position effects (e.g., Taylor and Fiske 1975, Study 1 versus Study 2), the effect of visual placement on attitudes and preferences does not appear to have been systematically researched by psychologists. While psychological “positioning” is a well-known concept to marketers, oddly, the literal, spatial analogy on which it is based, is under-researched (except for Hotelling type models of store location with a distance cost to consumers, see Eppli and Benjamin 1994 for a review). This paper introduces the important and novel concept of “spatial positioning,” in a literal sense, with psychological overtones to marketing.

The introduction of the “spatial positioning” concept leads to a set of interesting theoretical questions: If there is an advantage to position, what positions have this advantage over others? While some literature in survey methodology (Schuman and Presser 1996) and impression formation (Asch 1946) predict a primacy or recency effect implying that products at either end of an array would be more likely to be chosen, the literature on visual perception would suggest that the item mid-way between the start and the middle of the array would receive most attention (e.g., Ducrot and Pynte 2002). On the other hand, the literature on spatial perceptions based on the asymmetric hemispheric view of the brain suggests that the left- or right-hand position preference is contingent on whether the stimulus is verbal or visual (Janiszewski 1990). Finally, the social psychology literature on salience and vividness predicts that items in the center would be most salient, most likely to be recalled, and liked the best (e.g., McArthur and Post 1977).

This paper examines if, why and when the position of a product in an array confers an advantage. We propose that the position in an array is informative in and of itself. Across a variety of contexts and domains, there are certain “spatial” rules that appear to govern the ordering of people, items, and things in an array. There are learned associations that the “best” option is frequently in the middle (e.g., in a medal display the gold medal is in the middle; in a beauty contest, the winner is in the middle; in a conference, the most important speaker is in the middle). People may, therefore, subconsciously believe that the option presented in the middle is the most popular or best option. In a product display context, we propose that consumers use a “Center-is-Better” rule of thumb, as they believe that the order of items is itself informative. The use of this simple learned rule leads to higher evaluations for products in the center of an array as compared to those at the ends of the array, even if such products are not better recalled. Consistent with our proposed model, Mason (1982) found that 5-symbol arrays yielded a U-shaped reaction time function with the poorest performance for symbols at the beginning or the end of the array.

Understanding the reason why there is a position advantage is not only theoretically interesting, but also has managerial implications. For example, if a position advantage were due to higher attention, then attention getting packaging may be used to substitute or complement a poor shelf space position. On the other hand, if it were due to higher recall of a brand in a particular position then this would imply that mnemonic devices may be called for to increase the top of mind recall of a brand. If it were due to perceptual process due to the asymmetric construction of the brain hemispheres, then there is little managers can do to reverse this effect—they can only leverage it through placing visual/verbal material in the most appropriate position. If it were due to improved attitudes towards the brand, but these attitudes were not mediated by attention, but rather reflected an overall schema or belief such as “Center is Better,” this would imply that managers should be willing to pay a premium to have their brands occupying the premium position in a layout. Retailers would be able to use this information to bargain with manufacturers for shelf-space benefits. Finally, if position effects are due to an automatic, unintended behavioral response (e.g., of picking up the first item, last item, or central item from a display), this would imply that any sales spike enjoyed by a brand might be short-lived to the extent it enjoyed a premium position.

Four laboratory experiments with frequently purchased packaged goods show that i) consumers believe and use the “center is better” heuristic (Study 1: Stylized Choices); ii) there is a center-stage advantage: a product in a central position is preferred (Study 2: Pretzels) and chosen (Study 3: Chewing-gum) over one at either end of an array; iii) the effect is moderated by familiarity, such that the effects are stronger for higher (versus lower) purchase frequency (Study 4: Cookies). Across studies, we found no evidence that the recall of the brands was contingent on the order in which they were presented. The effects on attitudes and intentions are interpreted in terms of consumers using a heuristic: “Center is Better” whereby they believe that by virtue of being in the central positions a product is better than others that are in extreme positions. Such a heuristic, that the “order is itself informative,” is more likely to be used when consumers do not sequentially process the items in the array. This happens in situations where there is high product familiarity, which may be indicative of lower involvement in the decision-making process.

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