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THE ROLE OF THE BRAND IN PURCHASING PROCESSES: FROM CONSUMER AWARENESS TO LOYALTY

Summary

The paper focuses on discussing the role of the brand in decision-making processes of consumers, from building brand awareness to developing loyalty. The aim of this paper is to provide a theoretical study on the role and power of branding in consumer decision-making processes and its importance as a tool for building loyalty and competitive advantage. Brand levels were discussed, with attention drawn to economic and emotional aspects and how a strong brand influences consumer loyalty. The analysis contained herein indicates that brand awareness and brand structure (image and associations) play a significant role in the process of building lasting relationships with consumers and supporting long-term competitive advantage.

Keywords: brand awareness, consumer purchasing decisions, competitive advantage, behavioural economics.

ROLA MARKI W PROCESACH ZAKUPOWYCH: OD ŚWIADOMOŚCI DO LOJALNOŚCI KONSUMENTA

Streszczenie

Artykuł koncentruje się na szerokim omówieniu roli marki w procesach decyzyjnych konsumentów, począwszy od budowania świadomości marki aż po kształtowanie lojalności nabywców. Celem artykułu jest analiza wpływu marki na procesy decyzyjne konsumentów i jej roli w budowaniu przewagi konkurencyjnej przedsiębiorstw. Omówiono w nim ekonomiczne i emocjonalne aspekty marki, przedstawiając wyniki badań nad jej znaczeniem. Artykuł analizuje wpływ marki na decyzje zakupowe konsumentów, a także na budowanie wartości dodanej, wizerunku oraz pozycji rynkowej. Zwrócono uwagę na to, jak silna marka wpływa na kształtowanie lojalności konsumentów. Zawarta w artykule analiza wskazuje, że świadomość marki i jej struktura (wizerunek oraz skojarzenia) odgrywają istotną rolę w tworzeniu wartości, co przekłada się na satysfakcję konsumentów i wspiera długoterminowe budowanie przewagi konkurencyjnej.

Słowa kluczowe: świadomość marki, decyzje zakupowe konsumentów, przewaga konkurencyjna, ekonomia behawioralna.

Introduction

A *brand* is a set of unique features, such as a name, logo, symbol, values, and other elements that identify and distinguish a product, service, or company from its competitors in the market. Nowadays, a brand is not perceived solely as a trademark – it has become a key element of market strategy, building both emotional and functional bonds with consumers (Kall, 2001).

The role of the brand in the purchasing decision-making process is a consequence of modern marketing and financial research, especially in the context of analyzing customer behaviour. Research confirms that the brand influences purchasing decisions on both the emotional and functional level, depending on the nature of these decisions (Andruszkiewicz, 2011). The decision-making process, especially when choosing a product brand for the first time, can be prolonged – lack of previous experience and limited knowledge of the market mean that the consumer does not have developed preferences or evaluation criteria that would help him compare the options available on the market. Already at this stage of the decision-making process, the consumer may be partial to a specific product brand. On the other hand, in the case of consumers with experience and knowledge of the market, as well as developed evaluation criteria, purchasing decisions are more conscious and often focus on selected, preferred brands (Mazurek-Łopacińska, 2003). The importance of the brand in the case of purchasing specific product groups is emphasized by over 60% of respondents, both women and men (Grzybowska-Brzezińska, Grzywińska-Rapca, 2016).

Globalization, changing market conditions, including changes in product supply, have contributed to the dynamic development of the consumer market. Today, a brand is understood not only as a sign of quality, but also as a tool for building relationships with customers and influencing their purchasing decisions. Effective brand positioning – increasing brand recognition and solidifying its place in the minds of recipients – is a significant competitive advantage. Highlighting the unique features of the brand, providing added value to consumers and building an emotional bond are key to long-term development and achieving a significant position in the consumer market (Teślawski, 2015). Therefore a properly established and developed brand becomes an attribute of the company and a key tool of its market strategy.

The aim of this paper is to provide a theoretical study on the role and power of branding in consumer decision-making processes and its importance as a tool for building loyalty and competitive advantage. Furthermore, the paper touches upon the issue of anti-consumerism, which influences the contemporary approach to the role of the brand.

1. The importance of branding in purchasing decisions – an overview of key concepts

The goods and services market is saturated with a huge number of brands that are competing for the attention of consumers and trying to bolster their position against the competition. As a result, companies make use of a variety of marketing campaigns to achieve their sales goals, which means that consumers are constantly exposed to intense advertising. The results of the Meaningful Brands study, cited by Cybulska, show that as many as 91% of brands could disappear from the market without any major concern for consumers from Eastern Europe – only 9% of those brands present on the market are believed to play an important role and have a real impact on the quality of life (Cybulska, 2016). This data suggests that despite the vast number of brands available, their relevance to consumers is often limited to a few truly important ones, showing that only a few brands have real significance to the buyer. Therefore, market presence does not guarantee success – the success is achieved by brands that are able to build a bond with buyers, gaining their recognition and trust.

Creating a powerful brand¹ that builds strong and positive relationships with the customer affects the level of satisfaction felt by the consumer when purchasing the product. The increasing market competition demands that brands be managed with an emphasis on building their meaning and strength. Keller points out that the strength of a brand is primarily determined by the associations it evokes in the minds of consumers, which emphasizes the importance of a positive image and an appropriate communication strategy (Dryl, 2014). Consumers clearly define their brand preferences, a fact which is reflected in their familiarity with and loyalty to selected brands. Chorób (2013) notes that consumers increasingly frequently pay attention not only to the price but also to the quality of products, which proves the growing importance of brands that guarantee high quality.

From an economic point of view, a strong brand influences the price elasticity of demand – the consumer is less sensitive to price changes of products of recognizable and trusted brands. For companies, this translates into the ability to set higher prices without a significant drop in demand (Kotler, Kartajaya, Setiawan, 2016). This type of price advantage resulting from consumer brand loyalty leads to increased profit margins and reduced sensitivity to price competition. An example would be the luxury goods sector, where customers are willing to pay higher prices based on the emotional value and reputation of the brand².

Brands play a key role in the purchasing decision-making process, influencing consumer preferences and determining their loyalty to specific products. One of the popular models for describing brand structure is the concept proposed by de Chernatony and McDonald. This model presents a brand using four levels that reflect the various functions and benefits the brand offers to consumers (Figure 1).

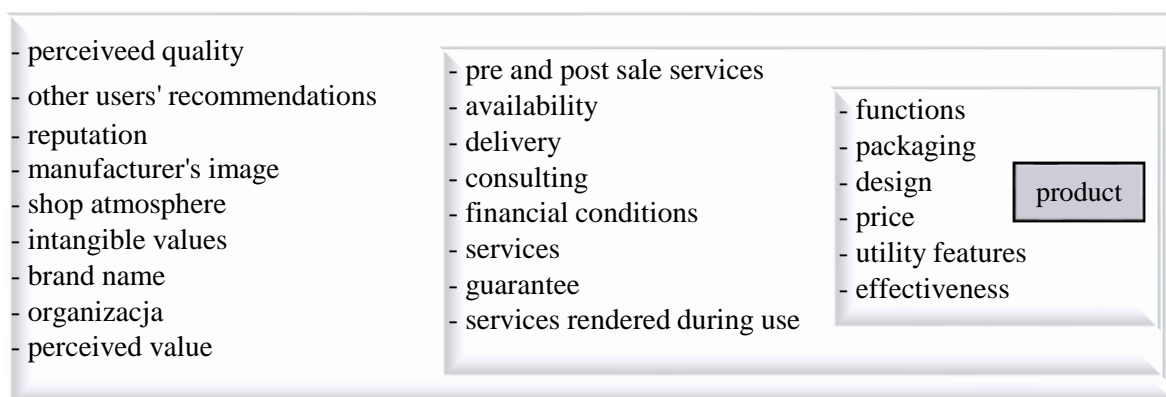


Figure 1. The four levels of branding according to de Chernatony and McDonald.

Source: own study based on *Silna marka. Istota i kreowanie*, J. Kall, 2001, Warszawa: PWE.

¹ Brand strength is the ability of a brand to build a competitive advantage by creating unique values appreciated by consumers, expressed in brand recognition, positive image, customer loyalty and willingness to pay a higher price. Brand strength also covers perceived quality, brand associations, and the emotional and rational connections that determine its ability to attract and retain customers (*Marketing przyszłości. Od ujęcia tradycyjnego do nowoczesnego*, G. Rosa, J. Perenc, 2016, Warszawa: C.H. Beck, Rosa, 2016; *Zarządzanie marką*, J. Kall, R. Kłeczek, A. Sagan, 2013, Warszawa: Wolters Kluwer Polska SA).

² Brand reputation is the perception of the brand by the environment, resulting from customer experiences and stakeholder opinions, influencing brand's credibility and market advantage (*Marketing przyszłości. Od ujęcia tradycyjnego do nowoczesnego*, G. Rosa, J. Perenc, 2016, Warszawa: C.H. Beck; *Zarządzanie marką*, J. Kall, R. Kłeczek, A. Sagan, 2013, Warszawa: Wolters Kluwer Polska SA).

Brand analysis by product structure allows us to identify the brand strength intrinsic to its individual components (Rosa, Perenc, 2016; Kall, 2001).

- I. **Generic brand level** – is an integral part of every brand, includes the basic product and the benefits it brings, but is not the basis for brand differentiation.
- II. **Expected level of functionality** – meets the minimum requirements set by buyers. This level includes basic performance characteristics such as efficiency and effectiveness, product packaging, price, etc. The set of these factors is extremely important in a situation when the buyer has little purchasing experience within a specific product category. Competition takes place at the level of expectations of "what does the brand do for the customer?".
- III. **Extended level** (meeting functional and emotional needs) – includes additional, higher requirements and needs, both functional and emotional. This level corresponds to an increasing sense of confidence when making purchases, willingness to experiment or look for the best value, and analysis of available options in terms of price. At this level consumers consider different brands as potentially different alternatives, and the choice of one over the other may depend on factors such as availability, warranty, or after-sales services.
- IV. **Potential level** – here the brand offers additional values that distinguish it from its competitors. These may be elements not directly related to the product, such as reputation, brand image³, recommendations from others or the unique atmosphere of the shopping place.

The last two levels, i.e. the extended level and the potential level, are crucial to the long-term brand strategy. Brand support at these levels allows a company to stand out from the competition while building a solid foundation of loyalty and long-term relationships with customers – which is extremely important in an era of growing competition and changing consumer expectations.

2. Brand awareness and purchasing decisions

Brand awareness is closely linked to brand reputation. It is a resultant of its familiarity, starting from recognizability and ending with the possession of specific cognitive structures among consumers (Koniewski, 2012). Brand awareness also means the ability of a potential buyer to recognize or associate a brand with a given product category, thus constituting the level of brand awareness. However, the mere knowledge of the brand name among potential buyers is not tantamount to its full awareness (Kall, Kłeczek, Sagan, 2013; Zawadzka, 2006).

The key elements influencing brand awareness are the name, product category and needs that the brand satisfies. These elements shape the image of the brand in the minds of consumers and constitute the basis for further building of its image (Figure 2).

The manner in which a brand is perceived directly impacts perceived value. Repeatable connotations resulting from consumers' contacts with the brand consolidate its recognition and build lasting associations in the minds of recipients. Brand awareness plays a role in limiting consumers' cognitive effort and shortening the purchasing

³ Brand image is the way in which consumers perceive a brand, shaped by associations and opinions resulting from the interpretation of signals such as the name, advertising, packaging appearance, price, and promotional activities (*Silna marka. Istota i kreowanie*, J. Kall, 2001, Warszawa: PWE).

decision-making process. From the economic perspective, brand awareness can be a way to reduce transaction costs – thanks to brand recognition, the consumer does not have to spend time comparing products, which simplifies the decision-making process (Williamson, 1985). This works as a form of *cognitive economics*, reducing the costs of searching for information. The creation of such associations is a result of consumer's contact with the brand's information elements, such as (Kall, Kłeczek, Sagan, 2013):

- brand name;
- the product category to which the brand belongs;
- the needs met by this product category;
- situation in which the brand can be used.

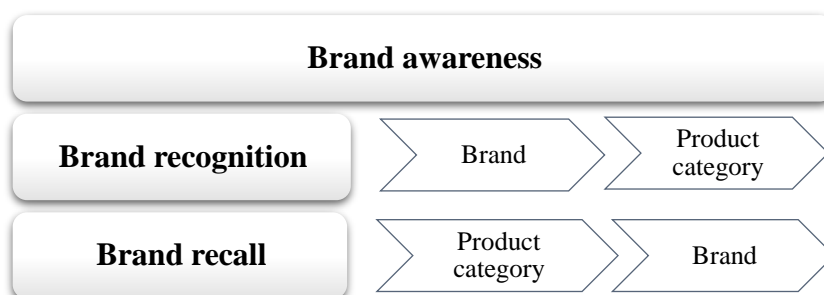


Figure 2. Sources of brand awareness.

Source: prepared based on *Dlaczego przywiązujemy się do marki?*, A.M. Zawadzka, 2006, Gdańsk: Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne; *Zachowania konsumentów*, R. East, M. Wright, M. Vanhuele, 2014, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Wolters Kluwer; *Zarządzanie marką*, J. Kall, R. Kłeczek, A. Sagan, 2013, Warszawa: Wolters Kluwer Polska SA.

Consumer purchasing decisions are based on brand knowledge resulting from familiarity with the brand and previous experience with the product offerings. Brand recognition simplifies the decision-making process and plays a key role in building a competitive advantage (Figure 3).

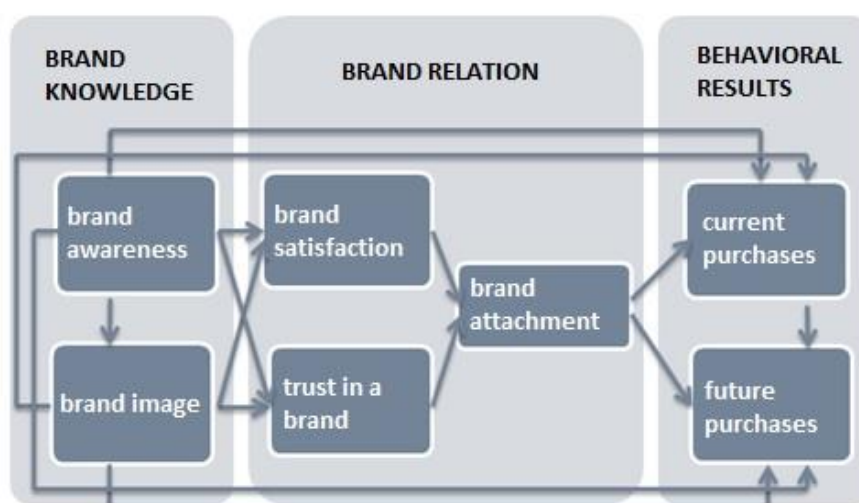


Figure 3. Brand knowledge as a result of consumers' purchasing decisions.

Source: own study based on "Are brands forever? How brand knowledge and relationships affect current and future purchases", F.R. Esch, T. Langner, B.H. Schmitt, P. Geus, 2006, *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 15(2), p. 101.

Brand awareness spans several levels of advancement: from recognition to dominance. The lowest level of awareness is *brand recognition* – the ability to identify a brand from others in a given product category as a result of prior contact with the brand. Brand recognition is a direct link between the external stimulus, when the consumer encounters the brand at the point of sale, and the response – the recognition of a need. Immediate awareness indicates which brand in a given product or service category is first considered when making a purchase decision (Krycia-Chomińska, 2013; Kall, 2001; Keller, 1993).

The *brand recall mechanism* refers to the consumer's ability to spontaneously recall the name of a brand in the context of a specific purchase need from a given category. Spontaneous awareness enables the consumer to make a decision more quickly, especially when choosing between several recognizable brands, which provides an advantage over competitors, especially in situations when the buyer does not analyze the purchase in detail (Kall, 2001).

The next level of brand awareness is mentioning the brand first, i.e. brand priority (*brand salience*). Unlike other levels of brand awareness, this is the degree to which the brand is preferred during shopping trips when the consumer needs to make a quick decision. Brand salience reflects the strength of a brand in the minds of consumers, especially loyal ones, and is a valuable measure of the effectiveness of advertising activities (van der Lans, Pieters, Wedel, 2008; Romaniuk, Sharp, 2001; Kall, 2001).

The highest level of brand awareness is *brand dominance*, in which consumers identify only one brand in a given product category. Brand dominance is the most advanced level of awareness, constituting a significant competitive advantage, especially in situations when the consumer is looking for a proven product (Dudovskiy, 2012).

Brand strength is the result of a number of factors, such as customer loyalty, overall satisfaction with product purchases or the service provided, and the extent to which the brand meets consumer expectations. Brand strength is also related to consumer perception, which influences purchasing decisions and brand loyalty. The assessment of the importance and power of a brand focuses on its market value and image. The most important factors building this strength include brand perception, the appearance of the product offered and consumer trust. An indicator of customer loyalty and satisfaction, NPS (*Net Promoter Score*), is also increasingly frequently used, which reflects customers' willingness to recommend a company or service to others (Van Den Bergh, Behrer, 2012).

The first step in building a brand's position on the market is to establish it in the minds of buyers. Brand awareness is the result of associations related to it and is a necessary condition for building brand's image. At the same time, brand awareness determines the consumer's consideration of its purchase when making a purchase. The power of a brand lies in both its communication effects (i.e. awareness, image and associations created in the minds of buyers) and its behavioural effects (behaviour resulting from brand loyalty). Keller notes that these elements directly influence brand perception and ultimately consumers' purchasing decisions (Kall, Kłeczek, Sagan, 2013).

Brands that have built a strong market position are vulnerable to attacks from imitators who may try to copy their solutions and image in order to attract customers. That is why proper brand protection is extremely important. This protection includes both

legal aspects, such as patents and trademarks, as well as strategic actions to increase the uniqueness of the brand in the eyes of consumers. It is helpful not only to use patent protection and a trademark, but also to build a brand image in such a way that it is clearly associated with a given company.

The ability of a brand to be spontaneously recalled in the minds of consumers indicates its position among other brands. It also influences brand's perceived strength, which depends on the size of the group of people recognizing it and the place it occupies in the minds of consumers. Companies strive to establish a positive brand image in the minds of customers, which may influence the development of their loyalty (Witkowska, Witkowski, 2007). Barlow and Stewart (2014) compare building brand awareness to the art of instilling brand values through a logo, which in effect provides a foundation for knowledge about the character of a company or organization.

However, the brand and its attributes are not a universal recipe for success, they are only one of many elements influencing purchasing decisions. In practice, there are situations in which the brand plays a secondary role – especially when purchasing basic necessities and FMCG (*Fast Moving Consumer Goods*) products. In such cases, price, availability and quality become crucial, and popularity or recognition are less important.

Research conducted by PwC in 2020 demonstrated that for almost all Poles (93%), the prices of products and services are of major importance when making a purchase. This trend continues, as confirmed by data from the Strategy& report from 2024, indicating price as the most important factor in choosing products by Polish consumers. TNS OBOP research from 2015 also confirms that when purchasing everyday products, Poles are guided mainly by price (83%) and quality (67%), while the brand is important only to every third consumer (32%). The order of importance of these factors remains consistent with the 2005 results, but it is worth emphasizing that the importance of the brand has clearly increased by 81% compared to the results of the research conducted in 2003. The brand is more often appreciated by people in their thirties, and it is also important for Poles with a higher financial status (TNS Polska, 2015; Sokołowski, 2006).

J. Łodzian-Grabowska's research from 2015 shows that almost 60% of respondents pay attention to the brand when making purchasing decisions, while only 12.4% do not take it into account. The aforementioned study also asked about specific product categories that consumers choose based on brand – footwear came first (15.7%), followed by clothing (15.2%) and consumer electronics (15.7%). Only 1.4% of respondents stated that the brand is not important to them when making purchases. A different approach to this issue was presented by the youngest respondents aged 18-24, who saw it as a factor determining their choice of footwear and clothing.

In turn, Strategy&'s research from 2022 shows that when choosing a place to shop, Poles primarily pay attention to prices, and compared to 2020, the importance of promotional offers has increased. The factors that may persuade consumers to change their preferred brand include a number of stimuli, but the most important are financial ones, such as better value for money (42%) and promotional offers (34%), with high product quality only ranking fifth in the hierarchy of importance. Brand reputation and image continue to dominate Poles' purchasing choices (PwC, 2024; PwC, 2022).

For young consumers, unique features of a brand that distinguish it from the competition and give it an individual character are also key. Research by Van den Bergh and Behrer (2012) shows that the brand logo is very important for young buyers, acting as a symbol, a specific visual brand identity and a shopping guide. The global position of the brand is seen as an indicator of its potential and strength, but high quality of the products offered and credibility of the offer are essential.

3. Brand as a tool for building loyalty and competitive advantage

Brand loyalty is the repeated purchasing decisions of consumers resulting from their trust in the brand, positive experiences and identification with its values. Brand's competitive advantage lies in providing unique values that distinguish it from the competition. These two elements – loyalty and competitive advantage – are closely linked, and their interaction ensures a brand has a lasting position in the minds of consumers, becoming their preferred choice.

Undoubtedly, the brand is an important differentiator taken into account by consumers when making purchasing decisions. Research indicates that buyers perceive a brand as a guarantee of constant quality, which is particularly important for those who expect a constant level of satisfaction with each purchase (Majkrzak, Salerno-Kochan, 2016; Newerli-Guz, 2015; Dryl, 2014; Sempruch-Krzemińska, 2014; Szulce, Janiszewska, 2006).

The basic functions of a brand are identification, warranty and promotional functions, which influence its perception and play an important role in consumers' purchasing processes. A brand also has a symbolic function, being a tool for non-verbal communication. By consuming certain products, consumers can express their individualism or belonging to a social group, which allows them to emphasize their social status (Elliot, Percy, 2007; Kall, 2001).

In some industries, such as clothing industry, consumer choices reflect lifestyle and status, making branding a key part of the consumer's identity. This approach, which is the result of socio-cultural changes, favors treating the brand as a determinant of identity and strengthens the emotional attachment of consumers, which in turn builds loyalty (Sempruch-Krzemińska, Kall, Perchla-Włosik, Raciniewska, 2016; Kall, 2001).

The factors that differentiate consumers' knowledge about brands and directly influence their strength are awareness and image, i.e. the strength of connotations associated with brands. A credible brand builds consumer trust, which in turn translates into consumers' satisfaction and encourages them to choose the offered products again. Consumer loyalty to a brand not only provides a company with financial stability, but also creates barriers to market entry, which further strengthens the competitive advantage, thereby limiting the opportunities for new competitors.

However, the brand's strong position can also meet with criticism, especially in the context of commercialization. Critics argue that excessive commercialization of a brand leads to negative reactions from consumers, who may reject the brand as a symbol of corporate influence on society (Klein, 2009). Bylok (2016) describes anti-consumerist movements as a phenomenon that develops in opposition to excessive commercialization, symbolic prestige of brands and the culture of consumerism. Instead of accumulating branded goods, such movements focus on values such as minimalism, localism, authenticity and social responsibility. Consumers critical of consumerism and excessive commercialization

are increasingly looking for products with limited negative impact on the environment and those that support local communities. Therefore, a strong brand may encounter resistance from consumers who value more sustainable alternatives and values that go beyond their corporate image.

A strong brand can ensure consumer loyalty, but this is only possible if it is based on an excellent quality of a product or a service. A good reputation attracts the attention of buyers and is an important asset to a company, but it is not in itself a guarantee of success. Building a sustainable competitive advantage requires companies to not only maintain high product quality, but also innovation and effective communication with consumers. Thanks to its ability to build trust and loyalty, a brand becomes not only a differentiator for a company, but also a strategic resource that allows it to strengthen its market position in the long term, increasing stability and resistance to growing customer expectations and changes in the competitive environment.

Conclusions

Brand knowledge directly influences buyers' consumption behaviour, and building lasting bonds is the result of brand knowledge. Brand recognition shapes consumers' decision-making process by referring to memory and own experiences (Sempruch-Krzemińska, Kall, Perchla-Włosik, Raciniewska, 2016; Koszewska, 2012; Wolanin-Jarosz, 2015; Beemer, Shook, 2010). Brand awareness undoubtedly plays an important role when purchasing a product for the first time, while subsequent purchases focus on functional attributes such as quality, functionality, taste and smell. The power of brand awareness increases in purchasing decisions when the product meets consumer expectations. Moreover, it is closely related to customers' attitude, trust and perceived brand quality (Wolanin-Jarosz, 2015; Koniewski, 2012).

To sum up, a strong brand has a significant impact not only on consumer purchasing decisions, but also on the overall functioning of the market. Brand's impact on the price elasticity of demand, consumer loyalty and competitive advantage means that brands play a key role in the structure of markets and are one of the tools that allow companies to achieve higher profit margins, even in conditions of high competition. Creating and maintaining an appropriate brand image is the key to building brand awareness among consumers (Riaz, 2015).

P. Nedungadi's research, cited by Zawadzka (2006), shows that a high level of brand awareness directly affects the probability of choosing this brand over others. With brand awareness, consumers can reduce the time and effort needed to compare products available on the market. The interpretation of a brand as a cognitive simplification is particularly apt in the case of FMCG products such as food, where purchasing decisions are often based on simple choices.

A brand is undoubtedly of strategic importance to businesses and is not just an attribute important to consumers. Growing competition and emerging anti-consumer trends are forcing brands to become more engaged with consumers. Building brand awareness and reputation are long-term activities that can help develop a competitive advantage, especially when consumers choose a brand because of the quality it offers, not just the price.

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