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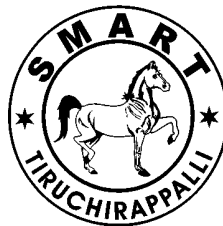
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# THE USE OF BENEFIT LADDERING IN BRAND POSITIONING A TOOL FOR STRATEGIC BRAND MANAGEMENT

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## *Abstract*

*Managing brands for competitive advantage has become a major challenge for brand managers all over the world today. Brands with the right positioning i.e. those that create a strong association in the minds of the target customer are the ones which have top of the mind recall, resulting in increased market share and growing revenues for the manufacturer. A contemporary tool that can be used to build a strong position based on the appeal of benefits that the brand offers its customers is Benefit Laddering. This tool has been extensively used by market researchers to understand the ladder of benefits that the customer seems to perceive from the brand. This paper attempts to apply the concept of Benefit Laddering to brand positioning as a tool for competitive advantage. Different types of laddering techniques and their applications have also been highlighted using suitable examples.*

## **Introduction**

Personal Values Research in marketing has recently received a substantial amount of attention from both academics and practitioners. This in-depth profiling of the consumer and his or her relationship to products offers potential not only for understanding the “cognitive” positioning of current products but also permits the development of positioning strategies for new products. Endorsing this psychological view of the marketplace, Sheth (1983) suggests that to be comprehensive in marketing products in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, both researchers and management have to, if they have not already, adopt this consumer-based orientation rather than one that merely focuses on product characteristics.

The application of the personal values perspective to the marketing of consumer products can be classified into two theoretically grounded perspectives, “macro” representing sociology and “micro” representing psychology (Reynolds, 1985). The macro approach refers to standard survey research methodology, combined with a classification scheme to categorize respondents into predetermined

clusters or groups (e.g..VALS methodology of the Stanford Research Institute). Products and their positioning strategies are then directed to appeal to these general target groups, such as the Merrill Lynch solitary bull appealing to the achiever orientation whose desire is to send out and “get ahead of the pack” (Plummer, 1985).

Reynolds (1985) notes how the concrete aspects of the product fit into the consumer’s life. As such, the macro survey approach only gives part of the answer, namely, the overall value orientation of target segments within the marketplace. Missing are the key defining components of a positioning strategy—the linkages between the product and the personally relevant role it has in the life of the consumer.

The more psychological perspective offered by the “micro” approach based upon Means-Ends Theory (Gutman 1982), specifically focuses on the linkages between the attributes that exist in products (the “means”), ‘the consequences for the consumer provided by the attributes, and the personal values (the “ends”) the consequences reinforce.

The means-ends perspective closely parallels the origin of attitude research represented by Expectancy-Value Theory (Rosenberg, 1956), which posits that consumer actions produce consequences and that consumers learn to associate particular consequences with particular product attributes they have reinforced through their buying behavior. The common premise, then, is that consumers learn to choose products containing attributes which are instrumental in achieving their desired consequences. Means-Ends Theory simply specifies the rationale underlying why consequences are important, for personal values.

The focus of this article is on detailing the specifics of the in-depth interviewing and analysis methodology, termed “laddering” (Gutman and Reynolds, 1979; Reynolds and Gutman, 1984a), for uncovering means-ends hierarchies defined by these key elements and their linkages or connections. The combination of connected elements, or ladder, represents the linkage between the product and the perceptual process of consumers, which as pointed out previously, yields a more direct and thus more useful understanding of the consumer.

### Positioning on Benefits

A well made product would usually offer more than one benefit. Promises of multiple benefits, however, tend to get lost because they leave in the consumer’s mind a vague and diffused imprint. Successful consumer products promise one or at the most two benefits and brand franchises are created around those specific benefits. Thus we have the opportunity for differentiation of similar products based on benefit positions which have not yet been occupied.

Consumers, who are similar in important ways, tend to cluster around the same benefit. Other consumers would cluster around

other benefits. This enables differentiation in a product market and has been well documented as ‘Benefit Segmentation’. Russel J Haley conducted research among toothpaste users in the USA (1963) and divided them into segments, each desiring a specific benefit from their brand of toothpaste. He uncovered four such benefit segments and their respective brand choices:

- Economy** : those who were looking for low price.
- Cosmetic** : those who wanted white, bright teeth.
- Taste** : those to whom taste mattered the most.
- Medicinal** : those who were concerned about prevention of decay.

Each benefit-seeking group or segment had certain common characteristics-demographic, psychographic, and also behavioural. There is no published account of similar research on the toothpaste market in India. Judged by their advertising, the benefit positions occupied or sought by major brands would be approximately as follows:

Benefit Position	Brand
Cosmetic: White, bright teeth	Close-Up
Fresh breath	Colgate, Close-Up
Taste	Colgate
Decay prevention	Pepsodent
Gum care and other therapeutic	Pepsodent, Promise

As can be seen, Colgate, the market leader by far, is positioned across a broad band of benefits. Others are positioned by more specific benefits.

### Benefit Laddering in Positioning

Positioning is defined as a battle for the consumer’s mind. That battle, given today’s brand clutter, seems to have developed into a full-scale war. In this cluttered Indian brand

market, where there are more than 150 brands of soap, 90 brands of toothpaste and 200 brands of edible oil, how does one position one's brand in a manner that is meaningful to the consumer, who is at the receiving end of all the visual and verbal communication?

Marketers long ago learnt that positioning a brand merely on product attributes would not help much except in the early stages of the category itself or if the brand was the first mover within the category. For, if your soap lathered well, any number of the hundred-odd other brands could lay claim to the same. So along came the concept of 'image positioning' which led to soaps that bonded the family together, those that kept you eternally young, soaps that were the beauty secrets of film stars and those that made you irresistible to the opposite sex.

If one continues in the same vein, then there are possibly a million other ways in which one can position a brand of soap. But, obviously, in order to make it work, the positioning platform adopted has to be one that the consumer can relate to. And here is where a technique like benefit laddering can come to the rescue.

### **Laddering**

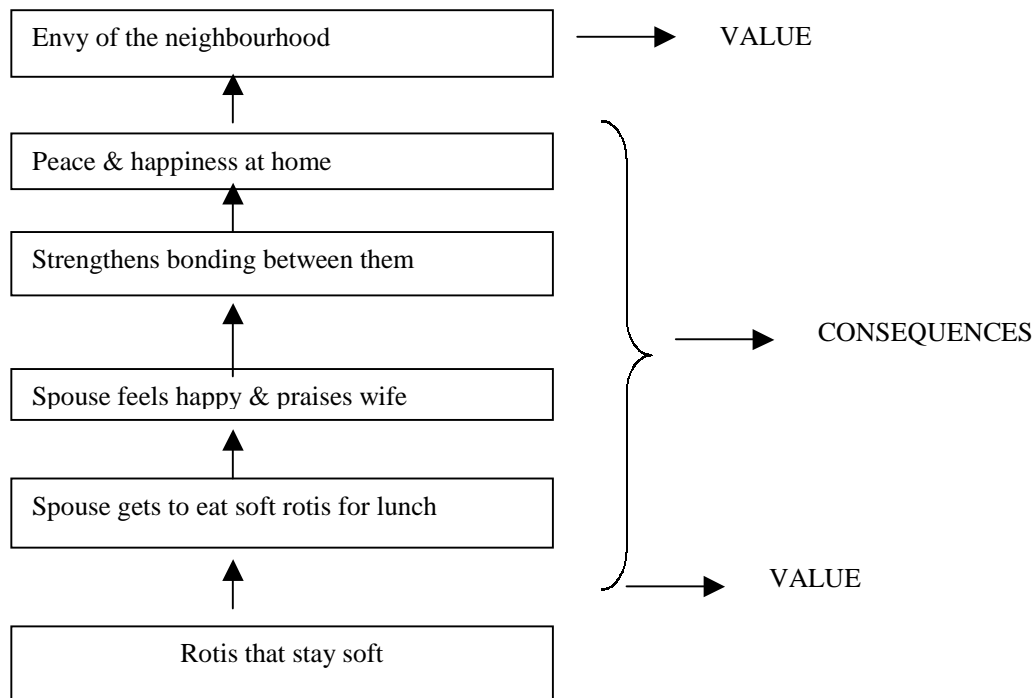
Laddering refers to an in-depth, one-on-one interviewing technique used to develop an understanding of how consumers translate the attributes of products into meaningful associations with respect to self, following Means-Ends Theory (Gutman, 1982). Laddering involves a tailored interviewing format using primarily a series of directed probes, typified by the "Why is that important to you?" question, with the express goal of determining sets of linkages between the key perceptual elements across the range of Attributes (A), Consequences (C), and Values (V). These association

networks, or ladders, referred to as perceptual orientations, represent combinations of elements that serve as the basis for distinguishing between and among products in a given product class.

It is these higher-order knowledge structures that we use to process information relative to solving problems (Abelson, 1981), which, in the consumer context, is represented by choice. Basically, distinctions at the different levels of abstraction, represented by the A-C-Vs, provide the consumer with more personally relevant ways in which products are grouped and categorized. Thus, the detailing and subsequent understanding of these higher level distinctions provides a perspective on how the product information is processed from what could be called a motivational perspective, in that the underlying reasons why an attribute or a consequence is important can be uncovered. The benefit laddering technique, which focuses on linkages between product attributes, their consequences and their ultimate consumer values, is very important in arriving at a brand positioning that a consumer can relate to.

The technique is based on Gutman's Means-Ends Theory which focuses on the linkages between the attributes that exist in products (the 'means'), the consequences for the consumer provided by the attribute and the personal values (the 'ends') that the consequences reinforce. To put it simply, it means that consumers seek certain attributes in products and these attributes lead to certain 'consequences' (benefits) for them. And when the consequences matter to them, over time they learn to choose products, which possess those attributes that lead to the relevant consequences.

Thus an 'atta' that makes 'rotis' that stay soft could lead to the following benefit chain:



### Arriving at the linkages

Understanding these linkages between product attributes, their consequences and their ultimate consumer ‘values’ are important if one has to arrive at a positioning that the consumer can relate to. The interviewing technique consists of a series of probes that aim at understanding why a particular attribute is important to the consumer. Thus, if one were to talk of hair oil, the question on attributes that consumers seek in hair oils could result in a variety of answers - fragrance, non-stickiness, presence of herbal ingredients, colour, packaging, price and so on. After having enumerated the attributes, the next stage involves taking each attribute one by one and understanding why it is important to the consumer. Thus if one were to consider ‘non-stickiness’ and the consumer was asked why non-stickiness was important to her in a hair oil, the response could be ‘so that my hair does not look and feel oily’. Then again she would be asked why that was important to her. The

response could be ‘so that I can keep the oil in my hair for 3 to 4 days’. Again, why is that important? ‘So that my hair grows well.’ And why is that important? ‘So that I look good’ and so on. The process continues till the responses begin to get repetitive or till the consumer is not able to think of any more benefits.

### Laddering Methods

**Eliciting distinctions:** Laddering probes begin with distinctions made by the individual respondent concerning perceived, meaningful differences between brands of products. Having made a distinction, the interviewer first makes sure it is bipolar, requiring the respondent to specify each pole. The respondent is then asked which pole of the distinction is preferred. The preferred pole then serves as the basis for asking some version of the “Why is that important to you?” question. The following overview identifies three general methods of eliciting distinctions that have proven satisfactory. The interview outline generally includes at least two

distinct methods of eliciting distinctions to make sure no key element is overlooked.

### **1. Triadic sorting.** (Kelly, 1955)

Providing the respondent with sets of three products is one way to elicit responses from a respondent. Following are instructions for a wine cooler study which used triads to elicit initial distinction:

There are no right or wrong answers. As I present you with each group, take a moment to think about the three wine coolers. Again, when I show you the names of the three wine coolers, think of some overall way in which two of the coolers are the same and yet different from the third. If your response for one group of wine coolers is the same as for a previous group, try to think of another way in which they differ.

### **2. Preference-Consumption Differences.**

Preference differences can also be a useful device for eliciting distinctions. Respondents, after providing a preference order for, say, brands of coolers, might be asked to tell why they prefer their most preferred brand to their second most preferred brand, or more simply to say why one particular brand is their most preferred (or second most preferred, least preferred, etc.) brand.

### **3. Differences by Occasion.**

In most cases, it is desirable to present the respondent with a personally meaningful context within which to make the distinctions. This contributes to more important distinctions being elicited as respondents' distinctions are being examined in the context of the setting in which they naturally occur (Barker, 1968; Runkel and McGrath, 1972). Attention to the context of consumer behavior provides a more meaningful context for laddering to proceed. People do not use or consume products in

general; they do so in particular contexts. A study done in the convenience restaurant category (Gutman, Reynolds, and Fiedler, 1984) used triads between various convenience restaurants as a starting point.

Respondents were then questioned about their usage of various convenience restaurants and the occasion (day-part, who with, concomitant activities) in which they frequented them. Using this information to provide a relevant context relating to frequent usage of the category, respondents were given the same triads but with a context for making a comparison. For example, it might be suggested to a mother with young children that she has been out shopping with her children, and it being lunch time, she wants to stop for lunch on the way home. Three convenience restaurants could be compared for their suitability with respect to this usage situation. Respondents could respond to triads using their two or three most frequent usage occasions as a context for responding.

### **Issues in Laddering Technique**

Obviously the technique calls for a very different calibre of interviewer who can ask probing questions without sounding obtrusive or judgmental. The greater the skills of the interviewer in eliciting responses, the richer the output of the research. And although the technique is used widely in qualitative focus group discussions, the strength of the laddering technique is that it actually superimposes this qualitative research technique of skilled probing into larger sample sizes.

### **Applications**

Since the introduction of the laddering methodology into the consumer research domain, numerous applications, both applied and academic, have been executed (Gutman, 1984; Gutman and Alden, 1984; Gutman and

Reynolds, 1983; Gutman, Reynolds, and Fiedler, 1984; Olson and Reynolds, 1983; Reynolds and Gutman, 1984a; Reynolds and Gutman, 1984b; Reynolds and Jamieson, 1984). Again, the primary application has been to develop a cognitive, hierarchical value map indicating the interrelation of the attributes, consequences, and personal values for a given product or service category.

Unfortunately, the term laddering in the marketing community has become a somewhat generic term representing merely a qualitative, in-depth interviewing process (Morgan, 1984), without reference to either its theoretical underpinnings (Gutman, 1982) or the rather critical distinction between the interviewing process and analytical methods used to derive meaning from the resulting data (Durgee, 1985). Not only have these critical distinctions been overlooked, but even the standard definition of laddering as an interviewing methodology, to date, has not been addressed in the academic literature. Given the value of this type of in-depth understanding of the consumer and in particular, the potential with respect to the specification of more accurate and appropriate positioning strategies, a comprehensive documentation of this research approach is needed.

## Conclusion

Thus, one can actually determine the number of times one particular attribute led to a particular consequence and the number of times that in turn led to another. So at the end, one arrives at a network of such linkages or an HVM (Hierarchical Value Map) that identifies the more dominant linkages that exist. The technique helps a brand to be positioned as offering a 'consequence' that the consumer associates with the relevant attribute. The positioning need not necessarily be on the end value. In fact, it may be difficult for a fairly new category to actually make the quantum leap

from an 'attribute' to the 'value'. It would be necessary to actually hand-hold the consumer up the benefit ladder. The best example of a brand where the consumer has been moved up the benefit ladder is perhaps Close Up. In the beginning, the brand communication was more attribute-led with visuals of the 'mouthwash in the toothpaste' connoting freshness. Later on, it moved up the 'social confidence' positioning. And today, the brand has moved several rungs up the ladder with self-confidence leading to situations unimaginable, some aspirational, some not.

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