Zebras in Russia! Where next?

R Pollay

The zebra may seem an odd choice as a brand image for a new cigarette in Russia, but subtle tobacco marketing forces are, as always, at work.

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freedom and independence so central to adolescent psychology and at the heart of the success of Marlboro among the young of the USA, or of Player's in Canada.4,5

Packaging—The “eye-catching pack” is “stylish, elegant, sexy” with distinctive black and white stripes that are uniquely associated with this brand. It has a retail display advantage as it “stood out on the crowded shelves of Russian tobacco kiosks”.

THE FUTURE

Product extensions—Already launching a “Light” version with the encouragement that “two weeks of limited promotion in Moscow” generated the same volume as the test markets.

Future strategy—Oriented toward global, not just local, possibilities and anticipating functioning in a highly regulated environment. The Zebra brand is registered with the World Intellectual Property Organization, based in Geneva. “Ultimately, we are looking to create an entire Zebra World. Our approach will provide us with a playground in a future world that will be hostile to tobacco.” The “entire Zebra World” they already contemplate will likely involve some or many brand stretching modes such as merchandise (for example, clothing), services (for example, travel agencies), locations (for example, nightclubs) and events (for example, contests or fashion shows).

DISCUSSION

One can only wonder how many young Russians seeking their own freedom and independence, and emulating the opinion and fashion leaders in their world, will make the tragic mistake of trying to play along with the “untamed” Zebras in this “playground”. Unfortunately, if it is many, we are likely soon to see Zebras exported from Russia into other neighbouring markets and perhaps even around the globe, as this marketing strategy is not uniquely Russian and hence can be readily exported.

The success of the Zebra brand is not guaranteed, however, despite the careful product development and the psychological sophistication of the targeting and positioning to date. The quality of the advertising executions communicating the meaning of Zebra to Russians, the budgets used to disseminate these, and the competitive responses of the transnationals, among other factors, will ultimately determine how much influence this brand has on the new generation of Russians.

Whether or not Zebra thrives is not likely to be much influenced by public policies, either in Russia or elsewhere. Once launch marketing establishes the Zebra brand as uniquely cigarettes with a certain image, it is hard to imagine how regulation can much restrict the use of the animal itself or the stripes that can represent it abstractly. It will be most difficult to corral the Zebras once loose.

REFERENCES