BRAND PREFERENCE TOWARDS AIR CONDITIONER IN DHARMAPURI TOWN: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

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Abstract
The Indian consumer durables industry has witnessed a considerable change over the last few years. Changing lifestyle and higher disposable income coupled with boom in the real estate and housing industry and a surge in advertising have been instrumental in bringing about a sea change in the consumer behaviour pattern. A recognized and trusted brand identity makes people confident that the organization is dependable. Developing a corporate brand is important because a positive brand image will give consumers, and other interested stakeholders, confidence about the full range of products and activities associated with a particular company. In this context, an attempt has been undertaken to find out the answers for the following questions: What are the factors influencing the customers to purchase current brand of air conditioner? What is the satisfaction level of the customers on current brand of air conditioner? What extend they had brand preference? The present study attempts to examine the perception of the customers towards brand preference of air conditioner in Dharmapuri town. In the first stage, by adopting simple random sampling, 15 per cent of the wards i.e. 5 municipal wards, Ward 4, Ward 12, Ward 17, Ward 26 and Ward 33 were selected out of the 33 municipal wards. In the second stage, by adopting convenience sampling, 30 customers were selected from each ward. Therefore, the sample consists of 150 customers. The primary data were collected from 150 customers residing at Dharmapuri town with the help of questionnaire. In analyzing data, statistical tools such as student t test, analysis of one-way variance, analysis of co-efficient of variation, multiple regression analysis and percentage analysis have been employed. Inadequate sales promotion, incompetent sales personnel, inadequate advertisement, poor reply on enquiry and inadequate exchange offers are the problems of the customers ranging from 7.33 per cent to 35.33 per cent with the current brand of air conditioner. Besides, lack of efforts to reduce post-purchase dissatisfaction, lack of financial arrangement and delay in servicing are also the problems of the customers ranging from 41.33 per cent to 54 per cent with the current brand of air conditioner. The researcher suggested suitable measures to improve the brand preference of air conditioners.

Introduction

The Indian consumer durables industry has witnessed a considerable change over the last few years. Changing lifestyle and higher disposable income coupled with boom in the real estate and housing industry and a surge in advertising have been instrumental in bringing about a sea change in the consumer behaviour pattern. Consumer durables have emerged as one of the fastest growing industries in India. Consumer durables involve any type of product purchased by consumers that is manufactured for long-term use. Consumer durables include electronic equipment, home furnishings and fixtures, photographic equipment, leisure equipment and kitchen appliances. They can be further classified as either white goods, such as refrigerators, washing machines and air conditioners or brown goods such as blenders, cooking ranges and microwaves or consumer electronics such as televisions and DVD players. Besides the steady growth, changing lifestyles and disposable income resulting in greater affordability have been causing fundamental change in the Indian consumer behaviour. Its favourable demographics and untapped market potential, India is emerging as an attractive market for consumer durables. With rising input costs and other environmental factors continuously putting pressure on margins, the competition among the consumer durable brands is building up in India. Therefore, it is essential for the marketers to keep a close eye on markets to face new challenges and convert them into meaningful opportunities. Over the last twenty years the consumer durables industry has become more and more commercialized.

Brand Preference

Brand is the name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers. Initially, branding was adopted to differentiate one person's cattle from another's by means of a distinctive symbol burned into the animal's skin with a hot iron stamp, and was subsequently used in business, marketing and advertising. There are many factors influencing the consumers to buy a particular product. Now a day, brand preference is closely related to brand choice which can assist consumer decision making and activate the brand purchase actions. Preferences are above all behavioural tendencies. Brand preference is defined variously as the consumer's predispositions toward a brand that varies depending on the salient beliefs that are activated at a given time. It represents the attitudinal brand loyalty excluding the action of repeat purchasing; the brand-oriented attitudinal loyalty. Thus, brand preference is related to brand loyalty. However, brand loyalty is more consistent depicted by the long-term repeated purchasing behaviour.

Statement of the Problem

A customer tends to purchase the brand which he can instantly recall at the thought of buying a product. In general, the Indian consumers were indifferent in choosing the brand, since a lot of close substitutes were available in the market. Due to technological and knowledge up-gradation, today's customers prefer to opt for branded product. The consumer's product preference is influenced by the brand services that go with it. It is difficult to imagine that in a normal situation, a consumer will make a purchase without paying enough attention to his needs and desires. But when several brands of a particular product, which are similar in quality of performance and external appearance, are available to the consumers; the various brand factors may create a preference in the minds of consumers. Thus, there is a need to take a re-look at analyzing the purchase intention and buyers' choice towards a particular brand.

As Indian population is moving towards service sector from manufacturing and agriculture sector, their lifestyles have changed over this transition period. Middle class population and above are getting habituated of comfortable life and products like air conditioners fit right in place in these situation. Average temperature of India has been increasing over years which demand a mode to keep the heat down. Due to increasing population and industries in cities temperature as well as pollutants in the air is increasing, which makes living difficult in the cities. Many industries run on heavy software machines which increases the temperature of room. Increasing heat of rooms and appliances will lead to overheating and appliances stop working. For Indian consumers, it is really important to keep up to the society. If one household buys some product it triggers a chain reaction of purchase in the society to prove their capability to own a similar product.

After globalization, a wide range of consumer household electronic products started flooding the market. The products, which were the presence of upper class during the eighties, have suddenly started thronging the middle-income group households. A noteworthy development of the nineties is that even the low income groups have started acquiring a wide range of consumer household electronic products. Some purchase decisions are routines and may not require these considerations. In this context, an attempt has been undertaken to find out the answers for the following questions: What are the factors influencing the customers to purchase current brand of air conditioner? What is the satisfaction level of the customers on current brand of air conditioner? What extend they had brand preference?

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are as follows:
1. To find out the factors influencing the customers to purchase current brand of air conditioner in Dharmapuri town.
2. To study the satisfaction level of customers towards various brands of air conditioners in Dharmapuri town.
3. To study the perception of customers towards brand preference of air conditioner in Dharmapuri town.
4. To suggest suitable measures for improving the brand preference of air conditioner based on the findings of the study.

Testing of Hypotheses: The following null hypotheses were formulated and tested.

H_{01}**:** There is no significant relationship among the satisfaction levels of the customers belonging to different socio-economic profiles towards select brands of air conditioners in Dharmapuri town.

H_{02}**:** The socio-economic profiles of the customers will not have any influence on their acceptance levels towards brand preference of air conditioner in Dharmapuri town.

Scope of the Study

The present study attempts to examine the perception of the customers towards brand preference of air conditioner in Dharmapuri town. The study is restricted to only 5 municipal wards of the Dharmapuri town namely, Ward 4, Ward 12, Ward 17, Ward 26 and Ward 33. In the present work, information search, influencing factors to purchase air conditioner, satisfaction towards various brands of air conditioners, and brand preference of air conditioner are mainly emphasized.

Sampling Design

The study is confined to brand preference of customers towards air conditioner in Dharmapuri town. As on October 2017, there are 33 municipal wards in Dharmapuri town. In the present study, the sampling involves two stages. In the first stage, by adopting simple random sampling, 15 per cent of the wards i.e. 5 municipal wards, Ward 4, Ward 12, Ward 17, Ward 26 and Ward 33 were selected out of the 33 municipal wards. In the second stage, by adopting convenience sampling, 30 customers were selected from each ward. Therefore, the sample consists of 150 customers.

Tools for Data Collection

The present study is empirical in character based on survey method. Both primary data and secondary data were used in this study. As an essential part of the study, the primary data were collected for a period of 3 months from November 2017 to

January 2018. The primary data were collected from 150 customers residing at Dharmapuri town with the help of questionnaire. Taking into consideration the objectives of the study, a questionnaire was constructed based on Likert scaling technique. The secondary data have been collected mainly from journals, magazines, books and unpublished dissertations. The data so collected have been entered into a master table and tabulated to arrive at useful conclusions.

Framework of Analysis
In analyzing data, statistical tools such as student t test, analysis of one-way variance, analysis of co-efficient of variation, multiple regression analysis and percentage analysis have been employed. Besides, comprehensive, descriptive and percentage analyses have been employed in this study.

Findings
1. Voltas, LG, Samsung, Blue Star and Hitachi are the brands of air conditioners possessed by the respondents at 18.67%, 32.67%, 24.67%, 17.33%, and 6.67% respectively.
2. Majority of the respondents indicate that they disagree (32%) with the factors influencing to purchase current brand of air conditioner, followed closely by neither agree nor disagree (20.67%) and strongly agree (18%). 16% and 13.33% of the respondents agree and strongly disagree respectively with the factors influencing to purchase current brand of air conditioner. The mean acceptance score reveals that the respondents have higher acceptance level towards price (3.19), followed by brand image (3.15). On the other hand, the respondents have lower acceptance score (2.67) towards influence of festival discount in the purchase of current brand of air conditioner in Dharmapuri town.
3. Respondents ranging from 8 per cent to 21.33 per cent are aware of various brands of air conditioners through salesmen/representatives, notices, pamphlets and leaflets, newspapers and magazines, publicity and banners and hoardings. Advertisement in television, and dealers' campaign and display are the sources of information of the respondents to aware about various brands of air conditioners at 24.67 per cent and 38.67 per cent respectively.
4. No significant relationship is found in the satisfaction level of the respondents belonging to different genders, age groups, educational status groups, monthly income groups, occupations, and possessed various brands towards air conditioners in Dharmapuri town.
5. In regards to various brand of air conditioners, female respondents, respondents in the age group above 50 years, respondents with H.Sc qualification, respondents having a monthly income of above Rs. 100000, housewives and students, and respondents possessed LG air conditioner are more satisfied in Dharmapuri town.
6. There exists consistency in the satisfaction level of female respondents, respondents belonging to above 50 years, respondents who have postgraduation and above qualifications, sample customers having a monthly income upto Rs.50000, housewives and students, and respondents who possessed Samsung air conditioner towards various brands of conditioners in Dharmapuri town.
7. There has been a low degree of correlation (0.245) between the selected independent variables and satisfaction towards select brands of air conditioners in Dharmapuri town. The R square indicates that 6 per cent of variation in satisfaction towards select brands of air conditioners is explained by all independent variables taken together. The F value indicates that the multiple correlation coefficients are not significant. Gender, age, educational status, monthly income and occupation of the respondents have no significant effect on their satisfaction towards select brands of air conditioners in Dharmapuri town.
8. In regards to various brands of air conditioners, the greater part of the respondents (22%) are dissatisfied, followed by neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (21.33%) and highly satisfied (20.67%). 19.33% and 16.67% of the respondents are satisfied and highly satisfied respectively with the select brands of air conditioners. The mean satisfaction score reveals that the respondents have higher satisfaction level with the power consumption (3.27), followed by price (3.25) and brand image (3.21). In the case of maintenance, the sample customers have low level of satisfaction (2.73).
9. No significant relationship is found in the acceptance level of the respondents belonging to different age groups, educational status groups, monthly income groups, occupations and various brands possessed towards brand preference of air conditioner in Dharmapuri town. On the other hand, there is a significant relationship the acceptance level of the respondents belonging to different genders towards brand preference of air conditioner.
10. Female respondents, respondents in the age group above 50 years, respondents with H.Sc qualification, respondents having a monthly income of above Rs.100000, businessmen and respondents possessed LG air conditioner have higher acceptance level towards brand preference of air conditioner.
11. There exists consistency in the acceptance level of female respondents, respondents belonging to the age group upto 30 years, respondents who have H.Sc qualification, respondents who have a monthly income of Rs.50000, housewives and students and respondents who possessed Hitachi brand of air conditioner towards brand preference of air conditioner in Dharmapuri town.

12. There has been a low degree of correlation (0.289) between the selected independent variables and acceptance towards the brand preference of air conditioner in Dharmapuri town. The R square indicates that 8.30 per cent of variation in acceptance towards brand preference of air conditioner is explained by all independent variables taken together. The F value indicates that the multiple correlation coefficients are significant at 5 per cent significance level. Gender, age, educational status, monthly income and occupation have no significant effect on the respondents' acceptance towards brand preference of air conditioner in Dharmapuri town.

13. Out of 150 respondents, 26.67 per cent and 26 per cent of the respondents reveal that they strongly disagree and disagree with the brand preference of air conditioner in Dharmapuri town. 23.33 per cent, 12 per cent and 10.67 per cent of the respondents strongly agree, agree, and neither agree nor disagree respectively with the brand preference of air conditioner. The mean acceptance score reveals that the respondents have higher acceptance level towards current brand of air conditioner as preferred brand over any other brands and fulfilling the requirements of customers by current brand than other brands (3.28), followed by putting customers in a good mood (3.06). The respondents have lower acceptance score (2.35) towards distinguishing one brand from the other.

14. Inadequate sales promotion, incompetent sales personnel, inadequate advertisement, poor reply on enquiry and inadequate exchange offers are the problems of the customers ranging from 7.33 per cent to 35.33 per cent with the current brand of air conditioner. Besides, lack of efforts to reduce post-purchase dissatisfaction, lack of financial arrangement and delay in servicing are also the problems of the customers ranging from 41.33 per cent to 54 per cent with the current brand of air conditioner.

Suggestions

1. Customers are more concerned about concessions in the price, cash discounts, gifts, easy installment, free services, free home delivery, coupons, extended warranty, and repair and maintenance of the air conditioner. Besides, after-sales service is more important for the creation of customer satisfaction and make customer stick to the company. Hence it should be entertained by marketers of air conditioners. Therefore, the marketers shall offer necessary promotional measures to the customers for the purchase of air conditioners in Dharmapuri town.

2. Demand for air conditioner is more volatile since it moves rapidly in relation to climatic conditions. Marketers shall separate the current demand for air conditioner in terms of replacement of old products and expansion of the total stock demand for such goods. The purchase through exchange and replacement is inevitable as customers are prone to change and adapt to the modern and updated products that invade the market very frequently. Exchange and replacement cost of the product is very less when customers go on to change the product due to wear and tear, defect identified, adopting to the new and updated version of the product. Therefore, the marketers of air conditioners can extend unlimited exchange offers to the customers.

3. Most of the respondents stated that the marketers of air conditioners have not been able to provide quick service. In an age of quick services, technology is a necessary ingredient for success of marketing function. Therefore, the marketers of air conditioners should work on having multiple payment options like cash, credit cards, debit cards, prompt and error-free billing and faster services. Besides, the marketers of air conditioners should use "real-time" monitoring systems for continuous improvement and to offer quick and prompt services to the customers in Dharmapuri town.

4. Air conditioners are characterized by high unit cost, long life and consequently low frequently of purchase. Hence, potential consumer is likely to seek more information and give more thought to the purchase of air conditioner. Therefore, marketers of air conditioners must ensure that sales personnel have sufficient knowledge of the air conditioner offered, and also must be capable of handling complaints. They must also exhibit willingness to handle returns, and should be available for advice or clarification. Overall, marketers of air conditioners must ensure courteous behaviour of sales personnel. Well mannered and helpful staff can always lead to store patronage decisions.

5. The customers have largely shown their preference to make extensive enquiry from the dealers of different brands of the air conditioners at the time of purchase. This trait should be emulated by all the customers in order to avoid post-purchase dissatisfaction about the quality, performance of and other services of the air conditioners.

6. The marketers must aim at building and maintaining customer satisfaction, avoiding dissatisfaction. Post-purchase evaluation no doubt is strictly concerning the buyers and the sellers. However other parties too get involved in case of the consumer decides to approach the outside intervention mechanism against product failure or dissatisfaction. Therefore, marketers of air conditioners should take steps to minimize the amount of post-purchase dissatisfaction of the customers in regards air conditioner.

7. Credit facility is the key influencing factor for buying air conditioner, there is an inadequate arrangement of credit facility to the customers in Dharmapuri town. Thus, customers need consumer credit to buy air conditioner. It is therefore suggested that the bankers and financial institutions shall focus their attention on the ongoing changes in lifestyle interests of the customers and extend adequate amount of credit for the purchase of air conditioner.

Conclusion

The market for air conditioner is becoming more competitive now a day. Therefore, the manufacturer of air conditioners should understand customer interest much to find higher sale of their products. The study of brand preference is rapidly evolving as researchers recognize and implement new techniques to understand the nature of purchase and consumption behaviour. The results of the study revealed that the respondents have higher acceptance level towards LG air conditioner as preferred brand over any other brand of air conditioner in Dharmapuri town. Inadequate sales promotion, incompetent sales personnel, inadequate advertisement, poor reply on enquiry, inadequate exchange offers, lack of efforts to reduce post-purchase dissatisfaction, lack of financial arrangement and delay in servicing are the problems of the customers with the current brand of air conditioner in Dharmapuri town. The researcher suggested suitable measures to improve the brand preference of air conditioners.

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