

Padua 2017 Abstract Submission

I want to submit an abstract for:

Conference Presentation

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Keywords

Champagne
Branding
Advertising
Promotions
Innovation

Research Question

How did the branding and marketing of champagne in the United Kingdom change in the second half of the 19th century?

Methods

Analysis of archival case histories from Champagne houses, the dominant UK distribution house of Gilbey's and the British press (including bankruptcy trials)

Results

Identification of the failure of promotional / advertising-led challenges to the established champagne trade marketing template and its implications for 19th century branding history

Abstract

The Victorian period saw the birth of mass luxury consumption. Champagne, the favoured drink of elite men and women, became known to, even available for mass consumption in the second half of the nineteenth century. Despite the ubiquity of champagne publicity it did not lose status. Two things made this possible: the unique ability to customise champagne from year to year to suit the evolving taste of elite customers and the sophistication of the branding strategies of its producers. By the 1860s, the names of the major champagne houses were not only known and trusted by the 'Upper Ten Thousand' of British consumers but were effectively managed and marketed as brands by the French shippers and their agents. In parallel, the buying power and distributive clout of W. & A. Gilbey's thousands of retail agents made the sparkling wines of their pioneering 'Castle brand' accessible to the 'million'.

This paper, which draws upon both the archives of the major French champagne houses and the extensive collection of price lists and marketing material in the scattered archives of W. & A. Gilbey, the dominant wine distributor in nineteenth-century Britain, will explore the variety of branding and marketing techniques used. Innovative and ingenious communication strategies and powerful branding created a marketing template for champagne that endured for well over a century. The rise of the champagne brands supplement the current historiography of branding, which, despite the work of Paul Duguid, Roy Church, Kolleen Guy and others, has obscured both the inventive fertility and commercial success of European entrepreneurs.

The paper focuses on four linked questions. First, how did the marketing of champagne evolve over time? Second, how did innovation affect the branding of champagne? Third, what do these changes tell us about the changing nature of Victorian consumption? And, fourth, what relevance does this story of Victorian advertising and branding have to the broader history of branding and marketing?

The marketing of champagne shifted from a belief that quality alone was the essence of a successful house to a relentless advertising-led strategy that made it impossible for secondary brands of all kinds, including retailer own brands, to gain vital space on the 'wine-cards' of restaurants or hotel chains. It was claimed that 'brandolatry', a 19th century term for 'worship of brands', meant that consumers of champagne were paying an unnecessary premium for top name champagnes that (in blind tastings) they could not differentiate from lower-priced secondary or own brands.

Contemporary commentators saw a 'cult' of famous brands which disadvantaged both consumers and merchants. Looking back at this period through the lens of a century of marketing history we can clearly see a different picture; one of astute marketing (though that term was not then in use) that exploited selective distribution and created the concept of vintage-dated wine (what we would today call 'limited edition' product lines) to make champagne an early example of Jean-Noel Kapferer's concept of 'abundant rarity' and a powerful status marker. The marketing template developed in the late nineteenth century has not only endured in the champagne trade to the present day but could be said to underpin much of today's luxury brand marketing.

The paper shows that the Victorian definition of advertising was very broad, encompassing not just press advertising but also the purchase of space on the wine cards of restaurants and hotels, the installation of branded 'tablets' on the walls of merchants' offices and hotels, the deployment of consumer and trade promotions, the use of what we would now call 'public relations' to gain coverage in newspapers and periodicals and sponsorship of both individuals and events to gain such coverage. The almost complete lack of records from the London agents of the champagne houses or the retailers vending champagne makes it impossible to estimate how much was spent on these different forms of advertising. However, by using the letters exchanged between the agents and their principals and on evidence from the wine trade press the paper shows how the marketing template for champagne was developed.

There were strong suggestions in the contemporary press that consumers were increasingly 'drinking the label' (as contemporary marketers call it). To buy a known brand was not just to guard against malpractice and adulteration but also to display status and the increasing importance of out-of-home consumption made labels more important. Both at home and in public venues the increasing influence of women on consumption in general and the champagne trade in particular was noted.

The evidence suggests that brandolatry (if it existed) was confined to champagne. The paper uses data from Punch on the incidence of brand names in cartoons show the uniqueness of champagne and suggests that what contemporaries called brandolatry was in fact one of the earliest indicators of the power of systematic and well-resourced branding to drive consumer choice, establish (and enforce) a pricing premium over goods of approximately equivalent quality but lesser name value and subordinate the distributive and retail segments of the value chain to powerful producing interests.

Finally, the paper will argue that that the branding and marketing of champagne in the later nineteenth century represents the first successful example of luxury brand marketing. Though its Anglo-French practitioners lacked the vocabulary and concepts of modern marketers their strategic insights and tactical initiatives anticipated much of the thinking and writing of their twenty-first century counterparts.