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MARKETING MANAGEMENT CASE STUDY

GATORADE: THIRSTING FOR COMPETITIVE POSITIONING

According to Larry Dykstra, manager of marketing research for Quaker Oats, the development of a focused positioning for Gatorade has allowed the company to target core users and identify secondary markets. Before Quaker acquired the beverage in 1983, Gatorade's previous owner had promoted it by portraying users as competitive athletes, adult men, teens, and nonathletes of athletes.

"When we acquired Gatorade," recalls Dykstra, "it was a poorly positioned brand, with a lack of consistent focus." The problem stood in contrast with the way current users were defined. "There was no message on the uses of this product or under which circumstances and occasions it was suggested to be used."

When Quaker looked at marketing research, Dykstra says the company found that Gatorade's main users were men aged 19–44, that they understood the product had a good perception of what it did and where to drink it and how to use it. Since Gatorade had been developed and marketed primarily in the South, Quaker wanted to find out if there was an opportunity to market the drink in other areas. A study of attitudes determined that the target could be expanded geographically. "We felt, based on research, that could take a national solid positioning of the product that is consistent with southern values and market the product in the North," Dykstra says. Gatorade was positioned for physical activity enthusiasts as a drink to quench their thirst and replenish minerals lost during exercise rather than other beverages do. Subsequent advertising in 1984 centered around these attributes.

In 1985, the company moved away from this core positioning by trying to play on the product's competitive heritage—a strategy that failed. TV ads showed people in different activity situations trying to make sports sites. A decision was made to go back to narrow positioning in 1986.

"In 1987, we focused in our primary target, but there have been refinements," Dykstra explains. "We've tried to portray users as accomplished but not professional athletes." Although the drink is perceived as a "serious beverage, the ads have added a fun component by showing people enjoying it together. We tried to show people who did it alternate customers, but also people they could aspire to be like."

An effort also was made to portray people's motivations for using the product. A computer graphic that portrayed three sponsoring was introduced—one which, according to Dykstra, came across so strong we're asked to change the language."

But being well-focused and consistent in developing the product over time can create other problems. "Because Gatorade is narrowly positioned in terms of users and user occasions," explains Dykstra, "growth opportunities are probably limited. So how do we go about identifying new opportunities?"

"The answer was to look for opportunities consistent with the product's imagery." About two years ago," says Dykstra, "we conducted a large study that included a sample of current users and other possible targets, such as children and mothers with young children." Quaker also looked in terms of vertical target. Should it target Gatorade toward runners or basketball players? "We built a large enough statistical study so we could look at people who considered themselves basketball players separate from those who considered themselves to be aerobic athletes. In the user needs, we asked people, 'There are 10 times you're in this specific situation, are you going to use Gatorade?'"

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