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THE GERMAN WINE QUEEN: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES OF A PRODUCT AMBASSADOR FORMAT BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY

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Summary

In this paper we analyze opportunities and challenges of the German wine queen concept as an example of a traditional food product ambassador. Explorative interviews with seven experts from politics, wine marketing and media have been conducted. The wine queen is confirmed as a well-known format that still seems to represent the self-image of the majority of the German wine industry well, especially for marketing abroad. Besides organizational and financial aspects, the main challenge is currently to re-shape the outdated role image and better align it recent social changes, yet without losing the appeal of its traditionality.

Keywords

Wine queen, product ambassador, opinion leader, marketing strategy, expert interviews

1 Introduction

In the agriculture sector worldwide, it is common that annually elected product sovereigns (e.g. the bacon queen, heath queen or beer queen) represent a region, a product or branches for the purpose of promotion campaigns. Among these product ambassadors in Germany, the best-known figure is probably the German wine queen, established in 1949 (JUNGLAS, 2008). As the 'highest' representative of the German wine industry (elected by 13 German wine regions), this format "[...] combines, like no one else in this country, folklore with modern demands" (BAUER, 2018). Historical props such as crown, sash and a mostly traditional dress are standing out in a modern and democratic society. A product ambassador is a special form of "opinion leader" (LAZARSELD et al., 1944: 49f.), besides influencers, ethical or authentic leaders, celebrities, professional experts or other avatars (BERGKVIST & ZHOU, 2016). Building awareness, influencing follower or consumer decision making and increasing sales are typically investigated effects, just as credibility, the fact that others regard them as leaders in their field or that they are well-known across specific markets or regions (BERGKVIST & ZHOU, 2016). Product ambassadors can be categorized into different types based on the communication channel (analog or online), the direction of impact in business (internal or external) and the logic of impact. Additionally, they can be characterized by what they do: a) conveying information, b) categorization, c) orientation, d) legitimation, and e) bridging function (GEISE, 2017). However, scientific research on product sovereigns in Germany and on the German wine queen in particular, is almost completely lacking. The historical development is described by JUNGLAS (2008). The media presence of a wine queens was investigated by FLADUM (2015) in the Hamburg area. WESTERKAMP (2018) investigated stakeholders' expectations towards different product sovereigns in Germany. He found that the wine queen is increasingly only known in wine-growing regions. The level of awareness of the product sovereign positively correlates to the respective region. RAMŠAK (2015) describes the history of wine queens from different nations and criticizes from the perspective of gender aspects and in analogy to beauty pageant contests, under which young women are regarded as objects and/or part of an unpaid or underpaid workforce. The aim of this paper is to study aspects of product ambassadors for the agri-food industry in general, based on the case of the German wine queen as a famous product ambassador with opportunities and challenges that originate both from changes in the overall societal values and new digital marketing formats.

2 Empirical methods and analytical frameworks

A total of seven experts were interviewed for this explorative study in the spring of 2020. Twelve questions to identify expectations, future marketing potential and adaptability of the German wine queen role were investigated using an interview guide. The average duration of the interviews was 55 minutes. Two interviews were answered in writing. The experts came from five groups: Politics, wine and agricultural marketing, association chairmen, former wine queens, and media representatives. All interviews were transcribed and then analyzed using a coding guide, which consists of fixed coding rules according to MAYRING (2010).

3 Results and discussion

The results indicate that there are various opportunities, but also challenges. The German wine queen is confirmed as a well-known institution and representative figure, yet increasingly popular abroad rather than in Germany. Most experts see the way in which the wine queen acts and communicates as an advantage: *“She is a kind of door opener, sympathetic and competent. Her job is to draw attention to an industry and its product, to provide information”*. Compared to other opinion leaders, the wine queen reaches people nationally and internationally, within and outside the wine industry, online or offline, with a fully developed marketing concept. Another opportunity is the annual election that is publicized in the media. This leads to continuously expanding interest and attention to this figure. Furthermore, it increases the option of adaptation to modernity without losing the recognition of tradition and attributes such as *“expertise”*, *“relationship with viticulture and rural areas”*, or *“seriousness”*. Finally, there is the potential to make volunteering more attractive to society. The interviewed experts identify challenges specifically in social changes such as gender mainstreaming and the alcohol debate, respectively. Due to the lack of a clearly defined target group and the resulting lack of a clearly defined task, there is a risk that the concept of the wine queen will lose its relevance. At last, the experts emphasized that the media presence should be expanded, especially the presence in the tabloid press. The potential of the wine queen as an opinion leader lies in being able to build on the tradition, as well as on the characteristics of the external appearance – *“first and foremost the crown”* – while becoming *“more experimental”* in the future. It is an opportunity to continue this tradition, but the concept needs to be moderately adapted to social changes without destroying its characteristic features. If the concept succeeds in interpreting this traditional role in a modern way, this type of product ambassador has a unique selling point with large potential. There is a lack of sound data on the success factors and effects of wine queens at home and abroad. The image and actual level of awareness as well as their acceptance within and outside the wine industry are yet not well understood. The work presented here should provide initial findings as well as ideas for the further evaluation of a traditional product ambassador. Studies with broader empirical data foundation will follow.

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