
POSITIONING AND REPOSITIONING OF TRADITIONAL PRODUCTS IN LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL MARKETS. THE PORTUGUESE EXPERIENCE

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Abstract. Traditional products are goods and services that are linked to the history and cultural heritage of each country. Their positioning and repositioning in local and international markets contribute to increasing market share, revenues, and the popularity of the country of origin. Careful repositioning is necessary to shift a product or service's place in customers' minds, while preserving the connection between traditional products and the country's economic development. This paper aims to investigate the positioning and repositioning of traditional products using Portuguese company as a case study. The reason for the choice is the dynamic change in the marketing strategies of O Valor do Tempo company and the success achieved in both local and international markets. This good business practice is not yet comprehensively discussed in the marketing publications. The research methods in the paper are a review of published literature on traditional food consumption, the observation method, and a case study. The case study provides an opportunity to explore different dimensions and conditions of the traditional food repositioning process. The main findings are that the repositioning of traditional products, supported by conventional and digital marketing campaigns, increases the revenues of the producing firms and creates conditions for a variety of business internationalization forms.

Keywords: traditional food products; repositioning; Portuguese O Valor do Tempo company, digital marketing, internationalization

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Introduction. There is no universally accepted definition of what a traditional product is. According to various studies (Caputo et al. 2017; Peulich et al. 2023; Popovi & Mihailovi 2023; Porciani et al. 2020; Rocillo-Aquino et al. 2021), there is a clear correlation between certain foods and specific geographical locations, along with traditions related to production methods, cooking habits, and regional culture.

The positioning and repositioning of traditional products in local and international markets increases their market share, revenues, and the popularity of the country of origin. The innovative marketing approach of the Portuguese company O Valor do Tempo is a good example of a successful repositioning process. The paper focuses on the reasons for the company's marketing success

and its international experience. The research methods used are a review of published literature on traditional food product marketing strategies, the observation method, and a case study. The case study allows learning more about a specific business situation and the relationship between the context and the business decisions. It contributes to theory development while providing also practical insights.

Globalization and digitization, as well as the rapid speed of life and work, do not decrease customers' desire to consume traditional food products that they have grown up with. Just the opposite trend is observed. Some authors claim that the reason is the consumers' need to feel "grounded" and it is achieved by choosing products that are associated with particular places, people, and good memories of their experience. In the U.S. this behaviour is more typical for consumers living in the big cities, that are well-educated, with higher income, and on whose work mobility, digitization and globalization have a bigger impact. They have a growing need for emotional grounded life (Eihinger *et al.* 2021). The construct of groundedness focuses on increasing consumer choices, happiness, and the need for safety, strength, and stability. The companies can successfully use it in market segmentation and marketing mix decisions. (Eihinger *et al.* 2021). Desire to consume traditional products is observed also in the Balkan countries (PEULICH *et.al.* 2023). In our case, the repositioning of a traditional Portuguese food contributes to attracting a variety of customer segments and successful internationalization.

Regulation of Traditional Products Quality in the EU

European Union has a comprehensive quality policy concerning food, wines, and spirits that encompasses a variety of protection schemes for products with special characteristics. Food certification ensures the quality and sustainability of traditional product production and thus contributes to their promotion. The Objective of the EU policy is to highlight the specific qualities of certain typical products on the market and to distinguish them from other products in the shops by labeling them with the relevant established EU symbols. Regulation (EU) No 1151/2012 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 21 November 2012 on agricultural product and food quality schemes is the major instrument for control. It defines a variety of ways for traditional food products protection¹.

The protection schemes are protected designations of origin (PDO), protected geographical indications (PGI), traditional speciality guaranteed (TSG), and the so-called optional quality terms (mountain product and agricultural product of the EU's outermost region). There are also voluntary

¹ EC.Agriculture and Rural Development.Geographical indications and quality schemes, https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/farming/geographical-indications-and-quality-schemes_en

certification schemes. Currently, there are more than 1,400 agricultural and food products with protected names that are registered in the European registries. The main principles applied in the Common Agricultural Policy of the EU are the leading role of the producers, and the protective covering of their collective interest. This also applies to products with a protected designations and foods with a traditionally specific character or TSG¹.

Protected designation of origin foods have the strongest links to the place where they are produced. There are three requirements for their registration including originating in a specific place, region, or, in exceptional cases, a country; the quality or characteristics which are mainly or exclusively due to a specific geographical environment with its built-in natural and human factors; and all the stages of production should take place in the defined geographical area.² Bulgarian yogurt, Strandjanski manov honey, and Bulgarian white brine cheese are examples of PDOs. Protected geographical indications (PGI) focus on the close relationship between the region and the name of the product. In comparison with the protected designation of origin, at least one stage of the whole process of preparation, processing and production should take place in the region. The Bulgarian traditional food examples are Gornooryakhovski sudzhuk and Bulgarian rose butter.

Traditional speciality guaranteed (TSG) describes a specific product or food which has two major characteristics. It results from a method of production, processing or composition that corresponds to a traditional practice for that product or that food, or it is produced from raw materials or ingredients traditionally used for it. In the case of foods with a traditional specific character, there is no link with the geographical area. In this case 'traditional' designates proven use on the domestic market for a period of time allowing transfer of experience in production and consumption from generation to generation. This period shall be at least 30 years. "Speciality guaranteed" means specific features of production that clearly distinguish this product from other similar products in the same category. This group is the largest for Bulgarian food products and includes Fillet Elena, Kayserowan neck Thrace, Beef Pastrami, Fillet Trapezitsa, Lukanka Panagyurska, Lukanka Troyanska, etc.³

Portugal has registered more than 190 protected designations among which three TSG. The canned sardines are considered a traditional food by the population but from the point of view of the EU regulation the only Portuguese

¹ ibid

² ibid

³ Ministerstvo na zemedeliето i hranite, Zashiteni Naimenovaniya, <https://www.mzh.government.bg/bg/politiki-i-programi/politiki-i-strategii/politiki-po-agrohranitelnata-veriga/zashiteni-naimenovaniya>

fish product that is TSG is the dried cod Bacalhau or Bacalhau de Cura Tradicional Portuguesa.¹

In April 2024 the EU Parliament adopted a new regulation on geographical indications for wine, spirit drinks, agricultural products, and traditional specialities. It envisages the introduction of a **single regulation** covering agricultural products and foodstuffs, wines and spirit drinks. The role of the producers is enhanced. They will be able to accompany geographical indications product specifications with sustainability report presenting their production practices.²

In more general terms traditional food products are considered to be associated with habits. Continual behaviour is often at the core of consumers' understanding of 'traditional products'. Traditional products are also often defined by consumers as seasonal or consumed on certain occasions, holidays, and rituals. Ratcliffe et al. (2018) posit that rituals, associated with the consumption of specific foods and drinks, foster benefits such as social bonding, emotional transformation, and enhance consumers' perceptual experience. Traditional food often causes hot regional debates due to the fact that these products are consumed in many neighbouring countries and have even similar names (Fiori 2020).

Cultural heritage closely links with traditional food products (Duralia 2023). Consumers buy them because of the associations of these foods with their national, ethnic, and racial cultural roots. The consumption of traditional foods creates a sense of authenticity. Porciani describes food as a crucial marker of identity connected with tradition, a specific place and the past (2020). Such products evoke feelings of nostalgia, memories of pleasant experiences from childhood and youth, and family celebrations. Building lasting brand bonds and loyalties with clients seeking peace of mind and a sense of belonging to a particular community is possible on this basis. Consumption creates belonging to traditions and thus a sense of social significance. Understanding these characteristics of consumer behaviour is a prerequisite for developing appropriate marketing strategies (Caputo *et al.* 2018).

Consumer behaviour towards traditional food products varies among generations. Though there are country differences, the generation born after World War II (1946-1964) is more interested in traditional products since it grew up with them. Consumers form loyalty and often have nostalgic feelings

¹ Portuguese Traditional Products, <https://tradicional.dgadr.gov.pt/en/quality-products/tsg-traditional-speciality-guaranteed>

² REGULATION (EU) 2024/1143 https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=OJ:L_202401143; <https://www.arepoquality.eu/2024/02/29/the-european-parliament-approves-the-new-gi-and-quality-terms-regulation/>

when buying such products. Generation X (1965-1980) is considered to seek a balance between tradition and innovation. It is attracted by upgraded flavors and positioning that focuses attention on convenience, quality, and good value for the price offered. Global and digital culture influences the generation Millennials (1981-1996). It is interested in traditional products from different cultures, and looks for authenticity, sustainability, and cultural experience. This generation frequently seeks food products that reflect their heritage and cultural identity, yet they favor those that are contemporary and align with their highly active lifestyle.

Generation Z (1996 - 2010) is also known as the Digital Generation. The social networks have a major impact on their preferences development. Researchers consider that consumers from this generation are more likely to engage with traditional food products through online channels and influencers. The consumers from Generation Alpha were born after 2010. They are often described as the hyper-digital and hyper-connected generation. People belonging to this group work with multiple digital channels. Researchers describe this group as creative virtual learners, influenced by real-time marketing. The consumers also influence their parents' choices. Generation Alpha is searching for healthy products that can be easily bought. They are very much interested in family which is considered a good prerequisite for the consumption of traditional food products (Engelhardt 2023; Kotler et al. 2021; Mujthaba 2023).

The major drivers for buying traditional food products are their specific taste and flavour as well as their uniqueness. Other important factors in the decision-making process are the traditional food health and safety benefits, and the consumers understanding that by buying them they support the local businesses. Ethical concerns, a desire for a sustainable economy, environmental friendliness, and nostalgia also draw consumers to traditional foods. Higher prices and limited accessibility to traditional food products serve as barriers to their consumption (Caputo et al. 2018).

Positioning traditional food products

Positioning is a major marketing decision that distinguishes a product or service in consumers' minds from competitive products. Traditional food often employs heritage and authenticity as positioning strategies. In communications companies often use brand storytelling that highlights the origin, the production process, the cultural significance, traditions, particular rituals, and the associated consumption. Packaging is an important part of communications, helping to convey a certain cultural relationship, symbols, etc. Generally, the price of traditional food products is higher reflecting the increased cost of product uniqueness, manual labor in production, preservation, etc. Fluctuations in supply and demand, increased logistics costs, and

seasonality also impact the consumers readiness to buy them. The customers' attitudes towards traditional food product prices vary. Some of them are willing to pay a higher price for authenticity, but others compare them to similar products on the market and abstain from buying them or buying traditional food products only on specific occasions.

Potential problems in marketing traditional products include limited market access. Certain products experience market saturation, making it challenging for consumers to distinguish them from competing traditional products. Some of the younger consumers perceive the traditional food products as old-fashioned. Traditional production and cultural heritage can be barriers to the renewal of the traditional food products. Marketers have to understand the nuances of cultural heritage and to represent them correctly.

Repositioning traditional food products is a challenging marketing decision because it requires applying marketing strategies that interpret traditional food products in a way that appeals to modern consumers while maintaining their cultural and historical relevance. This is often done by introducing modern packaging and design. Another approach is emphasizing the health benefits of the product, and the sustainable and ethical choices. One of the solutions is to create a hybrid product that includes changes in flavour, taste, form, etc. Marketers can also focus on the product's relevance in a multicultural context. New digital channels allow to tell short stories about the product and its place in modern society.

Researchers have identified that innovations in traditional food products are accepted mainly when they contribute to increased safety and tangible benefits. Perceptions and readiness to buy innovative traditional products differ among countries (Guerrero et al. 2008; Gere et al. 2019).

Canned sardines in Portugal

Sardines are a traditional food product in Portugal. St. Anthony's feast, which is celebrated every year on June 13, is dedicated to them. In the past, the abundance of this type of fish predetermined its traditional consumption. Canning fish has a long history. It starts from the beginning of the 19th century. Canning technology was perfected by French and English technologists, and this gave impetus to mass production. Ramirez was the first Portuguese company to start offering canned sardines, tuna, and mackerel in 1865 and to export them, as the catch on the French coast was not sufficient.

The two world wars gave impetus to the development of the canning industry. You can store canned fish for a long time, making it a nutritious and easily portable product. The sector became the second largest in Portugal. In the 1950s, there were more than 400 fish canneries in Portugal (Masih, 2024). They were situated on the Atlantic coast.

Sardines became a cultural symbol of Portugal and are present in various forms of Portuguese art such as ceramics, paintings, and sculptures, serving as a visual representation of Portuguese culture alongside the rooster, a more traditional symbolic animal for Portugal. The sardine symbol became stronger in the 20th century, representing national identity and resilience. The consumption of canned food consumption also grows in the gourmet market.

In the 1970s and 1980s, canning production declined significantly, but the last decade has seen growth again thanks to innovations in the sector and tourism. Many tourists buy canned sardines and other fish as a souvenir. At the beginning of the new century, the catch of sardines again significantly decreased, but since 2019 there has been an increasing trend. The nominal catch of fresh sardines grew in 2023 by 3,2% compared to 2022 (Statistical Yearbook Portugal, 2023). The export of canned sardines has also been steadily increasing since 2019. The major importers of Portuguese canned sardines in 2023 are France (40,3%), the United Kingdom(10,4%), Spain(8,3 %) and Austria (5,8%) (Nogueira 2023; Value added sardine, 2024).

There are currently 14 factories in Portugal, one of which is Comur which is now part of O Valor do Tempo. Established in 1942, Comur specialized in eels. The factories are located south of Lisbon in Sesimbra and Setúbal, in Porto and Portimao in southern Portugal. Of the 14 factories, only one uses entirely manual labor in canning. This is the Pinhais factory from the coastal town of Matosinhos in Northern Portugal. In the remaining factories, industrial production methods are applied. Sardines are preserved in a variety of ways. They use different-sized fish and fillets, and add various sauces and spices. The type of sardine that is canned is “*Sardina Pilchardus*,” which lives in marine latitudes between 25 and 100 meters below sea level. Their fishing season is from May to October.

A major innovation in the canning process is the decrease in salt content and the calories. It is due to the growing concern of Portuguese consumers and the customers in major import markets to buy and consume healthier food products. The fish industries in Portugal are introducing new fish spices today. There are 34 spices and 800 different canned fish products. In 2020 the Portuguese National Association of Canned Fish Industries (Associação Nacional dos Industriais de Conservas de Peixe – ANICP) launched a ‘Let’s Conserve What’s Ours’ campaign. Its major goal is to improve the consumption of canned food and to focus the attention of the Portuguese consumers on the variety of the national canned fish products. In support of the idea in 2022, the Portuguese Parliament proclaimed the 15th of November as the National Day of Canned Fish (Nogueira 2023).

Comur company and Grup O Valor do Tempo

The intensive competition in the Portuguese canned fish market requires clear differentiation of products, a unique selling proposition, and innovation. These are the crucial marketing decisions for a successful business in the Portuguese market (Barbosa 2024). In 2016 Grupo Valor do Tempo bought Comur with the idea to innovate the traditional canned sardines and position them in a new way on the national market. Currently, the group has 15 brands in different sectors all of which are based on Portuguese traditions and respect for heritage (<https://www.ovalordotempo.pt/en/brands/>).

In the first year, the Group invested heavily in its new ideas. They purchased an entire building in Rossio and produced millions of cans. The company developed completely new marketing strategy that aimed to change the way canned sardines were offered. The idea of the company was to focus the attention of consumers on the hard traditional work of catching and preserving fish, which required a lot of work by ordinary Portuguese men and women. The focus of the new marketing concept was the belief that it was time to increase the value of the canned fish. It shouldn't be sold for 70 cents. Portuguese products should not be considered cheap. They should be perceived as valuable.

The company devised a brand-new marketing strategy to revolutionize the canned sardine industry. An everyday traditional Portuguese product was offered as a luxurious one. The target markets became mainly the tourists for whom sardines are a symbol of Portuguese culture and they bought the expensive canned fish as a souvenir. The second major market segment, which presented the greatest challenge, was the Portuguese consumers, who were required to purchase the company's products at a significantly high price. They needed to adjust to viewing a traditional, daily-use product as a luxurious one, which they could only afford as a gift.

Changes in the targeting lead to tailoring a new marketing mix. The company's product portfolio comprises over 30 different types of products, one of which is a fillet with bones, available in a variety of sauces. Various themes from the canned fish series—a collection of years, cities in Portugal, and gold bars with sardines without skin and bones—altered the packaging to build a strong brand identity. Gold flakes adorn the gold bars and each piece retails for more than 20 euros. To create the marketing concept, the company went back 100 years to promote a reflection on the century of traditions in preserving fish. Thus the products in the specialized company stores are always the same: 140 grams of Portuguese sardines in olive oil, sold in cans with dates from 1916 to 2024, with an important event from the year in question and some personalities who were born on that date. Each decade has a base color, and each can has a slight chromatic variation with the previous one. The series of

Portuguese cities has a package that represents major sightseeing points and the names of the cities. The golden series represents canned fish as a treasure.

The distribution also changed. The company created novelty shops where it sells the tinned sardines. The first shop was opened in Lisbon and designed like a circus with a Ferris wheel, a carousel, a king chair, and a clock rotating on the ceiling. The store has a soundtrack created specially for it. The stores are branded as the “Fantastic World of Portuguese Sardines”. There are 23 shops in Portugal in major cities and tourist locations. Each one of them has its own atmosphere. Some of them like the stores in Obidosh and New York are designed as a library. The in-store experience is the way to give the canned sardines their real value and the consumers appreciate that. According to the former marketing director except for what is basic everything people buy is a small pleasure. And this is what the new marketing concept provides for the customers (IMR 2018). The location of the stores is central and corresponds to the most visited places by tourists in the area.

The pricing strategy corresponds to the target market groups. The brand positions and prices the product as luxurious, with prices varying from 9 euros to over 20 euros per piece and higher for a bundle, depending on the type of collection. Price discounts are offered on the webpage of the brand.

The communication decisions are made using traditional and digital marketing channels. The brand has a webpage at <https://portuguesesardine.com/>. The webpage presents a wealth of information through text and videos, including the history of Comur, the production process and brand, recipes, the health and well-being benefits of the products, and the company's sustainability goals. Customers can locate a store, place an order for products that qualify for free delivery above 100 euros, and apply a coupon. The activities can be followed on major social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, and Linked In. In addition to media publications, the brand frequently receives awards for its creativity. The Portuguese Creative Retail Award will shortlist it in 2024. The national media supports the innovative way of offering a traditional product. In March 2023 the Portuguese travel industry newspaper TNews honoured Mundo Fantástico das Conservas Portuguesas (Fantastic World of Portuguese Canned Foods) with the Tourism Leaders award for the best creative brand. (Nogueira 2023)

Product internationalization

After seven years of experience in the Portuguese market and 23 stores in Portugal, the brand started its internationalization by opening its first store abroad. In the summer of 2023, the group O Valor do Tempo opens near Time Square in New York a store with a 10-year lease. According to the company statement, this step in international business indicates a search for “unique experience” and exploration of “new stories”. Similar to the internal marketing

decisions the company positions its store in the luxury and entertaining food category.

The internal atmosphere of the store reminds an exquisite library in green and gold tones. The store offers 30 varieties of canned fish. Other fish products, such as canning, further expand the assortment. The location is one of the most vibrant in the world as is New York. The major task of the international endeavour is "to introduce the American consumer to "a traditional Portuguese product", and "to put Portugal back on the map of the U.S."

The business environment and the time for selling canned fish in the US are favourable for the Portuguese new marketing concept since the consumption of tinned fish in the country is rising. People perceive it as a ready-to-eat, variety-bringing, and durable product that has become a fundamental part of modern food culture. Social media sites like TikTok also encourage consumption, leading to the flourishing of American companies. For example the company Fishwife have grown 9900 percent since it opened in 2020 (Sietsima 2023).

The new store's opening has been widely promoted both in traditional and digital media. The major problem is considered to be the high price of the traditional Portuguese product which will impact regular purchases. People are likely to buy the product more as a gift than for everyday consumption. The highest price is 44 USD. A variety of media and communication channels promote Portuguese sardines and their purchase. For example towards the end of 2023 Interbrand collaboration of the Portuguese brand and the film "Poor Things" was implemented (Neves 2023).

The store serves as a physical location for promoting other Portuguese products. In June 2024 Valor do Tempo Group has demonstrated in the store its new brand "Aida Rugs". It represents the Portuguese traditions in hand-crafted Arraiolos Rugs that use Serra da Estrela sheep wool. With these products the company combines its goals of creating sustainability and creativity (<https://www.ovalordotempo.pt/>). The presentation of more traditional Portuguese products with new brands is likely to contribute to the store development and O Valor do Tempo's solid presence in the American market.

Conclusion

The repositioning of traditional products, supported by traditional and digital marketing campaigns, increases revenues and creates conditions for a variety of foreign market entries. Tradition is not a barrier to repositioning. A creative marketing approach adds value to traditional products and helps to develop unique product propositions in the local and international markets. Even the more conservative target markets gradually start to buy the

repositioned traditional products. Direct communication channels contribute to building brand loyalty.

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