IN SEARCH OF A POSITIONING FOR SPANISH TILE

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, it is not sufficient to project an image in order to provide the product with an image; rather, the product needs to be given its own personality to differentiate it. A positive image of the country may help. However, this requires an effort to be made not only by the country's institutions but also by the sector.

It is a matter of creating an umbrella, putting all the organizations under it and finding in it those dimensions with which this industry's product manages to differentiate itself. Thus, the country's image expressed through the term "made in..." may become a much more inexorable element and may even manage to transmit the industry's advantages.

In this sense, the objective of this work is to investigate the view that is held of Spanish ceramic products compared with those of other industries, so that a solid base can be created with which a communications strategy can be built to support the foreign marketing of Spanish tiles.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Spanish ceramic industry can be more than satisfied with the efforts made so far. These efforts are mainly in production, the commercial work and the running of stores, which allow it now to compete with an efficient service management and, undoubtedly, with a high level of product quality. However, will the work carried out be sufficient where it comes to the future?

The complexity, the dynamism and the competitiveness now present on the market make us think not. To be and, above all, to remain top-class, it will be essential to make its presence on the market known and, not only that, but that it is in the best of conditions to compete.

However, the truth is that many Spanish ceramic companies are still today doing their utmost to improve the material aspects of their products (mainly in functional features and technical quality), neglecting important policies that allow them to differentiate themselves on the new international scene, such as the creation and consolidation of their own brands, which would also help to get rid of that heavy burden that the lack of a proper image means for them.

The Spanish ceramic industry should keep this in mind and, after the good work done in more technical aspects, from now on it should begin to aim all its efforts at giving the Spanish ceramic product its own personality in order to manage to make it different.

A first step could be to try to make the "Tiles of Spain" brand come alive. Or rather, since it is by no means intended to suggest that it is a lifeless brand, it should not be underutilized by only using it to identify the Spanish ceramic product, but it should be given its own personality with which a response can be given to many of the voices that cry out that the Spanish ceramic industry should act jointly and go outside Spain under a single common *"made in Spain"* brand that was a differentiating synonym for quality and innovation.

However, all this requires a management effort not only by institutions such as ASCER (which, on this occasion, is acting as a promoter of the initiative), but also by the companies themselves. Not only is it essential to count on their support, but also on their complicity. It is a matter of building an "associative" advantage for the industry, which is also "competitive" on the new international scene and, to do so, ASCER becomes the key element in order to be able to create a climate of trust among all of these companies and, thus, carry out this collective action.

It is true that projecting a positive foreign image of the product's place of origin will always be an element that helps the activity of organizations abroad (Johansson and Nebenzahl, 1986 and Häubl, 1996). Thus, in the face of the globalization phenomenon, achieving high recognition abroad by countries and obtaining in principle a high level of credibility for their products is an objective to which the administrations should currently commit themselves (Ortigueira Sanchez, 1999; 2000).

In turn, those countries with a sufficiently good, consolidated image that helps effectively support their exports also profess to have organizations with recognized brands that have contributed substantially to creating that image and that also show a significant tendency to use the product's national origin as a reinforcing element for these brands (Oporto del Olmo, 1993 and Nieto and Llamazares, 1998). This phenomenon of transferring images and associations between the country of origin and product brands is known as "cross fertilization" (Alvarez del Blanco, 2000 and Casilda, 2001), and it refers to the mutual benefits that the country, the brands and their organizations achieve in time in terms of credibility and trust.

For these reasons, Valls (1993) and Ortigueira Sanchez (1999; 2000) point out the convenience of carrying out active management policies of the country's image at an institutional level, making this a starting point for its recognition abroad. Thus, the products from that place of origin would achieve what has become known in the literature as the "halo" effect, which basically consists of converting the place of origin's image into an identifying element for its products (Han, 1989). That is, in the event there is no specific information on the product, the country's image is sufficiently strong to be able to manage to transfer its perception to the product's qualities, and to be able thereby to contribute to the assignment of a quality judgement. Such an effect may and should be achieved through promotional efforts (Cattin, Jolibert and Lohnes, 1982; Kaynak and Cavusgil, 1983 and Chao, 1989).

However, it is also necessary to take action with regard to the management of the country's image at a sectoral level (i.e. at a specific level for a certain product category), for it is logical to think that the images formed by individuals can vary considerably depending on the product or the product category (Hooley, Shipley and Krieger, 1988). The product's origin is potentially a strong image variable that can be used for achieving sustainable competitive advantages, and that can, through time, become a quality brand for a specific product category. However, for this to happen, a proper communication policy which allows a high level of identification between the image projected and the image perceived by people also has to be applied at this level (Johansson, 1989; Parameswaran and Pisharodi, 1994).

Organizations can obtain more competitive advantages by associating their products to the name of their place of origin when they are commercialised abroad. But to do so, they must manage to identify it with a quality "savoir faire" that only corresponds to that place of origin's industry, thereby creating an umbrella brand under which the entire industry can shelter and take advantage. Therefore, it will be necessary to define exactly the dimensions it is intended to cover with this and with which the brand could compete at an international level.

As a result of the study presented here, it has been possible to create a series of positioning charts, whose analysis we hope will provide that idea of positioning on which the Spanish ceramic industry needs to insist, in order to be able to compete more effectively on the international stage.

2. METHODOLOGY

In order to determine this idea, it was considered useful to analyse the image. However, the truth is that obtaining this indicator does not help much if there is no reference. In other words, as in many other cases, the best thing to do is to measure this position in comparison with something and, in this precise case, it was done with respect to the position of other ceramics producing countries: Italy, Brazil, Turkey and Mexico as four of the world's top ceramic industries (except China), along with Spain.

On the other hand, it is interesting to know whether these other countries have a more solid basis for creating a better image or, in any case, with which attributes they manage to become associated, in order thus to define a better competitive strategy. We consider it is essential for a country's industry to become aware of its own image and therefore to know how it affects its organizations' foreign activity. That is, whether it represents a strong or weak point for them in the face of competitors and clients.

In 2005, in collaboration with ASCER (Spanish Ceramic Tile Manufacturers' Association), a field work was carried out in two countries: Germany and the United States. Both have a common denominator which is that they are considered prestigious markets in which the Spanish ceramic industry is present and where it hopes to increase its presence markedly. A total of 105 valid questionnaires were obtained (38 in Germany and 67 in the USA) which were filled out by professionals from the construction sector who work with ceramic products.

With regard to obtaining the information required to achieve the research target, a fully structured questionnaire was sent through the *Ceraspaña* magazine, edited by ASCER. In this case, it was considered the best methodological option since, although closed questionnaires can give rise to information on a conditioned image, they may, however, be totally valid when the intention is to measure the image of a dimension of the country such as, for example, the image of its products (Ortigueira Sanchez, 2000).

With this, the intention was to measure the image of the five countries being studied as ceramic product manufacturers. This was considered an appropriate measurement approach, considering that the country's image can differ among product categories (Etzel and Walker, 1974 and Halfhill, 1980). A country's image is linked to a series of its identifying attributes (known as the country's analytical image). On this occasion, the construction of the scale was done based on variables that had been used previously in the literature by authors such as Nagashima (1977), Han and Terpstra (1988), Han (1989; 1990), Knight and Calantone (2000) and Watson and Wright (2000).

To be exact, the attributes being evaluated were the perception of the R&D investment made, the prestige or reputation achieved by the industry and its degree of innovation, its skills in relation to product availability and after-sales services, the price levels offered in relation to the value of the product received, the design of the product and the availability of a large range of finishes, their resistance and, lastly, the quality of the product. The evaluations were made on a scale of 1 to 5 (where 1 means a very low score and 5 a very high one).

3. ANALYSIS OF AND DISCUSSION ON THE RESULTS

With regard to the analysis of the data obtained, it must be remembered that the objective set was to manage to identify the different product–country associations that the different countries being studied present, and thereby to determine the attributes to be used when defining a future positioning strategy for the Spanish ceramic industry.

Thus, using distance matrixes (created based on tables 1 and 2), in order to obtain a visual representation that makes it easier to interpret the identified relations

(Bisquerra, 1989; Hair et al., 1999 and Ibañez and Luque, 2000), distance charts (one per market), which are also called perceptual charts (for they contain perceptions), were built by applying multidimensional analysis techniques.

GERMANY	Brazil	Spain	Italy	Turkey	Mexico
R&D	2.28	4.21	4.24	1.86	2.50
Prestige of the industry	2.04	4.00	4.32	1.77	2.00
Product availability and lead time	2.00	3.63	3.34	1.84	2.26
After-sales service satisfaction	2.00	3.47	3.53	1.79	1.96
Value for money	3.14	3.88	3.50	2.58	3.44
Good designs	2.42	4.27	4.54	2.05	2.48
Product quality	2.37	4.08	4.05	2.00	2.61
Resistance to wear and scratching	2.69	3.92	4.22	2.52	2.90
Availability of a wide range of finishes	2.15	4.29	4.53	2.09	2.39
Innovating industry	2.37	4.08	4.03	2.00	2.27

Table 1

In order to prepare the charts, the best option is provided by a series of indicators that estimate the worthiness of the different adjustments. The reliability of the analysis is thus mainly based on two statistics (Bisquerra, 1989): Kruskal's stress and RSQ (squared multiple correlation). In the two cases analysed, the results shown can be considered as excellent and, therefore, it may be understood that a good fit has been obtained and that the analysis is reliable for their interpretation, since appropriate values were obtained for the two statistics.

USA	Brazil	Spain	Italy	Mexico	Turkey
R&D	2.60	4.42	4.68	2.37	2.37
Prestige of the industry	2.74	4.52	4.78	2.73	2.32
Product availability and lead time	2.67	4.16	4.30	3.05	2.50
After-sales service satisfaction	2.74	4.19	4.08	2.72	2.51
Value for money	3.43	4.17	3.95	3.43	3.23
Good designs	2.96	4.55	4.73	2.98	2.79
Product quality	3.10	4.69	4.72	2.82	2.89
Resistance to wear and scratching	3.41	4.45	4.48	3.09	3.19
Availability of a wide range of finishes	3.02	4.47	4.62	2.80	2.78
Innovating industry	2.76	4.39	4.56	2.61	2.71

Table 2

In regard to the interpretation of the results and, consequently, the charts, it should be pointed out that, firstly, each and every one of the elements analysed, whether it is linked to each one of the considered countries' image or not, should be taken into account for discussing the results, for even though they are low key attributes, they should not be excluded without first considering the possibility of converting them into elements with sufficient capacity for causing a country's image to change.

Thus, in the two charts (see figures 1 and 2), two clearly differentiated areas can be seen, divided by the y-axis. In this sense, this axis seems to differentiate based on the more or less recognition obtained by the countries being studied as ceramic product manufacturers.

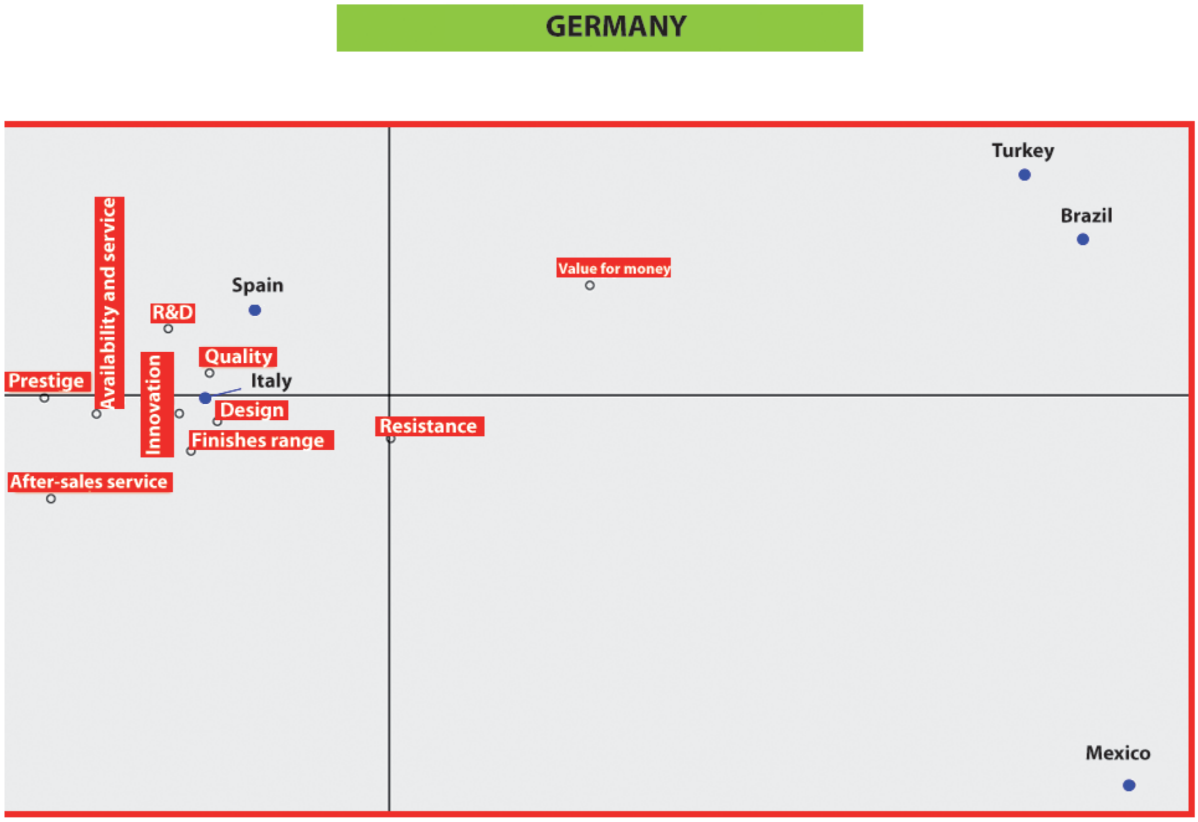

Figure 1

In both cases, to the right of the y axis, are the perceived images of Turkey, Brazil and Mexico, very dissociated from the product attributes with which the industry has been associated and, on the other hand, to the left of the axis are the images of Italy and Spain, strongly linked to these attributes for, the charts show, they surround these. In any case, in spite of the similarity that may be initially appreciated in the two charts, a series of differences can be seen.

In this sense, attributes that have to do with the industry's reputation (prestige and innovation) and with the aesthetics of the product (design and range of finishes) seem to be closer to Italy, which corroborates that, even today, the Italian ceramic industry is competitive thanks to two advantages: the pioneer effect and the *"made in*

Italy" reference, that "savoir faire" with which it has managed to become identified and which it knows how to transmit so wonderfully.

On the other hand, the significant efforts made by the Spanish ceramic industry to provide high technical quality in its products appear to be rewarded by strong linking with quality. However, even in this attribute in which it has made heavy investments, it does not manage to draw a significant advantage in the image perceived by the customers over Italy.

With regard to the attributes that refer to the level of services (product availability, lead time, and after-sales services), it is seen that, although they are close to these two industries, they do not seem to be attributes with which they can be identified today. However, as mentioned in the introduction of this study, in view of the characteristics that the new global scene is presenting, these may become determining attributes and, therefore, a linkage to which both industries aspire.

The same happens with the level of prices, depending on the value offered, which is not an attribute with which these two industries manage to identify themselves. However, as may be observed in the two charts, in this case it is an attribute for which the five industries maintain a more or less equidistant position. Thus, the image perceived is for all five. Even though they show very significant differences in their prices, these differences are not so great if the value perceived of their corresponding products is taken into account.

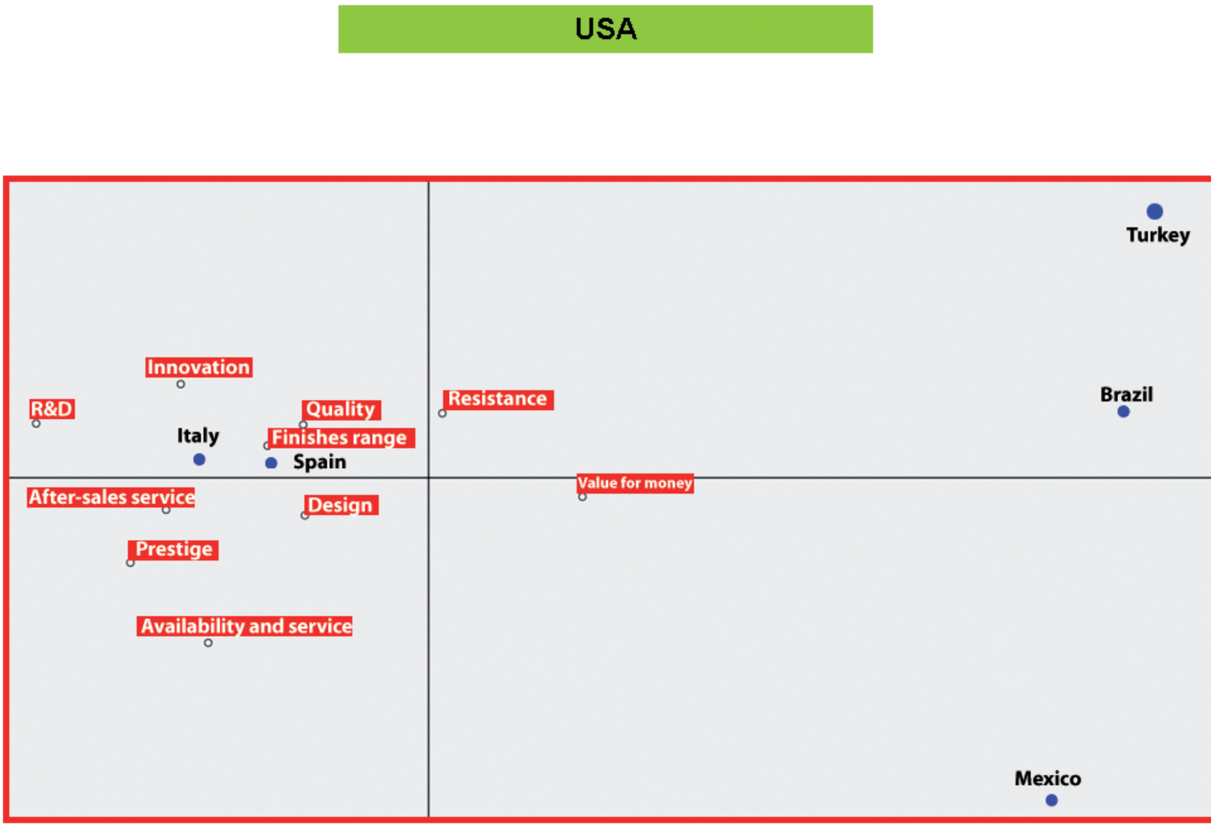

Figure 2

On the other hand, in both charts, very distant from the images perceived of these two countries and, therefore, from the attributes with which they achieve strong linkage, are the images perceived by people of Turkey, Brazil and Mexico as ceramic product manufacturers.

As a result, analysis of the two charts suggests that the image of countries in the process of industrialization with a lower economic level takes a toll on the respective evaluations as manufacturing countries ("halo" effect). In this sense, a curious piece of information that confirms this fact is the lower score given to these countries compared with the previous ones with respect to the attributes that have to do with the product's technical quality, when the truth is that these five industries all use the same technology.

Another aspect to be noted is the fact that in the two charts, the Brazilian and Turkish industries are very distant from the Mexican industry (they are divided by the x-axis), indicating that they are not perceived in the same way. This axis could differentiate these industries depending on the direction taken by each.

Where it comes to price levels, observing the charts shows that this is not considered an attribute that offers a competitive advantage, as mentioned previously, not even for these industries, because even though a product is offered at a low price, the image perceived is that it is the right price for the value received and is not cheap.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The intention of this study was to demonstrate the possibility of beginning to build a solid, trustful relationship between the Spanish ceramic industry and its customers on the international market based on a correct management of the intangible: product origin, by giving this attribute a twofold role, namely as an identifier and, at the same, as a transmitter of the industry's competitive advantages.

In the face of the threats currently presented by the new international scene, the Spanish sector should consider taking this type of initiatives aimed at creating an umbrella under which the entire industry can shelter.

Therefore, in view of the future, the challenges presented may be significant. At an institutional level, it can be seen that there already exists a commitment to develop this type of actions, but, in the future, it is necessary to reflect on the increasingly important role that private organizations should play and the most appropriate mechanisms for creating an appropriate coordination between companies and institutions that will allow correct implementation of the *"made in"* strategy that is designed.

In this sense, organizations should be aware of how important it is suitably to incorporate these actions into their marketing plans (Parameswaran and Pisharodi, 1994) and to be sure that both the place-of-origin intangible and their own particular brand can co-exist as product qualities. It is a matter of creating an umbrella brand that can be used for commercialisation on different markets with the aim of providing all the brands and organizations that shelter under it with higher-value global support, though without at any moment preventing them from developing individually. The intention is to allow both intangibles to be used as guarantees of satisfaction in helping customers make their purchasing decision (Wall and Liefeld, 1991).

However, it must be pointed out, first, that in order to promote such an initiative it is necessary to identifying the attributes that will be used as a basis for the competitive advantage it is intended to transmit, and which should be encompassed by the *"made in Spain"* umbrella.

Choosing them appropriately will allow this assigned double role to be played, i.e. not only the identification of the Spanish ceramic product, but also the fact of being able to instil it with an own personality that will facilitate its differentiated and, therefore, forefront it more in foreign markets.

On the other hand, in order to correctly define this competitive strategy, it was also necessary to aim efforts at investigating the position occupied by other competing industries, and not only the Italian one, but also other emerging industries.

Thus, after analysing the different analytical images, it was possible to conclude that *"made in Spain"* may constitute a valid differentiating option in the future. To be precise, we have seen that in the cases of Brazil, Turkey and Mexico as ceramic producing countries, no strong link existed between ceramic product qualities and the country's image, indicating that the existing stereotypes of these countries have had and have a significant weight, which also makes it difficult to undertake differentiating actions based on the country-of-origin attribute.

Where it comes to the case of Italy, the analysis carried out on its country image as a ceramic manufacturer showed a strong association with the attributes linked with the ceramic product, to be exact, with prestige, innovation, design and range of finishes. This circumstance may contribute to justifying the existing positive relation between the image that this industry manages to transmit under the *"made in Italy"* brand and its position as market leader.

Where it comes to Spain, the study carried out on its analytical image as ceramic manufacturer reveals a strong link between this and quality, which in turn is considered one of the competitive advantages of the Spanish industry.

However, such a link does not seem to be sufficiently strong, today, to achieve the differentiation presently required on the market. As a result, a revision of the marketing plans is recommended, as well as a commitment to using new elements that have more to do with the idea of efficiency and top level services. And, based on these, the development of a new positioning strategy.

Finally, it may be pointed out that, in order to implement such actions, it is essential not only to have the organizations, but also their complicity. It is a case of building an "associative" advantage for the industry which is also "competitive" on the new international scene. For this purpose, institutions like ASCER (Spanish Ceramic Tile Manufacturers' Association) will become key elements for creating a trustful climate among the organizations and, thus, for carrying out a collective action.

Furthermore, it is advisable to remember that just as organizations can take advantage of a favourable image of the place of origin when they enter new markets and thereby raise the profile of their products, so that they are perceived as less risky and therefore more rapidly accepted, there may also be organizations that, in view of this, try to take advantage of this favourable image with lower quality products (Agarwal and Sikri, 1996). This can seriously damage the image of that place of origin and, therefore, the other organizations, because people continually tend to make abstractions about the context (Han, 1989). This leads us to recommend that the sector should keep watch, based on constantly maintaining the desired image. So, it is vital to always remember that quality transmits the image projected by the origin and not the image we want to project. Thus, it is essential unceasingly to monitor how this image is perceived, so that corrective actions can be taken before the initially expected benefits become irreparable damage.

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