

Improvement Of Branding And Packaging For Empowering The Marketing Competitiveness Of Smes In The Udon Thani Province, Thailand

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ABSTRACT

Given the challenges of social inequality and economic disparity in running small and medium enterprises (SMEs), the objectives of this research were to: (1) analyze problems and needs of branding and packaging, (2) design branding and packaging for three SMEs, and (3) test the branding and packaging market of SMEs in Udon Thani to assess and promote the potential for marketing competitiveness of SMEs, which can be a part of reducing some of the challenges. The sample in the current study was comprised of: (1) 20 stakeholders who were interviewed to analyze the needs for branding and packaging through a focus group discussion, (2) a discussion with three branding and packaging experts to assess redesigned packaging for three SMEs, and (3) a survey of 200 SME consumers, via a questionnaire, to evaluate the new branding and packaging. The results of the study showed: (1) SMEs in Udon Thani had the need to design outstanding branding to represent group identity and convey the meaning and origin of the product, in addition to enhancing product differentiation and representing SME identity when the product was on the shelf; adding value to the product; protecting product integrity; and identifying product and producer contact information for consumers. (2) An expert evaluation of branding and packaging was developed by applying data from the problem and need analysis. (3) The market test revealed a high level of consumer satisfaction with regard to the branding and packaging of SMEs in Udon Thani.

Keywords: SMEs, OTOP, Udon Thani, branding, packaging,

INTRODUCTION

OTOP, which stands for “One Tambon (meaning subdistrict) One Product,” [1] is a local entrepreneurship stimulus program in Thailand that launched in 2001. OTOP has confronted many distribution problems, including (1) no branding for OTOP products in each community, which leads to the lack of brand recognition or brand promotion to consumers, although some products have been sold for a long time [1], (2) the OTOP product designs are not varied and do not respond to contemporary consumer needs, as OTOP producers are neither knowledgeable nor sophisticated in product and packaging design [2], and (3) the limitations of government program marketing promotion restricts the accessibility of support for OTOP entrepreneurs. As a result, the sales of OTOP products do not increase as they should, owing to a lack of product differentiation from other kinds of products or the same products of other entrepreneurs, causing products to be unremarkable and unmemorable to consumers. In addition, governmental support involving OTOP products focuses only on 3–5-star levels, meaning, underrated SMEs do not receive support. Thus, 1–2-star level SMEs often suffer

from a lack of budget to support product branding and packaging development, resulting in depressed business prospects and continued social inequality and economic disparity in the community.

In 2016, 58 OTOP entrepreneurs received 1–2-star (1 star being the lowest and 5 stars being the highest) levels from the selection in the Udon Thani Province [2]. Furthermore, a survey of economic needs and potentials of local people toward OTOP products revealed needs related to enhancing production efficiency; increasing labor efficiency in agriculture, industry, and service sectors; and promoting local wisdom to reach commercial development, mutual utilization, and promotion of marketing channels for export.

According to the strategic plan promoting the competitiveness of OTOP products, Thailand established its planning at different levels, including the 20-Year National Strategic Plan (2017–2036), contributing to competitiveness, which aims to develop competitive sustainable consumption and production and promote better quality of life and higher incomes for producers, and the 12th National Economic and Social Development Plan (2017–2021), which calls for strengthening the economy and underpinning sustainable competitiveness [2].

In light of these circumstances, this study was conducted to address the issues of SMEs rated at the 1–2-star level in Udon Thani, to enable comparison to the 3–5-star level in terms of elevated design and brand recognition, limitations of packaging marketing, and restrictions in the accessibility of budget support from the government. To address this, we improved the branding and packaging of three 1–2-star level SMEs in Udon Thani to enhance recognizable and outstanding branding. As most consumers spend only a small amount of time at shops and there are many similar kinds of products on shelves, consequently, packaging is a key element of attracting more consumer purchases [3]. This will contribute in promoting further distribution and adding product value that will raise sustainable income for community distribution, truly meeting the needs of the local people, and contributing to the reduction of social inequality and economic disparity of community members.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The importance of product branding

Branding has an important role in business promotion as it is tied to the representation of identity and brand recognition, differentiation, and loyalty. Brand identity can be perceived both internally (e.g., business objectives and brand values) and externally (e.g., a visual representation). Therefore, branding is a visual representation that can reveal the brand identity by communicating ownership, service, and product origins to consumers. It also helps consumers to easily recognize a specific product through the use of interesting design and color combinations. Additionally, branding can draw interest and pique the curiosity of consumers as well as stimulating consumers to purchase products. It distinguishes the product from other products and facilitates brand loyalty. Brand differentiation and brand loyalty normally correspond to recognizable branding that initially attracts consumers to purchase a product and to consequently repurchase based on its familiarity. Moreover, branding can directly deliver business messaging and unique values to consumers when it is announced on product packaging or advertised via marketing, packaging, products, social media, websites, and other platforms. It is widely accepted that simple branding is best if it will be used on a variety of materials or displayed on different media [4].

The importance of product packaging

Packaging not only protects the safe shipping and movement of products from the producer to the customer, but it can also carry a variety of benefits. There are thousands of products on the market to attract consumers' attention; therefore, unique product packaging stands out and looks different from competitors. It is claimed that one-third of a consumer's decision making is based solely on product packaging. In particular, the colors used in product packaging affect consumer purchasing decisions, as a color often evokes certain feelings and messages. For example, products with white packaging convey simplicity, safety, and purity; a light sky-blue color is considered more playful; while dark navy is considered much more professional [5]. Thus, the color of packaging can be a key element for consumers deciding to purchase a product. Moreover, product packaging

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is a helpful marketing tool for in-store advertising. Branded products are easily recognized, so package design that corresponds to branding results in consumers remembering the product the next time they shop. For instance, some brands (e.g., Coke) create brand recognition and remind consumers by making minor changes to the packaging while staying true to the original look. Clearly, packaging influences purchase decisions, guides advertising, and creates brand recognition, reminding consumers [5].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Conceptual framework

The current study was conducted by employing research and development (R&D) to design branding and packaging for three SMEs in Udon Thani, based on a conceptual framework of the improvement of branding and packaging for SMEs as empowering marketing competitiveness, as presented in **Figure 1**.

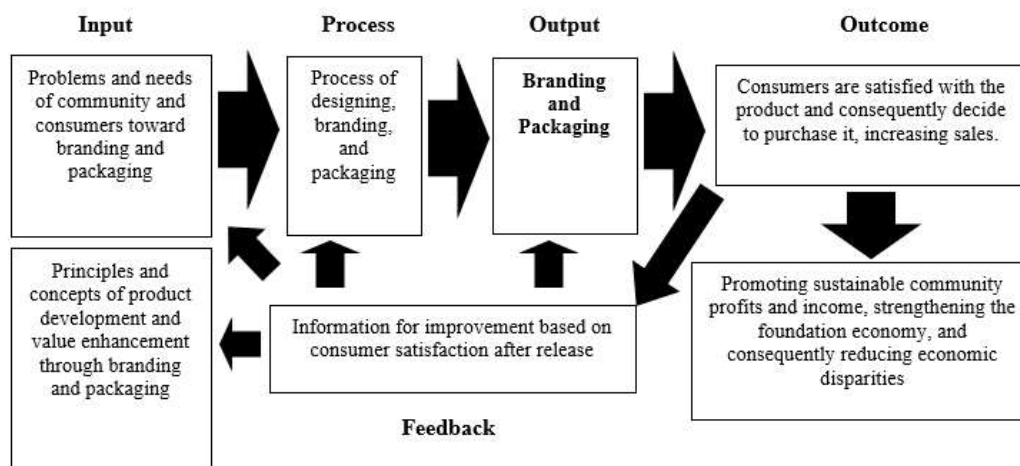


Figure 1 The branding and packaging improvement conceptual framework.

Research objectives

1. To analyze problems and needs regarding branding and packaging of SMEs in Udon Thani.
2. To design branding and packaging for SMEs in Udon Thani.
3. To test the branding and packaging market of SMEs in Udon Thani.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

H1: Based on the conceptual framework of the improvement of branding and packaging of SMEs for empowering marketing competitiveness, there will be a higher level of positive marketing results, confirming consumers' satisfaction with regard to branding and packaging of SMEs in Udon Thani.

H2: Based on the conceptual framework of the improvement of branding and packaging of SMEs for empowering marketing competitiveness, there will be no differences in market test results assessing consumers' satisfaction with regard to branding and packaging of SMEs in Udon Thani, based on gender, age and income.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The R&D method was employed in the current study to design the branding and packaging for three SMEs in Udon Thani. The study targeted three food-based SMEs, which included Phon Bok Cooperatives Group, Sawek Farm Group, and Pla Raa Lon Community Enterprise Group, as a sample. The research procedures were adapted from Kongjaroenkiat and Kongjaroenkiat [6] and Jam & Co Design [7] and were separated into two major phases:

Phase 1: Analyzing problems and needs and designing new branding and packaging for SMEs in Udon Thani consisted of six procedures:

1. Reviewed relevant literature and interviewed experts to acquire knowledge to construct the conceptual framework for the improvement of the branding and packaging of SMEs in Udon Thani.
2. Conducted fieldwork to gather data on problems and needs with regard to branding and packaging of SMEs in Udon Thani through an interview focus group discussion with 20 participants selected from the population of product stakeholders of SMEs in Udon Thani through a purposive sampling method.
3. Analyzed the combined data from relevant literature and fieldwork to construct the conceptual framework for the improvement of branding and packaging for the three chosen SMEs.
4. Designed branding and packaging prototypes based on the conceptual framework developed from the previous procedure.
5. Evaluated the branding and packaging prototypes with three branding and packaging experts using a 5-point Likert scale evaluation form and computed the evaluation results by employing descriptive statistics, including the mean (\bar{x}) and standard deviation (S.D.), to analyze the perceived quality of the prototypes. The evaluation results benefited from a high level of expert evaluation.
6. Adjusted the prototypes according to experts' suggestions and evaluations prior to finalizing the branding and packaging designs for the chosen SMEs that would be in real distribution.

Phase 2: Testing the market for the redesigned branding and packaging consisted of two procedures:

1. After adjusting the prototypes according to experts' suggestions and evaluations, the adjusted prototypes that would be in real distribution were used to test the market, employing a questionnaire to evaluate consumer satisfaction. The population consisted of 200 consumers of SMEs in Udon Thani, using accidental sampling.
2. A questionnaire to evaluate consumer satisfaction with regard to the new branding and packaging used a 5-point Likert scale, with the interpretation based on Best [8], as follows:

Mean score between 4.51 and 5.00 refers to the highest level of satisfaction.

Mean score between 3.51 and 4.50 refers to high level of satisfaction.

Mean score between 2.51 and 3.50 refers to moderate satisfaction.

Mean score between 1.51 and 2.50 refers to low level of satisfaction.

Mean score between 1.00 and 1.50 refers to the least level of satisfaction.

3. A questionnaire was developed, and its quality was analyzed by rating points of congruence by using the Item Objective Congruence (IOC) index, with the consistency index value from 0.50 and above. The result exhibited a high level in all aspects. The questionnaire was then analyzed to compute validity using Cronbach's alpha coefficient after conducting the pilot with 30 participants with similar characteristics to the sample in this study. The result showed the high level of validity, as evidenced by a value of 0.70 and above. This implied that the questionnaire could be used as a tool for the measurement of consumer satisfaction in this study.
4. The questionnaire was used to evaluate consumer satisfaction regarding the newly designed branding and packaging. The data were analyzed in terms of the market test, employing descriptive statistics, including the mean (\bar{x}) and S.D. To analyze the difference between the means of the two sample groups based on gender, an independent t-test was applied, whereas the analysis of the difference between the mean of the two sample groups based on age and income applied a one-way ANOVA.

Results and discussion

The results were divided into three sections, as follows:

The result of analyzing problems and needs with regard to branding and packaging of SMEs in Udon Thani are summarized in **Table 1**.

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Table 1 The analysis of problems and needs toward branding and packaging of SMEs in Udon Thani

Problems and Needs	Solutions
Packaging	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Suitable material, size, and capacity of products were needed. 2. The original packaging was not recognizable and unable to add value. 3. Graphics and colors used on packaging needed to be adjusted to suit the products. 4. Packaging design that could reduce cost of packaging production was needed. 5. Products were broken and deteriorated during sale from their original packaging. 6. Packaging promoting being green with a feeling of no chemical additives and good for health after purchasing products was needed. 7. Packaging that could help extend the shelf life of the products was needed. 8. Packaging that could be applied to the original packaging was needed. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Select packaging made of suitable material to protect the product. 2. Design packaging promoting being green with a feeling of no chemical additives and good for health after purchasing products. 3. Adjust the packaging size and capacity to suit the product price and be able to promote the competitiveness. 4. Design packaging that added value as follows: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Design packaging that showed the product inside to build confidence in the product - Modernize the original packaging by changing elements and size as well as adjusting graphics and colors to suit the products 4. Design packaging that could reduce cost of packaging production.
Branding	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The original branding did not represent the identity of the group. 2. A new color scheme was needed to add value to the product. 3. Branding that represented the identity of the product was needed. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Design new branding that could represent the identity and prominent feature of the group/product. 2. Change the color to add value to the product. 3. Design new branding to promote branding.

According to **Table 1**, the analysis of problems and needs revealed that SME producers and consumers seek branding that clearly demonstrates the group identity and conveys the meaning of the product as well as distinctive packaging that represents the group identity, adds value to the product, protects the product, and clearly displays product and producer contact information when the product is on the shelf.

The result of designing, branding, and packaging for the SMEs in Udon Thani

After analyzing the stakeholders' branding and packaging concerns and applying the conceptual framework to improve the branding and packaging to empower marketing competitiveness for the three chosen SMEs, the following results proceeded.

Phon Bok Cooperatives Group, Crispy Rice Cracker Product

The branding was redesigned to emphasize the identity and prominent features of the product by selecting the materials used and a graphic of rice farming, which was a part of the local identity. Additionally, a gold color tone was used to add perceived value to the product. The packaging was made of art card 300 gsm to protect the crispy rice crackers during distribution. The brown and gold color tone was used to make the packaging stand out on the shelf and add perceived value to the product. A transparent window was added, so consumers could see the product inside, which will also build consumers' confidence in the quality of the product. Moreover, a handle was added to the upper part of the packaging to reduce the use of plastic bags, which is consistent with communicating the brand's eco-responsibility, reducing environmental waste, and is suitable for reuse. In addition, this packaging could also increase the product price. The new packaging design is shown in **Figure 2**, and the evaluation result by experts showed a high level of evaluation ($\bar{x} = 4.59$ and $S.D. = 0.50$).



Figure 2 Branding and packaging of the Phon Bok Cooperatives Group.

Sawek Farm, Salad Rolls, and Organic Vegetables

The branding was redesigned with a simplified look to stimulate product recognition as well as represent the identity and prominent feature of the product, using a graphic of vegetables, which are an ingredient in salad rolls. The packaging with a handle was strapped around the original plastic box packaging in order for consumers to avoid using a plastic bag when they purchased it. The handle was made of Kraft paper to promote an organizational culture of environmental sensitivity and the products having no chemical additives and being good for health. Ink-stamped branding was placed in the middle of front packaging to reduce the cost of packaging printing. The newly designed packaging is shown in **Figure 3**, and the evaluation result by experts showed a high level of evaluation ($\bar{x} = 44.51$ and S.D. = 0.54).



Figure 3 Branding and Packaging of Sawek Farm Group.

Pla Raa Lon Community Enterprise, Dried Fish Chili Paste

This branding was redesigned by interchanging some features of the original branding, such as adjusting the color of the former chili graphic and representing the identity and prominent features of the product by using a chili graphic as an ingredient of dried fish chili paste. The packaging utilized a 100-gram aluminum foil zip-lock bag that was contained and sealed with a heat sealer to protect moisture and extend shelf life. The packaging also responds to consumers expressed need for portability and storage for later consumption by using a zip-lock. A transparent window helps consumers see the product inside to increase confidence that the chili paste is in good condition. Additionally, the new packaging can be vertically arranged when it is on the shelf for distribution. The new package design is shown in **Figure 4**, and the evaluation result by experts showed a high level of evaluation ($\bar{x} = 4.67$ and S.D. = 0.48).



Figure 4 Branding and packaging of the Pla Raa Lon Community Enterprise Group.

The result of testing the branding and packaging market of SMEs in Udon Thani

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The market test consisted of a questionnaire surveying consumer satisfaction with regard to the new branding and packaging that would be in real distribution. The sample comprised 200 consumers by applying accidental sampling. Categorization of gender showed that there were 83 males (41.5%) and 117 females (58.5%). The age result showed that there were 36 consumers aged 15–30 (18%), 88 consumers aged 31–45 (44%), 46 consumers aged 46–60 (23%), and 30 consumers aged 60 and above (15%). The income result showed that there were 23 consumers with an income lower than 10,000 baht (11.5%), 102 consumers with an income of 10,001–20,000 baht (51%), 54 consumers with an income of 20,001–30,000 baht (27%), and 21 consumers with an income higher than 30,000 baht (10.5%). The results are summarized in **Table 2**.

Table 2 The result of satisfaction toward branding and packaging of SMEs in Udon Thani

Lists of SMEs	Levels of Satisfaction toward Branding and Packaging		
	\bar{x}	S.D.	Interpretation
Phon Bok Cooperatives Group	4.38	0.56	High
Sawek Farm Group	4.37	0.60	High
Pla Raa Lon Community Enterprise Group	4.29	0.55	High

As presented in **Table 2**, there was a high level of satisfaction with regard to the new branding and packaging of the three chosen SMEs, according to the market test result.

A comparison of consumers' satisfaction is presented in **Tables 3, 4, and 5**.

Table 3 The comparison of consumers' satisfaction toward branding and packaging of SMEs in Udon Thani based on gender

Aspects of Consumers' Satisfaction	Gender	\bar{X}	S.D.	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		p-value ^a
				F	Sig.	
Phon Bok Cooperatives Group						
Branding Equal variances assumed	Male	4.36	.25	.742	.390	.725
	Female	4.38	.24			
Packaging Equal variances assumed	Male	4.39	.21	3.268	.072	.496
	Female	4.37	.18			
Sawek Farm Group						
Branding Equal variances assumed	Male	4.32	.23	.856	.356	.413
	Female	4.35	.25			
Packaging Equal variances assumed	Male	4.36	.28	.017	.897	.624
	Female	4.38	.28			
Pla Raa Lon Community Enterprise Group						
Branding Equal variances assumed	Male	4.28	.23	.567	.452	.947
	Female	4.28	.21			
Packaging Equal variances assumed	Male	4.30	.20	1.343	.248	.397
	Female	4.28	.18			

^a P < .05

According to **Table 3**, the result based on gender showed that all aspects of consumers' satisfaction had no statistically significant difference, with .05.

Table 4 The comparison of consumers' satisfaction toward branding and packaging of SMEs in Udon Thani based on age

Aspects of Consumers' Satisfaction	SS	df	MS	F	p-value ^a
Phon Bok Cooperatives Group					
Branding					
Between Groups	.180	3	.060	.986	.400
Within Groups	11.944	196	.061		
Total	12.125	199			
Packaging					
Between Groups	.037	3	.012	.302	.824
Within Groups	7.932	196	.040		
Total	7.969	199			
Sawek Farm Group					
Branding					
Between Groups	.509	3	.170	2.835	.039*
Within Groups	11.731	196	.060		
Total	12.240	199			
Packaging					
Between Groups	.298	3	.099	1.239	.297
Within Groups	15.725	196	.080		
Total	16.023	199			
Pla Raa Lon Community Enterprise Group					
Branding					
Between Groups	.095	3	.032	.616	.605
Within Groups	10.037	196	.051		
Total	10.131	199			
Packaging					
Between Groups	.101	3	.034	.864	.461
Within Groups	7.607	196	.039		
Total	7.707	199			

^a P < .05

According to **Table 4**, the result based on age showed that all aspects of consumers' satisfaction of all groups were not statistically significant different, with 0.05 except the aspect of branding of the Sawek Farm Group, as evidenced by the statistically significant difference of .05.

Table 5 The comparison of consumers' satisfaction toward branding and packaging of SMEs in Udon Thani based on income

Aspects of Consumers' Satisfaction	SS	df	MS	F	p-value ^a
Phon Bok Cooperatives Group					
Branding					
Between Groups	.414	3	.138	2.309	.078
Within Groups	11.711	196	.060		
Total	12.125	199			
Packaging					

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Between Groups	.278	3	.093	2.364	.072
Within Groups	7.691	196	.039		
Total	7.969	199			
Sawek Farm Group					
Branding					
Between Groups	.056	3	.019	.300	.825
Within Groups	12.184	196	.062		
Total	12.240	199			
Packaging					
Between Groups	.120	3	.040	.492	.689
Within Groups	15.904	196	.081		
Total	16.023	199			
Pla Raa Lon Community Enterprise Group					
Branding					
Between Groups	.041	3	.014	.266	.850
Within Groups	10.090	196	.051		
Total	10.131	199			
Packaging					
Between Groups	.111	3	.037	.956	.414
Within Groups	7.596	196	.039		
Total	7.707	199			

^a P < .05

According to **Table 5**, the result based on income showed that all aspects of consumers' satisfaction of all groups had no statistically significant difference, with .05.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of problems and needs with regard to branding and packaging of SMEs in Udon Thani illustrated that the stakeholders of SMEs needed outstanding branding that was recognizable and packaging design to convey the meaning and origin of the product as well as enhancing product differentiation when the product was on the shelf. Branding and packaging had to represent the group identity, add value to the product, and protect the product. The prototype designs were based on providing solutions to the problems and needs that were gathered from the fieldwork and underwent a high level of evaluation by packaging and design experts. This was consistent with the research conducted by Wells, Farley, and Armstrong [9], which demonstrated that more than 73% of consumers decided to purchase products based on the packaging and also corresponded to Azad and Hamdavipour's [10] work, which showed that packaging played an important role in marketing competitiveness and good packaging could increase the product price and concurrently reduce stock levels. Consequently, this helps producers gain higher profits that were relevant to Schueneman and Tollette [11] that good packaging could generate various benefits, such as product safety and maintenance, value add, convenient usability, and being environmentally friendly.

The market test using a questionnaire to gauge 200 consumers' satisfaction with the new branding and packaging of SMEs after the real distribution revealed a high level of satisfaction, which corresponded to Khuong and Hong [12], who demonstrated that consumer purchasing decisions are derived from branding perceptions and recognition. The design of the packaging was also consistent with the findings of Hussain Amna and Ahmad [13] and Azad and Hamdavipour [10] that communicating information on the product, production facility, ingredients, and storage on the package affected satisfaction and confidence in purchasing decisions. The comparisons of consumers' satisfaction based on gender, age, and income revealed no statistically significant difference in all aspects, except in the branding of the Sawek Farm Group that revealed

a statistically significant difference with .05. This conformed to Sankapong and Srihiran [14] and Heer and Bhuvanesh [15] that packaging was one of the factors that affects the satisfaction of consumers of different ages and to Eiamsai et al. [16] that using principles of simple graphic design and eliminating unnecessary details in branding design could promote brand recognition better than detailed branding. Accordingly, it can be concluded that the redesigned branding and packaging of SMEs in Udon Thani should be used in real distribution to the SMEs' benefit.

Further study should include additional foreign languages in brand and packaging designs to suit the context of the target country in addition to expanding the possibilities for opening distribution channels in overseas markets.

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