

When being pioneers in embracing technological innovation is not enough, an exploration into French Connection

Abstract

The onset of the pandemic and its impact on business has not only warranted business thinking of new, interesting and *innovating* ways in which to engage with consumer. However, has also warranted fashion brands to *re-establish* their core values and traits that originally made them successful. This conversation of re-evaluation of the core factors of success is now more important ever if key players in the fashion industry are seeking to engage in evolutionary transformation via the assistance of technology in order to survive and indeed retain their mantle of being vanguards for societal change during and in the aftermath of the pandemic. The necessity for business to engage with technology to entice Millennials and Generation Z more successfully is also of paramount concern. This is warranted in order to provide a *counter voice* to the *negative viewpoints*, which exist in relation to the perception of the fashion industry being exploitive and un-sustainable.

The incumbents in the fashion industry reaction to the emergent change that the pandemic has created, necessitates all industries to make actionable plans now more than ever, in conjunction with understanding that change is an inevitable ongoing reality of all business and emergent radical changes may be what the business world will *encounter* in the future.

However, it is important to acknowledge the *resurgence* in the fashion industry must be managed and navigated in a holistic manner. This warrants the *inclusion* all parts of an organisation working in conjunction with designers towards to the attainment of the same goals. Thus, unity of purpose is now more acute than ever by using French Connection as a case study the author proposes a model within which to embark upon the change process. The time for change is now and if organisation views this with opportunity in a positive manner, the results could prove to be favourable.

Background

Established in 1972, French Connection (FC) is a public limited British fashion retailer predominantly selling men's and women's clothing and was founded by Stephen Marks who currently owns 42% of the business.¹ Embracing innovation such as transactional website, Youtube channel and iPads years before any of its competitors were synonymous with FC activities. However, its effective marketing could be attributed to being a key part in the brand's success. FC's competitive strategy with its most memorable campaign being the "FCUK" campaign, assisted the brand becoming a formidable global force. This use of catchy yet controversial advertising has given them international brand recognition. The success of French Connections (FC) marketing campaign envisaged by its creative director Trevor Beattie, in the latter 1990's was acknowledged to be one of the most successful marketing campaigns of all time and consolidated its market position within the UK high street. However, its continuation of suggestive play on words for over a decade later became tiresome and in the former part of the noughties, it was apparent that the brand was experiencing a demise in profitability despite being a key innovator and embracing technological development before many of its contemporaries. This was evident by its heavy reliance on discounting apparel as considerable element of its promotional strategy. Such marketing strategies often suggest organisational weakness in its product assortments and is an approach that cannot be sustained in the long term.²

Financial overview

Since 2005 FC have actively sought to exploit a number of strategies in order to regain its once enviable position on the high street.

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The introduction of more personalised services, Youtube channels and celebrity endorsement campaigns have been aggressively pursued since 2005 have seldom resulted in an increase in profitability. In fact within 2013 despite operating in excess of thirty locations globally FC have had to consolidate its activities and closed stores in areas in which it has experienced a decline in sales.³ This included that of its flagship store, which is located in London's infamous Regent Street, such stores are usually regarded as being the epitome of an organisation marketing strategy. It is unfortunate that FC flagship stores do not confirm to the academic insight of 'exceptional experience' such environments are envisaged to provide.⁴

The lack of customer service and ambience in comparison to that in upper-middle/premium retailers akin to what is available within competitors (Ted Baker, Karen Millen and Reiss) reveals that this is an appropriate strategy as reforming its existing stores warranted being more highly geared and undertake greater risk. Declining in profitability led to FC revising staffing arrangements and amending its product portfolio. Working hours were amended in an attempt to ensure more shop assistants are working at the most busiest times so that in accordance to its mission statement it can provide a quality service to its consumers.¹

A review of financial statements revealed that its amendments within its product portfolio and marketing strategy were still not having the desired effect. In fact, throughout 2008 to 2012 financial decline in profitability is still evident. Within 2012-2013 a slight improvement in performance was evident but rather than being attributed to a significant increase in sales it was attributed to the disposal of assets.

In 2015 FC embarked on its most radical marketing initiative for in excess of a decade, which entailed reintroduced heritage collection in a spring/summer campaign which paid homage to the nineties marketing initiatives which contributed to its initial success. This included advertisements featuring its suggestive (FCUK) slogans as well as some it's (Appendix 2). However, the reliance of French Connection to embrace technology (Section 2.4) without combining it with the fundamental elements merchandising and the lack of adherence to the marketing mix, partially explains its continued decline in profitability from 2015 onwards to that of 2020. The preliminary financial statements of 2020 reveals a further 11.4% decline in like for like sales in 2019 after another difficult year in which they have had more store closures and are now suffering with the effects of Covid nineteen pandemic.³

Marketing mix

The fundamental core of marketing a product rather than reliance on technology has been suggested by a series of academics as being predicated on the notion of the effective management of the four P's. The four factors are attributed as ensuring that you have the correct product at the appropriate place at the right time and that it is promoted effectively to consumers.⁵

The systematic analysis of its marketing mix neither is nor warranted more than ever in the current global situation as it will enable FC to revisit its core marketing activity and potentially allows it to align itself in a more robust manner. An evaluation of the marketing mix construct reveals that although it is dated, it nevertheless impacts the consumer decision-making process to purchase fashion in a number of way and must be adhered to. Once a consumer has the initial recognition of a need to purchase a garment, promotional activity influences the desire to initiate the purchase. Once the need to make a purchase is identified the consumer's engage in a search for information to determine which store or brand will best satisfy their needs, which is what FC need to focus on. The satiation of needs can

be via processing internal memories, which stresses the importance of FC sales staff and actual store environment culminating together in order to provide a positive experience which is often assisted by promotional activities. Such an instance highlights the importance of effective advertising and public relations activity when consumers are seeking information how promotion activities such as social media, magazines, advertisements and product placement can serve to play a key part in pre purchase evaluation stage of consumer decision making.⁶ This evaluative information stage must now consider what is practical to achieve in light of the pandemic and must be complemented by the solutions phase. Within this stage, marketing communications can be evaluated in order to measure their success in determining if they can facilitate a purchase. The point of purchase phase is where the importance of visual merchandising and personal selling become instrumental and as they can influence the final phase of post-purchase evaluation within which a long lasting positive or negative attitudes towards a brand could be determined.⁷

Place

Academic thought by the likes of Lea-Greenwood contends that the *place* are a very important communication tool that "deserves to have its own separate place in the promotional mix" (2009, p230) The exploration into FC's retail environments especially amidst its smaller stores has been subject to critique by the likes of Westnedge as being extremely basic and not in line with modern retailing trends.^{8,9} Indeed it has been advocated that within FC's retail environment there is a dire absence of any basic visual merchandising (VM) strategy especially within its window displays, display units and shelving irrespective of the pandemic this needs attention.¹⁰ As well not adhering to any of the nine key variables of VM, for many years the FC environment has also been regarded as being overcrowded as well as inconsistent, which directly opposes its own mission statement (Figure 1). The incoherence being the result of product ranges being displayed in an erratic and imaginative manner in conjunction with limited changing rooms and till points.

The mission statement contends that their 'Prime goal to create distinctiveness in a crowded market place through focus on design. The brand's strength lies in balancing new, exciting ideas with consistent quality and affordability and in a world of "fast fashion" we are proud of our commitment to the creative process'

(French Connection, Online, 2020)

Figure 1 French connections mission statement.

It is apparent that FC will benefit from more effective management of the fashion environment is warranted (Place). This is extremely important as the last fifteen years have seen a consistent decline in sales as well as a continual reduction the amount of stores FC has globally. Hence, in an attempt to entice shoppers back in to the store environment a more overtly safe and hygienic, radical approach is warranted in order to not only entice more customers in the stores but actually covert footfall of full priced garments into sales.

As research reveals that browsers of FC apparel go elsewhere to actually purchase as there sales, promotional activity and indeed store ambience is better presented in other upper-middle/premium retailers the likes Ted Baker, Whistles and Reiss is more favourable.¹ It is apparent that French Connection fails to maximises its store potential and indeed online potential which suggest that it's inconsistent existing and often adhoc activity requires attention.¹² Hence, it may be beneficial for French Connection's to use the internet and social media to gain a better understanding of how they can entice more

consumers to their stores in order to facilitate the purchase of apparel. Such an instance ins more pivotal than ever if retailing is to survive the pandemic.

Perhaps smaller exclusive capsules of clothing, sponsorship of popular programs or indeed competitions the likes of retailers Pretty Little Things may be one way of embarking on this doing this in order for the positive experiences of the stores environment of FC to be cultivated.¹³ In conjunction with sales assistant expertly being trained to facilitate customer purchase and navigated them through the store and online environment in an efficient manner via effectively ascertaining customer needs.¹⁴

Hence, the absence of such fundamental merchandising in stores reveals an inconsistency of the FC retail which is resonated in not only large city centres but also within French Connection's flagship stores needs to be addressed as they at present they do not confirm to the academic insight of 'exceptional experience' that such environments which should be technologically superior are envisaged to provide.⁴

Price

The element of price is a very important factor within the marketing mix model as the price of fashion apparel is not only a reference to the nominal amount of money being charged for a product. But can also refer to the value equation that the brand creates in a consumers mind, as the perceived quality will directly influence purchase decisions and brand loyalty.¹⁵ Academics have in fact advocated that it is the most important element of the marketing mix, due it being a deciding factor for the consumer.¹⁶ The importance of price is important to consumers on a psychological level as it encompasses various emotions which could revolve around issue of ownership, cost of time and even a cost of guilt.¹⁷

The price strategy exhibited by FC in the last fifteen years has been characterised with FC unfortunately, not having an environment which is conducive to attracting and influencing consumers to purchase apparel. This has resulted in it having to be reliant on a strategy of heavy discounting of apparel and subsequent promotional strategy to support this. The initial embracement of premium pricing in light of the perception and brand personality¹⁸ reveals an instance in which adjusting the price in order to compete which less luxury apparel retailers could be the after effects of the profound weakness in the price of FC's marketing strategy, as the price the elasticity of the product often will affect the demand and sales as well.

FC's more premium pricing perhaps should perhaps be replaced by a pricing strategy which undercut's its competitors such as Reiss and Ted Baker. This arguably more effective targeting of consumers will serve to reduce the need for French Connection to discount the price of its apparel which has been the core strategy it has embraced in the last few decades. Hence, the amending of the price line of FC is warranted so that it's formal wear and occasional wear is more aligned with the Zara, Reiss and Ted Baker who's competitive pricing is resulting in taking it share of formal and occasional wear. The adjustment of its price ranges for it's more contemporary ranges akin to the likes of traders such as H&M, Topshop and Topman could be advantageous.⁹

The instance of consumers trading up and down for added value may be more necessary in light of the current pandemic climate hence it may be important for FC to introduce more diffused or premium lines which must be targeted and positioned correctly in conjunction with the quality of the apparel and assortment offers available by other retailers. The likes of Drapers¹⁹ reveal that in an environment in which there is restricted disposable incomes, and when the UK consumer have less money to spend on apparel it creates a situation in which retailers are forced to justify their price points through quality, service and the shopping experience at the actual store/place.

Product

The evaluation of the product portfolio 'French Connection' offers reveals that akin to the previous sections on price and product, the quality of the apparel products is perceived by consumers as being over-priced whereas as the Marketing Director (French Connection, Online) advocates that their products are of extremely technologically advance, considerably durable and of high quality. However, one can question if this is really what is wanted by today's consumer at the price and with the marketing that FC offers its products for.

The instance of depending on a continual reduction of the cost of apparel illustrates organisational weakness in its product assortments and cannot be sustained in the long term.² Although FC have in 2006 and 2007 engaged in promotional activity in which they promoted *the*

product as King and seeking to create a new movement in fashion in order to reduce its dependency of discounting product the gross profit figure still illustrated the dependency to reduce its product cost. The way in which FC have sustained this for many years the consequence of such action has been to consistently reduce the number of their stores and sell assets.

The product offering has often been critiqued for the apparent disconnect between the managing director of French Connection and the desires of consumers as it has consistently failed to deliver the latest trends with its own unique angle on apparel. Such as in stance has resulted in industry commentators stipulating that the brand actually "remains lost in the fashion wilderness".¹⁹

In order to regain the futures of its product offering it the likes of Kotler et al.² contend that it is important to have some clarity on the demographics of its consumers. Demographic analysis is beneficial as it as it provides quantifiable measures of a given population which enables organisations the likes of French Connection to obtain insight in to the typical traits of a consumer the virtue of which will help facilitate producing product that can successfully fulfil their needs.

The typical consumer for French Connection is identified as being that of male and female consumers amongst the age range of 18-35's. this is identified in the UK market sector as being that of upper-middle to that of premium fashion.⁸ This research reveals that customers aged between 18-35 represents a massive demographic who appreciate products from brands that are at the cutting edge of high street fashion, which offers quality and style. Such a declining demographic as a result of the falling birth rate has created a situation in which the key target demographic of French Connection is declining. Hence, it may be important for FC to review it's product ranges by, providing greater product assortments (i.e. Ath-Leisure), amending quality, sizes and fits of products accordingly. Perhaps the reduction of store activity warrants a corresponding reduction in seeking to pursue a younger and less wide target 20-35 market by providing affordable stylish and trend-led apparel.¹²

Promotion

The literature and exploration into marketing reveals that there is no single method of promotion that can guarantee success for a brand. Hence, a combination of integrated marketing communications is needed to effectively reach a target market.^{20,21} The communication channels embraced FC are indeed an combination of approaches including, celebrity endorsement, direct mail sales promotion invitations to in promotion and aftershave products. Aaker¹⁵ contends the benefits of celebrity in collaboration serving to enhance the brand perception and confidence for retailers to price products at certain levels. The combination of promotional activity if successfully undertaken could also result in not needing to focus on specific items of apparel and can be enough to sustain a brand the luxury status.

The exploration in to FC marketing reveals that online activities undertaken have exploited technology online, which accounts for 22% of its overall sales and offers a functional website. The pandemic can be a pivotal point in which French Connection can regain its fortune by revisiting its highly innovative marketing approaches but in a more highly politicised manner in the pandemic. The instance of FC being one of the first brands to have a fully transactional website and due to its success has innovated by being one of the first brands to have an interactive video store on YouTube called "Youtique". This provided a personalised interactive shopping experience that gives advice on what to wear and how to wear it, perhaps Instagram will be a more appropriate avenue to channel this. As such activities warranted more

aggressively promotion but since 2005 and were not fully integrated into a cohesive promotional mix. Innovations such as the 'interactive selfie booth' which captures images and then projected on rotation in the windows of the store, turning shopper's selfies into five seconds of fame were perhaps to revolutionary for the time but are now very much a societal feature. This innovation was launched in the brand's flagship Regent Street store in London amidst celebrities but was only restricted to that event and failed to capitalise on publicity from the event. Despite FC concentrating on Celebrity Endorsement and Sponsorship, Product Placement,²² such covert strategies using A-List celebrities (Angelina Jolie, Pippa Middleton and Kate Middleton) the pandemic necessitates an increase in greater exposure in order to ensure that the French Connection consumer (potential consumer) can associate the positive attributes of the celebrity. The likes of Strauss and Frost²³ revealed that an improved social relationship to increase customer loyalty so that can have more positively associated meaning will 'French Connection' will be warranted such as obtaining the royal standard for instance could enable them to benefit from reaching new consumers.²⁴ Thus, it becomes apparent that event sponsorship⁷ and a more holistic and informed social networking strategies,²³ be integrated in a cohesive and more holistic manner in order for the promotional activities of FC to have more longevity and positive association with customers which in light of the pandemic may now be more easy to foster in an online forum more than ever before.

Conclusion

The investigation in to the last fifteen years activity of FC reveals that it has indulged in a series of technological endeavours, seldom without out any parity and cohesiveness marketing subsequently resulting in heavy discounting and an gradual decline in stores. What is warranted now is a reduction in the target range of audience and more acknowledgement of social cultural trends which can be assisted with technology such as block chain and artificial intelligence. Mintel^{25,26} reveal that the demographic between the ages of 25-44 are more likely to 'click and collect' and have differing needs from consumers ten years ago, who are more inclined to purchase product that are of less quality with a more affordable assortment is warranted. Hence, more attempt to retain and entice consumers is needed, rather than being revolutionary in their marketing approach and inconsistent from season to season (Appendix 2) with their product offer so that consumers are not confused on who their audience is.²⁷⁻⁵⁵

The evaluation of the product portfolio and other elements of the marketing mix reveal that 'French Connection' offers reveals that a more robust promotional strategy is warranted in which its experimentation with the new technology is clearly aligned to their desire of their target market. Organisational departments need to work in more unison and review product performance more intensely so that there is consistency in product assortment in order to ensure that products are made with appropriate innovative materials and price lining is more aligned to that of competitors and its own mission statement. Continual failure to simply embrace technological innovation whilst not adhering to the most basic elements of marketing, fashion buying and merchandising will create a situation in which decline will continue and the pandemic serve to be the final nail in the FC coffin if they do not act now.

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Conflicts of interest

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