

China's Spicy Strips, a Global Test: An Analysis of Weilong's Marketing Strategy

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Abstract: With the development of the national economy and the improvement of resident's the consumption levels, the leisure food market is experiencing rapid growth, and spicy leisure foods have gradually become a part of consumers' daily lives. As a leading company in spicy leisure foods, how Weilong Food maintains its market leadership through effective marketing strategies amidst fierce market competition and evolving consumer demands is a significant topic worthy of research. This study aims to analyze Weilong Food's marketing strategies and their effectiveness, exploring how it enhances brand awareness and expands market share through precise positioning, multi-channel sales, and cross-industry cooperations. By employing data collection methods and integrating the SPT model and 4P theory, this paper systematically analyzes Weilong's marketing status and brand innovation strategies. The research indicates that Weilong has successfully attracted a large number of young consumers through accurate market positioning and has continuously increased brand awareness and market share through multi-channel sales and cross-industry collaborations. However, Weilong also faces challenges from market competition and the diversification of consumer demands, necessitating continuous innovation in marketing strategies and product quality improvements. This study provides valuable insights for the marketing strategies of other leisure food brands.

Keywords: Marketing, positioning, differentiation, channels, customer experience

1. Introduction

As China's economy continues to grow and consumers' living standards continue to improve, the casual food industry has ushered in unprecedented opportunities for development, and spicy noodles, as an important category, has gradually become a favourite choice for consumers, especially young people, due to their unique taste and convenient consumption. According to the "China Spicy Strip Food Industry Innovation and Consumption Demand Insight Report 2023" released by iiMedia Research, China's spicy strip food market size reached 51.7 billion yuan in 2022, and is expected to reach 92.7 billion yuan in 2026. This data fully demonstrates the rapid growth of the chili bar market and its important position in China's casual food industry [1]. With its unique product positioning, innovative flavors, and flexible marketing strategies, Weilong has successfully attracted a large number of young consumers and established a distinctive brand image, making it an important member of China's casual food industry. The theme of this study is to conduct an in-depth discussion on the marketing strategy of Weilong Food, focusing on assessing the effectiveness of its marketing strategy. By analyzing Weilong's successful experience, this paper aims to reveal how Weilong has

been able to win over consumers and maintain its market leadership position in a highly competitive market through innovative marketing techniques. The study adopts the case study method and combines a variety of analytical tools, such as the STP (market segmentation, target market selection, and market positioning) model, the 4P (product, price, channel, and promotion) theory, and the SWOT analysis, to comprehensively evaluate Weilong's marketing strategy.

The research in this paper helps Weilong to solve existing problems in its marketing strategy and provides it with more targeted market positioning and marketing plans, thereby enhancing brand awareness and market share, which is conducive to helping Weilong maintain its leading position in the highly competitive market. In addition, this paper complements the existing research on marketing strategies in the food industry by providing a case study on the transition from traditional marketing to digital marketing, which provides a certain reference for other enterprises. Meanwhile, this paper attempts to introduce the analysis of consumers' personalized needs, which provides new perspectives and ideas for marketing strategy research.

2. Weilong's History and Brand Status

Weilong Delicious Global Holding Co., Ltd. was founded in 1999 by Liu Weiping and Liu Fuping with its headquarters in Luohe City, Henan Province. In 2004, the “Weilong” trademark was successfully registered, and the company relocated to Luohe Industrial Park. This move facilitated the transition to full automation and mechanization, eliminating the limitations of manual production efficiency by introducing automated production lines, focusing on improving product quality and pricing, and establishing a strict quality control system [2]. Between 2006 to 2010, Weilong completed and commenced operations at the Phase I Park Pingping Factory and established the Luohe R&D Centre. The company increased its research and development efforts, leading to continuous product innovation, with the ‘large and small gluten’ products becoming classic flagship items. From 2010 to 2015, Weilong continued to innovate, refining its production processes and launching new products such as Pro-Beak Burn and Konjac-based snacks. During this period, the company also expand its market reach by venturing into online sales channels, joining major e-commerce platforms such as JD. Com and Tmall. Leveraging social media and online marketing strategies, Weilong significantly boosted its brand awareness and influence. In 2019, Weilong further enriched its product portfolio by launching new wind-eating seaweed snacks. It, established 22 sales regions to expand its market coverage and integrated online and offline resources to build an omnichannel sales network. Additionally, the Weilong Delicious Phase II Park, known as the Wei-To factory, was put into operation, further enhancing automation and production capacity. These measures supported product innovation and market expansion, laying the foundation for the company’s long-term sustainable development. In 2021, Weilong applied for a listing on the main board of the Hong Kong Stock Exchange, becoming the first publicly traded company in the flavoured noodle products industry [3].

Today, Weilong has evolved into a large-scale food enterprise with multiple product lines, including spicy strips, soybean products, and meat-based snacks, which are sold in more than 40 countries and regions worldwide. With a strong consumer-centric approach, Weilong continues to push the boundaries of its brand, maintaining vitality and competitiveness through innovations in packaging design, product flavors, and marketing strategies. The company remains committed to making Chinese flavors loved by consumers globally. In 2024, facing challenges such as declining sales and fierce competition in the spicy snack market, Weilong introduced new flavors, pursued diversification, and sought growth opportunities through various strategic initiatives. The company launched innovative products, including durian-flavored spicy strips, and expanded its product range to enhance market coverage and brand influence. By adhering to its “multi-category, large-single product” strategy, Weilong actively explores new sales channels to achieve long-term stable growth.

However, with increasing consumer demand for healthier snacks and the high substitutability of spicy strip products, Weilong continues to face increasing competitive pressures and challenges [4].

3. Marketing Strategy Analysis

3.1. STP Strategic Analysis

STP theory (Segmentation-Targeting-Positioning) is the core model of modern marketing strategy; its essence is to achieve the precise allocation of resources through market stratification and value positioning. Weilong's practice fully embodies the logic of 'value-driven STP' proposed by Kotler.

3.1.1. Segmentation

Market segmentation is a strategic approach for enterprises to divide the overall market into distinct groups of customers with similar characteristics based on varying consumer needs, allowing them to identify and target their specific market segments effectively. For Weilong's chili fries, a thorough analysis of market segmentation across several dimensions is crucial to cater to the diverse needs of different consumer groups.

Geographically, Weilong's market segmentation takes into account the regional differences within the Chinese market. Primarily, Weilong targets young consumers with higher spending power in first- and second-tier cities, where there is a greater acceptance of innovative flavors and brands. As the company expands, it is gradually entering third- and fourth-tier cities and rural markets with cost-effective products to attract price-sensitive consumers. The focus is also on densely populated areas, especially residential and school zones, where young people form the core consumer base. Internationally, Weilong has entered the overseas market through cross-border e-commerce platforms, focusing on attracting young overseas Chinese and overseas consumers interested in Chinese culture, thus forming a multinational brand creation network. To cater to regional taste preferences, Weilong has launched differentiated products such as 'Big Gluten' and 'Konjac Sharp,' which meet the 'salty and spicy' tastes of the northern part of the country and the 'sweet and spicy' tastes of the southern part of the country.

Demographically, Weilong's core consumers are young people aged between 15 and 35, including students and young white-collar workers. With the brand's gradual premiumization, it also attracts middle- and high-income groups. This extension of age groups enables Weilong's products to meet the needs of consumers with different lifestyles. Weilong also considers the combination of occupations and consumption scenarios, such as providing snacks for students between classes and for office workers to satisfy cravings, and leveraging social media platforms to engage a large number of active users from the Z generation.

Psychologically and behaviourally, Weilong's marketing strategy emphasizes emotional appeal, particularly through evoking 'childhood memories' to resonate with the nostalgia of the post-80s and post-90s generations [5]. The brand also uses 'apple style' packaging to attract consumers from the Z era, aligning with their pursuit of trends and personalisation. Recognizing the demand for social media communication, Weilong introduces small packages and high-value products that facilitate sharing and encourage consumers to post reviews on platforms like Jieyin and Xiaohongshu. In response to health concerns about chili congee products, Weilong incorporates healthy elements such as zero trans fatty acids and non-frying processes, projecting a healthy and safe image through packaging and advertising. [6].

3.1.2. Targeting

In terms of target market selection, Weilong adopts a differentiated focus strategy, launching different product lines for different groups. Firstly, through precise positioning, Weilong has targeted young students and Generation Z consumers, who are price-sensitive, active on social platforms, and susceptible to Netflix marketing. Weilong has attracted a large number of loyal fans through social platform marketing and interaction. Secondly, Weilong also attracted secondary yuan and national tide fans through cross-border cooperation and co-branding activities (e.g., Glory of Kings and Forbidden City cultural and creative cooperation), further expanding the brand's influence and audience [7].

The target market is characterized by high brand engagement, with consumers happy to share their experiences and interact on social media to form word-of-mouth communication. Meanwhile, Weilong has adopted a price stratification strategy, with low-end products (e.g., entry-level chili fries at RMB 1-3) to meet mass-market demand and high-end product lines (e.g., RMB 5-10) attracting young consumers who are in pursuit of quality and experience.

3.1.3. Positioning

In terms of brand positioning, Weilong has upgraded its brand through the strategy of 'high-end + entertainment.' Weilong has transformed itself from a traditional 'low-end snack' to a 'high-end leisure food,' and has designed innovative packaging co-branded with cross-border IPs, and has launched limited edition products (such as 'Spicy Stripes Moon Cake') to increase brand premium and enhance the brand's high-end image. In addition, by investing in transparent factories and inviting KOLs to visit the production process, Weilong has strengthened its brand label of 'hygiene and health' to enhance consumers' trust in product quality and safety. In terms of product characteristics, Weilong Spicy Strips have successfully established a distinctive brand personality with their spicy and addictive flavor and tough texture, which has won the hearts of consumers.

Through the comprehensive use of STP strategy analysis, Weilong has demonstrated strong market acumen in market segmentation, target market selection and brand positioning. Its success lies in its ability to accurately identify the needs of different consumers and continuously improve the brand's market competitiveness through innovative products and precise marketing strategies. Weilong's differentiated positioning and diversified marketing strategies have enabled it to gain a foothold in the fiercely competitive market.

3.2. Marketing Mix Strategies (4Ps)

The 4Ps theory is one of the classic models in marketing, proposed by marketing scholar Philip Kotler, which covers the four key elements of product, price, channel, and promotion, and helps companies to develop a comprehensive marketing strategy so as to achieve market positioning and competitive advantage for the brand. In the marketing strategy of Weilong Chili Sticks, the 4Ps theory provides the framework for the brand to effectively adjust and optimize its product design, pricing strategy, distribution channels, and promotional activities in order to enhance its market share and increase brand influence.

3.2.1. Product

Through diversified product lines and innovations, Weilong continues to challenge the stereotype that 'spicy noodles are low-end snacks' and promotes brand upgrading. Its product range caters to various consumer groups, from traditional chili sticks to high-end innovative series. The basic product line

includes classic chili sticks such as 'Big Gluten,' 'Small Gluten,' 'Konjac Sharp,' 'Kissing Mouth,' etc., primarily targeting young consumers, especially in campuses and youth-oriented locations.

Weilong also introduced a series of 'healthy' products, including Zero Trans Fatty Acid Spicy Strips, Low Sugar Konjac Sharp, and Gift Boxes (e.g., Chinese New Year Limited Edition) to enhance product value. Cross-border co-branded products, like the collaboration with Glory of Kings and Forbidden City Wenchuang, along with themed packaging products, attract a young and trendy demographic. Additionally, Weilong introduced innovative formats such as small packs and portable packs for different consumption scenarios and incorporated non-frying technology and natural seasonings to emphasize 'health' and meet consumer demand for healthier snacks. The brand has also simplified its packaging style and strengthened its entertainment image by incorporating popular internet phrases.

3.2.2. Price

Weilong has implemented a tiered pricing strategy to cater to both the mass market and high-end consumers, thereby attracting a broader range of customer groups. In the low-end market, Classic Spicy Strips are priced at RMB 1-3 per packet, targeting students and the value-conscious 'sinking market' to maintain a high repurchase rate. For the mid-range market, products like Kissing Mouth and Konjac Sharp are priced between RMB 3-5 per pack, appealing to white-collar workers and families by balancing affordability with quality.

At the high-end, IP co-branded models and gift-boxed products are priced between RMB 10-30, leveraging limited releases and emotional value to meet the demands of consumers seeking premium brand and product quality. Additionally, Weilong stimulates consumer stock-up behavior and boosts sales through full-reduced and second-half price promotions during festivals like Double Eleven and New Year's Eve. Regarding regional pricing, Weilong adjusts prices by +10%-15% to account for consumption differences between first and second-tier cities and the sinking markets, aligning with varying consumer purchasing power.

3.2.3. Place

In terms of channel strategy, Weilong has broadened its market reach through an omni-channel approach and global expansion. Offline, the brand is extensively distributed in traditional retail outlets such as kiosks and convenience stores near schools, with over 200,000 terminals nationwide, ensuring wide consumer access, particularly among young students. Presence in modern supermarkets like Walmart and Carrefour enhances brand image and targets mid- to high-end consumers. Additionally, Weilong has established experience shops in first and second-tier cities and hosts themed flash mob events to boost consumer engagement and brand perception.

Online, Weilong bolsters consumer connections through flagship stores on e-commerce platforms Tmall and Jingdong, which contribute over 30% to annual sales. Pinduoduo focuses on the value-oriented market. Social commerce platforms like Jittery and Shutterbug have become significant sales channels, achieving GMV of over 10 million through collaborations with top influencers. Weilong also leverages WeChat's Weilong Mall and social media for exclusive offers, tapping into private traffic pools [8]. To penetrate international markets, Weilong utilizes cross-border e-commerce platforms like Amazon and AliExpress, emphasizing 'snacks with Chinese characteristics,' and partners with overseas Chinese supermarkets such as Dahua 99 to leverage cultural affinity and expand its market presence.

3.2.4. Promotion

In terms of promotional strategy, Weilong takes ‘entertainment marketing + social media promotion’ as the core, making full use of young consumers' reliance on social platforms to enhance brand exposure and engagement. By creating hot search events, the brand utilises topics for marketing communication. Weilong also cooperated with food bloggers and reviewers to strengthen its ‘stress-relieving’ and ‘addictive’ labels, attracting more consumers' attention and tasting. In addition, Weilong has also linked up with a virtual idol to launch a co-branded advertorial to appeal to the Generation Z second-generation. Celebrity endorsement is also an important part of Weilong's promotional strategy. The endorsement of traffic stars has effectively boosted the brand's market reputation. Meanwhile, Weilong also launched limited edition packaging through cross-border cooperation with popular IPs, (e.g. Wandering Earth, Disney), leveraging the fan economy of IPs to enhance the added value and market penetration of the brand [9].

Festive limited activities are also one of the highlights of Weilong's promotions, such as the ‘Spicy Strip New Year's Eve Dinner’ launched in the Spring Festival and ‘Spicy Strip Rice Dumplings’ in the Dragon Boat Festival, which are innovative in combination with the traditional culture and bring a sense of freshness and unique experience to consumers. In addition, Weilong also launched interactive activities such as the ‘Spicy Stick Creative Eating’ challenge, which received more than 500 million plays on Jittery Voice, further enhancing the brand's sense of user engagement and loyalty.

Through the precise application of the 4Ps strategy, Weilong has differentiated itself from the competition in terms of product innovation, price setting, channel layout and promotional activities, and has successfully increased the brand's market share and consumer loyalty. In the midst of fierce market competition, Weilong has ensured the sustainable development and market competitiveness of the brand by continuously adjusting and innovating its marketing mix.

4. Conclusion

The analysis of Weilong's marketing strategy for its spicy noodles yields several key conclusions. Firstly, Weilong has successfully attracted young consumers, especially Generation Z, through targeted market positioning, diverse product lines, and innovative marketing. The brand has undergone a high-end transformation and engaged in cross-broader collaborations, shedding its ‘low-end snacks’ label and rapidly gaining market share. Secondly, Weilong employs a flexible pricing strategy, with tiered pricing to cater to various consumer segments and dynamic pricing to encourage stock-ups during holidays. Its comprehensive online and offline distribution, especially the integration with e-commerce and social media, ensures brand reach and efficient communication. Finally, Weilong's entertaining marketing and social media promotions have successfully linked the brand with the lifestyle and social needs of young consumers, enhancing its social attributes and engagement.

While Weilong's strategy has been successful, there is scope for optimization as consumer demand for health and sustainability grows. Weilong should increase R&D in healthy snacks, exploring low-sodium, low-fat, high-fiber options, and seeking health certifications. It could also introduce functional snacks with added benefits like probiotics for digestion or collagen for beauty, appealing to health-conscious consumers. Innovations in product forms for different scenarios, such as travel packs for airlines or sharing packs for offices, could broaden the consumer base.

Weilong's success offers lessons for other companies: invest in R&D to meet modern consumer needs; target marketing strategies to resonate with aesthetics of specific groups; diversify sales channels to expand market share; and stay attuned to fashion trends and market dynamics. Innovative

marketing techniques, like cross-border collaborations and unique advertising, can enhance brand fun and social attributes, increasing consumer loyalty.

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