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A Framework for a Strategic Repositioning Strategy: A Case Study of Bulmers Original Cider

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ABSTRACT

Repositioning is conscious adaptation to a changing environment, representing a fundamental shift in the firm's value proposition (Turner, 2003). Repositioning as a pure play is largely neglected in the strategy literature, while empirical studies are rare. This paper explores the concept and process of strategic repositioning, based on the case of Bulmers cider in Ireland. A framework for successful repositioning is proposed, with six elements: core strategic values, strategic flexibility/learning capabilities, customer awareness and sensitivity, external orientation, management commitment, and belief in the product and brand. The Bulmers case affirms the ontological status of repositioning as a viable strategy. The case also indicates that repositioning is a feasible means of strategic change, which is transformational with limited scale, and is largely intellectual and enacted with strategic learning. This paper affirms the external/internal duality and need for an evolutionary, repositioning process of Turner (2003). It also extends Turner's study due to the successful and more persuasive context of the

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Bulmers study, and by providing a tentative template for successful repositioning.

Key Words: Repositioning; Strategy; Change.

INTRODUCTION

Empirical investigations of repositioning strategies are rare despite being much in evidence in the business media. Typical examples of popular pieces include the Lucozade repositioning from hospital recuperative medicine to high energy performance fluid for athletic excellence (Kleinman, 2003), the rejuvenation of Molson Ex in Canada from tired common beer to classic sports viewers' friend (Button, 2001), passing reference to Snickers' new face (Murphy, 2003), and the classic *National Jeweller*'s story on Sears' reinvention as a mass merchandiser of gems (Andrews, 2002). Common to these testaments are companies' desire to move to more favourable positions and/or to surrender previous positions in a strategic space.

Though vital to the survival or success of many firms, repositioning as a pure play is largely neglected in the strategy literature. While references can be found sprinkled throughout renowned strategy articles and leading textbooks, repositioning is generally mentioned only in passing and without supporting citation. Empirical work is even sparser, with only one major empirical study of a (failed) repositioning strategy – in Cable and Wireless (Turner, 2003). In general, repositioning remains both nebulous and underspecified.

This paper explores the concept and process of strategic positioning. It investigates the efforts of an Irish company ('Bulmers') to reposition itself over a twelve-year period. Based on an in-depth case study, the paper proposes a framework of six elements for a successful repositioning strategy. The paper is structured as follows. The next section provides an overview of the academic literature relating to strategic repositioning. Following an outline of the methodology employed, the story of the repositioning strategy in Bulmers is described, based on extensive, longitudinal fieldwork. From this, the paper derives a framework for successful repositioning, and culminates with a discussion of the theoretical implications for the strategy of repositioning.

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THE LITERATURE RELATING TO STRATEGIC REPOSITIONING

Although the literature on repositioning is not extensive, the concept can be found across a broad range of the strategy literature. Repositioning has been variously employed as essential to corporate transformation (Dunphy and Stace, 1993), as an element of corporate-level strategy (Thompson and Strickland, 2003), as a strategic response in dynamic environments (Eisenhardt and Brown, 1999), as integral to strategic competition (Porter, 1996), as an explanation for disagreements on strategic group membership (Reger and Huff, 1993), as a rationale for network organisation (Powell, 1990) and as a strategy in stakeholder mapping (Johnson et al., 2005). It has also been used interchangeably with turnaround (Williamson, 1999). In general, repositioning is referred to in passing, without elaboration and with few supporting citations. Such breadth of remit, obliqueness, intellectual permissiveness and dearth of theoretical development are suggestive of a concept that lacks clarity and a process that is under-specified.

The realm of strategic change appears prospective as a theoretical home for repositioning. The idea of strategic change in terms of radically overhauling a company's strategy is discussed in detail by many key authors in the field of strategy (Hamel, 1996; Schoenberg, 2003). The reorientation of strategic direction takes on many guises in the literature: turnaround strategy (e.g. Bibleault, 1982), strategic innovation (e.g. Markides, 1997) and even transformational leadership (e.g. Pawar and Eastman, 1997). There are a number of perspectives on strategic change reflecting different assumptions on the drivers of change (Van de Ven and Poole, 1995).

Turnaround

Turnaround is a particularly radical form of strategic change, induced by performance decline that threatens the very existence of the organisation. It is generally characterised by an overlapping two-stage approach. This involves, firstly, an efficiency/turnaround stage to stabilise operations and restore profitability and, secondly, an entrepreneurial/strategic stage to achieve long-term, profitable growth (Bibleault, 1982). In general, it has been found that efficiency-led moves, rather than entrepreneurial initiatives, are associated with successful turnarounds (Hambrick and Schechter, 1983). Overall,

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however, studies have consistently shown that only a minority of turnaround attempts are successful (Slatter, 1984).

Positioning

The concept of positioning evolved from research on market segmentation (Sekhar, 1989). Building on the product, Ries and Trout (1986) proposed that positioning is what is done to the mind of the prospect – 'the battle for your mind', focusing on communications and advertising. This was endorsed by Kotler (2000: 298), who defined positioning as 'the act of designing the company's offerings and image to occupy a distinct place in the target market's mind'. Arnott (1992: 111) similarly stated that 'positioning is the deliberate, proactive, iterative process of defining, modifying and monitoring consumer perceptions of a marketable object'. Of course, it is also important that the (prospective) customer interprets the image of the organisation in the manner intended.

Webster (1991) brought the discussion into the strategy domain, referring to the 'firm's value positioning', which is defined as 'the firm's unique way of delivering value to customers'. Evidence supports a positive relationship between company performance and clearly defined and well-formulated positioning activities (Brooksbank, 1994; Devlin et al., 1995; Porter, 1996). Appropriate positioning within an industry was notably identified as a key determinant of firm profitability (McGahan and Porter, 1997).

Repositioning

In essence, to reposition is to change the way in which a firm's product or service is conceived in the marketplace. 'Strategic repositioning is a conscious act undertaken by enterprises as they adapt to a changing commercial environment. Such strategic change often represents a fundamental shift in the underlying value proposition of the enterprise as it seeks to change its targeted market segment(s) and/or its basis of differential advantage' (Turner, 2003: 251). In his empirical study of the failed repositioning efforts of Cable and Wireless, Turner (2003) highlights the importance of the firm reconciling changing external market needs and internal ability to meet them. A key error by Cable and Wireless was adopting a process of repositioning that was too radical, and which needed to be more

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pragmatic. In addition, repositioning was not evolutionary in that it was largely discontinuous with key capabilities and core businesses.

Repositioning shares parallels with turnaround, in terms of their fundamentally strategic character, and the attempt of both to improve the firm's value proposition when performance is challenged. However, major differences patently exist in terms of the nature, scope and path of change.

METHODOLOGY

The research design is a longitudinal, multi-stage, nested case study within a single corporate setting (Yin, 1984). This approach is particularly suited to the study of strategic processes (Barnett and Burgelman, 1996). Since a key objective of the study was to gain an understanding of the strategic repositioning process in Bulmers from the perspective of the company's management, the governing paradigm was interpretive (Burrell and Morgan, 1979) and the philosophical orientation hermeneutic (Taylor, 1994).

Data collection spanned three years (2001–2004) and involved a variety of sources, both current and retrospective. Archival data were both internal (company) and external (industry). Interviews were conducted with five senior managers in Bulmers from different periods, and with the company's advertising agency and market research company (Table 1). All interviews were in-depth and open-ended, lasting between one and two hours. Full transcripts were completed in respect of all interviews. Triangulation was used to mitigate inherent problems of the 'hermeneutic circle' (Johnson and Duberley, 2000) and the use of retrospective data (Golden, 1992). This involved using different (internal and external) data sources as well as several researchers, interviewing successive marketing managers in Bulmers, and data collection at different time periods.

The basic question that informed the study was, 'How did Bulmers reposition its branded cider product?' Analysis involved methods of constant comparison and pattern recognition (Eisenhardt, 1989), resulting in a continuous cycle of data collection, cross-checking and examination. Being preliminary and exploratory, the Bulmers case study has theoretical and methodological limitations. The purpose of the study was to develop early-stage theoretical insights on the process of strategic repositioning, not validate (or otherwise)

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Table 1: Bulmers Case Study Interviews

Name	Title/Position	Number of Interviews
Brendan McGuinness	Managing Director, Bulmers (1975–present)	3
Colin Gordon	Marketing Director, Bulmers (1989–1994)	1
John Keogh	Marketing Director, Bulmers (1994–2001)	1
Maurice Breen	Marketing Director, Bulmers (2002–present)	1
Stephen Kent	Marketing Manager, Bulmers (1998–present)	2
Brian Hayes	Bulmers Account Executive, Young Advertising (1990–present)	1
Colm Carey	Managing Director, The Research Centre Qualitative Research Company (1988–present)	1

existing theory (Eisenhardt, 1989). Consequently, Bulmers was intentionally selected on theoretical grounds as an exemplar of a successful repositioning strategy. In this regard, generalisability of the study to the theory of strategic management is not centrally pertinent. A case study is not a statistical sample of one (Roche, 1997).

This approach facilitated the emergence of a framework for a successful repositioning strategy, comprising six elements. Following a description of the process of strategic repositioning in Bulmers, this framework is outlined in the penultimate section of the paper. Finally, theoretical implications are discussed in the Conclusions section.

REPOSITIONING IN PRACTICE: A CASE STUDY OF BULMERS ORIGINAL CIDER?

Bulmers Ltd is Ireland's leading manufacturer of cider under the brand name Bulmers. The company has been making cider in

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Table 2: Bulmers Repositioning Timeline

Year	Event
1988	Bulmers' first failed marketing campaign
1990	'Nothing added but time' theme initiated
1991	Launch of the 'Pint Bottle' in Dublin
1992/1993	Product gathers sales momentum
1994 and 1996	Government duty on cider increased
1996	Bulmers cider sells at a premium to lager
1996 and 2000	Bulmers wins gold in IAPI advertisement effectiveness awards
1996	Bulmers sponsors golf events and Saturday sports show on radio
1998	Cider Industry Council established
2001	Seven-fold rise in cider sales in volume terms since 1989
2005	UK-wide launch of Magner's cider

Clonmel in the south of Ireland since 1935, when William Magner first produced the drink commercially. Today, Bulmers Ltd is owned and controlled by Cantrell and Cochrane (C&C) plc, an international producer and distributor of beverages and snack foods based in Ireland. However, the Bulmers' brand is the largest and most important in the Group. This section of the paper describes the successful repositioning of Bulmers Original Cider over an extended period (Table 2).

The Image of Cider in the 1980s

In the late 1980s in Ireland, cider suffered from a negative image among consumers, the media and licensed publicans, many of whom refused to stock the drink. It was thought of as cheap, strong in alcohol content, and was associated with binge drinking, particularly by teenagers out of doors. It further served as a convenient scapegoat for many of the alcohol abuse problems of the time in Ireland. The product was sold in brown, two-litre plastic bottles ('flagons') and it

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was not unusual at the time to find empty Bulmers bottles strewn all over public parks, the residue of a night's 'bush drinking'.

Bulmers was seen as a company in disarray. Cider had low margins and showed little growth potential. As John Keogh (Marketing Director, Bulmers Ltd, 1994–2001) stressed, 'The brand declined in volume terms by 11 per cent that year [1989] so you had a low price brand with a very poor image going nowhere. It was decision time – what to do. What would you do about it?'

Background to Repositioning

Bulmers began in 1988 with a marketing campaign that tried to position Bulmers cider as a beer. The campaign used somewhat tasteless 'ZZ Top'-type advertisements, reinforced with rather coarse posters saying, 'everything else tastes like pils'. Such shock tactics aimed to show the public how cider was superior to beer. (Cider is basically fermented apple juice.) Although it had a huge recall factor, the campaign did nothing to correct the image problems of the product and brand.

Following this failed campaign, Bulmers' management took stock of their situation. Marketing research carried out at the end of the 1980s confirmed that people were concerned with the product's negative image ('lunatic juice' or 'electric lemonade') and its adverse effects, in part reflecting high alcohol content. Nevertheless, people had a certain regard for the product (although not in the form in which it was then conceived and marketed) and would not wish to see the drink removed from the marketplace. Bulmers cider had redeemable features that no one could quite put their finger on at the time. The problems and potential of the brand were highlighted by Brian Hayes (Bulmers Account Executive, Young Advertising):

> The research showed it was an image problem, but what specifically about the product? Was there anything wrong with the product? And most people would tell you in response, 'no, but my perceived idea is that it is jungle juice'.

Bulmers' management acknowledged that it was too big a challenge to try to convert all lager drinkers to cider drinkers, so they

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looked at their own consumers. They established three varieties of Bulmers drinker. The ***regular core drinker*** drank cider most of the time due to its taste and alcohol strength. The ***regular repertoire drinker*** was the kind of consumer who went out to play a football match on a Wednesday night and started off on Bulmers for refreshment, before moving on to Guinness after two or three pints. Finally, the ***occasional repertoire drinker*** only drank Bulmers when in the countryside or when the sun shone on a Sunday afternoon.

While Bulmers would never be perceived as another beer, there were lessons to be learned from the beer market in Ireland. Brendan McGuinness (Managing Director, Bulmers Ltd, since 1975) believed that the market was characterised by rapidly changing preferences, with resultant opportunities:

> Well, there's no clearly defined sort of population the consumer is in. If you look back in the history, you know stout was a dominant category and stout has declined. You know, there was a time when stout was, I think, 60 per cent of beer consumed in Ireland, so clearly if categories are in decline there's opportunities for other brands.

However, problems of negative perceptions remained. Creative and bold action was clearly required in relation to the product's image. The answer lay in a return to the roots of the company and cider making. Brendan McGuinness recalled, 'The basics were telling us that it was all about tradition, naturalness and heritage. Those are our properties.'

The catalyst for fundamental change was external cues from the company's competitive environment, allied to management insight and experience. Brendan McGuinness explained:

> For example Guinness departed from their traditional strategy ten to fifteen years ago and started appealing very clearly to young people, and they chopped and changed their advertising, and I suppose we moved in and took part of their territory, which was the whole naturalness and heritage and tradition area and product qualities and craft of making it.

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Repositioning Strategy

Bulmers embarked upon a strategy to change consumer prejudice about their cider brand. Colin Gordon (Marketing Director, Bulmers Ltd., 1989–1994) stressed that, 'everything we did was fundamentally around how to continuously improve the image.' He also highlighted the need to be ahead of the consumer, portraying Bulmers cider in a more favourable light and as a premium product. Management decided to use a theme based on 'time' throughout all company advertising. Colin Gordon reflected on the inception of the idea and the snowballing consequences:

> Once you had the copy line, it actually became unstoppable what you could put in against it. So, 'nothing added but time' allowed you to be natural.... You could pick on the absence of things because of the 'nothing added' part of the by-line.

Consistency of meaning was achieved through several communication media, all portraying the same messages of naturalness, tradition and heritage. Bulmers has maintained the 'time' theme in all advertisements. It initially began as 'Nothing added but time'. Although very successful, the company was forced to change the slogan in 1996 due to a European Union ruling on misleading advertising (a colorant is added to the cider). The next campaign focused on 'All in its own good time'. This, in turn, was superseded by 'Time dedicated to you'. Using symbols and legends in different fields of endeavour, this drew a parallel between the product and the single-minded person devoted to succeeding.

The second creative platform added to the brand's character was that of 'craft', with advertisements showing craftsmen at work and implying the same for Bulmers. The aim of this constant brand building and learning was to allow the Bulmers brand to evolve while at the same time retaining the initial focus and qualities identified at the outset of the strategy. Therefore, although the message was changing in response to the consumer, market and product, it still retained its core meaning.

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Industry and Other Measures

The bad public image of cider remained a critical issue. The first element tackled was cider's perceived high alcoholic strength. Before 1990, the alcohol content of Bulmers was 5.0 per cent by volume for draught, and 4.5 per cent for bottles. This compared with levels of 4.2 or 4.3 per cent for beer. (Historically, when UK cider brands had first entered the Irish market, they had a high alcohol content, which Bulmers matched.) Moreover, reflecting insufficient controls, the alcohol content of flagons sold through the retail trade varied between 4.0 and 8.5 per cent. As a result, Bulmers suffered from both an unnecessarily high cost of production and a bad image associated with drunkenness partly caused by the high and inconsistent alcoholic strength of its cider. Management took action to reduce and standardise alcohol levels.

Another problem was adverse press coverage, which affected Bulmers' image unfavourably in the mindset of consumers and the licensed trade. Newspaper headlines such as, 'Cider crazed youths', and 'Cider party turned nasty, court told' were commonplace. In 1998, the Cider Industry Council (CIC) was set up with an initial fund of IR£100,000. Its stated aims were:

- To encourage appreciation of cider amongst responsible and mature drinkers
- To encourage use of cider in cooking to accompany food
- To help combat underage drinking

Although claiming to represent the major cider companies in Ireland, Bulmers provided the CIC with 95 per cent of its funding, and got all of the other industry players involved. The CIC's real aim was to counteract the harmful media reports that were leading to negative consumer and trade attitudes. As John Keogh pointed out:

> This was good work, need[ed] to be done and positioned cider very positively as taking a responsible attitude. We were seen as the irresponsible ones of the past acting responsibly.

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At the same time, some marketing employees were given the task of contacting any journalists who reported on 'cider parties'. If it could not be confirmed that a substantial amount of cider was consumed, the journalist was then asked to retract the article or print an apology. Bulmers also funded various initiatives supported by the police, such as alcohol awareness schemes, which helped to increase public recognition that the cider industry was becoming more socially responsible. Over time, such measures proved very effective in changing media and consumer attitudes to cider, with negative media stories about cider falling by five-sixths over a six-year period.

Bulmers also addressed elements of the marketing mix. The relatively low price of Bulmers had undermined the high quality image engendered by the company's advertising. Over a number of years the price was increased to reflect its new premium product positioning and, since 1996, Bulmers cider has sold at a premium to lager (in part due to two government increases in excise duty). In addition, management stopped the previous in-pub promotion policy, which was judged to show Bulmers in a bad light, through encouraging drunkenness. The money saved was utilised elsewhere in the marketing budget. The focus of promotion shifted to image correction in public relations and sponsorship in areas more in keeping with Bulmers' repositioned product image, such as golf and other sports events.

Bulmers also adopted several innovative approaches to packaging, which further reinforced the changed image of the product. The company introduced the pint bottle of cider served with ice, which over time became a trademark of the Bulmers' brand. This arose from management spotting a consumer usage pattern and developing it. In addition, a long-neck bottle of Bulmers cider was introduced, following a suggestion by a lower-level employee.

Continuing Success

The deliberate repositioning strategy was hugely successful in enhancing the image of Bulmers cider. It significantly changed the mindset of consumers in relation to a product that looked to be in decline. The result was a huge increase in sales of cider, with annual consumption rising seven-fold from just under twelve to close on 83 million litres in twelve years (Figure 1). Bulmers, as the dominant market leader, was the chief beneficiary with substantial volume and market share gains (Figure 2). By 2002, Bulmers cider was on

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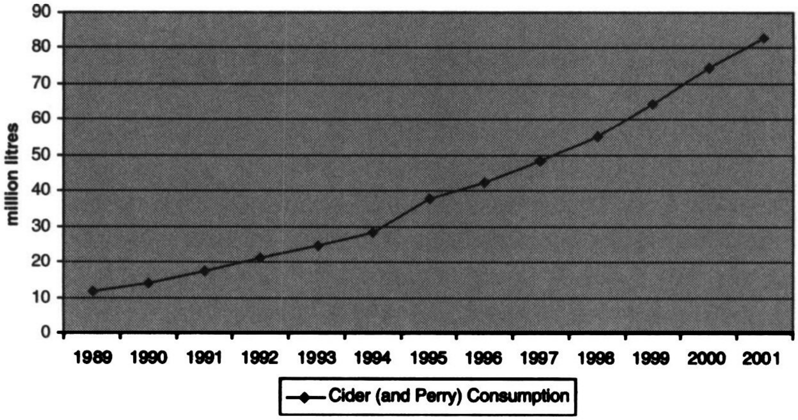
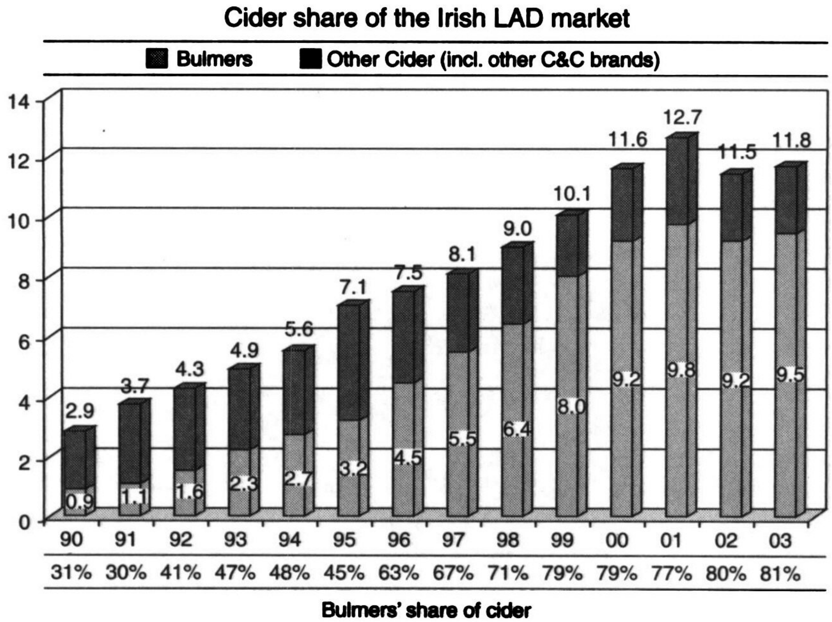
Figure 1: Cider Consumption in Ireland, 1989–2001



Source: Revenue Commissioners (1998–2001) 'Table EX8: Excise Duty on Cider and Perry', in *Statistical Report of the Revenue Commissioners*, Dublin: The Stationary Office.

Figure 2: Bulmers' Market Share



Source: C&C Group plc website, Our Brands: Bulmers section, http://www.cancgroupplc.com/group_alcohol_long.asp, accessed 23 May 2007.

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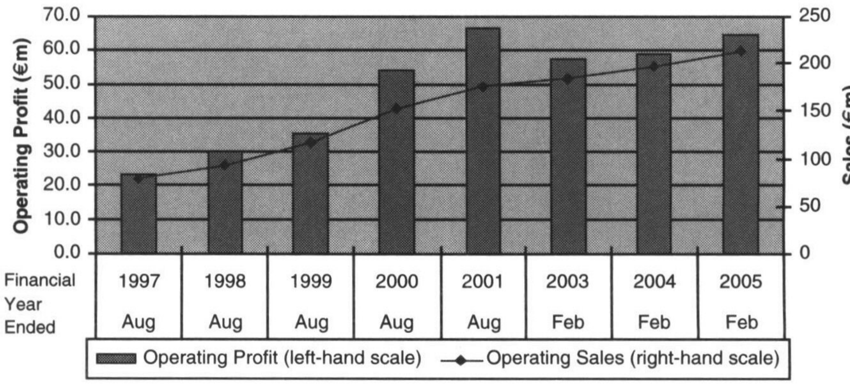
Figure 3: Bulmers' Financial Statistics (estimated)



Source: Adapted from Goodbody Stockbrokers (2004) 'C&C Group: No hangover?', Dublin: Goodbody Stockbrokers.

sale in virtually every pub in the country compared to only 40 per cent ten years previously. Brendan McGuinness commented: 'They (the consumers) think of Bulmers in the same breath as Guinness, Bud and Heineken'.

Bulmers has continued to build on its repositioning strategy, the success of which is reflected in financial terms (Figure 3). In 2004, C&C floated on the stock market, providing Bulmers with ready access to capital for expansion and development. In 2005, following several years of test marketing in a number of locations, Bulmers launched its cider product nationally in the UK under the brand name 'Magners'. To date, the success of Magners in the UK has paralleled that of Bulmers cider in Ireland, and has been the main factor behind the strong performance of C&C's share price.

ELEMENTS OF A SUCCESSFUL REPOSITIONING STRATEGY

From analysis of the Bulmers case, a framework for a successful repositioning strategy emerged, comprising six elements (Figure 4). Each of these elements is outlined below.

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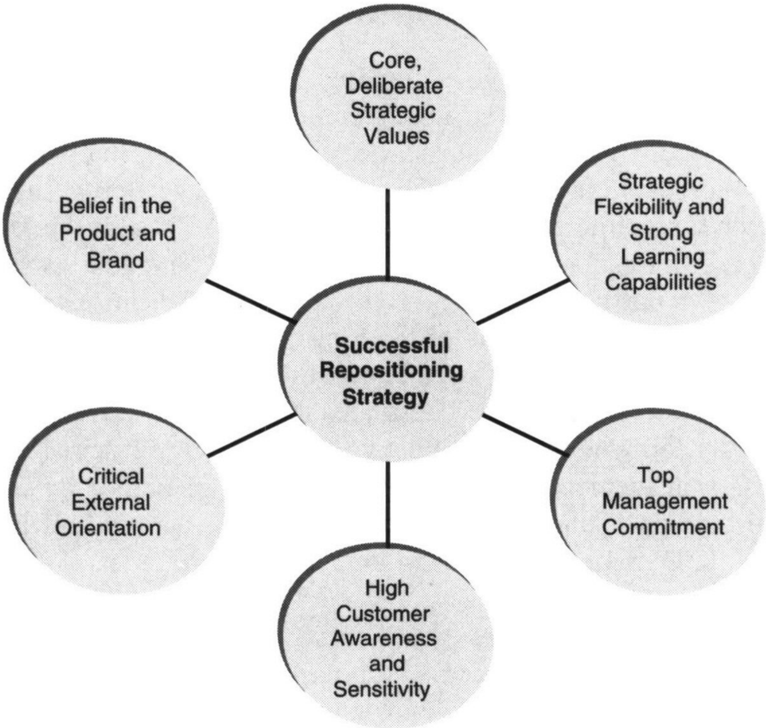
Figure 4: Framework for a Successful Repositioning Strategy



Core, Deliberate Strategic Values

Repositioning involves realignment and refocusing, not replacement, of strategic posture. In the Bulmers case, based on analysis of market research and customer feedback, the product (except for reducing the high alcohol content), organisational structure, strategic architecture and management were left unchanged. What was altered (fundamentally and radically) was the strategic thinking of the management team and the image of the product in the minds of consumers. Thus, strategic repositioning is underpinned by purposeful, enduring, fundamental values (Collins and Porras, 1996). In the case of Bulmers, these values embraced product quality, marketing-led core competence and a restless management culture of change, which is open to internal questioning and external influences.

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Strategic Flexibility and Strong Learning Capabilities

Bulmers' management clearly believed that even the most deliberately intended strategy is not carved in stone and should be open and receptive to change, allowing it to develop over time (Mintzberg, 1987). As John Keogh emphasised, 'It is and should be constantly evolving and your strategy should be constantly evolving.' Moreover, throughout the case interviews, words such as 'snowballing', 'iterative' and 'emerged' were routinely common. The case is replete with examples of a strong emergent aspect to Bulmers' repositioning strategy. These include the introduction of the pint bottle with ice and of the long-neck bottle, in response to consumer trends and employee input, respectively.

The Bulmers case also encapsulates the view that learning capability is a cornerstone of an effective repositioning strategy (Senge, 1992). Management used this capability to engender enhanced understanding of the product, the marketplace, the consumer and, above all, their successes and failures.

High Customer Awareness and Sensitivity

Bulmers' repositioning success highlights how important it is for a company to have a thorough knowledge of its consumers (Drucker, 1955). Bulmers had a comprehensive awareness of the consumer categories that drank their product: regular core, regular repertoire and occasional repertoire drinkers. This helped the company to focus on and target those consumers who were most likely to be swayed into buying the product. In addition, proximity to consumers and sensitivity to their needs gave Bulmers' management the confidence and insight to make the bold entrepreneurial moves required to reformulate the image of Bulmers cider and reposition the product successfully. This is evident in the process of leading the consumer through the change of image with innovative advertising, in raising progressively the price of Bulmers cider to premium levels, and in daring industry-level and media initiatives.

Critical External Orientation

Astute market and competitive analysis triggered Bulmers' repositioning strategy (Porter, 1996). It was competitors who unwittingly prompted Bulmers to return to its roots of naturalness, heritage and

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tradition. Management was able to recognise the value and appropriateness of a strategy previously abandoned by Guinness, the market leader. Allied with the opportunity perceived from consumer brand switching, this demonstrated a deep and ingrained understanding of external developments, which was not shared by others. Bulmers' management also correctly defined its sphere of influence and action broadly, to embrace industry-level and media management activities.

Top Management Commitment

Bulmers' commitment to the repositioning strategy was steadfast and was not undermined by the introduction of new senior managers, notwithstanding some early misgivings. In addition, repositioning was led from the top of the company, as in most successful strategic change (Nadler and Tushman, 1989). Furthermore, the focus in repositioning was on the overall good of the company going forward. Given that there were no specific managerial incentives attaching to the success of the strategy, pride and willingness to succeed were the main factors driving management. Such affective motivations generate superior commitment (Meyer and Herscovitch, 2001).

Belief in the Product and Brand

Bulmers Original Cider was central to the repositioning strategy, while management's belief in the product and brand was unswerving. The evidence in the case supports an almost messianic conviction, despite an inauspicious start, in which the auguries were overwhelmingly negative. At all times, the brand was seen to be strong and the product right (save for too high an alcohol content). All management actions, from highly directive advertising to industry-level and media measures, proactively and aggressively reflected this. At the same time, management's belief was not characterised by omniscience and hubris.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper makes a number of preliminary theoretical contributions. Primarily, the Bulmers case affirms the ontological status of repositioning as a viable strategy. Over a twelve-year period, the

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company's value proposition has been fundamentally altered (Turner, 2003) for the better. This is evidenced by the Bulmers-led transformation of the cider market from moribund to rapid growth; by the brand's transposition from second-rate beer to premium category leader; by the more positive profile of the product; and by the company's greatly increased sales, market share and profits. The strategic nature of repositioning is also attested by the framework for repositioning success developed in this paper. This framework is fundamental in character and wide-ranging in scope, encompassing many prerequisites for strategic success. Moreover, the elements of the framework are rooted in core precepts from the strategy literature.

The success of Bulmers indicates that repositioning is a feasible means of strategic change. It is clear that the change that occurred was transformational in character (Dunphy and Stace, 1993). At the same time, a noteworthy aspect of the Bulmers repositioning story is how limited was the scale of change. Product, structure, architecture and management remained essentially intact. The predominant change that occurred was in mindsets (Liedka, 1998). Internally, repositioning involved a change in the strategic thinking of management. Externally, what changed was the image of the product and brand among consumers, the media and general public. Predominantly, repositioning at Bulmers reflects intellectual processes, rather than concrete phenomena, with far-reaching ramifications. This may account for the mistaken (but understandable) conclusion that repositioning is marketing-based, and therefore functionally specific, rather than strategic, in nature.

In this regard, repositioning can be differentiated from turnaround. In repositioning the emphasis is on positive, mental mapping (Walsh, 1995) in which change is predominantly enacted, supplemented by strategic learning (Rajagopalan and Gretchen, 1996). (Change is also complemented by supportive entrepreneurial action.) Turnaround, on the other hand, involves expedient, forced operational intervention. Given the stark contrast between the failure of many turnarounds (Slatter, 1984) and the success of Bulmers (albeit only a single case), repositioning would appear to be more prospective as a strategy for change than its sparse treatment in the literature would suggest.

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This paper affirms Turner's (2003) previous empirical study of repositioning. Turner's prescription of the need to reconcile external and internal environments finds resonances in the insight and experience of the management of Bulmers in exploiting Guinness' abandonment of its core traditional qualities, which Bulmers subsequently adopted. The internal/external duality is also evident in changed mindsets – both the strategic thinking of management, and the marketplace image of the product, respectively. In addition, the limited scale of change in the Bulmers case reinforces Turner's dictum that the process of repositioning should be evolutionary and pragmatic, building on existing capabilities.

However, the Bulmers case also extends Turner's paper in two important respects. Firstly, Bulmers is a story of successful repositioning, in contrast to the failure of Cable and Wireless outlined in Turner (2003). Arguably, the more favourable context lends persuasive weight to the resulting conclusions and theoretical insights. Secondly, this paper proposes a framework for successful repositioning. This provides a (tentative) template for embarking on repositioning, which builds on Turner's valuable highlighting of the issues and challenges of such a strategy.

As an early-stage exploration of repositioning, this case does not purport to be a panacea for all ailing companies. It does, however, highlight the value of such a strategy and puts forward some tentative suggestions for successful repositioning. It is hoped that this paper will stimulate further analysis and study with a view to firmly establishing repositioning in the lexicon of strategy and change.

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