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**RESEARCH ON THE OPINION OF  
THE CONSUMER CONSIDERING  
THE IMAGE OF THE FURNITURE IN  
HUNGARY**

**ABSTRACT.** Is it possible to characterize an industrial branch in the nowadays complex competition surroundings merely with its companies' financial indicators? Is it possible to leave the soft factors out of consideration? The one who is standing behind: the person...

In my research on the decision making procedure in strategic management of the furniture industry, I focused on the opinion of the consumer. I guided 20 focus groups, which were located in different places and were segmented according to the modified traditional family life cycle from the furniture industries point of view. My goal was to lay down: what is the peoples' opinion about the substance of their furniture. I wanted to find out if the opinion of the decision makers of the furniture trade consistent with the opinion of the average people. And finally I wondered whether these opinions have any effect on their strategic decisions.

**JEL Classification:** M3, P2,  
Z13

**Keywords:** qualitative research, focus group, wood science, strategy, furniture, image.

**Introduction**

Being a wood science engineer, for many years I've been listening to the stories of my professors and I've been undergoing many wonderful experiences of wood. This affection for wood saturates us at the Faculty of Wood Sciences through the years and soon, the material itself combines with many experiences and anecdotes. As time goes by, these stories turn highly coloured to become legends and then myths at last.

So it is only natural, that young wood science engineers take these impressions of wood along with them, and in leading positions they determine this way a company's attitude, products and communication towards the potential consumers in the long run.

The question remains, whether the consumers who buy the wooden products, the furniture, take delight in the sight of the product having pleasant memories. Do they love wood as much as the manufacturer?

The purpose of my research summarily presented in this article, is to get acquainted with the wood related attitudes of potential consumers of different geographical and socio-demographical specifics.

## Research issues

I started my research by enumerating the cases, when consumers meet wood while their reactions and thoughts speak of how they feel about wood. I examined the issues in three large domains. How these issues occur according to geographical regions and in the different family life cycle periods, and how they relate to the opinion of wood industrialists.

*Issues concerning wooden toys:* these questions are dominant, because the material of a child's toy significantly influences their choices of material in later years; since those consumers, who used to play with mostly wooden toys as children, provably prefer wooden furnishings in their adulthood.

That is the childhood playing habits uncover much of the wood related attitudes. Another reason why issues concerning wooden toys are important is that remembering childhood recalls mostly positive images, that's why people are more open during the interviews and their answers are deeper and more true.

*Issues concerning nature:* these questions are useful, because as I suppose there's a contrast in people's minds between wooden products – probably liked by many people - and the fact, that these products can only be produced by timber cutting.

Consequently it seems to be a choice between the popular forest and the popular wooden product. Which is of course not true, as modern silviculture makes a perfect balance possible. I hope with these questions I can get behind the scenes, as nature is an important factor of the image of wood.

*Issues concerning furniture:* attitudes can be examined by actions. Examining a serious decision such as buying expensive furniture is a golden opportunity to get an insight into the consumers' wood related attitudes.

## Theoretical background

Thus the point in question is to get acquainted with attitudes, which is the key point of the research, as attitudes are not palpable or easily knowable. Attitudes are what we feel, while actions are what we do. Our actions are observable, but attitudes can only be concluded from people's talking and actions. Attitudes are conceptions of brands, ideas, behaviour, everything that is attached to feelings. (Ágnes Hofmeister-Tóth [2003] 233 p.).

That's why we can't ask people whether they like wood, because it wouldn't result appreciably – everyone would say „of course I like wood”. According to the definition of the attitude, behaviours can be observed by actions. Consequently I had to find a deeper, more flexible method that supports a better self-expression.

This complexity is the reason, why I decided to draw up a combined plan of research, on a qualitative research basis, because these methods provide the opportunity to examine the consumers' opinion and behaviour concerning a product or a service, in order to understand the consumer's connection, behaviour, conduct.

True enough that these methods – in opposition to the quantitative techniques – don't answer to „How much?”, but in our case it's more important to give answers to „What?”, „Why?” and „How?” (Gordon-Langmaid [1997] 15. p.), which fits perfectly my research ideas.

Qualitative market research methods in addition:

- Are open, dynamical, flexible,
- Help deeper understanding,
- Use the creativity of consumers,
- Rest on a wider, deeper data base,
- Overcome rationalized or superficial answers, and

- Serve as a richer source of ideas for marketing and creative plans.  
That is why the qualitative research can be used mostly when the results:
- Deepen the understanding,
- Complete the knowledge,
- Clear up the real questions,
- Conduce to setting up hypothesis,
- Identify a spectrum of behaviour,
- Uncover and explain the consumer's motives, behaviour, conduct,
- Serve as an input to a future part of the research or the development.

From the methods of the qualitative marketing research I've chosen the focus group as the most adequate method that helps to achieve my research aims, using additional techniques as a combination.

The method is a type of the qualitative market and promotion research methods, which isn't suitable for statistical analysis, but allows a deeper analysis of great dimension.

The focus group is a kind of collective interview that's built on the communication among the participants of the research to collect data. Though sometimes researchers use these collective interviews to collect data quickly and easily, the groups have an important advantage: focus groups use the interactions of the group in an explicit way. This means, that instead of asking the participants to answer the questions one by one, the researcher encourages everyone to have a conversation with each other: to ask questions, to tell anecdotes, and to tell their opinions of other participants' experiences and views (Kitzinger [1994]).

The conversation is informal, where participants get the chance to express, without limits, their opinions and feelings that are difficult to put in words. The technique helps the emotionally coloured, fragmentary opinions to come to light, and lets us get an inside view of people's preferences, aversions and attitudes related to the concrete matter.

The main idea of the focus group is that the group processes help people to express their views clearly in a way, which cannot be done in a twosome interview. The group conversation is particularly an adequate method, when the researcher has many open questions, and he would like to encourage participants to reveal the important issues themselves, using their own vocabulary, asking their own questions and emphasizing things that they find important. When group dynamics work well, the participants work together with the researcher, while quite new and unexpected trends may be developed.

Hereafter the effects of the group allow the chance to debate and to give voice to uncertain associations.

The gained results are multicoloured and richer than the statistical results of survey researches; on the other hand they are inadequate for target group specific representative use.

Further on I expound the advantages and drawbacks of the focus group interview, gathering the most important ascertainments of the specialist literature (Kitzinger [1994], Gordon-Langmaid [1997], Malhotra [2001], Fischer [2001] and Scipione [1994]) and my own experiences:

Advantages of the focus group:

- The information gained from the consumers one by one is generally less, than in the case of a group discussion, when the group situation increases creativity and decreases fear. Participants usually generate each other's thoughts.
- In the course of a group interview the differences of opinion are highlighted and by this means the attitudes are revealed relatively easily.
- Answers are usually spontaneous, there's no time and chance for „face-lifting”.

- When consumers go for a focus group interview, they are generally cooperative, supporting the work.
  - Non-verbal communication, which can't be observed in a survey research, often says more, than verbal answers.
  - During a focus group interview many tasks and ideas can be attained, which couldn't be done using other market research techniques.
  - The tasks can be easily interpreted, in opposition to surveys, where a special wording or an unusual scale may cause difficulties in answering.
  - Cost-effectiveness.
- Drawbacks of the focus group:
- It doesn't produce quantitative results, so the analysis is difficult and often subjective (though subjectivity may also be an advantage of great importance).
  - Results can easily be deformed, when not everyone is sincere during the interview.
  - The processing is difficult, because the research is not available in printed form, only on audio or video tape.
  - Persuading people to participate in a focus group interview is hard.
  - Group situation prevents some people from telling their opinions. Of course this can be eased by right verbal motivation. Indeed according to my experiences, if the moderator addresses the shy participant looking in their eyes, leaning forward and being interested, further on if he answers to every manifestation with a nod of approval, then anyone can be drawn into the group. And more than once the most valuable and the deepest information is gained this way.
  - It happens that the group has a negative attitude to the moderator or the subject and the atmosphere „freezes”.
  - There will always be some strong personalities in the group, who think that only they have an opinion, and they keep down other group members.
  - The discussion can easily be diverted, and useless issues turn up.

### **Script of the focus group interview**

Though focus group interviews can be made without a sketch, it's not worth doing, because a beforehand planned script can be an important help during the group discussion.

My script is literally a sketch, as according to my plans, I wanted the conversations to be absolutely without limits. I only intended to stop and drive back the conversation on its original track, when it gets really away from its point. Until it happens I only wanted to control the discussion with small gestures and sentences. Getting on to a side-track isn't only possible, but it often has to be done, so that really important aspects turn up. The script may not contain these aspects, because while writing it I didn't know that these issues would turn up.

As I see it the technique worked well, I found feelings and thoughts that would have been lost in case of an autocratical control. Moreover participants often answered my unsaid questions, and I even obtained deeper and more sincere information by not asking concrete questions.

The script is written so as to promote debate, which makes a good opportunity for group roles to work out as well as interesting opinions to get into the limelight.

#### *1. Introduction*

Arriving in the prepared meeting room.

Filling in the data sheets.

Introducing the research, a few words about the aims and the method. Brief review of the interview, mentioning its length (45-60 minutes), and that it's going to be recorded.

Draw the group's attention that the conversation is going to be free, encouraging everyone to say anything that comes into their minds. They don't have to convince each other of anything.

Point out that there are no good or bad answers, only opinions.

Participants introduce themselves one by one. Ask them to talk about their general interests too.

### *2. Presentation of pictures of children playing with wooden and plastic toys*

Pictures are shown at the same time.

What do participants think about the pictures? (First thoughts are written on a board, seen by everyone.)

The duality (wood-plastic) may cause interesting reactions.

Childhood memories pop up, everyone identifies with the subject.

Conversation about the pictures.

Presumably the phase of „rush” will pass soon, participant find the common values („regulation”). Questions, if the discussion doesn't go spontaneously („fulfilment”):

- What type of toys did you use to play as children? What was the material of your childhood toys?
- What type of toys do/would you buy for your children? And of what material?
- What factors do you consider when you're buying a toy?
- Do you have positive/negative experiences related to toys? What are they?
- Does the environment of your place of residence influence your choice of toy?
- Are you satisfied with the toy purchasing possibilities? What are you satisfied/unsatisfied with?
- What is the ideal toy like?

### *3. Presentation of pictures of forests and timber that's thrown down and stacked*

Pictures are shown at the same time.

What do participants think about the pictures? (First thoughts are written on a board, seen by everyone.)

This duality (beautiful forest-timber thrown down) may also cause interesting reactions.

Memories of touring and hiking pop up, everyone identifies with the subject.

Conversation about the pictures.

Presumably the phase of „rush” will pass soon, participant find the common worth („regulation”). Questions, if the discussion doesn't go spontaneously („fulfilment”):

- Do you like hiking? When were you on a trip the last time? Where? With whom?
- Why is timber cutting necessary? What do you think about it?
- What are the advantages of timber cutting? What are the drawbacks?

### *4. The presentation of drawings (projective pictures)*

Presenting the task and the length (5 minutes).

First of all a story is presented (like comic strips) of a tree's possible course of life. Participants have to write the thoughts of the tree in the bubbles. This way many attitudes can be known. Though people write these words like the thoughts of the tree, these are their own projected thoughts, which they wouldn't or couldn't tell in words.

After the comic strips, the tree is presented in a typical situation (for the ordinary man), and participants have to write in the thoughts of the people presented in the picture.

The task takes only a few minutes, and then we talk about the pictures – who wrote what. This breaks the ice, and makes everyone totally relaxed.



Pic. 1. Example of the projective pictures

Source: Eszter Dékány's drawings

### 5. „Real” fulfilment

Connecting text: We saw a drawing of a furniture shop.

- What kind of furniture do they sell?
- What factors do you consider when you're choosing a furniture?
- Does the age influence the choice of furniture? How much? Why?

Inquiring about the inherited pieces of furniture. These are usually old pieces of furniture and many feelings are attached to them.

- Is the material of the furniture important?
- Show participant a piece of furniture made of chipboard in the room. Ask them whether they consider it wood, though it's obviously not solid wood.
- The answer determines the next question: Why? Which of our senses are affected by wood? And how?

If it's not working this way:

- Tell your first or last or the most determinant memory of wood!
- Where did you meet wood for the first time?
- What feelings did this meeting awake?

It's almost certain that the reactions are positive. The question follows:

- Can you say negative opinions about wood or wooden products?

Meanwhile asking steadily:

- Everyone agrees with this?
- Is everyone of the same opinion?

### 6. Farewell

Are there any omitted things that we would like to speak about?

Ask the participants to summarize collectively what we were talking about.

Expression of thanks, telling participants how valuable their cooperation was and how it helps in the research.

Handing over gifts.

## Planning the sample

Though it's possible to work with a representative sample in the case of a smaller population, most of the focus group researches use the theoretical sampling model, when the participants are chosen in a way that reflects the diversity of the whole population or lets concrete hypothesis be tested.

Ideally a focus group consists of between 4-8 people, though every single specialist literature prefers different numbers between three and fifty.

It's important, that the composition of the sample is determined by life periods and not by age, because purchasing habits may undergo drastic changes during the different family

life cycle periods. That's why the focus groups are worth to set up according to the Traditional Family Life Cycle Model (Murphy-Staples, 1979), assuming that the research doesn't requires a more specific method.

- 1) *Bachelor (Young single people not living at home)*: Considering their lifestyle they possess high income, which they spend mainly on clothing, entertainment and electric household appliances.
- 2) *Newly Married Couples (Young, newly married couple without children)*: Their possibilities of purchasing are relatively modest, if the wife is gainfully employed it allows surplus of consumption.
- 3) *Full Nest I. (Young, married couple with youngest child under 6)*: Changes in requirements also change the consumption habits. The wife works in the household. Important factors are the house purchasing and related family investments. They give great attention to every single purchase.
- 4) *Full Nest II. (Young married couple with youngest child over 6)*: Children spend individually more than before, and they influence choices of purchase. The wife usually returns to her gaining employment.
- 5) *Full Nest III. (Older married couple with dependent children - usually teens)*: The sum spent on the children's education, nutrition and clothing is significant. If the income conditions make it possible, the family buys a second car and changes their house.
- 6) *Empty Nest (Older married couple with no children at home)*: Children are grown ups and have left the nest, they are independent. The income of the couple allows entertainment, journeys and pursuing hobbies. Retiring the couple's income decreases, on the other hand they spend more on health and nutrition. The family usually changes for a smaller home and moves to a healthier environment.
- 7) *Solitary Survivor (One remaining spouse)*: The old pensioner is left alone. He/She moves to a smaller home, spends much on his/her health and dietary products.

I set up the sample in the following way according to the geographical and socio-demographical specifics:

In three different geographical locations:

1. Mountains (Sopron),
2. Lowland (Debrecen),
3. Large city (Budapest),
4. And a base group of wood industrialists.

I slightly modified the Traditional Family Lifecycle Model, decomposing the four groups further:

1. Young single people not living at home,
2. Young, newly married couple without children,
3. Young, married couple with youngest child under 6,
4. Married couple with children 6-18,
5. Older married couple with no children at home.

I made two modifications in the model:

- I left out the Solitary Survivor group, because this group is irrelevant regarding the wood industry purchases.
- I drew together two groups – the „Young married couple with youngest child over 6” and „Older married couple with dependent children”, because I don't feel considerable differences between these groups – like in case of the other groups – in terms of purchasing wooden products.

In this way I formed 20 focus groups with the generally ideal 4-8 persons, which make about 100-140 participants.

Table 1. Set-up of the sample of the focus group interviews

	Sopron	Debrecen	Budapest	The circle of wood industrialists
Young single people not living at home	X	X	X	X
Young, newly married couple without children	X	X	X	X
Young, married couple with youngest child under 6	X	X	X	X
Married couple with children 6-18	X	X	X	X
Older married couple with no children at home	X	X	X	X
			Total: 20 groups	

Source: own compilation

### Results of the research

All in all relying upon my researches I can say that it's the opinion of people living in an environment densely covered with forest (Sopron) that can be compared the most to the opinion of wood industrialists. This is followed by the viewpoint of people living close to nature, but not near forests (Debrecen), and the further standing-point is that of the large city dwellers (Budapest).

Wooden toys brought up positive images for every participant. The impressions are mostly related to cheerfulness, the desire of natural materials and development.

Children playing with dolls as well as plastic toys caused neutral associations in the groups from Sopron and of the wood industrialists, while looking at these pictures participants from Debrecen thought of negative associations. For large city dwellers wooden and plastic toys represented the same values.

My hypothesis assuming that the more close one lives to nature, the more typical is that they used to play with toys made of natural material has not been justified. According to the research results the connection between these two factors can not be made evident, though it's a fact that the major part of citizens from Budapest admitted that they used to play with plastic toys. Nevertheless the hypothesis proved false, because all of the children used to play with similar toys: dolls, LEGO, mini cars (matchbox), wooden building blocks, board games. The difference lies in the outdoor toys, which is understandable, since the different environment gives different possibilities and consequently different toys. Groups found that the most important factor was obviously the place of residence and its environment.

At the same time, we can point out that the next significant element is to engross children with toys made of natural material, as it positively affects the development of the offspring.

A considerable part of the participants buys the same type of toy for their children as they used to play with, though according to the interviews parents fortunately try to give their children mostly wooden toys.

The need for better solutions has occurred in every group, though the groups didn't always choose the same ways. Groups from the country find development of creativity the most important factor, just like wood industrialists' groups; which means that my hypothesis assuming that everyone considers safety as principal requirement proved false.

This high value isn't worth everything though. Each young group shares the opinion that wooden toys are too expensive and not everyone can afford them. For older groups it's

not of cardinal importance – this acknowledgement can be really important, as it means that a possible promotional campaign should be aimed at the grandparents, who buy the expensive wooden toys and consequently they are the target group.

An equally important perception is that only groups from Budapest preferred safety and colour to skill development and material, besides only they pointed out the requirement of conformity with the environmental regulations of great nicety.

Accordingly every group considers LEGO and wooden building block the ideal toy, and only participants from Budapest and Sopron added to this duet the outdoor sports toys.

All of the participants associated the forest with peace, calmness and perfection, and it leads to a desire for a life in perfect harmony with nature. Apart from a considerable part from participants from Budapest everyone described timber cutting as a necessary thing, judging its process impartially, that is they understand the difference that has to be made between the useful cutting and the exploitation. For me it was a really pleasant recognition, as I used to think that this discernment is only typical of the trade.

The other part of the city dwellers can't distinguish the before-mentioned activities; the reason for this is the lack of information and the negative impressions of the media.

Everyone likes wooden furniture; participants prefer mostly them in their homes, or they would prefer them if they could afford. Yet young groups – apart from their place of residence – don't use wooden furniture for many reasons. First of all wooden furniture is expensive and until they are on velvet they buy cheap and simple furnishings. Young groups only change for expensive furniture of high quality when these furnishings are for good and all. On the other hand for the youth light weight and mobility is pretty important for practical reasons and because of frequent moving. These features take shape in furniture made of panels, though it's not considered wooden furniture by many groups.

Participants from Debrecen associate furniture made of panels with negative images and only solid wood is considered wooden furniture by the youth, while the majority of the older generation doesn't see it this way – maybe out of sheer habit. Just like participants from Sopron as well as the wood industrialists, who don't see much difference between solid wood and veneer. City dwellers' opinion about this question also represents duality; though young people more typically reject panels; on the other hand – probably due to the better and better quality of panel products – the positive point of view is present too.

So the choice of furniture is age-dependent for several reasons. Young people consider principally the price, functionalism, practical reasons, modern appearance, comfort, and harmony with other parts of their home. Consequently my hypothesis assuming that the price is the most important factor proved true, as long as we regard young people, newly married couples and families with little children. For older generations the system of important factors modifies – beauty and value come into prominence that materialize through old, rustic and antique furniture, while the old times' heavily lacquered furniture made of veneer boards are still frequently encountered in their homes.

According to participants' opinion wood doesn't only affects our senses, but beyond experience our metaphysical subconsciousness that cannot be sensed. The differences between the groups derive from the proportion of this duality.

This change of proportion can be observed in two ways. First of all from the younger ones to the older generation I experienced feelings that are more and more incomprehensible, like expressions of peace, warmth and spirit. On the other hand a similar change caught my attention getting closer to nature.

These associations can be observed in the case of the wood industrialists, and the associations are expanded by many other professional characteristics as well.

Negative associations are related to the price for all of the participants, except from wood industrialists – partly justifying my hypothesis; besides the maintenance and polishing

needs of wooden products mean a great disadvantage for many people. It was a problem for everyone, especially groups from Budapest, who don't like to spare time on it.

Other important issues are the anxiety over the quality of wooden products and the unknown characteristics of wood, which make a part of the consumers turn away from wood in the case of certain products (e.g. windows). These characteristics are damage done by insects, inflammability, warping, water sensitivity of certain surface treatment materials. There is help for these problems though, by adequate products and proper information, as every wooden product of a high quality has its own place. If not only the trade, but the consumer too, is well informed, then the circle of consumers purchasing wooden products is going to enrich with people loving as well as using wood for more and more purposes.

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