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Marketing strategies and the development of competitive positioning for telecommunications companies in KOLWEZI: A comparative analysis of Vodacom and airtel

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the marketing strategies and the development of competitive positioning among telecommunications companies in Kolwezi, DRC, through a comparative analysis of Vodacom and Airtel. It aims to understand how marketing practices contribute to brand visibility, brand differentiation, and consumers' perception of brand positioning. The research is based on a systemic and comparative approach, utilizing interviews, direct observation, literature review, and a quantitative survey conducted among 100 subscribers and 20 employees from both companies. The analysis focuses on three main dimensions: the components of competitive positioning, promotional practices, and the orientation of marketing services.

The results reveal that both operators use similar marketing tools, including media advertising, sales promotions, and customer relationship management systems. However, their strategic orientations differ. Vodacom stands out for the emphasis it places on brand visibility, event-based communication, and relationships with its target audiences.

This orientation is accompanied by a favorable perception of its leadership, as 94% of respondents consider the company a leader, compared to 78% for Airtel.

For its part, Airtel places greater emphasis on product knowledge and the use of the Internet as an information channel. Furthermore, the two operators show convergence in their promotional practices, with 70% of respondents from each network reporting that they had purchased a phone at a promotional price.

The study thus shows that competitive positioning does not depend solely on the variety of marketing tools employed, but above all on their combination, consistency, and strategic focus. It also highlights the importance of customer experience, brand recognition, and visibility in differentiating telecommunications companies. Ultimately, the coordination of marketing initiatives is an essential factor in building a distinctive competitive positioning in the Kolwezi market.

Key words: Marketing strategies; competitive positioning; telecommunications; marketing communication; brand differentiation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The rise of ICT has profoundly changed social practices and the relationships between organizations and their audiences; this evolution has been accompanied by a proliferation of telecommunications companies and a diversification of the products and services offered to consumers. Thus, companies are no longer merely expected to offer products or services; they must also build a recognizable identity, maintain a relationship with their audiences, and differentiate themselves from their competitors.

The development of digital technologies and changing consumer expectations compel companies to continually adapt their strategies in a competitive environment. Consequently, marketing has become a tool for understanding the market, identifying consumer needs, and developing offerings capable of meeting those needs. Lambin and de Moerloose (2008) describe marketing as a market-oriented approach that is not limited to sales functions but is part of a comprehensive strategy involving field analysis, understanding needs, and creating value. In the telecommunications sector in the DRC, which is far from being a homogeneous market marketing strategies thus become tools that enable companies to simultaneously influence their visibility, their customer relationships, and their market position.

Thus, we view the Kolwezi market as a space for strategic competition in which companies seek not only to win over consumers but also to occupy a specific place in their perception. Competitive positioning therefore emerges as a construct that goes beyond mere commercial presence. This aligns with the distinction made by Lambin and de Moerloose (2008) between strategic marketing and operational marketing. Strategic marketing involves market analysis, customer segmentation, and the definition of positioning, while operational marketing translates the chosen strategies into concrete actions, notably through the marketing mix.

The study of competition between VodaCom and Airtel cannot be limited to identifying the promotional activities carried out by these companies; it must also examine how these activities are structured, the meanings they convey to their audiences, and their contribution to the development of their competitive positioning. The central question guiding the analysis is as follows: How do the marketing strategies implemented by VodaCom and Airtel contribute to the construction of their competitive positioning in Kolwezi? This article aims to highlight, through a comparative approach, the main marketing strategies employed by the two operators and to analyze how these strategies relate to processes of visibility, differentiation, and positioning among target audiences.

2. RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework of this study is built around three pillars that provide insight into how telecommunications companies in Kolwezi build their competitive positioning. The first focuses on the relevant components through which positioning manifests itself to target audiences, notably customer relations, brand recognition, event-based communication, visibility, and the media; the second examines marketing and promotion as tools for market action; and the third explores the orientation of marketing services to understand the outcomes of companies' communication and marketing practices.

2.1. Components of Competitive Positioning

Positioning is a crucial aspect of strategic marketing. It refers to a company's desired level of recognition in the minds of its audiences relative to competing offerings.

Positioning is not based solely on the objective characteristics of a product or service; it also depends on how the company is identified, recognized, and evaluated by its audiences.

Lambin and de Moerloose (2008) identify as one of the fundamental decisions in strategic marketing, alongside market analysis, segmentation, and targeting. Positioning thus serves as a strategic direction that enables the company to seek a distinctive place in its market and to build a value proposition consistent with its customers' expectations.

2.1.1. The Customer Relationship

It is an integral part of the positioning process and refers to all interactions between the company and its customers before, during, and after the use of the service. This brings us back to the relational approach to marketing. Van Laethem (2005) presents marketing as a function that integrates the strategic, operational, and relational dimensions. Marketing, therefore, is not solely about attracting consumers; it also involves building and maintaining a relationship that fosters satisfaction and loyalty.

It is considering the above that we consider the customer relationship to be a component of positioning, because it constitutes a concrete space in which the customer experiences the company's promises.

2.1.2. Brand Recognition

It refers to the public's ability to identify a company based on various signs associated with it: name, logo, color, slogan, brand sound, products, communication materials, or other distinctive elements. The brand thus makes it possible to differentiate an offer from those of competitors. In a market where the services offered are similar, the signs associated with the brand become important distinguishing features.

Brand recognition, however, does not result from a single advertising message. It is built gradually through repeated exposure to the company's various symbols and through people's experiences with the company. Communication therefore helps make the brand identifiable, while interactions with the public help give it meaning. Brand recognition will therefore be considered in this study as an indicator of the company's symbolic presence in the competitive environment.

2.1.3. Event-Based Communication

Event-based communication is a form of communication that allows a company to establish more direct contact with its various audiences. It takes the form of cultural, sporting, artistic, or institutional events; games; contests; sponsorships; or other brand-related events.

Sanjaume and Caplier (2010) describe event-based communication as a means for organizations to create opportunities for encounter and interaction with their audiences. In this vein, the event is not merely a medium for conveying a message; it creates an experience centered on the brand.

This aspect is particularly relevant to building brand positioning. By associating its name with sporting, cultural, or social activities, a company can seek to foster certain perceptions among its audiences. The event then becomes a space in which the brand can express its personality, increase its visibility, and develop a sense of connection with its environment.

2.1.4. Visibility and the Media

Visibility refers to a company's ability to be present and recognizable in the public sphere. It is an important factor in brand awareness and contributes to building brand positioning. Visibility can also be defined as the range of methods that enable a company to raise its profile, particularly among its external audience.

Visibility can be achieved through various channels: television, radio, print media, billboards, the Internet, social media, events, and other communication platforms.

In this regard, the media play an important role in disseminating commercial and institutional messages. Media advertising makes it possible to reach a large number of people and maintain the brand's presence in the consumer's environment.

Visibility will therefore be considered in this study as an observable dimension of positioning, insofar as it allows for an assessment of the communicational presence of the two brands within their competitive environment.

2.2. Marketing and Promotion

The second pillar of the conceptual framework focuses on marketing and promotion. It helps us understand how companies seek to directly influence the market, particularly by stimulating demand, highlighting the value of their products, and encouraging the purchase or use of their services.

Lambin and de Moerloose (2008) distinguish between strategic marketing and operational marketing. Strategic

marketing primarily involves analyzing market needs, segmentation, targeting, and positioning, while operational marketing ensures the implementation of the chosen strategies through the various elements of the marketing mix.

This distinction helps us understand that promotion is an operational activity that must be embedded within a broader strategic framework. Companies do not promote their products in isolation; they do so to achieve specific objectives, such as acquiring new customers, increasing consumption, launching a new offering, or building customer loyalty.

Malaval (2002) pays particular attention to promotional techniques and their objectives. Sales promotion, in particular, can take various forms and be linked to sales activities, information, advice, or even public relations. It thus serves as a tool for directly influencing audience behavior.

Promotion must, however, be distinguished from marketing communication. While communication aims primarily to inform, persuade, and maintain the brand's presence in the minds of the public, promotion generally seeks to elicit a more immediate response by offering a benefit likely to stimulate demand.

2.3. The Focus of Marketing Departments

The third area concerns the orientation of marketing departments. This involves analyzing the objectives that companies assign to their marketing departments and how these reflect their strategic priorities. The marketing department may be oriented toward several objectives: increasing the company's visibility, raising awareness of products and services, stimulating sales, developing customer relationships, or contributing to brand image building.

This diversity aligns with the concept of marketing as a comprehensive corporate function. Van Laethem (2005) argues that the marketing function integrates strategic, operational, and relational dimensions. The marketing department cannot, therefore, be reduced to a sales function; it plays a role in market analysis, the design of marketing initiatives, and the relationship between the company and its stakeholders.

Lambin and de Moerloose (2008) also emphasize the importance of market and customer orientation. Marketing must thus enable the organization to understand its environment, identify consumer needs, and adapt its actions accordingly. The value of this dimension lies in linking organizational intentions and priorities to the visible manifestations of marketing strategies.

The orientation of marketing departments serves as an intermediate level between the company's overall strategy and observable actions in the market. It helps us understand what companies primarily seek to achieve through their marketing actions: visibility, product awareness, or sales performance.

3. Research Methodology

This study falls within the field of Information and Communication Sciences, with a focus on organizational communication and, more specifically, marketing communication. The fieldwork was conducted in the city of Kolwezi, where the two companies under study are located. The period covered by this study spans from 2025 to 2026. Two main methods were employed: systemic contextualization and comparative analysis.

Systemic contextualization allows us to understand companies as open systems whose actions are influenced by their relationships with customers, competitors, suppliers, the media, and the social environment. Comparative analysis, on the other hand, highlights the similarities and differences between the marketing practices of the two operators.

Three techniques were used: interviews, direct observation, and secondary research. Interviews were conducted to gather information from company managers and employees; observation allowed for the consideration of practices observable in the field; and secondary research served to supplement and contextualize the collected data.

The quantitative survey will focus on the customer bases of both companies, with a sample of 100 subscribers and 20 employees from the companies under study. The data will be presented in tabular form and interpreted from a comparative perspective.

4. Results

4.1 Components of Competitive Positioning

This section allows us to examine how the two companies have positioned themselves relative to the competition based on five dimensions we deem relevant: customer relations, brand recognition, event-based communication, visibility, and media.

Table 1: Components of Competitive Positioning

Components	Indicators / Measures	VodaCom	Airtel
Customer Relations: Welcome	Warm welcome	62%	53%
	Poor service	18%	7%
Customer Relations: Customer Service	Best solutions to problems	48%	46%
	Listening	31%	40%
	Promptness in responding	21%	14%
Brand recognition	SIM card	30%	38%
	Logo	22%	30%
	Color	10%	21%
	Sound identity	30%	6%
	Broadcasting	8%	4%
Event Communication	Miss VodaCom	40%	—
	VodaCom Super League	32%	—
	VodaCom Super Star	13%	—
	VodaCom Best of the Best	12%	—
	VodaCom Kata Dance	3%	—
Visibility / Communication Channels	Media	55%	65%
	Sponsorship	25%	10%
	Philanthropy	20%	25%
Information Channels	Radio	53%	49%
	Television	40%	27%
	Internet	7%	24%
Perceived positioning	Company perceived as a leader	94%	78%
	Company perceived as a challenger	6%	22%

Source: our 2026 survey

Overall, the results highlight relatively similar positioning profiles, though with differences in the strategies favored by the two companies. In terms of customer relations, VodaCom is perceived more favorably regarding customer service, while the two operators are closely matched in terms of customer service's ability to resolve subscribers' issues. Airtel stands out, however, with a higher proportion of respondents valuing its attentiveness to customers.

Brand recognition also reveals distinct profiles. At VodaCom, the SIM card and brand sound each play a significant role, whereas at Airtel, recognition is based primarily on the SIM card, logo, and color. Both operators therefore have identifiable distinctive features, but their hierarchy varies by brand.

In terms of communication, the media are the primary means of visibility for both companies, with a higher proportion at Airtel (65%) than at VodaCom (55%). VodaCom, on the other hand, places greater emphasis on sponsorship (25% versus 10% for Airtel), while Airtel places greater emphasis on philanthropy (25% versus 20%). Radio remains the primary information channel for both operators. Airtel stands out, however, for its reported greater use of the Internet as an information channel (24% compared to 7% for VodaCom).

Finally, the perceived positioning indicator reveals a clear advantage for Vodacom in the sample studied: 94% of respondents consider it the market leader, compared to 78% for Airtel. It should be noted, however, that this indicator reflects the respondents' perceptions and is not an objective measure of market share.

Taken as a whole, these results suggest that Vodacom builds its positioning more around visibility, its relationship with its audiences, and certain identity markers, while Airtel shows a stronger focus on media, visual brand recognition, and digital channels. The perceived difference in positioning between the two operators thus appears to be less related to the use of entirely different tools than to the combination and relative emphasis placed on these various marketing and communication levers.

4.2 Marketing and Promotion

The second area focuses on marketing practices directly aimed at stimulating demand and encouraging the purchase or use of services.

4.2.1 Vodacom's Promotional Practices

Vodacom employs several forms of promotion: top-up bonuses, usage bonuses, free samples, price discounts, games and contests, in-store promotions, and loyalty benefits. With regard for subscribers, 70% report having purchased a phone at a promotional price, compared to 8% who report having

received a gift after purchase and 22% who report having received nothing.

4.2.2 Airtel's Promotional Practices

Airtel also uses several promotional mechanisms, including usage bonuses, recharge bonuses, and daily activations. Examples include the 100% data bonus on certain prepaid cards and the "KANGA JOURNEE" offer.

Among subscribers, the results are very similar to those of Vodacom: 70% report having purchased a phone at a promotional price, 8% report having received a gift after purchase, and 22% report not having benefited from any specific promotion.

4.2.3 Strong Promotional Convergence

The comparison reveals virtually identical quantitative results regarding the purchase of phones at promotional prices: 70% for Vodacom and 70% for Airtel.

Promotions are therefore a common tool for competition. Both companies use pricing advantages, bonuses, gifts, contests, or special offers to influence consumer behavior.

The difference seems to lie more in the variety and form of the mechanisms used than in their very existence. VodaCom notably uses games and contests, free samples, in-store promotions, and various bonuses; Airtel notably relies on bonuses, daily activations, and Internet-related offers.

Marketing and promotion thus appear to be tools for customer acquisition and retention that bring the two companies closer together while allowing them to seek ways to differentiate themselves.

4.3 Focus of Marketing Departments

The third area allows for a comparison of the objectives that employees associate with their company's marketing department.

Three orientations were identified in the questionnaire: increasing the company's visibility, promoting the product, and selling the product.

4.3.1 Focus of the Marketing Department at VodaCom

The results show that, at VodaCom, 45% of the employees surveyed believe that the primary role of the marketing department is to increase the company's visibility. 35% associate it with raising awareness of the product, and 20% with selling the product.

Visibility is therefore the primary stated focus of the marketing department.

This finding is consistent with several previous results: strong brand recognition, the importance of the media, a strong presence at events, and a high perception of leadership among subscribers.

4.3.2 Focus of the Marketing Department at Airtel

At Airtel, the hierarchy is different. 50% of the employees surveyed believe that the marketing department's primary role is to raise awareness of the product. 30% associate it with increasing visibility, and 20% with product sales. Airtel's marketing department thus appears to be more focused on product communication than on corporate visibility.

This focus is also evident in the use of the website: 70% of employees surveyed believe the site is primarily used to promote the product, compared to 30% who associate it with providing information about the company.

4.3.3 Comparison of Approaches

A comparison between the two companies reveals a clear difference:

Table 2: Comparison of Marketing Priorities between Vodacom and Airtel

Marketing Department Focus	Vodacom	Airtel
Increase visibility	45%	30%
Raise awareness of the product	35%	50%
Sell the product	20%	20%
Total	100%	100%

Source: Our 2026 Survey

Product sales therefore account for the same proportion at both companies (20%). However, VodaCom shows a 15-point higher focus on visibility, while Airtel shows a 15-point higher focus on product knowledge.

This difference is one of the most interesting findings of the study. It suggests that, despite the proximity of the two operators in the same market, their marketing efforts do not appear to focus on the same primary objective. At VodaCom,

the emphasis is more on building the company's visibility; at Airtel, it is more on product awareness and promotion.

4.4 Comparative Summary of Results

An analysis of the three dimensions reveals a comparative profile of the two companies. Overall, the results show two strategic configurations that are similar but not identical. VodaCom is characterized more by a combination of visibility, brand recognition, customer relations, and non-media communication, while Airtel exhibits a relatively stronger focus on product knowledge and digital media, while still making extensive use of traditional media

5. Discussion of the Results

The objective of this study was to analyze how marketing strategies contribute to the development of VodaCom's and Airtel's competitive positioning in Kolwezi. The discussion of the results is organized around the three dimensions identified in the conceptual framework: the components of competitive positioning, marketing and promotion, and the orientation of marketing services.

5.1 The Components of Competitive Positioning: Between Customer Experience, Brand Recognition, and Visibility

The results first show that the competitive positioning of Vodacom and Airtel is built through several complementary dimensions, rather than through a single marketing tool. Customer relationships, brand recognition, event-based communication, and media visibility collectively contribute to how the two operators are identified and differentiated by their audiences.

This observation aligns with the marketing framework developed by Lambin and de Moerloose (2008), according to which positioning is a matter of strategic marketing and must be understood in relation to market analysis, targeting, and the choices made by the company. From this perspective, a company's position depends not only on what it offers, but also on how its offerings and identity are perceived in a competitive environment.

5.1.1 Customer Relations as a Differentiation Factor

The results regarding customer service show a more favorable perception of Vodacom than of Airtel: 80% of responses regarding Vodacom are favorable, compared to 60% for Airtel. This difference suggests that the customer relationship is a factor that may contribute to the differentiation between the two operators.

Perceptions of customer service reinforce this observation. At VodaCom, 48% of respondents highlight the customer service team's ability to find better solutions to subscribers' problems, compared to 31% for attentiveness and 21% for responsiveness. At Airtel, problem-solving also ranks first at 46%, followed by attentiveness at 40% and responsiveness at 14%.

The similarity in the results regarding problem-solving is significant. It indicates that both companies appear to be evaluated primarily on their ability to provide concrete solutions to subscribers' concerns. The difference is more evident in the perception of the overall customer experience than in the ranking of qualities attributed to customer service.

These results can be linked to the relational approach to marketing developed by Van Laethem (2005), according to which marketing is not limited to commercial acquisition but also involves a relational dimension. In the telecommunications sector, this dimension is particularly important since the customer maintains an ongoing relationship with the operator: network usage, top-ups, support, complaints, and use of various services.

The results thus allow us to consider the customer relationship as a concrete component of competitive positioning. They also show that, within the sample studied, VodaCom has a perceptual advantage in terms of customer service, while Airtel maintains a relatively favorable perception regarding its effectiveness in resolving problems.

5.1.2 Brand Recognition and Signs of Positioning

The results regarding recognition cues further reveal that the two brands are identified through different elements.

For Airtel, the SIM card is the primary recognition cue at 38%, followed by the logo at 30% and color at 21%. The sound identity accounts for 6% and the antenna for 4%.

For VodaCom, the results notably highlight the sound identity and the SIM card, each accounting for 30%, followed by the logo at 22%. This pattern shows that both brands have signs sufficiently established in the consumer environment to be spontaneously associated with their companies.

A brand is not just a trade name; it also functions through a set of signs that take on meaning in communication contexts. Boutaud and Veron (2007) emphasize, in this regard, the value of semiotics for analyzing communicational phenomena.

The difference between the two operators is thus noteworthy: Airtel is recognized more through visual and functional signs

primarily the SIM card, the logo, and the color while Vodacom exhibits a relatively more balanced recognition between functional and identity-based elements, particularly given the importance of its brand sound.

This means that both operators construct their symbolic presence through semiotic devices, but the hierarchy of signs mobilized by their audiences is not identical. Competitive positioning can thus be understood as a construction that is both commercial and symbolic.

5.1.3 Event-Based Communication, Visibility, and the Media

The results also show that event-based communication contributes to the brands' public presence. For VodaCom, respondents identified several events, notably Miss VodaCom and the VodaCom Super League. This presence is consistent with the company's stated practices, which involve leveraging the media, sponsorship, and philanthropy.

At VodaCom, the employees surveyed cited the media as the primary means of communication (55%), compared to 25% for sponsorship and 20% for philanthropy. Airtel presents a comparable pattern but with an even greater emphasis on the media: 65%, compared to 25% for philanthropy and 10% for sponsorship.

The predominance of the media indicates that both companies seek first and foremost to ensure wide dissemination of their messages. However, the difference in the distribution of communication channels suggests nuances in their visibility strategies: Vodacom places relatively more importance on sponsorship, while Airtel places greater emphasis on the media and philanthropy.

Data on information channels point in the same direction. Radio is the top channel for subscribers of both operators, with 53% for Vodacom and 49% for Airtel. Airtel stands out, however, with a higher proportion of respondents citing the Internet 24% compared to 7% for Vodacom.

These results show that, despite the growth of digital media, traditional media remain important in building the operators' visibility in Kolwezi. Radio retains a central role, likely due to its accessibility and its ability to reach a broad audience.

Brand positioning thus appears to be a cumulative process: the brand gains visibility through the media, builds connections with specific audiences through events and sponsorships, and then consolidates this presence through interactions with consumers.

5.2 Marketing and Promotion: Competition Based on Stimulating Demand

The second axis reveals a strong similarity in the promotional practices of the two companies. This convergence can be explained by the very nature of the telecommunications market: operators offer relatively comparable services and must regularly stimulate consumption, attract new subscribers, and retain existing ones.

This concept aligns with the marketing mix approach adopted in the theoretical framework. Promotion is one of the tools used to translate marketing strategies into concrete actions in the market. It aims to influence consumer behavior and support sales performance.

The results show that 70% of VodaCom respondents and 70% of Airtel respondents reported having purchased a phone at a promotional price. This similarity is significant: it reveals that both operators use promotional mechanisms capable of reaching a comparable proportion of their customer base.

Our observation aligns with Malaval's (2002) perspective, which views promotion as a set of techniques designed to influence public behavior and support the company's business objectives.

However, the results also suggest that the role of promotion in shaping brand positioning should be viewed in context. While both operators report the same 70% proportion of customers who purchased a phone at a promotional price, promotion alone is clearly insufficient to explain the difference in perceived positioning observed between the two brands.

In other words, promotion appears to be more of a common competitive tool than a sufficient factor for differentiation. Differentiation must therefore be sought in the interplay between promotion, customer relations, visibility, brand recognition, and other components of the marketing strategy.

5.3 The Focus of Marketing Departments: Two Different Strategic Priorities

The third area reveals the clearest difference between the two companies.

At VodaCom, 45% of the employees surveyed associate the marketing department's primary role with increasing the company's visibility, 35% with product knowledge, and 20% with product sales.

At Airtel, the order is partially reversed: 50% associate the marketing department with product awareness, 30% with increasing visibility, and 20% with product sales.

This difference is particularly interesting in that it reveals two distinct internal orientations. Vodacom appears to be more focused on building brand presence and visibility, whereas Airtel places greater priority on promoting and raising awareness of its products.

This distinction can be linked to the separation between strategic marketing and operational marketing proposed by Lambin and de Moerloose (2008). Strategic marketing primarily concerns the choice of positioning, while operational marketing translates these strategic directions into concrete actions aimed at the market.

The results show that both companies hold a strong position in the public's perception, but that this position is not of equal strength. The 16-point gap in favor of Vodacom suggests that the latter has a perceptual lead among the sample studied.

However, it would be an overstatement to interpret this gap as an objective measure of market share. The data measure respondents' perceptions, not the actual commercial performance of the two companies. Nevertheless, they demonstrate that VodaCom is perceived as more strongly associated with leadership among the surveyed group.

The marketing department's focus thus helps explain part of this difference. A strategy more oriented towards visibility can foster the brand's constant presence in the consumer's environment. Conversely, a focus more centered on product knowledge can enhance understanding and the appeal of offerings without necessarily producing the same effect on the overall perception of the brand.

The case of Airtel is particularly revealing. Its website is perceived by 70% of the employees surveyed as a tool intended primarily to promote products, compared to 30% who view it as a means of providing information about the company.

This focus reinforces the idea of marketing that is more centered on the offering and its promotion. However, it does not imply a lack of brand-building: Airtel is still perceived as a major company by 78% of respondents. It is therefore more a matter of a difference in strategic priorities than a contrast between two entirely distinct models.

5.4 Overall Perspective: Two Similar Positionings in the Same Competitive Landscape

Taken together, the results show that Vodacom and Airtel operate in a competitive landscape where marketing tools share many similarities, but where their combination produces distinct profiles.

Both companies use media, promotions, customer relationship initiatives, and visibility campaigns. They also enjoy high levels of brand recognition and are generally viewed favorably by their subscribers.

The difference lies primarily in how these various tools are integrated.

VodaCom's approach is more heavily weighted toward brand visibility, customer relations, and event-based communication, while Airtel stands out more for its focus on product knowledge and its relatively greater use of the Internet as an information channel.

This observation brings us back to systems theory: a company's positioning does not result from an isolated action, but from the interaction between various elements of the organizational system and its environment. The results obtained illustrate this logic: a brand's perceived position appears to be linked to the interaction between communication, promotion, customer relations, recognition cues, and the marketing department's focus.

The comparison also shows that competition does not necessarily mean that strategies are completely at odds with one another. Vodacom and Airtel use several of the same tools but assign different levels of importance to them. It is therefore not so much the existence of marketing tools as their combination and focuses that seem to contribute to the differentiation between the two brands.

CONCLUSION

This study focuses on the marketing strategies and the development of competitive positioning among telecommunications companies in Kolwezi. The study is structured around several dimensions, including customer relations, … media visibility, promotional practices, and the focus of marketing services.

The comparative analysis shows that the two operators operate within the same competitive landscape and, in many respects, employ similar tools. Promotions, media, customer relations, and visibility initiatives are common levers for acquiring and retaining subscribers. The strong convergence observed in

promotional practices notably shows the identical 70% proportion of respondents reporting that they had purchased a phone at a promotional price from each of the two operators shows that promotion serves more as a common competitive tool than as a sufficient factor for differentiation. Competitive differentiation must therefore be sought in the way these various levers are combined and directed.

The results, however, reveal distinct profiles. Vodacom appears to be characterized more by a strategy focused on brand visibility, customer relationships, event-based communication, and certain identity markers. This approach seems to contribute to a stronger perception of leadership: 94% of respondents consider Vodacom a market leader, compared to 78% for Airtel. This gap reflects Vodacom's perceptual lead among the samples studied, though it does not constitute an objective measure of market share. Airtel, for its part, stands out for its relatively stronger focus on product knowledge, visual brand elements, and the use of the Internet as an information channel.

This article also highlights the importance of consumer experience in building brand positioning. The customer relationship emerges as a concrete space in which the brand promise is experienced and evaluated. Similarly, brand recognition through the SIM card, logo, color, or brand sound demonstrates that positioning also relies on a set of elements that help embed brands durably in the consumer environment. Media and event visibility further reinforces this presence by creating repeated opportunities for contact between companies and their various audiences.

In response to the central question of this research "How do the marketing strategies implemented by Vodacom and Airtel contribute to building their competitive positioning in Kolwezi?" we can conclude that these strategies contribute to positioning by simultaneously influencing visibility, differentiation, brand recognition, customer relationships, and demand stimulation. However, their perceived effectiveness depends not only on their presence but, above all, on their coherence, their coordination, and the weight assigned to each of the levers employed.

We argue that the competition between Vodacom and Airtel in Kolwezi appears less as a clash between two entirely different marketing models and more as a contest between two relatively similar strategic approaches. Vodacom seems to prioritize building a strong and visible brand presence, while Airtel places greater emphasis on product knowledge and promotion, as well as on certain digital channels. This situation confirms that, in an environment where telecommunications offerings tend to be similar, a company's ability to build a distinctive identity, maintain a lasting relationship with its audiences, and effectively coordinate its marketing efforts is a major factor in its competitive positioning.

Finally, this study paves the way for future research that could deepen the analysis using additional indicators, including actual sales performance, market share, subscriber loyalty, the effectiveness of digital campaigns, and changes in consumer perceptions over time.

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