

Advertisers try to bridge Germany's consumer divide

Retailers in the east and west now stock similar products but old brand values can still hold sway, writes **Hugh Williamson**

At first glance, German consumers could be forgiven for believing that, at least in their shopping habits, their country has become fully unified.

Seventeen years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, earnings levels and political preferences may still vary between east and west, but the shelves of supermarkets in Düsseldorf and Dresden appear to be stocked with similar products.

Yet significant differences remain, with consumers in the two regions often filling their shopping baskets with different brands of products as basic to German households as coffee, beer, detergent and shampoo.

Few shoppers may notice the phenomenon, but consumer product companies certainly do. In particular, some companies successful in western Germany have been scratching their heads as to why their brands often have much lower market shares in the east.

The reason, according to Alexander Mackat, joint founder

in 1993 of Fritzsch & Mackat, a Berlin-based advertising agency focused on eastern Germany, is not just because of the trend towards "Ostalgie", nostalgia towards the former East Germany, which includes buying brands that date from communist times.

Rather, Mr Mackat, a 37-year-old easterner with 30 staff, believes eastern German consumers have different underlying values from western Germans and that these play a role in shopping decisions. He gives the example of marketing experts at Persil, who in 1997 came to his company to better understand why the washing powder was a top-seller in the west but not the east.

"We told them that the image [in Persil's west German advertising] of a beautiful but serious-minded housewife getting upset about tiny spots of dirt turned easterners off," he says. "Persil was seen in the east as an elite product for rich people."

An alternative proposal by his

company, using more emotional and ironic images, was eventually adapted and used Germany-wide by Persil.

Mr Mackat believes easterners have hung on to what sociologists see as Germany's "traditional values", such as community spirit, modesty and diligence, more firmly than westerners. They in turn from the late 1960s onwards switched

to more "modern values" such as individualism, creativity and adventure.

Yet such values are not static. Now, almost two decades after German unity, Mr Mackat has been keen to find out what "values mix", if any, is common to east and west. "Companies need Germany-wide advertising campaigns, but are unsure which values to focus on," he

says. Two years of research has produced a surprising result: western Germans are becoming more like their eastern cousins in their outlook on life.

Mr Mackat bases his finding, outlined this month in a book* published jointly with SuperIllu, an eastern German magazine, on academic studies of youth culture, interviews with marketing directors and tests with hundreds of consumers in Leipzig, Hamburg and elsewhere.

"The western values that dominated immediately after reunification are now being mixed with eastern values – the hedonism in much western advertising is more controlled," he says.

He cites dummy ads he drew up to test his theory, for instance for Lavazza, the Italian coffee. He found that an advertising image the company was using, which showed a highly-stylised model and man in chains, was seen by eastern consumers as artificially erotic and unreal, and by

westerners as exaggerated.

An alternative idea, showing an elderly man sucking a finger, had "pan-German appeal", Mr Mackat says, stirring positive reactions of authenticity and humour in both east and west.

Helmut Sailer, marketing vice-president for household goods at Bosch, the German appliances maker, says he had been impressed by Mr Mackat's work when the two met recently. "German advertising for engineering-based products is traditionally very cool and technical, so the degree to which emotional elements and community now play an important role even in the west was surprising," says Mr Sailer, who so far has not worked with Mr Mackat's agency.

"We have to be open to new trends, whether from east or west," he concludes.

* "Das Deutsch-Deutsche Geheimnis" [The inner German secret], Alexander Mackat, SuperIllu Verlag 2007.



Lavazza's 'artificially erotic' ad was changed for 'pan-German appeal'

