



# Associative and dissociative comparative advertising strategies in broadening brand positioning<sup>☆</sup>



Robert D. Jewell<sup>a,1</sup>, Christina Saenger<sup>b,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Kent State University, College of Business Administration, P.O. Box 5190, Kent, OH 44242, United States

<sup>b</sup> University of Tennessee Martin, College of Business & Global Affairs, 231 Lovelace St., Martin, TN 38238, United States

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## ABSTRACT

When marketplace dynamics prompt a familiar brand to change its positioning, consumers often meet such attempts with resistance. This research demonstrates how familiar brands can incorporate new attribute information into the brand's position via comparative advertising in order to broaden the brand's marketplace positioning. Study 1 shows how the use and nature of comparative advertising affects the ability of a familiar brand to broaden its positioning. Studies 2a and 2b demonstrate that a comparative advertising strategy that incorporates a specific sequencing of dissociative and associative comparative advertisements best broadens brand positioning.

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## 1. Introduction

The Midas Company, faced with a 15% sales decline in the exhaust replacement business due to longer-lasting original mufflers, changed its positioning from a singular focus on muffler replacement (“We install mufflers for a living. We have to do a better job”), to one that emphasizes a wide variety of auto repair services (“It's like a spa treatment for your car.” Halliday, 2000). More recently, KFC announced an attempt to alter its positioning due to growth in the fast-casual dining sector, slowdown in the firm's existing quick-service restaurant sector, and an attempt to appeal to younger consumers. The firm opened KFC eleven, an upmarket restaurant paying homage to its famous Original Recipe chicken but offering contemporary menu options and more sophisticated décor (Horowitz, 2013). These brief examples represent firms' efforts to broaden the positioning of their familiar brands. Broadening a familiar brand's positioning means associating the brand to new attribute information while retaining certain favorable associations to existing attributes. Broadening, rather than repositioning completely away from the existing positioning, allows a firm to maintain the desirable aspects of its positioning while contemporaneously addressing the changing marketplace conditions that rendered the original positioning ineffective.

In a dynamic marketplace, a firm must proactively manage brand position to retain its advantage (Park, Jaworski, & MacInnis, 1986; Punj &

Moon, 2002), which may require modifying the original positioning over time (Danneels, 2011; Kaul & Rao, 1995; Porter, 1996). However, broadening the positioning of a familiar brand can be a daunting task (Ellickson, Misra, & Nair, 2012). Over time, as the brand strengthens associations to the attributes that comprise its existing positioning, the familiar brand simultaneously precludes association to new attributes (Jewell & Unnava, 2003). Consumers may reject any new attribute association they perceive as incongruent with the familiar brand's existing positioning (Desai & Ratneshwar, 2003; Herr, Sherman, & Fazio, 1983).

The present work examines the extent to which a familiar brand can encourage the acceptance of new attribute information, thus broadening brand positioning. Specifically, this research considers how explicit contextual referents, such as those employed in comparative advertising, may facilitate the acceptance of new attribute information for a familiar brand. This work demonstrates the effectiveness of comparative versus noncomparative advertising in broadening the positioning of a familiar brand, and reveals that the nature of the comparative advertising matters. Further, this research shows that the broadening of brand positioning is best accomplished by establishing and strengthening the new brand-attribute association through a specific sequential comparative advertising campaign strategy.

## 2. Fostering brand-attribute associations for familiar versus new brands

The categorization perspective of brand memory asserts that consumers have schema-like structures in memory representing product categories (Cohen & Basu, 1987; Nedungadi, 1990). For a new brand, categorization can be straightforward; associating a new brand to

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\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 731 881 7354; fax: +1 731 881 7231.

E-mail addresses: [rjewell1@kent.edu](mailto:rjewell1@kent.edu) (R.D. Jewell), [csaenger@utm.edu](mailto:csaenger@utm.edu) (C. Saenger).

<sup>1</sup> Tel.: +1 330 672 1263; fax: +1 330 672 5006.

specific attributes is often a matter of resource matching and repetition (Anand & Sternthal, 1990).

However, from this perspective, it is not as easy to foster new brand-attribute associations when the brand is familiar. Consumers often think of familiar brands as exemplars of the product category in which they reside (Desai & Ratneshwar, 2003). As a result, attributes typical of the product category schema, at least in part, characterize the brand schema for a familiar brand (Broniarczyk & Alba, 1994; Desai & Ratneshwar, 2003; Pechmann & Ratneshwar, 1991), and these product category attributes are often the most accessible information available for consumer judgments about familiar brands (Meyvis & Janiszewski, 2004). When consumers consider associating a new attribute with a familiar brand, they evaluate the claim in the context of the product category attributes accessible in memory in order to judge the fit between the new and existing attribute information (Herr et al., 1983). As a result, consumers may reject a new brand-attribute association because of a lack of fit between the existing product category schema and the new attribute intended to broaden its position. Accepting the familiar brand's new attribute information when category attributes are accessible requires consumers to make a fundamental structural change to their product category schema, which would be cognitively onerous (Desai & Ratneshwar, 2003; Sujan & Bettman, 1989) and thus undesirable.

From a judgment process perspective, however, the contextual information that is accessible can either foster or hinder the association between a brand and new attribute information (Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1997). More specifically, contextual information acts as a referent by which consumers compare and evaluate a target item (Kim & Meyers-Levy, 2008; Schwarz & Bless, 2007; Stapel, Koomen, & Velthuisen, 1998). When consumers evaluate a new attribute claim about a familiar brand, product category attributes are likely to be the most accessible contextual information available in memory to judge the claim, and consumers may reject new brand-attribute linkages. However, if an explicit, external (i.e., non-memory based) contextual referent is accessible, judgments made relative to this contextual referent should differ from judgments made solely based on the product category attributes stored in memory. This line of reasoning suggests that marketers may have an opportunity to broaden the position of a familiar brand by making an explicit, external contextual referent available at encoding for consumers to access at judgment, rather than leaving consumers to access only their memory-based category schema. Thus, the judgment process perspective expands upon the categorization perspective by considering the differential and potentially beneficial effect of an external versus an internal referent in accepting new information into the positioning of the familiar brand.

### 3. Using comparative advertising to broaden familiar brand positioning

Comparative advertising is one tactic marketers can use to make a contextual referent accessible at encoding. In comparative advertising, the comparison brand serves as the contextual referent, and consumers judge the target brand, in part, based on a relative comparison to the comparison brand (Miniard, Rose, Manning, & Barone, 1998; Rose, Miniard, Barone, Manning, & Till, 1993). However, if a contextual referent can either foster or hinder brand-attribute associations (Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1997), the question becomes: will the nature of the comparative ad differentially affect acceptance of a familiar brand's broadening attribute?

A marketer has two basic options when selecting a comparison brand for a familiar brand that wants to broaden its positioning via comparative advertising. In the first alternative, the marketer selects a comparison brand from the brand's current product-type category and orients the ad to communicate the new attribute association as a point of distinction, referred to as a dissociative strategy. In the second alternative, the marketer selects a comparison brand from the product-type category associated with the new attribute, and communicates the new attribute association as a point of similarity, termed as an

associative strategy (Dröge & Darmon, 1987; Pechmann & Ratneshwar, 1991).

Earlier research documents enhanced association, or perceptions of similarity, between the target brand and the comparison brand as the primary effect of comparative advertising (Dröge & Darmon, 1987; Sujan & Dekleva, 1987), regardless of the type of comparative advertising employed (Gorn & Weinberg, 1984; Johnson & Horne, 1988; Pechmann & Ratneshwar, 1991). Support for this associative effect relies on the theory that comparative advertising reduces the psychological distance between brands (Dröge & Darmon, 1987; Gorn & Weinberg, 1984), which may be the result of a variety of heuristics; for example, marketers are comparing the brands because they are comparable, or brands always copy the leader (Pechmann & Ratneshwar, 1991). Such reduction in psychological distance can influence consumers to categorize the advertised brand into the comparison brand's product-type category and lead them to make category-based inferences about the common attributes of the brands (Johnson & Horne, 1988; Sujan & Dekleva, 1987; Walker, Swasy, & Rethans, 1986).

Therefore, if both associative and dissociative types of comparative advertising serve to reduce the psychological distance between the target and comparison brands, an associative strategy should be more effective for a familiar brand seeking to broaden its brand position. If so, the familiar brand should select a comparison brand from the product-type category that possesses the desired new broadening attribute and communicate the attribute as a point of similarity between the two brands. Further, a dissociative approach should not produce the desired broadening attribute association for the familiar brand. Selecting a comparison brand from the familiar brand's current product-type category should reinforce perceptions that the familiar and comparison brands both exist in the same product-type category, which does not possess the desired new broadening attribute, despite communicating the new attribute as a point of distinction for the familiar brand.

However, more recent research supports the ability of dissociative comparative advertising to differentiate between brands (Manning, Miniard, Barone, & Rose, 2001; Rose et al., 1993; Soscia, Girolamo, & Busacca, 2010). Support for this differentiation effect relies on evidence that consumers do not always use heuristics to simplify categorization in response to comparative advertising (e.g., Soscia et al., 2010). According to Manning et al. (2001), comparative advertising "explicitly encourage(s) consumers to adopt a relative encoding frame," (p. 30). The contextual referent should also enhance consumers' processing ability and comprehension (Moorman, 1990). Indeed, a growing body of research documents heightened differentiative thoughts and perceptions resulting from dissociative comparative advertising (e.g., Manning et al., 2001; Miniard et al., 1998; Walker et al., 1986).

However, the dissociative comparative advertising approach may not always result in differentiation. Soscia et al. (2010) report that dissociative comparative advertising can increase differentiation between target and comparison brands on a focal attribute when consumers perceive low pre-exposure differentiation between brands (i.e., when the target and comparison brands are perceived as similar), compared to brands with high perceived pre-exposure differentiation (i.e., when the target and comparison brands are perceived as different). When consumers initially perceive the target and comparison brands as different, as is the case in an associative comparative advertising approach, consumers may not need, and therefore may not use, the contextual information provided in the advertisement to evaluate the target brand (Soscia et al., 2010). Rather, they may rely instead on the memory-based category schema. As previously discussed, a memory-based contextual referent is not expected to effectively associate the familiar brand with new broadening attribute information, as the new attribute association is likely to be rejected due to incongruence with the product category attributes accessible in memory. A similar effect may occur when consumers' hold differentiated perceptions of the brands pre-exposure, suggesting that an associative comparative advertising approach may not be effective.

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