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Journal of Business Research 62 (2009) 432–440

JOURNAL OF BUSINESS RESEARCH

The effect of fit and dominance in cause marketing communications

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Received 30 April 2006; accepted 31 January 2008

Abstract

Consumer processing of cause marketing communications featuring a brand and a cause is investigated in the context of the communication format (perceived fit and dominance) on consumer attitudes and behavioral intentions. Two studies using different forms of communication, public service announcement (PSA) and cause-related marketing advertisement (CRM ad), are used to examine these effects. Findings suggest that both factors are important to consider in any joint communication. While high fit is critical for brands, dominance is shown to be important for both in joint communications.

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Keywords: Cause marketing; Advertising; Nonprofit; Brands

Business firms are increasingly linking their brands with causes/charities to achieve corporate and nonprofit objectives. Such relationships have been referred to as cause marketing or cause–brand alliances (Lafferty et al., 2004). Spending on such programs rose from $1.11 billion in 2005 to $1.35 billion in 2006 with increases being led by specialty retailers, banks, automakers, and non-alcoholic beverages (Watson, 2006).

Cause marketing communications feature a business's name/logo (referred to as brand) along with a nonprofit name/logo (referred to as cause) (Barone et al., 2000). The increasing corporate involvement with nonprofits makes it timely to understand and improve the effectiveness of such communications (Pracejus et al., 2003).

While previous research has examined the relationship between the brand and cause (Drumwright et al., 2000); the specific characteristics of the communication need more research attention. Hence, this study will investigate two key communication characteristics: perceived fit, the degree to which the brand and cause are perceived as compatible or congruent with each other (Pracejus and Olsen, 2004), and dominance, the relative emphasis given to brand/cause in a particular message. While perceived fit has been studied before, dominance is a new construct in cause marketing communication. These two factors determine the "which" (specific cause) and "how" (specific focus) of cause marketing messages. In summary, this paper addresses the following questions related to cause marketing messages:

- ➢ Should brands select causes with high versus low perceived fit as partners?
- ➢ Should brands or causes dominate, or should both have equal emphasis in the message?

1. Factors affecting consumer processing of cause marketing messages

Perceived fit has a significant effect on consumers with higher fit impacting choice and market share (Pracejus and Olsen, 2004). Fit has been studied in terms of product/cause and similarity of target markets with perceived fit being the compatibility/congruence between the brand and cause based on any meaningful association between them or their target markets (Drumwright et al., 2000).

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[1] The authors would like to acknowledge financial support from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

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doi:10.1016/j.jbusres.2008.01.039

Dominance is the degree to which a particular message (e.g., a CRM ad) differentially emphasizes the brand and/or the cause. Gestalt psychology suggests that when one part of a stimulus (figure) dominates, other parts (ground) recede into the background (the figure-ground effect) (Bigand et al., 2000). Consumers are expected to initially focus on the dominant part of the message and allow other parts to recede to the background. In an ad, if consumers perceive that the majority of the space, words, or images are devoted to the brand (cause), then it is brand (cause) dominant. Equal dominance exists when consumers perceive that neither the brand nor the cause is differentially emphasized.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Processing of cause–brand messages

Categorization and causal attribution approaches can be used to understand consumer responses to cause marketing as consumers are expected to draw inferences about a brands' motive for associating with a cause (Gooding and Kinicki, 1995). Many responses are partially based on consumers' perceptions of corporate motives such as internally (self-interested) or externally directed (public interested) or some combination (Stuart, 2004). It is important to note that the cause is typically perceived more favorably than the brand (Webb and Mohr, 1998). Also, cause marketing messages do not generally evoke elaboration, and consumers rely on heuristics to develop their perceptions of corporate motives (Menon and Kahn, 2003).

When consumers process a cause marketing message, their goal is to achieve a satisfactory level of understanding (Steenbergen and Lodge, 1998). When cause–brand fit is high, the message makes sense and consumers are expected to use category-based processing and attribute positive thoughts about the entities (Menon and Kahn, 2003). When fit is low, consumers are expected to use piecemeal processing as they find it difficult to connect the organizations in a logical manner, motivating effortful and systematic processing, and negative attributions. Consumers perceive the brand's motive to be driven by self-interest and so it is attributed a more negative disposition, especially when fit is low (Webb and Mohr, 1998). Since the cause is perceived as more altruistic, its motives are less suspect and consumers are less likely to attribute negative motives to it. Hence,

H1. Higher perceived fit between the brand and cause would lead to (a) more positive attitudes towards cause, (b) higher intent to volunteer/contribute, than low fit.

H2. Higher perceived fit between the brand and the cause would lead to (a) more positive attitudes towards the brand and (b) higher intent to purchase, than low fit.

2.2. Dominance

When viewing a brand dominant ad, research (Yasukochi and Sakaguchi, 2002) suggests that consumers initially focus on the dominant element (brand), and categorize it as a "regular brand ad." Next, consumers would perceive that the brand is partnered with a cause and infer the intentions of both and attribute dispositions to them (Shaver, 1983). Consumers may perceive that the brand is trying to help the cause and attribute positive thoughts towards it (Menon and Kahn, 2003). But if the brand is over-emphasized, consumers may perceive the brand as self-interested, leading to negative feelings towards the brand (Stuart, 2004). On balance, information integration theory suggests that consumers should have moderately positive feelings for the brand (Sanbonmatsu et al., 2003).

Corporate donations had an inverse relationship with perceptions of cause exploitation, with increased donations leading to greater appeal (Dahl and Lavack, 1995). Hence, limited emphasis on the cause in a message (e.g., brand dominance) could lead to negative attitudes towards the cause for allowing itself to be used by the brand (Webb and Mohr, 1998).

When the cause is dominant, consumers categorize it as a "cause ad" and attribute positive thoughts towards it. They are unlikely to question the motivation of the cause as the cause is *by nature* altruistic and the brand is *by nature* self-interested (Webb and Mohr, 1998). As the cause domination increases, consumers should perceive the brand support to be more authentic. Consumer attitudes towards the brand should also be positive for supporting the cause.

When neither brand nor cause is differentially emphasized, consumers may find it difficult to categorize it as a "regular" or "cause ad," and therefore are expected to use piecemeal processing. The brand's motivation would be ambiguous and consumer attributions will be least positive. Attributions towards the cause could also be less positive than the cause dominant condition, but higher than the brand dominant condition as the cause is emphasized more. Hence,

H3. (a) Attitude towards the cause, (b) intent to volunteer/contribute would be most positive for cause dominance and least positive for brand dominance; equal dominance should be more positive than brand dominance but less than cause dominance.

H4. (a) Attitude towards the brand, and (b) intent to purchase would be most positive for brand dominance and least positive for equal dominance; cause dominance should be more positive than equal dominance but less than brand dominance.

2.2.1. Dominance × fit interaction

When the brand is dominant, consumers are expected to initially categorize it as a "typical brand ad." Two things happen when they notice the cause: (1) perception of fit becomes important and (2) perception of the cause by itself and in combination with the brand affects processing.

When perceived fit is low, consumers are expected to use piecemeal processing to understand why the brand is associating with the cause (Meyers-Levy and Malaviya, 1999). The low fit and the minor role given to the cause should lead to the lowest favorability towards the cause (Dahl and Lavack, 1995). When perceived fit is high, consumers are expected to use category-based processing and have positive attitudes towards the cause (Menon and Kahn, 2003) moderated by the minor role given to

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