Does the Frame of a Comparative Ad Moderate the Effectiveness of Extrinsic Information Cues?
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Title: Does the Frame of a Comparative Ad Moderate the Effectiveness of Extrinsic Information Cues?  Authors: Anne Roggeveen, Babson College Dhruv Grewal, Babson College Jerry Gotlieb, Western Kentucky University  Short Abstract:This research investigates how framing moderates the use of message cues on performance risk evaluations. Understanding the moderating impact of frame is important from a theoretical perspective as frame is a critical contingency factor in how evaluations are formed. This research investigates whether framing affects the use of all extrinsic cues similarly, the effect of multiple extrinsic cues and the impact when extrinsic information is not explicitly provided. Evidence is provided that positively framed messages engender more thorough analysis of message cues than negatively framed messages and impact how extrinsic cues are used.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Comparative ads simultaneously communicate both positive information about the sponsor and negative information about the competition, and as a consequence could be framed in either a positive or negative fashion. When a comparative ad is negatively framed it focuses on the inferiority of the competitor and encourages consumers to think about potential losses they will incur as a result of using the competitor’s brand (e.g., “AT&T had over twice as many network outages as AT&T”). In contrast, when an ad is positively framed it focuses on the superiority of the sponsor and encourages consumers to think about their potential gains (e.g., “AT&T had less than half as many network outages as MCI”; Shiv, Edell, and Payne 1997). In both frames, the information content conveyed is the same; only the valence differs.

The valence difference caused by the message frame has a significant impact on consumer evaluations, preferences and choices. This has been demonstrated repeatedly in a variety of situations ranging from evaluations of ground beef to health related behaviors (see summary articles by Kuhberger 1998; Levin, Schneider and Gaeth 1998). Yet, despite the width and breath of this stream of research over the past 25 years, there is limited research into interactive effects of framing. The majority of the studies which do exist examine how factors moderate the effect of framing on outcomes (e.g., Maheswaran and Meyers-Levy 1990, Raghubir and Menon 2001, Shiv, Edell and Payne 1997). We only know of one study which has examined the moderation from the perspective of how framing moderates the effect of message cues (Grewal, Gotlieb, and Marmorstein 1994). That study suggests that the effectiveness of a new brand comparing itself to an established brand may be contingent upon the manner in which the message is framed.

The study found that when a comparative ad is framed positively (vs. negatively) people are less likely to use price in forming their evaluations of performance risk (Grewal, Gotlieb and Marmorstein 1994). Grewal, et al’s explanation for the moderating effect of framing flowed from Prospect Theory (Kahneman and Tversky 1979). They argued that consumers who are risk averse (e.g., exposed to a positively framed message) conduct a more thorough analysis of the available information prior to making a decision in order to ensure a well-thought out evaluation that minimizes risk. They went on to hypothesize that a consequence of this more thorough analysis is that consumers are less likely to be affected by a single extrinsic cue, such as price.

The importance of their finding is significant. If their result holds, it means that framing can moderate the effectiveness of information cues on consumers’ evaluations, preferences, and choices. As such, framing would be a critical contingency factor. Thus, understanding the moderating impact of frame is important from a theoretical perspective.

Although Grewal et al. provided initial evidence concerning the effects of message framing, the article tested only one extrinsic cue, and only alluded to the underlying process leading to the result. To have a more complete understanding of the moderating impact of framing, we extend Grewal et. al.’s paper in four critical ways—by (1) testing whether framing similarly affects the use of other extrinsic cues, (2) determining the effect when there are multiple extrinsic cues, (3) determining the effect when extrinsic information is not explicitly provided, and (4) providing process evidence for the results.

Three experimental studies are conducted. Study 1, which used 240 subjects, is a 2 × 2 × 2 between-subjects design which manipulates message framing (positive vs. negative), length of the product warranty in comparison with an industry standard (shorter vs. longer), and reputation of the retailer (strong vs. weak). Study 2 was 2 × 2 × 2 between-subjects design (n=186) which manipulated message framing (positive vs. negative), reputation of the retailer (strong vs. weak) and price (discount versus no discount). Using the reputation and price we manipulated the consistency/inconsistency of the extrinsic cues. Finally, study 3 (n=86) used a 2 × 2 between-subjects design with message framing (positive vs. negative) and whether the individual prices of the warranty and product were bundled (individual prices not provided) or unbundled (individual prices explicitly available) as the factors. In all studies, performance risk was the key dependent measure. Studies 1-2 also collected process data.

Findings indicate that Grewal et al.’s result replicates for retailer’s reputation, but consistent with our hypothesis, not warranty length. Findings also indicate that framing impacts whether consumers consider the consistency of the multiple extrinsic cues, as well as whether they consider if information is explicitly available or not. All results can be explained by the fact that positively framed messages engender more thorough analysis of message cues than negatively framed messages and impact how extrinsic cues are used. Process supports this conceptual underpinning.

REFERENCES


