Relatedness Vs. Similarity: the Role of Response Set Effects in Competitive Advertising

Yih Hwai Lee, National University of Singapore, Singapore
Elison Ai Ching Lim, University of Melbourne, Australia
Anish Nagpal, University of Melbourne, Australia

Past research on competitive advertising has generally focused on interference among similar stimuli and its subsequent negative effects on recall and attitude. Using response set theory, we propose that learning can actually be facilitated when consumers identify implicit categorical relations between competing ads. Specifically, we showed that ads containing related (vs. similar) product claims indeed produced better overall recall. Collectively, these results suggest the effectiveness of implicit retrieval cues in enhancing overall recall. Theoretical and managerial implications, along with directions for future research, conclude this paper.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/13037/volumes/ap07/AP-07

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
RELATEDNESS VS. SIMILARITY: THE ROLE OF RESPONSE SET EFFECTS IN COMPETITIVE ADVERTISING
Yih Hwai Lee, National University of Singapore
Elison Ai Ching Lim, University of Melbourne
Anish Nagpal, University of Melbourne

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Competitive interference, i.e., the notion that brand information recall is lower when a brand’s advertising occurs in the presence of competitive advertising (competing ads having similar ad content) than when the competitive advertising is absent (competing ads having dissimilar ad content), has been the focus of numerous studies for the past two decades (e.g., Burke and Srull 1988; Keller 1987, 1991; Jewell and Unnava 2003; Kumar 2000; Unnava and Sirdeshmukh 1994). Although, most of the research has focused on the damaging effects of competitive interference, Unnava and Sirdeshmukh (1994) suggest that variable encodings of stimulus information should result in multiple retrieval cues which should assist in the retrieval of information. Such variable encoding can occur when consumers see the same ad in different program contexts (Singh et al. 1992) or when the product is portrayed in different situational contexts by varying the ad executions (Unnava and Sirdeshmukh 1994).

In this research, we extend this notion of reducing the damaging effects of competitive interference and seek to uncover some conditions under which marketers can maneuver themselves out of the detrimental effects of inevitable clutter. Our research differs from the previous research in two aspects. First, whereas past research has focused on the recall of brand name and information of the target brand, we focus on the combined/overall recall of brand information for the target and competitive ads. Overall recall is important when firms manufacturing different products are interested in improving awareness of the overall brand name, rather than the awareness of a single product. Second, past research has typically used externally provided cues (e.g., headline from an ad) at the time of retrieval to reduce the damaging effect of competitive interference, we employ the response set theory as a basis to suggest that when appropriate retrieval cues are present at the time of encoding rather than retrieval, they offer ease of identifying the categorical relations between pieces of information, which in turn enhances recall (Garner and Whitman 1965). Applying this to the competitive advertising context, we propose that such retrieval cues may take the form of related ad content. Hence, we conjecture that response set effects are evoked when competing ads contain related (rather than similar or dissimilar) product claims, as observed from enhanced recall. Importantly, examining related, in addition to similar and dissimilar stimuli, fills a gap in interference research.

Response set theory (Bower, Thompson-Schill and Tulving 1994) proposes that predictive retrieval cues can be used to call up a small group of response words, thereby making them available for recall. For this to happen, a cue should be specific to the item to be recalled (Bower and Bolton 1969). In addition, an obvious rule relating a cue term to its response terms (e.g., ‘duck’ and ‘luck’) both end with ‘uck’) should be present and easily identified. In their experiments, Bower et al. (1994) used two main lists of items: the all-same list and the congruent list. The former constituted a list of items that belonged to the same type of material (e.g., all were two-digit numbers). These authors observed that higher levels of interference occurred because there was no specific response term for its category (i.e., an abundance of similar responses). In competitive advertising, similar ad content is likewise prone to higher levels of interference since they are possible responses during retrieval. In contrast, vastly different paired-lists should have no retrieval cue since there is no obvious relation between the response terms and the retrieval cue (e.g., pan, 45, sick, ball, W). This in turn corresponds to the notion of dissimilar ad stimuli in competitive advertising, where interference is negligible.

On the other hand, items in Bower et al.’s (1994) congruent list either belonged to the same form class (e.g. numbers with numbers, letters with letters) or had similar semantic structures (e.g. even numbers, rhyming words). Thus, the congruent list observes a systematic same-category rule, which serves as the retrieval cue (Underwood 1963). The form class of sets of response terms (e.g., two-digit numbers, alphabetical letters, and names of famous persons) acts as an important retrieval cue which provides an enormous boost in learning effects. Extending this notion to advertising, similarity in semantic structures may be replicated through ad content relatedness. For example, an ad may promote a car’s product benefits of “spaciousness” while another may advocate the related benefit of “child safety auto-lock.” These two benefit claims are conceivably linked by the cue term “good for family use.” Hence, competing ads related to each other by virtue of having similar semantic structures should facilitate easy identification of the relations between themselves, which in turn evoke response set effects. Related ad content in competing ads should therefore result in better learning compared to ads of similar or dissimilar ad content.

Results from our experiment indicated that there was no difference in the recall of information between ads portraying dissimilar versus similar ad content, in line with response set theory. However, ads portraying related content information led to a significantly higher overall recall compared to ads portraying similar information. Collectively, the results from the current study augment past interference findings by demonstrating that related content can actually enhance recall. These results supported the usage of similar semantics structure (i.e. related ad claims) as a retrieval cue, enabling the identification of an implicit relation associating the competing ads. Given that subjects were not explicitly cued or primed about how competing ads may be related, enhanced recall performance for ads containing related ad claims suggest that they were able to form associations between the two ads.

REFERENCES
Competitive Interference Can be Beneficial,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 30 (September), 283-291.


