Ironic Effects of Warnings

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We illustrate that warnings associated with products that promise alluring benefits, can ironically enhance distant appeals (e.g., future-related, or viewed-a-priori) of these products. Four studies consistently demonstrate this phenomenon, provide clues about its causes, and illustrate an effect on actual purchases. We conclude by discussing disconcerting implications of this effect.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

High profile ads promoting alluring benefits, such as pain relief or renewed sexual potency, often prominently and clearly warn of grave potential side effects (e.g., a stroke or cancer). Such warnings are presumably mandated by legislators or intended to preempt regulatory interventions. Disclosing potential risks associated with a product is expected to facilitate safer consumer choices, hurting attitudes toward the product. However, there are indications that warnings may not necessarily be effective.

Warnings can have positive associations, as including negative information in a message can enhance perceived truthfulness. We propose that warning effects may be better understood by taking into account time delays that often separate the behavior from exposure to the communication about it. We draw on construal level theory (CLT), whereby events and objects can be represented at different levels of construal. In the context of warnings, negative side-effects, which are secondary to the promised benefits, thus constitute lower-level construal of the warning; however, source trustworthiness, a general characteristic relating to the promised benefits, constitutes a higher-level construal of the warning. Temporal distance should therefore make side-effects less prominent and promised benefits and source trustworthiness more prominent.

Building on this reasoning we predict that from a proximal time perspective, presence of a warning should produce a standard warning effect, reducing interest in the behavior. In contrast, a message could benefit from presence of a warning from a distal time perspective, both prospectively (e.g., seeing the message earlier) and retrospectively (e.g., receiving the product later). We term this phenomenon ironic effect of warnings and test it in four studies.

In study 1, participants saw an ad for cigarettes with or without a severe warning. All were offered an opportunity to make an immediate purchase decision. Half were told that they will receive the product in the near future and the rest were told they will get the products in the distant future. As expected, in the presence (absence) of warning participants in the distant future condition bought more (less) packages than those under the near future condition.

Study 2 extended our findings to immediate and delayed judgements and to a different context. Participants saw an ad for artificial sweetener with or without a severe warning and were offered to buy the product either immediately or 2 weeks after seeing the ad. As expected, in the presence (absence) of a warning, participants in the delayed decision bought more (less) packages than those under the immediate condition.

In study 3, participants saw an ad for a hair loss medication product with or without a severe warning, and were asked for immediate or for delayed judgment. As predicted, we found that in the presence (absence) of a warning, participants evaluated the product more (less) highly in delayed versus immediate judgments. Moreover, in the presence of the warning, the ad was perceived as more trustworthy over time. However, without a warning, perceived ad trustworthiness was no different over time. Moderated mediation analyses revealed that, as predicted, ad-trustworthiness mediated the temporal effect under presence-of-warning but not under absence-of-warning.

Study 4 demonstrated the dual meaning of the warning. Its findings show that presence of a warning in an ad for ED medication leads to greater concerns under lower construal levels, but increases perceived trustworthiness of the company and the product perceived attractiveness under higher construal levels.

In addition, because using information encountered days earlier relies on long-term memory in addition to mental representation, readers may wonder what role memory played in our results. Memory research reinforces the CLT prediction—delayed recall entails more schematic information and meta-cognitive knowledge—associated with higher-level construal. Further supporting this point, in follow-up studies we explored recall of the ads used in studies 2 and 4 and found converging evidence that both prospectively and retrospectively participants recalled the information at higher level in the remote condition than in the proximate one.

In conclusion, we consistently show that describing risks associated with products promising alluring benefits, can enhance subsequent appeal of these products. Such consequences of warnings can have important and disturbing public policy implications. For example, adding warnings of smoking risks to cigarette ads may promote rather than curtail smoking. Interestingly, this effect may go undetected, since warnings improve product assessment only sometime after the ad was first viewed (when consumption decisions are likely) yet hurt product appeal soon after the ad was viewed (when regulators are likely to examine ad impact).