The Effect of Irrelevant Information on Consumer Irritation and Attitudes: the Moderating Role of Need to Evaluate
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT - Past research has investigated the effect of irrelevant information related to the advertised product on consumers' beliefs in the product's ability to deliver the desired benefit. The results suggest that irrelevant product information systematically weakens consumers' beliefs that the product will provide the desired benefit. An interesting question that follows is if the impact of brand related irrelevant information is considerable to the extent it may systematically weaken the impact of diagnostic information, then what would be the impact of non-brand related irrelevant information, as it is likely to be in the context of cross-selling? Is the impact of such irrelevant information negative to the extent that it causes irritation in consumers? Since irritation can have negative consequences, does such irrelevant information lead to negative reactions toward the focal product as well as the advertiser? The above questions assume importance when in an attempt to make additional sales, advertisers and salespeople frequently expose consumers to a substantial amount of information that may be irrelevant to the product under consideration.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Past research has investigated the effect of irrelevant information related to the advertised product on consumers’ beliefs in the product’s ability to deliver the desired benefit. The results suggest that irrelevant product information systematically weakens consumers’ beliefs that the product will provide the desired benefit. An interesting question that follows is if the impact of brand related irrelevant information is considerable to the extent it may systematically weaken the impact of diagnostic information, then what would be the impact of non-brand related irrelevant information, as it is likely to be in the context of cross-selling? Is the impact of such irrelevant information negative to the extent that it causes irritation in consumers? Since irritation can have negative consequences, does such irrelevant information lead to negative reactions toward the focal product as well as the advertiser? The above questions assume importance when—in an attempt to make additional sales—advertisers and salespeople frequently expose consumers to a substantial amount of information that may be irrelevant to the product under consideration.

The current paper explores consumers’ reactions to information that is irrelevant to the product offering itself, as is likely to happen in a cross-selling context. We posit that consumers are likely to be more irritated when they are exposed to descriptions and offers of products that are completely unrelated to the focal product (i.e., highly irrelevant information) than when these products are viewed as complementary to the focal product (i.e., less irrelevant information).

Based on excitation transfer theory and recency effects, it is suggested that the irritation elicited as a result of exposure to information that is not relevant to the focal product may negatively affect consumers’ attitudes toward the advertiser, the focal brand, and their purchase intentions. We further posit consumer irritation will be elicited in different degrees in consumers who differ in their propensity to evaluate information. In other words, the individual level variable—need to evaluate—will moderate the elicitation of irritation in consumers and its subsequent transfer to attitudes towards the advertiser and the advertised focal brand.

A 2 (nature of irrelevant information: highly irrelevant vs. less irrelevant) X 2 (need to evaluate: high vs. low) between-subjects design was used to test the proposed hypotheses. Seventy-two undergraduate students received course credit for participating in the experiment. Out of these, twenty-eight students were males and forty-four were females. The subjects were randomly assigned to the two conditions related to the nature of information: highly irrelevant vs. less irrelevant. Need to evaluate was a measured variable. The subjects completed a questionnaire which contained a scenario. The subjects were asked to imagine that they had called advertisers and salespeople frequently exposed consumers to a substantial amount of information that may be irrelevant to the product under consideration.

The results of this study show support for the moderating influence of consumers’ need to evaluate. Specifically, it was found that highly irrelevant information leads to higher levels of irritation and the effect is greater for consumers with a high need to evaluate than for consumers with a low need to evaluate. Consequently, consumers with a high need to evaluate displayed lower attitudes toward the advertiser and the focal brand, as well as lower intentions to purchase the focal brand compared to consumers with low need to evaluate. Finally as hypothesized, irritation is seen to completely mediate the effects of irrelevant information and need to evaluate on consumers’ attitudes toward the advertiser, the focal brand and their intentions to purchase.

Our study supports the excitation transfer theory in that consumers’ negative feelings such as irritation may be transferred to their subsequent judgments. This is because residual arousal, such as feelings of irritation from preceding emotional experiences or behaviors, may be carried over to subsequent experiences or behaviors. In addition, recency effects may also explain our findings. Since consumers were exposed to irrelevant information immediately before forming judgments of the advertiser and the advertised brand, it may be argued that this irrelevant information was more salient in the minds of the consumers. Overall, our findings suggest that irritation, an under-researched construct in marketing, may have serious and undesirable implications for consumer attitudes. Thus, it becomes critical to identify the causes of irritation in consumers from a theoretical as well as managerial point of view. Knowledge of factors that irritate consumers is critical since consumers are often exposed to cross-selling situations.

From a managerial point of view, our findings may be deemed as disturbing and problematic for advertisers or marketers involved in cross-selling. Our findings assume importance especially because advertisers and salespersons often attempt to increase their overall sales by offering products which may not be related to the focal product or to each other, thus increasing the likelihood of a negative response from the consumer. In addition, since our results indicate that the high need to evaluate individuals show higher irritation levels and unfavorable attitudes toward the advertiser, the focal brand, and intentions to purchase products, it is suggested here that advertisers and the researchers may consider need to evaluate and other such individual level variables to understand the differences in cognitive and affective processing.

References


