Attributional Processes During Product Failures – the Role of the Corporate Brand As Buffer

Sabine Einwiller, University of St. Gallen
Michaela Waenke, University of Basel
Andreas Herrmann, Jakub Samochowiec, University of St. Gallen, University of Basel

Information about product failures is expected to deteriorate brand attitudes. However, our research indicates that the harmful impact is attenuated if the responsibility for the failure can be assigned to a superordinate brand. We found a significant interaction between the favorability of product information and the strength by which a product brand is endorsed by a corporate brand. Negative information reduced attitudes towards the product brand but only when the product brand was not strongly endorsed by a corporate brand. These findings call for the incorporation of the corporate brand’s function as buffer into the models of brand architecture.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/12278/volumes/v33/NA-33

[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/.
like Puff Daddy wears that or like, this guy wears that.” Lastly, participants talk about themselves as being taken in by agent attempts at persuasion, terms such as “sucker” and “slave” come up repeatedly in interviews. For example, on Ecko, Jon notes how he “hopped on the bandwagon” and later, in talking about the prevalence of branded placements, he remarks “Oh clearly I’m a slave. [What do you mean?] Just cuz I am, know what I mean, you see a poster, a commercial, a radio show, you say ’I want to buy that’. I don’t know why.”

Closing
This paper shows how consumer target perceptions of brands as agents can be more complex and their responses less resistant than previous conceptualizations. Targets can perceive agents as representing, offering, reaching out, getting the word, and making do; and they can respond by defending, congratulating, choosing, and getting suckered. A sensible next step is to probe conditions that cultivate such beliefs.

References

Attributional Processes in the Case of Product Failures–The Role of the Corporate Brand as Buffer
Sabine Einwiller, University of St. Gallen
Michaela Waenke, University of Basel
Andreas Herrmann, University of St. Gallen
Jakub Samochowiec, University of Basel

A coherent brand architecture is to enhance impact, clarity, synergy, and leverage among a firm’s brands (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). Within this context, the organizing structure between the corporate brand and the product brands is of considerable interest for marketing and corporate management alike. Extending the ideas of what good brand architecture should do, we argue that a superordinate corporate brand can serve a buffer function by protecting its subordinate brands in case of a negative occurrence.

Attributional theorists argue that individuals attempt to develop a realistic understanding of the causes of events, such as why a product has failed (Folkes, 1984). Accordingly, people are inclined to find reasons why something negative has happened and who is responsible for the damage. We suggest that the brand architecture influences consumers’ judgment of responsibility (Weiner, 1995) by indicating the level of influence one brand has over another. The closer the endorsement by the corporate brand for the product brand, the closer the perceived influence of the former over the latter. A strong endorsement also indicates that the company guides the decisions and actions of the endorsed product brand, making the former partly responsible for the latter’s actions if things go wrong. Consequently, the corporate brand takes on some of the blame for mishaps and thereby attenuates the negative effects for the product brand.

H1: A strong (weak) endorsement of the product brand by the corporate brand leads to less (more) perceived responsibility of the product brand in case of a failure.

The deferred responsibility to the endorsing corporate entity prevents damage to the attitude toward the product brand. Judgment of responsibility serves as the mediating variable for the effect of brand endorsement on brand attitudes.

H2: A strong (weak) endorsement of the product brand by the corporate brand results in a less (more) negative attitude towards the product brand in case of a failure.
H3: The effect of brand endorsement on product brand attitude is mediated by a consumer’s judgment of responsibility.

We conducted two experiments to test our hypotheses. In study 1 we manipulated the endorsement of a product brand (strong vs weak endorsement) by a superordinate corporate brand to find support for hypothesis 1. In study 2 we tested hypotheses 2 and 3 by means of a 2 (brand endorsement: strong vs weak) x 2 (information valence: neutral vs negative) factorial design.
Results

The results of our first study which was conducted among 39 student subjects indicated that the strength of the corporate brand endorsement moderated the perceived responsibility in case of a product failure. Responsibility was judged on a scale from -5 (product brand completely responsible) to 5 (corporation completely responsible). The responsibility of the corporation for a failure by the product brand was judged significantly greater when the corporate endorser was prominently displayed in an advertisement than when it was hidden in the corner of the ad (mean_{endostrong}=-0.25, mean_{endoweak}=-1.88; F=4.1, p<.05). Further support came from the manipulation of the brand name similarity. The corporation was perceived more responsible when the corporate brand and product brand names were similar than when the brand names were different (mean_{endostrong}=-1.37, mean_{endoweak}=-3.59; F=6.3, p<.02).

In study 2 we presented 77 student subjects with an advertisement of a product brand for sporting goods and a fictitious news article. The advertisement served as the main manipulation of brand endorsement by either prominently displaying the corporate brand endorser or by hiding it in the corner of the ad. The news article reported either on flaws in products (broken zippers and faulty shock absorbers) or on a neutral event (brand presents its new collection) thereby manipulating the valence of the information. In the strong endorsement condition the corporate name was reinforced in the news article but not in the weak endorsement condition.

In support of hypothesis 2, we found a significant 2-way interaction of information valence and endorsement strength on the attitude toward the product brand (F=14.8, p<.001). The attitude toward the product brand was negatively affected by the failure story when the corporate brand endorsement was weak (mean_{negative}=2.8, mean_{neutral}=4.07). In the strong endorsement condition the corporate brand seemed to have worked as a buffer by taking on the responsibility for the failure (mean_{negative}=4.18, mean_{neutral}=4.10). Also, the product brand was perceived less responsible for the failure when the corporate endorsement was strong than when it was weak thereby replicating the findings from study 1 (mean_{endostrong}=0.22, mean_{endoweak}=-3.32; F=31.0, p<.001).

Mediational analyses (Baron & Kenny, 1986) suggest that judgment of responsibility served as a mediator of attitude towards the product brand. Brand endorsement was a significant predictor of brand attitude (p<.001) and brand endorsement predicted judgment of responsibility (p<.001). Regressing both, the potential mediator and the independent variable, on attitude, the impact of brand endorsement was attenuated (from p<.001 to p<.10).

Our findings extend the previous research on the role of superordinate brands. They raise new questions on how to incorporate the buffer role into the theoretical models of the effects of brand architecture and provide practical implications. Strengthening the corporate brand as is currently en vogue in marketing may provide an unforeseen benefit when it comes to coping with product failure.

References


Protection Motivation Theory—An Additive or a Multiplicative Model?

Magdalena Cismaru, University of Regina

Protection Motivation Theory (PMT) Variables

According to PMT, four factors influence the persuasiveness of health communications: vulnerability, severity, efficacy (response and self), and costs. Vulnerability refers to one’s subjective perception of the risk of contracting a condition or leaving a condition untreated. Severity refers to feelings concerning the seriousness of the condition. Response efficacy refers to the person’s belief that the recommended behaviors are effective in reducing or eliminating the danger. Self-efficacy refers to the person’s belief that he or she has the ability to perform the recommended behaviors. Finally, costs represent the sum of all barriers to engaging in the recommended behavior.

Variables’ Importance

All PMT variables were found to have an impact on persuasion, though not equally so. Indeed, the results of a meta-analytic review (Milne, Sheeran, and Orbell, 2000) show that costs and self-efficacy have the highest impact on persuasion measures.

Interactions Effects

Literature shows significant two-way interaction effects suggesting that costs influence the effect of self and response efficacy on persuasion measures, whereas self-efficacy and response-efficacy influence the effect of perceived vulnerability. Further, vulnerability was found to modify the effect of severity, whereas severity was shown to influence the effect of response efficacy.

Additive versus Multiplicative

There is disagreement among researchers as to whether the combined effect of PMT variables on persuasion follows a multiplicative model or an additive one. A multiplicative model assumes that no protection motivation would be aroused if the value of any of the components would be zero and expects a significant interaction effect among all variables. An additive relationship assumes that even when one of the predictor variables is 0, the persuasion could be different than zero and the combination of high levels of the variables produces the highest persuasion scores.