Advertising Claims About Search and Experiential Attributes and Their Effect on Post-Trial Evaluations of Functional Versus Hedonic Products

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This paper focuses on understanding the effects of pre-trial advertising claims on consumers’ post-trial evaluations. Drawing upon message claim and ad-trial literature, I hypothesize effects based on product type. For functional products, I expect search claims will generate more favorable post-trial evaluations than experiential claims, and objective claims will result in more favorable evaluations than subjective claims. For hedonic products, I expect experiential claims will generate more favorable post-trial evaluations than search claims, and subjective claims will result in more favorable evaluations than objective claims. I argue that product trial alone generates less favorable post-trial responses for both types of products.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/12438/volumes/v33/NA-33

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Low-motivation subjects were only told they would be asked to judge an advertisement; additionally, hi-motivation subjects were told they would have to explain the ad to another subject at a later time. Within the bilingual group, half the subjects were asked to make a conscious effort to think of the words in the ad in a language other than English.

Subjects were then exposed to an advertisement for a backpack which featured seven distinct attributes. Immediately after the exposure, subjects were asked to complete a standard attitude toward the ad scale, they were then asked to list all of the product information they could recall from the ad. This was followed by language usage, demographics, and product involvement questions and a measure of lexical activity.

One week later, subjects were asked to complete a conjoint task meant to assess their revealed preferences for a subset of the different product attributes presented in the stimulus advertisement.

It was hypothesized that bilingual subjects’ revealed preferences for certain product attributes would be more highly correlated with the attributes they recalled after exposure to the stimulus ad during week one, indicating that bilingual subjects had better recall for the attributes they preferred in the focal product category than monolinguals.

Through a series of binary logistic regressions, we regressed the relative importance of all attributes on the likelihood that a given attribute was recalled. We expected to find more and higher significant betas corresponding to our dependent attribute for bilinguals than monolinguals.

Examination of the data revealed sampling problems related to self reported language proficiencies by American bilingual subjects; however, tests on a small sub-sample of international bilinguals yielded strong directional support for the hypothesized effects.

Future studies will be conducted with subjects whose language proficiency can be objectively assessed; specifically, individuals enrolled in English as a Second Language programs.

References

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Introduction
Advertising and product trial are often used by companies to encourage consumers to buy their products. One focus of ad-trial research has been on type of attribute information provided by advertising versus trial. A key finding is that product trial provides maximum information relative to experiential attributes (e.g., taste, speed, softness); whereas advertising provides maximum information for search attributes (e.g., price, ingredients, calorie content) (Wright and Lynch 1995).

Several researchers have speculated that other factors are important in the ad-trial experience. In particular, Devi and Ang (2001) argue that advertising can more effectively communicate products’ hedonic dimensions, and product trial can more effectively communicate the utilitarian dimensions. Additionally, research indicates that message claims affect advertising’s degree of effectiveness (see Darley and Smith 1993; Edell and Staelin 1983; Ford, Smith, and Swasy 1990; Holbrook 1978), and in the context of trial, the extent to which a claim provides more objective versus more subjective information may be important.

To-date, no ad-trial research has examined the effect of advertising claims on post-trial evaluations. Specifically, the objective of this study is to investigate whether objective versus subjective pre-trial advertising claims about experiential versus search product attributes differentially affect consumers’ post-trial perceptions of a functional versus a hedonic product.
Background Literature

The Integrated Information Response Model

The Integrated Information Response Model (Smith and Swinyard 1982) provides an insightful framework in understanding the processing of advertising and trial experience. IIRM states that an advertisement because it is provided by a source with a vested interest will be met with resistance by consumers, generating weak beliefs about the advertised brand. These weak beliefs coupled with weak affect lack sufficient expected value to create brand preferences; only upon trial can these weaker beliefs be transformed to stronger beliefs and affect, and result in commitment to the brand.

Although advertising may be less effective in generating stronger belief strength and belief confidence, it may still play a significant role in product evaluation. In his two-stage model of advertising effect, Deighton (1984) argued that advertising arouses expectations. Therefore, even though consumers may indicate that they do not believe in the ad claims, they store the message and (subconsciously) form a tentative hypothesis regarding the product, which is then assessed during product trial.

In the context of advertisement and product trial effects for highly diagnostic products, I argue that the processing related to the IIRM is dependent upon product type (hedonic vs. functional), type of attribute information (experiential vs. search) and claim objectivity (objective vs. subjective).

Hypotheses Development

Functional products are those that fulfill utilitarian needs (Babin, Darden, and Griffin 1994; Engel, Blackwell, and Miniard 1993), and the utilitarian value of a product is decided objectively. Using the expectancy value model, several studies investigating functional products have demonstrated that objective claims, as opposed to subjective claims, generate more positive expected values, are more credible (Ford, Smith, and Swasy 1990; Holbrook 1978), and generate higher purchase intentions (Darley and Smith 1993). Further, Ford et al. (1990), by cross-classifying claim objectivity (objective/subjective) with attribute type (search/experiential attributes), indicate that in the context of functional products: (1) consumers are least skeptical of advertising claims about search attributes expressed in objective terms (e.g., “Buy this product for only $4.99”); (2) consumers become more skeptical of subjective claims about search attributes (“Buy this product at an extremely low price”), which are relatively ambiguous; (3) consumers are even more skeptical of objective claims about experiential attributes (e.g., “[…] carpeting will not mildew or rot for at least three years”); (4) consumers are most skeptical of objective claims about experiential attributes (e.g., “this auto service treats you fairly time after time”). Further, because belief confidence is a function of the amount of information the individual has available to form a judgment of relevant attributes (Peterson and Pitz 1988), search attribute claims have the potential to generate more confidently held trial-based brand beliefs than trial alone.

The hedonic value of a product is decided upon the ability to provide feelings or hedonic pleasure. Hirschman (1980) defines hedonic consumption as consumer behavior that is related to sensual, fantastic, and sensitive experience with a product. As argued by Hopkinson and Pujari (1999, 273), “the unrestricted imagination is controlled ultimately by the participant, hedonism creates the opportunity for the individual dream” and experiential attributes, as opposed to search attributes, may facilitate imagination. For instance, when shopping for perfumes, trial by giving away scented cards does not effectively communicate the fantasy and imagination attributes associated with a perfume. Perfumes do not just sell the fragrance. They also sell beauty, image, dreams, and fantasy, which are more effectively communicated through advertising’s experiential attribute claims than through trial (Dewi and Ang 2001).

With regard to claim objectivity for the experiential attribute information, the subjective claims should generate more positive consumers’ responses than objective claims in the context of hedonic products. In fact, research indicates that subjective claims may be more effective than objective claims for value-expressive products (Park and Young 1986) or other hedonic products like perfume or stylish clothes. However, for the search attribute advertisement, I do not expect a significant difference between the objective and the subjective ads in the post-trial responses they generate, because the search attributes, by definition, are pragmatic and do not allow the customer to imagine experiencing the product. Finally, trial alone should generate the least positive post-trial responses because it neither “prepares” the customer for the experience that is about to occur, nor does it provide additional information (i.e., search attribute information) to increase consumers’ beliefs in their evaluations.

Conclusions

This paper develops the theoretical foundation and hypotheses related to the effect of pre-trial advertising messages (i.e., objective versus subjective claims about search or experiential attributes) on subsequent trial experience. This study provides practical insights for advertisers in formulating specific advertising claims for functional versus hedonic products, when advertising precedes a sampling campaign.

References