The Moderating Effect of Brand Commitment on Consumer Response to Logo Shape Redesign

Michael Walsh, University of West Virginia
Vikas Mittal, University of Pittsburgh
Karen Page, University of Pittsburgh

Consumers can have strong reactions to brand logo redesigns. We posit that reaction to change in roundness of logo shape is moderated by consumer brand commitment. Results from two experimental studies indicate that consumers who are strongly committed to a brand have a more negative attitude toward the brand following exposure to the redesigned brand logo. Conversely, consumers less committed to a brand have a more positive attitude toward the brand. Furthermore, logo evaluation provides additional insight into the processes underlying these results.

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Michael F. Walsh, West Virginia University, USA
Vikas Mittal, University of Pittsburgh, USA
Karen L. Page, University of Pittsburgh, USA

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
In a given year, one in 50 companies will change its name and logo for a variety of reasons (Speath 1990). Logos may need to be changed due to changes in the company name, adoption of new strategies, reorganizations or novelty. Not all logo changes are embraced by a brand’s customers. In 2003, Apple Computer announced a change to their logo from a monochromatically red color to a brushed silver hue. Within hours of Apple’s announcement, there were over 200 signatures on an online petition demanding a return to the old logo treatment (Kahney 2003). On the other hand, Pepsi’s 1991 logo change was accepted by consumers with little resistance. These examples of logo change beg the obvious question, why are some logo changes met with consumer resistance and others are not?

Our research explores this issue, specifically consumer response to one aspect of logo redesign: shape. Past logo research has developed a typology of logo elements and examined how some of these elements (such as color) affect underlying brand attitudes. However, consumer brand attitude in response to logo redesign has not been addressed by researchers (Henderson and Cote 1998, Gorn, Chattopodhyay, Yi and Dahl 1997, and Tavassoli 2001).

Brand commitment has been shown to play a critical role in determining resistance to various actions such as brand transgressions and outside attacks on the brand. The more committed an individual is toward a brand, the more likely they will resist information that attacks that brand (Ahuwalia, Unnava, and Burnkrant 2000). When faced with negative information regarding a brand, consumers committed to the brand counter-argued negative information about the brand (Ahuwalia, Unnava, and Burnkrant 2000). Consumers who counterargue negative information are defense motivated (Ratneshwar and Chaiken 1991), defined as the use of heuristics to protect vested interests, attitudinal commitments, or other preferences (Koslow 2002). Thus a strongly committed consumer of a brand, because of defense motivation, is more likely to resist information that attacks or undermines the meaning of the brand. This counter-argumentation occurs to protect one’s brand, which defines their self-image. What occurs when committed consumers are faced with a change to a core element of their self-defining brand’s meaning—brand logo (Bennett 1995)? Changes to a logo have the potential of changing the meaning of the brand to a consumer, which may impact the consumer’s self-image.

We posit that reaction to change in logo shape is a function of the degree of change (from incremental to considerable) and the level of commitment (from strong to weak) a consumer has towards the underlying brand. Two experimental studies featured modified brand logos and measured consumer response to the redesign and consumer commitment to the underlying brand. Study one used athletic shoes as stimuli and study two featured brands of bottled water. The second study was designed to extend generalizability by replicating the effects in study one for brands from another product category. Study two also considered a number of potential covariates and tested a mediation hypothesis (defined and discussed as part of study two).

In these studies, we find that consumers who are strongly committed to a brand have a more negative attitude toward the brand (as logo redesign increases) whereas consumers less committed to a brand will have a more positive attitude toward the brand. Additionally, in Study 2 we find that logo evaluation mediates the moderating effect of brand commitment on brand attitude.

We believe this research makes several contributions to brand commitment and brand management literature as well as to the practices of brand managers. First, brand commitment has been found to have several positive benefits to brands, such as counter arguing negative information (Ahuwalia, Unnava, and Burnkrant 2000) or minimizing brand dilution (Ahuwalia, Unnava, and Burnkrant 2001). However, this research indicates that changes to logo design can result in a more negative brand attitude for strongly committed consumers than for weakly committed consumers. Second, this research indicates that logo redesign can significantly impact brand attitude even when there are only incremental changes to logo shape. Therefore, brand management research should give more attention to the effects of changes in brand logos on brand attitude and evaluation and those factors that influence the reaction to these brand dimensions. Third, these findings have substantial implications for brand managers. Specifically, brand managers should recognize that their loyal customers may have the strongest reaction to changes in brand logo redesign, and it is not a positive response. To avoid alienating committed customers brand managers should consider the response of their customers, both strongly and weakly committed, prior to making such changes.

REFERENCES