Broadening Perceptions of Familiar Brands

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When changes in the market reveal the need for a well-defined brand to broaden its consumer perceptions, such attempts are often met with resistance. This research examines how a well-defined brand can encourage the assimilation of discrepant information into the brand meaning via comparative advertising. We propose that the comparison brand acts as a referent, facilitating the development of associations between the advertised brand and new attributes. Further, we argue that the characteristics associated with the comparison brand will moderate the ability of a brand to expand its meaning via comparative advertising.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

When changes in the market reveal the need for a well-defined brand to broaden its consumer perceptions, such attempts are often met with resistance. Perceptions of well-defined brands are typically strongly held, inhibiting the ability of a brand to broaden perceptions when faced with changes in the market, such as shifts in consumer preferences or flat revenues. This research examines how a well-defined brand can encourage the assimilation of discrepant information into the brand meaning via comparative advertising. We propose that the comparison brand acts as a referent, facilitating the development of associations between the advertised brand and new attribute information. Further, we argue that the characteristics associated with the comparison brand will moderate the ability of a brand to expand its meaning via comparative advertising.

It is generally accepted that brands are stored as concept nodes and are defined based on linkages to category-relevant attributes (Nedungadi 1990). To broaden perceptions of a brand, links to new attributes must be established. One way to establish these links is to make salient relevant context cues (Meyers-Levy and Tybout 1997); when context cues become accessible, the evaluation of an item is not only derived from the characteristics of the item, but also from the interaction of the characteristics of the item and the context in which the item is evaluated (Meyer and Johnson 1995). Thus, employing a context cue or referent should facilitate consumers’ interpretation of the extent to which a brand is associated with new attributes; however, a brand-attribute link will be rejected for a brand attempting to associate with a product-class category that is inconsistent with existing brand linkages. Well-defined brands are constrained by strong associations to existing product-type attributes; the association of new information is likely to be resisted due to the high level of discrepancy between the new information and the existing associations. Combining new information with a contextual cue that dissociates the brand from, but still ties to, membership in, its existing product type, should result in relative acceptance of the new attribute information.

Comparative advertising is often used in marketing to make a context cue salient. The comparison brand serves as a reference point by which the new claim of the advertised brand is, in part, judged. When selecting a comparison brand, a competitor may be chosen from either the brand’s current product-type category, or from the product-type category of the new attribute information. When comparing a brand to a competitor in its existing product class category, the advertisement communicates points of distinction of the brand from that competitive group (i.e., a dissociative strategy). When comparing a brand to a competitor in the product-type category of the new attribute information, points of similarity between the brands are emphasized (i.e., an associative strategy).

When communicating the link between a brand and a new attribute from a different product-type category with a noncomparative advertisement, we expect the highly discrepant attribute information to be rejected due to its inconsistency with current perceptions of the brand (cf. Meyers-Levy and Sternthal 1993); the development of the link would be met with resistance. In a dissociative comparative advertisement, however, we expect that the reference point increases the likelihood that the link will be developed between the brand and the new attribute information because the comparison brand has links to the current product-type category, providing a schema-consistent reference point that makes the link between the advertised brand and new attribute seem less discrepant. In an associative comparative advertisement, this tempering of the new claim is not expected. The associative reference point should amplify the discrepancy between the advertised brand and the new attribute information because the advertised brand would be compared to two referents from a different product-type category: both the attribute and the competitor from the new product-type category.

We hypothesized that a dissociative comparative advertising strategy would be more effective in broadening perceptions of a well-defined brand than both an associative strategy and a noncomparative strategy, and that there would be no difference between the associative and noncomparative strategies. Further, we hypothesized that an associative strategy would result in evaluations that are more consistent with the current product-type category than would a dissociative or noncomparative strategy. Results of our first study confirmed that the use of a reference point facilitates the broadening of the meaning of a brand, and that the nature of the reference point (dissociative or associative) matters. Further, results of the associative strategy showed that associative comparative advertising strengthens the association to the existing product-type category.

While the dissociative comparative advertising strategy proved successful in our first study, it may have a significant weakness. Repeated encoding of dissociative information may strengthen the linkages of the advertised brand to the existing product-type category due to repeated activation of the schema-consistent reference point as the comparison brand. Thus, we proposed that a comparative advertising approach combining both dissociative and associative strategies will be successful, over time, in pushing the brand away from the existing product-type category and pulling the brand toward the new product-type category. We hypothesized that this combination approach would be more effective than a purely-dissociative approach, and that the dissociative approach would be perceived as more consistent with current product-type category attributes than the combination strategy. Results confirmed that context cues from multiple product-type categories were more effective in broadening perceptions, and that multiple exposures to context cues from the current product-type category reinforce the existing meaning of a brand.

The present paper contributes to the comparative advertising literature by demonstrating how comparative advertising can be used to broaden perceptions of a well-defined, existing brand. Previous research on comparative advertising has focused on the effects of a comparison brand on perceptions of new or unfamiliar brands, where the process of assimilation is fairly straightforward. This paper examines the impact of existing linkages on the acceptance of new information and provides a framework through which a well-defined brand may broaden the way it is defined in the marketplace.

REFERENCES


