Sequencing Promotion and Prevention Features: the Moderating Role of Regulatory Focus

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We show that mixing the promotion and prevention features of a brand (i.e., presenting them alternatively) instead of blocking them (i.e., presenting all promotion features first or last) increases the brand’s perceived variety among both promotion and prevention-focused consumers, but the difference in liking between the mixed and blocked feature sequences is higher among promotion-focused consumers relative to prevention-focused consumers. We suggest that the enhanced variety perception gives the impression that the brand is a change from the status-quo, and the desire for change fits better with the advancement goals of promotion-focused consumers.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Consider a recent advertisement for Crest Pro-Health toothpaste highlighting seven brand benefits: preventing cavities, preventing tartar, whitening teeth, freshening breath, preventing sensitivity, preventing gingivitis, and preventing plaque (http://www.crest.com/prohealth/). Since the brand lists more prevention features (i.e., information focusing on avoiding negative outcomes) than promotion features (i.e., information focusing on achieving positive outcomes; Aaker and Lee, 2001), it is likely to appeal more to prevention-focused consumers as opposed to promotion-focused consumers (Higgins 1997). However, the advertisement also uses a mixed sequence to present the information (alternating between promotion and prevention features) instead of blocking them (presenting all prevention features before all promotion features, or vice versa). We claim that a mixed sequence might appear less organized than a blocked sequence, a sense of disorganization that could increase the perception that the brand offers more variety (Kahn and Wansink 2004). Moreover, should the enhanced variety perception give the impression that the toothpaste is a change from the status quo, the mixed sequence should appeal more to promotion-focused as opposed to prevention-focused consumers (Chernev 2004). This is because the desire for change fits better with the advancement goals of promotion-focused consumers than the security and safety goals of prevention-focused consumers.

In Study 1, sixty undergraduate students (26 females), from a large university in the northeast, read that the makers of a new brand of toothpaste, positioned on two promotion features (fresh breath and white teeth) and two prevention features (plaque buildup and tooth cavity), were investigating three different methods of ordering the features in their advertisements. The mixed sequence alternated between the promotion and prevention features. The two blocked sequences put the two promotion features either first, or last. We asked participants which sequence maximized the perception that the brand offers a variety of features. Thereafter, the participants completed the Regulatory Focus Questionnaire (RFQ; Higgins et al. 2001) that contained six promotion items (e.g., I feel like I have been successful in making progress toward being successful in my life) and five prevention items (e.g., Not being careful enough has gotten me into trouble at times; reverse scaled). Seventy percent of our participants (42/60) reported that the mixed sequence maximized feature variety (z=3.10, p<.01). We classified each participant as either promotion-focused (average promotion score-average prevention score>0) or prevention-focused (difference score<0; see Higgins et al. 2001) and examined the feature variety perceptions of the two groups. Seventy-one percent (21/31) of the promotion-focused participants thought the mixed sequence offered more variety (than the two other blocked sequences), and 68% (13/19) of the prevention focused participants thought likewise.

In Study 2, we tested whether a mixed presentation of promotion and prevention features led to superior brand evaluation relative to a blocked presentation of the same features, and whether the favorable assessment was stronger among promotion as opposed to prevention-focused consumers. One-hundred-eighteen undergraduate students (77 females) participated in the study. We randomly assigned the participants into one of two regulatory focus conditions. Following the procedure outlined by Higgins and others (1994), we asked participants in the promotion-focused (prevention-focused) conditions to write a brief essay about their hopes and aspirations (duties and obligations), at present as well as five years from now. After participants had completed their essays, we directed them to a different task where they read that a toothpaste manufacturer was conducting a market survey to find out what consumers thought about the four different features of their brand. The selected features were identical to Study 1. To mimic a sequence, we presented the four features, one page at a time. The mixed sequences alternated between a promotion feature and a prevention feature or between a promotion feature and a promotion feature. The blocked sequences presented all the promotion features first or last. After reading about each feature, the participants evaluated the feature on two 7-point scales (very attractive/very unattractive, very important/very unimportant), and then turned the page to read about the next feature. After the participants had read and evaluated all four features, they evaluated the brand on a 100-point (Best/Worst) scale (see Escalas 2007, for a similar scale).

The attractiveness/importance ratings of the features were sufficiently correlated (α=0.75) to merit creating a composite weight measure for the promotion and prevention features. We modeled brand evaluation as a function of all main and interaction effects of regulatory focus (promotion, prevention) sequence (mixed, blocked), prevention-feature weights, and promotion-feature weights. We controlled for gender (males, females), and the felt intensity of the prime (the number of words written by the participants in their essays) by treating these as covariates in the model. On the average, the brand received higher evaluation when the features were mixed (M=89.19) than blocked (M=80.37; F(1,98)=4.99, p<0.05). The sequence main effect was qualified by regulatory focus (F(1,98)=5.33, p<0.05). Promotion-focused participants gave higher brand evaluation when the features were mixed (M=90.93) than blocked (M=78.50; F(1,98)=7.99, p<0.01). The prevention-focused participants gave marginally higher brand evaluation when the features were mixed (M=87.83) than blocked (M=82.39), but the difference was not statistically significant.

Our results hold both theoretical and practical significance. From a theory perspective, to the best of our knowledge this is the first attempt to connect the concept of regulatory focus to information sequencing, and therefore adds to previous research on self-regulation in different contexts (Brockner et al. 2002, Chernev 2004, Liberman et al. 1999). From a managerial perspective, given that marketers often cannot customize their appeals to the promotion-focused and prevention-focused target segments (e.g., one Crest Pro-Health advertisement targeted to both promotion-focused and prevention-focused segments), it would make sense to include both promotion as well as prevention appeals in their communications. However, to get the maximum impact out of such mixed advertisements, our results show that marketers would need to use a mixed (alternating) feature sequence.

REFERENCE


