The Role of Alternative Causes and Disabling Conditions on Consumers’ Acceptance of Product Claims.

Elise Chandon, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, USA

Chris Janiszewski, University of Florida, USA

The believability of a product claim depends on the consumer’s ability to generate disabling conditions (i.e., other events that could block a cause from having its effect) and alternative causes (i.e., other events that could cause the outcome). Framing a product as the solution to a problem versus as a way to prevent a problem influences a consumer’s ability to generate disabling conditions and alternative causes. Hence, certain types of arguments are more or less supportive of claims made about products that solve problems versus prevent problems.

[to cite]:


[url]:

http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/14331/volumes/v36/NA-36

[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.
EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Causal conditional reasoning involves making inferences on the basis of an “if p then q” statement (i.e., a conditional premise), where p is the antecedent (i.e., cause) and q is the consequent (i.e., effect). In the field of marketing, product claims often take the form of a conditional premise. The goal of advertisers is to convince consumers that brands are a “true” cause of beneficial effects. For instance, Crest toothpaste uses the slogan Crest fights cavities in an attempt to persuade potential customers that if they use Crest toothpaste, they will not develop cavities.

Product claims can be formulated in many different ways. First, product claims can either focus on the presence (i.e., usage) or absence (i.e., non-usage) of the brand and the resulting impact on the effect. Second, ad claims can lead with the cause (e.g., Pantene Pro-V: For hair so healthy it shines) or the effect (e.g., How do you spell relief: R-O-L-A-I-D-S). Manipulating these two variables (usage or non-usage of the brand and presentation order) offers four possible ways to express a product claim. Examples of product claims that fit into each of these classifications (see Table).

Prior research investigating a person’s willingness to accept a causal claim has focused on two types of counterarguments (Cummins 1995; Cummins et al. 1991; Dieussaert, Schaeken, and D’Ydewalle 2002): the availability of alternatives causes and the availability of disabling conditions. An alternative cause is a possible cause that can generate the effect and a disabling condition is a situation which prevents the effect from happening despite the presence of the cause. A person’s ability to think of disabling conditions can make a claim less believable. For example, knowing that people with high sugar diets are more likely to have cavities may decrease a person’s willingness to believe that Crest prevents cavities. The presence of disabling conditions cast doubt on the sufficiency of the cause (e.g., using Crest). Second, the person’s ability to think of alternative causes can make a claim less believable. For example, knowing that good oral hygiene also prevents cavities may reduce a person’s willingness to believe that Crest prevents cavities. The presence of alternative causes casts doubt on the necessity of the cause.

We contend that the persuasiveness of a product claim will depend on the accessibility and diagnosticity (e.g., Feldman and Lynch 1988; Wyer and Hartwick 1980) of disabling conditions and alternative causes. Experiment 1 investigates the diagnosticity of disabling conditions or alternative causes for assessing the believability of a conditional premise. We ask participants to read a conditional premise, to list disabling conditions or alternative causes on the believability of a causal claim. We show that a claim framed as achieving a gain is more believable in a MP argument format (e.g., “If you use a deodorant soap, then you will remove body odor.”) than a DA argument format (e.g., “If you do not use a deodorant soap, then you will not remove body odor.”). In contrast, a claim framed as preventing a loss is more believable in a DA argument format (e.g., “If you do not use a deodorant soap, then you will not prevent body odor.”) than a MP argument format (e.g., “If you use a deodorant soap, then you will prevent body odor.”).

The results show a complex, but predictable, pattern of acceptance of product claims depending on the claim frame and the argument format. Most importantly, the results show that one argument format (i.e., MT) is not universally the best argument type. It is also interesting to note that a number of existing product claims are being stated in a manner that limits their acceptance.

REFERENCES


TABLE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conditional Premise</th>
<th>Product Claim</th>
<th>Argument Format</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cause, therefore effect</td>
<td><em>Pantene Pro-V: For Hair So Healthy It Shines</em></td>
<td>Modus Ponens (MP)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not effect, therefore not cause</td>
<td><em>If it is not trail rated, it is not a Jeep 4x4</em></td>
<td>Modus Tollens (MT)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effect, therefore cause</td>
<td><em>How do you spell relief: R-O-L-A-I-D-S</em></td>
<td>Affirmation of the Consequent (AC)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not cause, therefore not effect</td>
<td><em>If you haven’t relaxed on a French Quarter balcony, you haven’t lived yet</em></td>
<td>Denial of the Antecedent (DA)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>