A Demonstration of the Influence of Advertising on Brand Choice

J. Edward Russo, Cornell University, USA
Anne-Sophie Chaxel, Cornell University, USA

We propose one way that advertising can influence brand choice. A superior TV commercial creates an initial preference for its brand over a competitor. During a choice this early preference is reinforced by the biased evaluation of new information to support the leading brand. In an experiment, the superior of two award-winning commercials installed its brand as the initial preference for most participants. The subsequent choice process exhibited greater information bias, more final choice of that brand, and greater confidence in that choice. This study shows not only that advertising can influence choice but how it can do so.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/14959/volumes/v37/NA-37

[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/.
A Demonstration of the Influence of Advertising on Brand Choice
J. Edward Russo, Cornell University, USA
Anne-Sophie Chaxel, Cornell University, USA

Advertising influences brand choice (e.g., Mehta, Chen, & Narasimhan, 2008). This is true even for TV commercials that rely mainly on conveying a positive feeling about the brand. Although there is general agreement that such commercials can influence brand choice, there is much less agreement on how they do it. That lack of agreement may reflect the existence of several different ways that commercials succeed, each with its own process through which the viewing of the commercial influences a subsequent brand choice. The purpose of the present work is to demonstrate one such process.

That process requires two steps. First, an effective commercial must install its brand as the initial leader in a choice against a competing brand. This should be straightforward so long as the commercial for the targeted brand is superior to a commercial for the competitor. Not all viewers may see the selected commercial as superior, but it should install its brand as the initial leader for a substantial majority of them.

The second step relies on a phenomenon that occurs during the subsequent product choice. As new information is received, its evaluation tends to be biased toward supporting whichever alternative is currently leading in overall preference (Russo, Meloy and Medvec, 1998). If the superior commercial makes its brand the initial leader, then the distortion of new information during the choice process should enable it to remain in the lead and emerge as the chosen brand for a majority of consumers. Information distortion (ID) is, by now, a well established “predecision” bias (see Brownstein, 2003, for a review). It is frequently observed, difficult to eliminate (Meloy, Russo and Miller, 2006), and quite systematic, increasing linearly with the strength of preference for one option over the other (Russo et al., 1998).

In an experiment, participants were asked to imagine having to decide between two Caribbean resorts for their next vacation. They might see a commercial for each resort, possibly on their websites or on a travel-oriented TV channel. This constitutes Step 1 of our process. Then they might use the internet, books or friends to gather information on several attributes of these two resorts, such as their activities and amenities. This is Step 2.

To track the commercials’ influence on each attribute to the eventual brand choice, we used a method known as the stepwise evolution of preference (SEP; Meloy and Russo, 2004). This method requires participants to provide three responses after they have read each product attribute. The first is an evaluation of the attribute. This response is the basis of the measurement of ID. Second, participants are asked which brand they prefer at this point in the process, knowing that more information is coming. This response identifies the current leader. Finally, participants are asked for their confidence in this current leader. This third response captures the strength of their preference for the identified leader. If the superior commercial succeeds in installing its brand for a substantial majority of viewers and if ID is sufficient to preserve enough of that majority in the face of subsequent information, then the targeted brand should be chosen by a majority of participants.

A between-participant design included one experimental and one control condition. In the experimental condition, participants were shown two commercials before they saw five descriptive product attributes and made their choice of resort. A pretest showed one of the commercials (Club Zephyr) to be superior to the other (Club Helios). Neither commercial was designed to convey product information, at least explicitly. None of the five attributes favored one brand over the other (i.e., they were all written and pretested to be “neutral”). In the control group, participants saw no commercials. Their brand choice provided a baseline level of both choice proportion and ID against which the levels observed in the commercial condition could be compared.

Results confirmed our hypothesized process. First, the superior commercial did install Club Zephyr as the initial leader for a clear majority of viewers (80%). In contrast, the control group who saw the first attribute but neither commercial divided their initial preference evenly between the two resorts (50%). Second, enough of the initial effect of the commercials was preserved to enable a significant final preference for the brand with the superior commercial (76%). Third, further analysis demonstrated that the commercial for Club Zephyr resulted in a relatively large mean ID (M = 1.25) in the evaluation of information to favor this Club. In comparison, the benchmark level of ID from the control group was only .33. We also computed the confidence in the final choice in each of the two conditions. The greater ID in the advertising condition should have led its participants to be more confident (on a scale from 50 to 100). Confirming this expectation, participants in the advertising group were reliably more confident in their final choice (M = .83) than those in the control group (M = .76). Thus, participants in the commercial condition were more convinced of their choice than participants in the no-advertising condition. This occurred despite there being little information in the advertisement condition and little directional information in any of the five attributes (which were pretested to be neutral).

These results provide one answer to the question: How might advertising influence consumer choice? We showed that a superior commercial can succeed in influencing brand choice by first installing the advertised brand as the initial leader and then letting the subsequent ID help maintain that leadership throughout a subsequent brand choice process. Thus, our findings reveal one specific process through which an advertisement can influence product choice.

References