A Meta-Analysis on the Effectiveness of Publicity Versus Advertising

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This meta-analysis provides an answer to the question whether and when publicity (versus advertising) is more or less effective. Results show that the credibility effect of publicity is on average about twice as strong as the effect of recipients’ exposure to negative information. This effect, however, holds only for products, where recipients lack prior knowledge.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This study tries to provide an answer to the question whether and when publicity (versus advertising) is more or less effective. For this purpose, we investigate the trade-off between enhanced credibility effects (due to third-party endorsement) and negative effects of recipients’ exposure to negative information (due to lack of control over media content by the advertiser) by means of a meta-analysis.

Three models are applied in the literature to explain the effects of publicity versus advertising. The source credibility model shows that highly credible sources are viewed as more trustworthy and generate more attitude change than low-credibility sources. The information processing model assumes that intentional exposure to news and publicity enhances the number of cognitive responses. Publicity, compared to advertising, also lends greater salience to information. Enhanced information processability can produce positive responses towards the message and the product being evaluated. The information evaluation model assumes that publicity in comparison to advertising will not only lead to enhanced processing, it is also likely that the increase is higher for negative than for positive information. Negative information is also more salient. That leads to more thorough processing of negative information than positive information, which directly impacts object evaluation.

The literature search for the meta-analysis covered the period from 1971 (the publication year of a study that is considered the first empirical study on the topic) up to and including 2009. Only studies that investigated the impact of marketing-oriented publicity versus advertising on recipients concerning the following dependent variables were considered: attitude towards message, attitude towards brand, cognitive responses (total, positive, and negative), message processing, purchase/behavioral intention, source credibility, recall, and recognition. This search resulted in 30 independent samples with 257 effect sizes that could be included in the meta-analysis. The effect size metric selected for the analysis is the correlation coefficient; higher values of the coefficient indicate a stronger effect of marketing-oriented publicity over advertising on outcome variables. The meta-analytic integration procedures were performed taking a random-effects perspective. The integration of the correlations uses variance weights in order to consider the varying sample sizes of the studies. Furthermore, measurement errors were corrected by considering reliability coefficients of the dependent and independent variables. Weights for multiple measures were considered as well. Study moderator variables are used as predictors in a regression model in order to explain the heterogeneity of the effect sizes of dependent variables that are based on a sample of at least twenty effect sizes. Furthermore, a structural model analysis was performed. The suggested models include seven variables in total. That is, 28 off-diagonal cells have to be filled in order to produce the input of the correlation matrix for structural equation modeling. Hence, in addition to the results of the effect size integration, the studies were searched for further statistical measures reporting the relationship between the dependent variables.

The meta-analytic results show that marketing-oriented publicity (compared to advertising) has a positive effect on all dependent variables. The structural models show an acceptable fit. All coefficients are significant and indicate the assumed direction in the models. That is, marketing-oriented publicity versus advertising enhances source credibility, total, positive, and negative cognitive responses. Both source credibility and total cognitive responses enhance attitude towards message, which enhances attitude towards brand. Positive cognitive responses enhance and negative cognitive responses reduce attitude towards brand. Attitude towards brand enhances purchase/behavioral intention. The total effects show that the source credibility path explains most of the variance in the dependent variables brand attitudes and purchase/behavioral intention; the effect is about twice as strong as the effect of the information evaluation model, and about five times as strong as the total effect of the information processing model. The moderator model showed that the effect of publicity versus advertising on positive cognitions and on source credibility decreases significantly for known versus unknown products. If we replace the coefficients in the model with the coefficients for the subgroups of known versus unknown products, the results indicate a moderator effect. For unknown products, the total effects become stronger. For known products, however, the total effects become negative with the negativity effect increasing and the source credibility effect even reversing due to a superior effect of advertising over marketing-oriented publicity.

The results of the meta-analysis support the effect of publicity over advertising that is due to a source credibility effect, an information processing effect, and an information evaluation effect. While the last effect is an overall negative effect, both other paths show a positive effect, with the source credibility effect being about twice as strong as the negative effect due to evaluation of negative information. The results show that the trade-off between credibility and control is in favor of the credibility of the source. This effect is moderated by prior product knowledge, though. The described relationship holds and even becomes stronger for unknown products. However, the effect changes for known products where the total effect of the source on dependent variables becomes even negative. These results show that marketing-oriented publicity versus advertising is superior for products where consumers lack prior knowledge. Indeed, most studies that have investigated and supported the positive effects of media coverage refer to product innovations, product pre-announcements, or products with which most consumers are not yet familiar. The meta-analytic results further contribute to the research on the negativity effect as triggered by publicity, because they support this effect but also show that an overall evaluation of publicity effects needs to take different effect paths into account in order to produce an overall effect on consumers. By introducing prior knowledge as an important moderator for the negativity effect, the findings show that the negativity effect can be outweighed by a positive source credibility effect in case consumers do not yet know a product.