Revealing an Advertising Myth: How Supportive Is Editorial Support?

Claas Christian Germelmann, Saarland University, Germany
Andrea Groeppel-Klein, Saarland University, Germany

Does editorial support support advertisements? Based on quasi-biotic instead of forced exposure designs we found no positive effect on ABrand, but a significant negative effect on AAd two weeks after the experiment. When media involvement is low and cognitive elaboration on manipulative intent unlikely, editorial support hurts ABrand significantly.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
In public relations and marketing, positive media articles about companies or brands are considered to be “gold standard”. Yet, other than what has been learned from anecdotal evidence, little is known about their success with consumers. In two experimental studies we thus focus on two critical questions:

Does coupling positive news stories with advertisements leverage ad memory and attitudes toward the advertised brand?

Could coupling advertisements and editorial content actually backfire and damage brand and/or media brand image?

Research on Effects of Editorial Content on Brands in Consumer Research
Positive news stories about companies or brands are often deemed to be more effective in influencing attitudes than advertisements (Jo 2004; Putrevu 2005; Çelebi 2007). This has been explained by the higher credibility of editorial content due to a lack of “manipulative intent” (Hallahan 1999). Only a few studies deal explicitly with ads and editorial content about a brand in the same medium. Loda and Coleman (2005) and Micu (2005) tested whether sequencing of the same message presented either as an ad or as news has an impact on persuasion. Both established mildly positive effects of supporting ads with positive news stories. However, the studies lacked realistic contexts and relied solely on forced exposure procedures in which subjects were asked to examine the stimulus material closely and didn’t have the chance to avoid exposure altogether.

Repetition and “Memory Trace Refreshment” Effects on Brand Recall

From the perspective of memory research, coupling means repeating a brand message. Information that is perceived successively from two different sources (ad and news), and thus in two different contexts, leaves more “memory traces” to facilitate retrieval than information presented in only one context. Thus:

H1: If a positive editorial report about a brand appears in the same medium as an advertisement for the brand (“article/advertisement coupling”), consumers’ recall of the brand will be higher than if the editorial report were to appear alone.

Effects of Supporting Ads with News Stories on $A_{brand}$

The mere exposure effect suggests that repeated exposure should lead to a more positive attitude toward the object (Zajonc 1968). Familiarity of the message is increased by repetition in both ad and news story, and coupling multiple sources leads to a “truth effect” (Roggeveen and Johar 2002). Based on these theories, a positive effect on $A_{brand}$ could be hypothesized.

Expecting a positive effect is based on the assumption that consumers do not notice the connection between a news story and an ad at all (due to typical low-involvement situations). If consumers do consciously notice the connection, or if they just feel that there might be manipulative intent behind the editorial support, a negative effect can be hypothesized. Friestad and Wright (1994; 1995) posited that consumers possess knowledge about persuasion strategies used in advertising. The use of such knowledge typically requires cognitive processing of messages. However, even when consumers are not willing or able to elaborate on persuasive messages, it is possible that they would unconsciously draw on former experiences of perceived manipulation by editorial support. Such “tacit” knowledge about manipulative or covert ad strategies can work as a readily available quick heuristic that could alarm consumers to intended manipulation. MacKenzie and Lutz (1989) pointed to the fact that, in low-involvement situations, an attitude can be shaped not only by the features offered but also by the advertising context. However, we focus first on $A_{brand}$ since we are interested in natural exposure situations in which $A_{brand}$ may not be the best indicator of immediate ad effectiveness (Coulter and Punj 1999). Weighing all arguments, we find stronger theoretical bases for a negative effect of couplings:

H2: If a positive news story about a brand appears in the same medium as an advertisement for the brand, consumers’ attitudes toward the brand will be more negative than if the news story were to stand alone.

The Persistence of Editorial Support Effects Over Time

Most studies on persistence of attitudes are based on the sleeper effect, positing that negative evaluations caused by the message source (in our case, the coupling of ad and news story) can phase out over time. However, two critical conditions for such an effect are not met here: the discounting cue “editorial support”, from which consumers could gather possible vested interests, is not conveyed beforehand, and the ability or motivation to think about the message and its context is usually low in standard media exposure situations. In such low-involvement situations, a second contact with the brand by way of supportive editorial support (e.g., in the course of a second survey), which was evaluated negatively after the first contact, could even trigger a reinstatement effect which could intensify the negative affective reaction to the ad itself and to the brand. Thus:

H3: If a positive news story about a brand appears in the same medium as an advertisement for the brand, after two weeks, consumers’ attitudes toward the brand and to the ad will be more negative than if the news story were to stand alone.

The Problem of Realistic Experimental Designs in Advertising Research

Experimental designs in advertising and media research differ from natural settings in two ways. In the first place, the stimuli often lack realistic contexts. Secondly, the typical paradigm in experimental advertising effectiveness research uses forced exposure, and this creates a risk that consumers start hypothesis-guessing and potentially adapt their behavior accordingly. Forced exposure provides no opportunity for non-selection of the medium, thus ruling out ad avoidance and making ad and ad context processing generally more likely than in biotic media contact situations (Schuman and Thorson 1990). Consequently, in a pretest, we tested for the effects of exposure in experimental research on editorial support by comparing forced exposure with quasi-biotic exposure (where consumers know that they take part in a study but they are not informed that the stimuli are part of the design).

Key Findings

Our two studies show that news stories consistently do not improve the impact of ads on brand image. On the contrary, over time, the image of $A_{brand}$ deteriorates due to the coupling, and H3
finds support. When consumers’ active involvement with the medium is low, A_{brand} deteriorates if the ad receives editorial support (H2 is supported). Thus, we presume to have observed a peripheral or heuristic process to be at work. In both studies we found a positive effect of coupling ad and news story on recall, thus confirming H1. However, the second study shows that this result can also be achieved by adding a reminder spot to a commercial break, because familiarity seems to be the reason for the improved recall rather than a multiple source effect.

From a methodological perspective, the forced exposure designs commonly used in advertising research run the risk of exaggerating positive evaluations of A_{brand}. On the other hand, forced exposure experiments tend to downplay the memory effects.