Brand Suicide?: Memory and Liking of Negative Brand Names

Duncan Guest, Lugano University, Switzerland
Zachary Estes, University of Warwick, UK
Michael Gibbert, Lugano University, Switzerland
David Mazursky, Hebrew University, Israel

Brand names can convey important attributes of a product, and can more generally impact the brand image itself. For instance, brand names such as Dove and Apple implicitly convey positivity. However, some products are marketed with distinctly negative brand names, such as Burn energy drink, Fat Bastard chardonnay, and Poison perfume. What are the consequences of such negative brand names for consumer behavior? Might they bestow certain benefits that outweigh their negative connotations? We report two experiments that investigate this question.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1010315/volumes/v39/NA-39

[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/.
introduction of price as an independent variable. We introduce price variable because, as mentioned above, thin is associated with status. We manipulate price and attempt to investigate whether price interacts with model body size to create the perception of quality and to elicit generally more favorable attitudes toward advertisements. At the same time, we investigate how body X price interaction affects consumers' body-esteem and weight loss intentions. Our preliminary results suggest that thin body size condition loses its advertising effectiveness when paired with low price. Generally the main effect for model body size disappears virtually in every variable of interest.

REFERENCES


Brand Suicide? Memory and Liking of Negative Brand Names

Duncan Guest, Lugano University, Switzerland
Zachary Estes, University of Warwick, UK
Michael Gibbert, Lugano University, Switzerland
David Mazursky, Hebrew University, Israel

Brand names can convey important attributes of a product, and can more generally impact the brand image itself. For instance, brand names such as Dove and Apple implicitly convey positivity. However, some products are marketed with distinctly negative brand names, such as Burn energy drink, Fat Bastard chardonnay, and Poison perfume. What are the consequences of such negative brand names for consumer behavior? Might they bestow certain benefits that outweigh their negative connotations? We report two experiments that investigate this question. Specifically, a wealth of psychological research indicates that negative words are more memorable than neutral words, and some preliminary evidence suggests that negative stimuli become less negative with repeated exposures. We therefore predicted that, relative to neutral brand names, negative brand names would be better remembered (H1) and would become less negative with repeated presentations (H2).

Experiment 1 investigated whether negative brand names are better remembered than neutral brand names (H1). Eighty-four undergraduates viewed a series of slides containing one negative brand name (e.g., Poison) and one neutral name (e.g., Obsession), with a different novel logo presented above each brand name. Half the brand names were presented in blue font and half in red. The negative and neutral names differed in valence but were matched for word length and frequency. We then tested participants’ recognition memory of (1) the brand names, (2) their color, and (3) their associated logos. Based on cognitive research, we hypothesized that negative brand names would not only be more memorable than neutral names, but also that they would evoke better memory for contextual details such as font color and logo. Results supported these predictions. Relative to neutral names, negative brand names elicited significantly better recognition (p < .05) of the
brand (71% vs. 65%), its color (55% vs. 49%), and its associated logo (58% vs. 54%). Evidently, negative branding evokes better memory for the brand name and its contextual details (e.g., color, logo).

Experiment 2 investigated attitudes toward negative brand names. Our primary interest was whether attitudes to negative brand names would improve across exposures (H2), as some prior research suggests that emotional stimuli become less extreme with repeated exposures. Secondarily, we also varied two dimensions of negative stimuli, namely, their extremity and their arousal. Negative words can be more or less extreme, and they can be high or low in arousal. Thus, 48 undergraduates evaluated the same brand-product pairs at three different times. Hypothetical brand names varied in extremity and arousal, producing a 2 (extremity: extreme, moderate) X 2 (arousal: high, low) within-participants design, with five brand-product pairs in each condition. All brand names were paired randomly with a neutral object, such as Hatred chair (extreme, high), Grief stove (extreme, low), Trouble clock (moderate, high), and Neglect cabinet (moderate, low). At time 1 (t1), each brand-product pair appeared for 13 seconds, and respondents evaluated how much they liked it (1 = “not at all”…7 = “very much”). Participants evaluated their liking of each brand-product pair again six hours later (t2) and two weeks later (t3). At t3 participants first were given a complete list of brand and product names, and they were asked to match the brands with the products that they had seen previously.

A 2 (extreme, moderate) X 2 (high, low arousal) x 3 (t1, t2, t3) repeated measures ANOVA on liking ratings indicated that all three main effects were significant ($p < .05$). Specifically, (1) moderately negative brands were liked more than extremely negative brands, (2) highly arousing brands were liked more than less arousing brands, and (3) brands were generally liked more across times. However, these effects were qualified by two interactions. First, valence and arousal interacted, with a larger effect of arousal among moderate brands than among extreme brands. Second, arousal and time interacted, with a significant effect of time only among moderately arousing brands. Extremity and arousal both affected memory identification scores at t3 as well, with better memory for extreme brands than for moderate brands, and for highly arousing brands than for less arousing brands. Interestingly, liking and memory were not directly related: Moderate brands were liked more, but extreme brands were better remembered. Thus, as predicted, negative brands tended to become less negative across exposures. Moreover, extremity and arousal both affected liking and memory of brands and products.

In sum, negative brand names are more memorable than neutral names, and repeated exposures increase liking of negative names. This exposure effect on liking was observed among low-arousal names such as Gloom but not among high-arousal names such as Torture. Those high-arousal brand names, however, were more memorable than the low-arousal names. Thus, negative brand names may be particularly memorable, but repeated advertising may be necessary to overcome consumers’ initial dislike of them. Managers therefore need to think carefully about whether the benefits gleaned from making the brand stand out at the point of sale and in memory outweigh the negative perceptions created when using a negative brand name. Furthermore, because negative brand names are evaluated worst at initial exposure, a marketing strategy should consider advertising the brand for some time prior to product release to enable consumers to overcome initial negative perceptions.