The Csr Surprise Effect: When Unexpected Csr Activity Enhances Brand Evaluations

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This research shows that unexpected CSR activities that deviate from consumers’ schema regarding brands’ CSR activities improve brand evaluations when the CSR fit is high. The positive effect of unexpected CSR activities is cognition-based, and increases brand evaluations of consumers who are not involved with brands’ CSR activities.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1017566/volumes/v42/NA-42

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction

This research examines the influence of CSR expectancy on brand evaluations. Expectancy of a CSR activity is the extent to which a CSR activity deviates from consumers’ mental schema regarding brands’ CSR activities (Heckler and Childers 1992). We show that unexpected CSR activities have a positive influence on brand evaluations when CSR fit is high, and that the effect is mediated by cognitive processes.

Theoretical Framework

According to dual process models of persuasion (Petty and Cacioppo 1986), consumers’ motivation to process information influences whether they scrutinize information (i.e., central route) or use simple heuristics (i.e., peripheral route; Petty, Cacioppo, and Schuman 1983). Expectancy is one of the antecedents to motivation to process information (Meyers-Levy and Tybout 1989). We therefore posit that when the CSR fit is high, an unexpected CSR activity (but not an expected CSR activity) initiates elaboration. As elaboration increases, sincere CSR motivations of the brand become more salient (Ellen, Webb, and Mohr 2006). When the CSR activity is expected, consumers do not invest cognitive effort in evaluating the brand and use simple heuristic that CSR is a good deed (Simmons and Becker-Olsen 2006). Given that central route processing has a stronger positive impact on persuasion compared to the peripheral route (Petty and Cacioppo 1986), we predict a positive effect of the unexpected CSR activity when CSR fit is high. We further predict the indirect effect of expectancy (conditional on CSR fit) on brand evaluations is mediated by (a) elaboration and (b) perceived sincerity of the brand’s CSR motivations. When CSR fit is low, we do not predict an effect of expectancy of the CSR activity on brand evaluations.

Study 1

Using a fashion brand, expectancy was manipulated by changing the implementation strategy (high [low] expectancy: donation per sale [tweet]) and fit was manipulated by changing the nature of a product donation (high [low] fit: clothes [toiletries]), as validated in pretests.

The study (n = 158) employed a 2 (CSR fit) × 2 (expectancy) between-participants design. Participants provided brand evaluations and reported their perceptions about sincerity of the brand’s CSR motivation (Ellen, Webb, and Mohr 2006). An ANOVA with fit and expectancy as independent variables revealed a significant interaction of fit and expectancy (F(1, 174) = 4.59, p < .05) on brand evaluation. When fit was high, unexpected CSR activity led to more favorable brand evaluations compared to expected CSR activity (5.87 vs. 5.36; F(1, 174) = 5.39, p < .05). When fit was low, expectancy did not affect brand evaluations (p > .3). Process analysis confirmed mediating role of sincerity of brand’s CSR motivation (ab = -.09, 90% CI = [-.18, -.01]).

Study 2

Using a coffee brand, expectancy was manipulated by varying the cause (high [low] expectancy: financial support [Hepatitis B vaccination]) and fit was manipulated by varying the target of the CSR activity (high [low] fit: coffee farmers [underprivileged children]). Manipulations were successful without any crossover effects.

In addition to brand evaluation and perceived sincerity measures, this study included thought protocols to measure elaboration, pre and post-treatment affect, and a measure of perceived uniqueness of the CSR activity. An ANOVA with fit and expectancy as the independent variables revealed a significant interaction effect of fit and expectancy on brand evaluation (F (1, 154) = 5.30, p < .05). When fit was high, the unexpected CSR activity resulted in more favorable brand evaluations than the expected CSR activity (5.67 vs. 5.06; F(1, 154) = 7.29, p < .01). When fit was low, expectancy did not affect consumers’ brand evaluations (p > .10). Process analysis with elaboration as the mediator, expectancy as the independent variable, fit as the moderator, and brand evaluations as the dependent variable revealed a significant conditional indirect effect of expectancy (estimate = -0.09, 95% CI = [-.17, -.04]). A serial mediation model (model 6) with fit × expectancy interaction as the independent variable, elaboration as the proximal mediator, perceived sincerity of brand’s CSR motivations as the distal revealed a significant conditional indirect effect of fit × expectancy through elaboration and sincere CSR motivations (a1a3b2 = -.04, 95% CI = [-.08, -.01]). Affect and uniqueness explanations were not supported.

Study 3

Given that involvement influences consumers’ motivation to process information positively (Petty, Cacioppo, and Schuman 1983), CSR expectancy should have no effect on consumers who are already highly involved in brands’ CSR activities. However, consumers who are not highly involved in brands’ CSR activities should be influenced by the expectancy of the CSR activity when CSR fit is high. Study 3 (n = 117) tested this boundary condition, using a 2 (expectancy: low, high) × 2 (CSR involvement: low, high) between-participants design. Given that expectancy influences involvement when it is measured as a state variable (Karmarkar and Tormala 2010), we used a proxy measure (NEP scale; Dunlap et al. 2000). Manipulations and measures were similar to Study 2. In a regression of brand evaluations on expectancy and CSR involvement, the interaction between expectancy and CSR involvement was significant (β = .22, p < .05). When consumers’ CSR involvement was low, the unexpected CSR activity, compared to the expected CSR activity, lead to more favorable brand evaluations (5.97 vs. 5.35; β = .31, p < .05). The positive effect of the unexpected CSR activity disappeared for consumers with high CSR involvement (p > .10).

General Discussion

This research extends the literature in three ways: It conceptualizes CSR expectancy and shows positive effect of unexpected CSR activities when CSR fit is high. Second, it clarifies the role of elaborations in the CSR literature. Earlier research showed negative effects of elaboration in response to low CSR fit (Menon and Kahn 2003; Simmons and Becker-Olsen 2006). However, when low expectancy motivates consumers to elaborate on high fit CSR information, scrutinizing CSR information enhances brand evaluations. Finally, we demonstrate a boundary condition for the positive effect of the unexpected CSR.
REFERENCES