Life-Changing Events Foster Favorable Responses to New Products

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Consumers experiencing life changes respond positively to unfamiliar products. In this paper, we examine the consequences of this finding for advertising. We show that advertisements that refer to life-changing events (vs. everyday life events) foster consumers’ openness to new products and improve their attitude toward unfamiliar brands with novel characteristics.

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Life-changing Events Foster Favorable Responses to New Products
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Recent research has encouraged manufacturers of unfamiliar products and brands to target consumers who are experiencing, or who have recently experienced, life-changing events (Wood 2010). Wood (2010) finds that consumers in states of high (vs. low) life change are more likely to be attracted to unfamiliar products. In a similar vein, Eelen, Millet, and Warlop (2011, 2012) show that even minor changes, such as performing an unfamiliar task, trigger consumers’ openness to new consumption experiences and motivate them to choose unfamiliar options. From a marketing perspective, it is important to establish which product features it is that make new options attractive to consumers experiencing change.

The degree of product unfamiliarity for consumers is likely to depend on both the unfamiliarity of the brand and the novelty of the product’s attributes. In light of consumers’ “chronic orientation to newness” in times of change (Wood 2010, 953), we suggest that consumers experiencing life change respond particularly positively to highly unfamiliar product options that do not possess any familiar traits, but they are not that attracted by products that still have some familiar characteristics.

Hypothesis 1: Consumers’ perceived life change positively influences their attitudes toward unfamiliar brands with novel attributes. However, perceived life change does not affect consumers’ attitudes toward unfamiliar brands with known attributes or familiar brands with novel or known attributes.

If, as suggested, consumers in high (vs. low) states of change respond more positively to highly unfamiliar products, how can marketing make the best use of this phenomenon? Directing advertising toward consumers who are experiencing, or who have recently experienced, changes in their personal lives (e.g., moving house, having a baby) may be an option for manufacturers of highly unfamiliar products. The latter can be done, for example, by choosing where to place print advertisements: home decoration magazines, magazines aimed at new parents. However, it is only possible to a limited extent to control who watches these advertisements. Thus, the question arises of whether perceptions of life change can also be triggered by means of advertising (Wood 2010). Wood (2010) demonstrates that manipulating perceptions of high (vs. low) life change is basically possible by asking consumers to list eight (vs. two) major changes that they are experiencing (listing task). This manipulation is based on the idea that reasoning about major changes triggers a change mind-set which makes consumers open to unfamiliar options. Previous literature has shown that mind-sets are not only activated by listing tasks, but also by scenarios which describe events that occur to a (fictional) person (Galinski and Moskowitz 2000). While, in listing tasks, participants are specifically asked to think about life changes, priming effects of scenarios are considered to be self-generated (Galinski, Moskowitz, and Skurnik 2000), and may thus be used in advertising. For example, depicting life-changing events in advertisements may lead to consumers thinking about changes in their personal lives. It is thus conceivable that advertisements for highly unfamiliar products that refer to life-changing events induce perceptions of high life change which trigger consumers’ openness to new products, generating positive responses to the products advertised.

Hypothesis 2: Advertisements that refer to life-changing events (vs. everyday life events) foster consumers’ openness to new products and improve their attitude toward unfamiliar brands with novel attributes.

In two experiments, we examine how consumers’ perceived life change influences their responses to products with differing degrees of unfamiliarity. In study 1, participants were shown one of four TV commercials for a known or novel flavor of potato chips of a familiar or unfamiliar brand. As expected, we found a significant three-way interaction between participants’ perceived life change, brand unfamiliarity, and novelty of the product attributes: For the unfamiliar brand with the novel flavor, participants’ perceived life change positively influenced brand attitudes. However, brand attitudes were not affected by perceived life change for the other combinations of brand unfamiliarity and novelty of the product attributes (unfamiliar brand and known flavor, familiar brand and novel flavor, and familiar brand and known flavor). These results were replicated in a second study using a different product category (chocolate instead of chips) and a different advertising media (print advertisements instead of TV commercials). In a third experiment, participants were shown one of two advertisements for an unfamiliar brand with novel product attributes, the advertisements referring to life-changing events or everyday life events. As expected, the participants’ perceptions of life change were influenced by the manipulation. The results further showed that referring to life-changing events (vs. everyday life events) in advertisements fosters consumers’ openness to new products, which in turn leads to better attitudes toward unfamiliar brands with novel product attributes.

In our research, we examined the impact of life changes on consumers’ attitudes toward products with differing degrees of unfamiliarity in terms of their brand and their characteristics in the context of advertising. We found that changing circumstances lead to consumers having more positive attitudes toward products that are highly unfamiliar in terms of their brand and their characteristics, but not toward products that are relatively unfamiliar or familiar (studies 1 and 2). These results contribute to the fields of variety seeking behavior and product innovation. They extend the research done by Wood (2010) by revealing that important changes in consumers’ environments benefit, in particular, highly unfamiliar products that do not have any familiar traits. Study 3 further reveals that advertisements that refer to life-changing events (vs. everyday life events) evoke higher perceptions of life change. This indicates that advertising can create particular mind-sets for consumers.

Besides, our findings have important practical implications for marketers of unfamiliar products and brands. It would appear that such products can compete better with well-established brands by choosing appropriate advertising strategies, such as highlighting the novelty of the product attributes in question, targeting consumers who are experiencing major life changes, and referring to life changes in the advertisements. Future studies should assess the effect of perceived life change on consumers’ responses to highly unfamiliar options for product categories with different features (e.g., technical innovations) and under real-life conditions of exposure to advertising.
REFERENCES