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Marketing experts' assessment of healthy eating messages in Australian food advertising

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Disciplines
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Marketing experts' assessment of healthy eating messages in Australian food advertising

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Abstract

The social world can be described in terms of experts and consumers, identified by their roles and responsibilities towards each other. The advertising and marketing of products based on nutritional value is widespread, and attended to by consumers, yet research in the marketing and nutrition domains suggests that consumers may lack the requisite knowledge and skills to evaluate and use this information appropriately. This concern can be viewed from a sociological perspective, and a theoretical framework for studying this context can be provided by ethnomethodology which describes how people make sense of their social world. This study was the second phase of a three-part study examining current healthy eating campaigns. A sample of professional marketers was asked to evaluate the nutritional accuracy and intent of food advertisements in magazines, previously identified by nutrition experts as containing health claims. They were also asked to provide their opinion on consumers' capacity to understand and interpret the health claims made. The marketers responded that over one-third of the advertisements contained nutrition claims that could potentially be misinterpreted or misunderstood by consumers. These results display a congruence between marketing and nutrition experts in the sense of their responsibilities towards others deemed non-expert in the field.

Introduction

Marketing of food products and controlling health messages are two forms of social behaviour that have received substantial attention in recent years. The right of food companies to promote the nutritional value of their products has been recognized for many years, but in many countries specific health claims for foods are still prohibited (Hawkes, 2004). Nonetheless nutrition marketing of products is widespread and several studies have shown that when a health claim is made for food product, consumers view the product as healthier and are more likely to purchase it (Ford, Hastak, Mitra and Ringold 1996; Mazis and Raymond, 1997; Garretson and Burton, 2000). This display of the social practice of health claims, with companies delivering, authorities regulating and consumers responding lends itself well to analysis, particularly with related issue such as obesity emerging as a problem to society..

Research in the health and marketing domains has suggested that while consumers report they are interested in nutrition information or claims about foods, they may lack the requisite knowledge and skills to evaluate and use this information appropriately (Burton, Biswas and Netemeyer, 1994; Health Canada, 2000). Ethnomethodology provides a theoretical framework for studying this phenomenon. Ethnomethodology describes how people make sense of their social world, and assumes that social order (or 'norms of society') can be observed through analysis of the actions people take in response to given situations (Garfinkel, 1967).

In Australia, five different surveys from 1984 to 1998 have all reported that magazines are the source of nutrition information most commonly used by consumers (Radimer and Harvey, 1995;

Kellogg's, 1998). A few studies have examined the accuracy of nutrition messages in articles or features in magazines, and reported that the level of misinformation was generally low (Begley and Cardwell, 1996; Radimer, 1996); however, the same type of examination of nutrition claims made in food advertisements has not been undertaken, nor have they been addressed with a social perspective in mind.

Purpose of the Study

This study aimed to test the hypothesis that marketing experts would be able to identify health claims the same as nutritionists and display concern for areas in which consumers may need protection. Magazines were chosen as the medium for the study as previous research has shown that women in particular consider magazines to be an important source of food and nutrition information (Crawford and Baghurst, 1991; de Almeida and Graca, 1997; American Dietetic Association 2002). The study reported here followed on from a study phase that monitored magazine advertising of food products for 6 months in the top 30 selling magazines in Australia. Here a team informed by expert nutritionists analyzed the nature and extent of (1) health claims - defined as specific comments on the function or claimed effect of the food (or an ingredient or property of the food) on consumer health or performance – and (2) health messages - defined as descriptions of the nutrient content or properties of the food (eg, ‘contains 20% of daily calcium needs’) or general product descriptions (such as ‘healthy’ or ‘nutritious’).In the second phase of this three-part study examining current healthy eating campaigns, an independent expert analysis of message accuracy and intent was conducted with marketing experts..

Method

Expert marketers were recruited by sending a request for participation via the email list for the Australian and New Zealand Marketing Academy. They were asked to comment on 30 advertisements that appeared most frequently between January and June 2005 in the 30 best-selling magazines in Australia (based on total annual sales) that met the study’s inclusion criteria.

Specifically, they were asked to assess:

1. whether a nutritional claim was made; and
2. whether consumers would have the capacity to interpret and evaluate the nutritional information

The marketers were sent a package via post containing the advertisements and questionnaires. The packs included a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study; a full-page full-colour copy of each of the 30 ads and a set of questions for each ad; a reply paid return envelope; and a form to enter the competition to win a $250 voucher.

Magazines were chosen as the medium for the study as previous research has shown that magazines are often used by food advertisers as they enable greater selectivity of target audience (Shimp, 1997); magazines have a longer life span than electronic (Belch and Belch, 2001) which enables greater processing of the information presented; and women in particular consider

magazines to be an important source of food and nutrition information (Crawford and Baghurst, 1991; de Almeida, et al., 1997; American Dietetic Association 2002).

Ethics approval for the study was provided by the University of Wollongong Human Research Ethics Committee.

Results

Respondents

A total of 21 panel members (respondents) took part in the study. Approximately half (48%) of the respondents were female; 43% were aged 18-34, 33% 35-44, and 24% 45 and over. All but one (95%) described their employment role as 'academic,' and the remaining individual as a 'practitioner.' Just over one-quarter (29%) reported that they had been in their current profession more than 15 years, 33% 10-15 years, 19% 5-10 years, and 19% less than five years.

Nutritional Claims

Over 90% of the respondents believed that a nutritional claim was made in 22 of the 30 advertisements. There were only two advertisements in which nutritional claims did not appear present (<30% respondents): for Twinings tea and Continental soup. Of these, advertisements for 4 products were not deemed as nutritionally accurate by over half the respondents (Nutella imaging breakfast, Nutri-Grain imaging a lawnmover, V imaging a powerpoint, and Continental soup). There were only six advertisements for which more than 90% of those who believed a claim was made agreed that the claim was accurate: Dairy Australia "growth spurts" advertisement (100%); Pura milk (100%); V8 vegetable juice (95%), Guardian breakfast cereal (94%); Tassal salmon (93%); and Wonder Berry (93%).

Consumer Capacity to Interpret Information

For all of the advertisements well over half of the respondents reported the view that the target market would believe the nutritional information provided, with over 90% holding this view for nine of the advertisements and over 80% for an additional 11 of the advertisements (Table 1). The two advertisements whose claims were perceived to be least believable for the target audience were the two Coco Pops advertisements, although these still received an affirmative response from 60% to 65% of the respondents, and the Dairy Australia (Waists) advertisement at 63%.

Table 1: Respondents' Perceptions of Consumer Interpretation and Understanding

Advertisement	Target market believe (%)	Target market understand (%)	Target market misunderstand or misconstrue (%)
Pura	100	90	20
Yoplait	95	71	62
Devondale	95	90	48
Flora	95	85	42
Guardian	95	85	40
V8	95	86	38
Dairy Aust. (Cheesy Grins)	95	89	26
Smart Balance	94	79	58
Capilano	94	95	53
Dairy Aust. (growth spurts)	90	95	19
V (sunbaking)	89	84	68
Nutella (Breakfast)	85	81	80
V (power point)	85	90	67
So Good	85	63	60
V (penthouse)	85	80	50
Nutri-Grain (lawnmower)	85	85	45
Woolworths (grapes)	85	76	43
Tassal	84	79	21
All-Bran	83	94	28
Wonder Berry	82	74	32
Woolworths (Grape Heart)	79	79	47
Carnation (Pasta)	79	74	42
Musashi	78	47	70
Nutri-Grain (couch lifter)	76	86	50
Carnation (Cake)	68	79	58
Coco Pops (both sides)	65	83	63
Dairy Aust. (Waists)	63	95	32
Coco Pops (artificial colours)	60	84	70

Similarly, for all of the advertisements, except for Musashi, over half of the respondents were of the view that the target market would be able to understand the nutritional information. The advertisements seen as most understandable were those for Capilano honey, Dairy Australia ('growth' spurts and 'waists'), and All-Bran cereal. The advertisements whose nutritional information was perceived to be least understandable to the target market were those for Musashi (47%), So Good (63%), and Yoplait (71%). Conversely, for 11 of the 28 advertisements over half of the respondents believed that there was potential for the target market to misconstrue or misunderstand the nutritional information provided. The advertisements seen to be most likely to result in consumer misunderstanding were Nutella "breakfast" (80%), Coco Pops "artificial colours" (70%), Musashi (70%), the two V advertisements (68% and 67%) and Coco Pops "both sides" (67%).

Credibility

Overall, the respondents reported they believed that the target market would be able to identify the sponsor or advertiser, with more than two thirds answering yes to this question for all but two advertisements (Dairy Australia 'waists' and So Good). Further, the majority expressed the view that the target market would trust nutritional information from the sponsors/advertisers. The advertisers perceived to be most trusted by consumers included Devondale (95%), Pura milk (95%), V8 juice (95%), Flora margarine (90%), Guardian breakfast cereal (90%), Yoplait (89%), Dairy Australia (85%, 84% and 82% across the three ads), Nutri-Grain (84% and 80% across the two ads), So Good (84%) and All-Bran (82%).. Those perceived to be least trusted by consumers included Smart Balance (53%), and Mushashi (58%), Woolworths (62% and 63% across two ads), Wonder Berry (63%), and Coco Pops (65% for both ads).

Discussion

The results indicate a reasonable degree of congruence between expert groups in nutrition and marketing as to what constitutes a health claim. While it may be reasonably assumed that the nutritionist discipline would be dominated by theoretical positions in biology and marketing by behavior, there appears to be enough in common to achieve this congruence. The finding that only six advertisements for which more than 90% believed a claim was made also were seen as accurate, warrants further research in terms of how marketers deem advertisements to be accurate, and if this differs form nutritionists. It is of note that the referent foods in these advertisements all form part of the Australian Guide to Healthy Eating (Smith, Kellett and Schwmerlaib, 1998), which in itself has social agency, coming from a body with nutrition expertise .

The data also demonstrated that marketers differentiate themselves from consumers in that they reported the target market would believe the nutritional information provided. Further, the advertisers perceived to be most trusted by consumers were those promoting dairy products and breakfast cereals (with the exception of Coco Pops), again, all of these food categories within recommended food guides. The exception may well reflect the reputation of the high sugar content of Coco Pops, a brand that has been around for some time and received public attention for this attribute. The social currency of lack of trust might also be reflected in the results obtained of four advertisements rated as potentially misleading by the respondents. These were for products targeted at children (Coco Pops chocolate-flavoured breakfast cereal and Nutella chocolate-flavoured sandwich spread), the social group most likely to be afforded protection by society at large.

This preliminary analysis of data obtained from a broader study reflects the way in which marketers might make sense of both the content and effect of nutritional claims made in food advertisement. Further analyses of this data may help in understanding the context of health claims development and contribute to solutions to problem that may arise along the way.

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