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An Exploratory Study on the Effect of Positive (Warmth Appeal) and Negative (Guilt Appeal) Print Imagery on Donation Behavior in Animal Welfare

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Abstract

Very few studies in social marketing empirically compare the effectiveness of positive and negative appeals. This study examines the effect of positive (warmth appeal) and negative (guilt appeal) print imagery on donation behaviour to an animal welfare organisation. A quasi-experimental design was used to test the appeals, using a convenience sample of 282 university students, with each experimental group being exposed to only one type of appeal. The results indicated that negative imagery which evoked guilt was more effective than positive imagery which evoked warmth, on intention to donate money and time to the animal welfare organisation.

Keywords: guilt appeals; warmth appeals; donation behaviour; animal welfare

Introduction

The RSPCA is a non-profit, non-government animal welfare organisation, and relies on donations – from individuals, commercial organisations, and government bodies – to carry out its work. However, in recent times there has been less government support for charities along with increasing demands (Shelley and Polonsky, 2002). Additionally, there has been an increase in the number of charities appealing for public donations (Sargeant, 1999). The combination of these factors has resulted in a highly competitive environment for very limited resources (Sargeant, 1999). In trying to solicit donations from the general public, these organisations have used both positive and negative appeals – although negative appeals predominate (Jones, 2003). To date, no studies have examined the differential effects of positive and negative imagery on donation behavior.

Donation Behaviour

In recent times the literature on donation behavior has grown substantially and ranges from individual studies on variables that might influence donation behavior (for example see Schlegelmilch, Diamantopoulos and Love, 1997; Bennet, 2003; Kottasz, 2004) to comprehensive models that strive to encompass all elements that affect donation behaviour (for example see Guy and Patton 1989; Bendapudi, Singh, and Bendapudi, 1996; Sargeant, 1999).

Among the many variables that have shown to somehow influence donation behaviour, the literature mentions emotions such as feelings of self-esteem, feeling better as a person afterwards, and relief from guilt or obligation as important influencers on donation behaviour (Hibbert and Horne, 1996).

Positive and Negative Appeals

This mention of emotions is important in social marketing, for the same reasons that emotive stimuli (or emotional appeals) are used widely in commercial marketing. These include both positive appeals such as sex appeals (Reichert, 2002) and humor appeals (Scott, Klein and Bryant, 1990; Weinberger and Gulas, 1992); and negative appeals such as fear appeals (Ray and Wilkie, 1970), shame appeals, anger and indignation appeals (O'Shauhgnessy and O'Shaughnessy, 2003) and guilt appeals (Bozinoff and Ghingold, 1983; Burnett and Lunsford 1994; Rawlings, 1970). Social marketers may also adopt these appeals, yet aside from a recent study by Reichert (2001) on sex appeals, and a study by Bozinoff and Ghingold (1983) on guilt appeals, most social marketing studies focus on fear appeals.

Guilt appeals are appeals whereby advertisers try to instill guilt into their audiences in order to influence their behaviour (Cotte, Coulter and Moore, 2003). Guilt is defined as violating ones own internal standards. The literature suggests that moderate level guilt appeals actually arouse the most guilt among target audiences (Coulter and Pinto, 1995) (as with fear appeals, extreme guilt appeals are likely to be rejected by the target audience) and are more effective as they appear less manipulative and more credible (Cotte, Coulter and Moore, 2003). Studies of guilt appeals indicate mixed results in their ability to affect behaviour (Bozinoff and Ghingold, 1983; Coulter and Pinto, 1995).

The studies on warmth appeals are limited. However, the few existing emotional studies that have examined the effect of warmth appeals suggest that people usually associate warmth appeals with the adjective happy (Smith and Ellsworth,1985), generally have a positive valence and mild arousal and can be effective in influencing likelihood of purchase (Aaker, Stayman and Hagerty, 1986).

Very few studies in social marketing empirically compare the effectiveness of positive and negative appeals. Two studies were identified which included such a comparison –an AIDS prevention study (Marchand and Filiatrault, 2002) and a study by Lord (1994) on encouraging recycling – both of which concluded that fear appeals were more effective than the positive on aspects of condom use and satisfaction with recycling. However neither of the two used print imagery as an independent variable, nor was their dependent variable donation behaviour. This highlights an important gap in the literature. Moreover, a practical example that illustrates the uncertainty that plagues social marketers as to what appeal to choose is Oxfam's change in 1996 from negative emotional appeals that evoked guilt in their recipients (as do many traditional charity campaigns) to a positive emotional appeal that depicts the dignity of those in poverty and tries to sell hope for the future (Marsden, 1996).

Rationale for this Study

Bendapudi, Singh and Bendapudi (1996) suggest that the use of images is a critical issue for charities, and furthermore, whether the image portrayed depicts a needy beneficiary or a helped beneficiary. Bendapudi, Singh and Bendapudi (1996) go on to suggest that the answers are unclear with only two studies carried out resulting in conflicting results. Both studies used similar conditions and compared a verbal message only, with a verbal message combined with an image of a starving child. Neither of these studies compared the use of a helped beneficiary (positive

image) and a needy beneficiary (negative image). As a result no studies have empirically examined the differential effect of positive and negative print imagery on donation behaviour. The importance of examining the use of images in print media is underlined by the fact that for many years newspaper and magazine advertising has been the staple recruitment medium for charities and many commercial organizations (Maple, 2003).

In carrying out this study, the most appropriate positive and negative emotional appeal had to be selected to compare in our chosen context of using print imagery to stimulate donation behavior in animal welfare. For the negative appeal the emotion of guilt was chosen, due to the body of literature which demonstrates that relief from guilt and obligation increases donation behavior (Hibbert and Horne, 1996), and the fact that such appeals are regularly used by charities and fund-raising organisations (Huhmann and Brotherton, 1997). As discussed above, no empirical studies were found directly relating the use of positive appeals in donation behaviour. Having said this, current RSPCA advertising in Australia and in particular their latest direct-mail campaign seeking donations used a positive appeal. The appeal used a drawn image of a happy dog with no perceived need. This appeal would seem to align most closely with warmth emotional appeals, and for this reason we chose a warmth appeal as our positive appeal. A warmth appeal was also selected as it appeared more appropriate than the other two commonly used positive emotional appeals in advertising. That is, a sex appeal -which was seen to be inappropriate in the context; and a humour appeal –which appeared difficult, if not risky with a static print imagery of a dog with no text and no movement.

Research Objective and Methodology

The main objective of this research is to determine which appeal – positive (warmth) or negative (guilt) – is more effective in influencing intentions to donate to animal welfare. It is expected that a guilt appeal will be more effective than a warmth appeal in influencing intentions to: donate money; donate time; and/or adopt a dog.

It was decided that dogs would be the subject of the image/appeals as many people have dogs as pets, they are a well-known animal, and are most often in the pound. Semi-structured interviews were first carried out to determine the most suitable elements to evoke warmth and guilt in images of dogs. These points, along with elements in the literature describing warmth and guilt appeals and the literature on influential non-verbal communication points as eye-contact and facial expressions, were also used in creating the images (Kotler and Roberto, 1989). Furthermore, though the dogs would be created to evoke different emotions, to control for internal validity, it was decided that the dogs should not appear vastly different in breed as this may inadvertently affect the results. Only one dog was used in each image so as to reduce complexities in maintaining internal validity. An artist was then enlisted to create the images. The questionnaire included the image on the front with the RSPCA logo at the bottom followed by the questions. First, respondents were asked an open-ended question concerning their initial impressions of the ad. The second set of questions was designed to determine what emotions were evoked by the images. The emotions selected for inquiry were taken from studies on emotions by Edell and Burke (1987), warmth appeals by Aaker, Stayman and Hagerty (1986), and guilt appeals by Bozinoff and Ghingold (1983). Pre-coded responses to the emotion items were 0= not at all, 1=slightly, 2=quite and 3=extremely. The third set of questions examined the

dependent variables – that is, people's intention to donate time or money to the RSPCA and/or to adopt a dog. Pre-coded responses included 1= I would not donate to the RSPCA regardless of any ad that I saw, 2 = less likely to (donate money/donate time/adopt a dog), 3 = no change, 4 = more likely to (donate money/donate time/adopt a dog). The fourth set of questions related to other influential variables on donation behaviour outlined in the literature (Guy and Patton 1989; Sargeant, 1999) (response scale 1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree). The purpose of these questions was to ensure that between-group differences on the dependent variables were not due to differences between the groups on these potential confounding variables. The fifth set of questions related to past donation behaviour and demographics, and was also included to control for extraneous influences on the results and ensure internal validity. Both the images and questionnaire were pre-tested, modified accordingly, and re-tested on a separate sample before the study commenced (details of the pre-testing are not provided here due to space limitations).

A post-only-monadic quasi-experimental design was then used to determine the effect of the warmth and guilt images on a convenience sample consisting of 282 students in two separate undergraduate marketing lectures. As an exploratory pilot study, students were used although the literature might suggest that due to factors as age and income, this group may not be the most disposed to giving. The questionnaire was administered to both groups, with one exposed to the warmth image (n=130) and the other to the guilt image (n=152). Participants were told that we were carrying out research on new ads for the RSPCA and would like their feedback. The questionnaires were completed in lectures and returned for analysis.

Results

There were no statistically significant differences between the two experimental groups, as determined by chi-square analysis, in regard to: gender (62% female, 38% male); current dog ownership (40% yes; 60% no); previous pet ownership (88% yes, 12% no); donation to other charities in the previous 12 months in terms of time (26% yes, 74% no), and money (71% yes, 29% no); previous donation to the RSPCA in terms of time (8% yes, 92% no), money (23% yes, 77% no); and previous adoption of a dog (11% yes, 89% no). The average age of participants was 21 years old and the average income was $210 per week. All of the measured external variables, which were seen as potentially impacting on the dependent variables, with the exception of mood, did not differ between experimental groups. As anticipated, participants exposed to the positive ad indicated they were in a slightly better mood than those exposed to the negative ad.

Content analysis was undertaken on the open-ended initial ad response question, with 69% of participants completing this section of the questionnaire. One of the major findings was that the guilt appeal evoked responses that reflected people were more likely to feel "sad", "depressed" and "upset" (30%) than "guilty" (5%). At the same time most participants exposed to the guilt appeal said that they saw the dog as sad (16%); dogs should not be treated like this (7%); the dark blue colours were effective (7%); and that they felt angry at people who placed dogs in this situation (6%). For the warmth appeal the main responses were that the dog was cute and friendly (28%); evoked warm feelings (10%); was a happy dog (6%); and that the image made them feel both happy and sad at the same time (4%). In comparing the guilt and warmth appeals, the guilt appeal evoked more expressions of sympathy (24% to 2% respectively) and more people

expressing a desire to help (5% to 2% respectively). In combining the written responses on both guilt and warmth images, 4% of respondents said that photos of real animals would be more effective, however 5% said that the artwork was effective in gaining their attention.

Factor analysis was conducted on the 14 emotion variables and found two underlying constructs. The first factor has been termed "positive" and consists of six emotions: joyful, happy, positive, cheerful, hopeful and good. The second factor has been termed "negative" and consists of eight emotions: sad, guilty, concerned, ashamed, sympathetic, angry, compassionate and sorrowful. The ads were successful in evoking the desired emotional responses, as all positive variables received higher scores for the warmth appeal ad than the negative appeal ad (all significant with $p < 0.000$) with an average positive rating of 1.1 versus 0.2, respectively. All negative variables also received higher scores for the guilt appeal ad than the warmth appeal (all significant with at least $p < 0.01$) with an average negative score of 1.6 versus 0.8, respectively.

Respondents exposed to the negative appeal indicated that they felt the advertiser was trying to manipulate their feelings to a greater extent than did those exposed to the positive appeal (4.2 versus 3.6, respectively). Additionally, respondents exposed to the negative appeal reported feeling more susceptible to the ad ($p = 0.07$) and indicated it had greater relevance to them ($p = 0.03$). Table 1 shows that the negative appeal was more successful on two of the dependent measures (intention to donate money and time) than the positive appeal. However, there was no difference in effect on intention to adopt a dog.

Table 1 – Positive And Negative Appeals and Effect on Intended Donation Behaviour

Dependent variables	Positive (Warmth) Appeal	Negative (Guilt) Appeal	F-statistic	p-value
Intention to donate money	3.06	3.40	14.51	.000
Intention to donate time	2.85	3.10	5.48	.020
Intention to adopt a dog	3.02	3.07	0.24	.628

Discussion and Implications

In the context of donation behaviour to animal welfare organisations, negative (guilt) appeals may work more effectively as they evoke feelings of sadness and sympathy. For most people, experiencing sadness or guilt evokes a drive to reduce these negative feelings. Donating (or intending to donate) money or time would be mechanisms for relieving these negative feelings, allowing them to get back to a normal state of emotion. The coping stage of Lazarus's Model (Bagozzi and Moore, 1994) supports this sequence of events, although Lazarus's Model refers to empathy and not sympathy. For our study, although originally intended as a guilt appeal, the negative ad evoked greater sympathy and sadness than guilt. The reason for this could be that an animal was the subject in need in this study, whereas most other social marketing causes relate to helping humans. One would expect people to empathise with humans, but they are less likely to empathise (as opposed to sympathise) with an animal. Future research is required to determine the effect of negative and positive appeals in other social marketing contexts and among different target audiences. For example, it is possible that warmth appeals that evoke altruistic tendencies

may work better on older audiences, such as the baby boomer segment who are heading towards retirement and may have more discretionary income to donate to charities.

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