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2009

The impact of claim diagnosticity on consumer scepticism to corporate social responsibility advertising claims

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THE IMPACT OF CLAIM DIAGNOSTICITY ON
CONSUMER SCEPTICISM TO
CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY
ADVERTISING CLAIMS

**A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the
requirements for the award of the degree**

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

from

THE UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

Alan Anthony POMERING, B.Ec, Dip. Ed., MBA

School of Management and Marketing
2009

CERTIFICATION

I, Alan Anthony Pomering, declare that this thesis, submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in School of Management and Marketing, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Alan Anthony Pomering

11 May 2009.

Abstract

A considerable body of literature on consumers' responses to information about firms' corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives has been published over the past decade. To date, however, little if any of this research has looked at consumer reaction to such information communicated via the medium of advertising, despite the increasing use of such corporate societal advertising appeals. While scepticism is a common cognitive response toward advertising, how scepticism toward non-economic corporate image claims might be promoted or inhibited through message elements has not been the focus of research attention. This thesis seeks to address this knowledge gap by investigating the impact of two diagnostic message elements on scepticism toward specific CSR claims.

This study examines whether consumer scepticism toward the advertising of CSR claims can be influenced by altering the diagnosticity of social topic information and CSR commitment message dimensions. Two key research questions are addressed: does the provision of more social topic information encourage consumers toward less CSR advertising claim scepticism?, and does more specific information about a firm's CSR commitment, expressing both its history and actual achievements, and their impacts, inhibit CSR advertising claim scepticism?

In order to investigate these two research questions, an experimental approach was used to allow the manipulation of message elements and the testing of cause and effect. Data received via an online panel of a cross-section of 417 Australian consumers were analysed, and the hypotheses specified in study were tested using analysis of variance and covariance techniques.

Results from this research suggest that increased information about the social topic related to the domain of the firm's CSR initiatives does not significantly influence the level of scepticism toward CSR advertising claims, but information specificity about the firm's CSR commitment does. These results are impacted by the consumer's level of scepticism toward advertising in general, attitude toward the notion of corporate social responsibility, and attitude toward the social topic. The findings of this thesis provide evidence that consumers have the ability to deal with larger cognitive loads, created by information about specific impacts of firms' CSR programs, and that such diagnostic information is useful in reducing scepticism responses to CSR messages. These responses are important, as they form the foundation of subsequent attitudinal and belief structures so critical for influencing consumer behaviour.

The theoretical contributions of this study include: (1) situating the role of social topic information, considered a critical element of advertising campaigns in social marketing, in CSR advertising situations; (2) implicating an organisation's CSR history and CSR and impacts as important diagnostic elements in CSR message claims; and (3) defending the ability of consumers to adequately discriminate between cognitively demanding informational inputs when evaluating CSR advertising claims. Given increasing demand from consumers to learn about firms' CSR efforts, and firms' increasing willingness to respond to these information demands with CSR-based advertising campaigns, this study also offers guidance for marketing communication managers charged with developing corporate image based on CSR-based brand claims. Limitations and directions for future research are also discussed.

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In setting out on this research path and during the conduct of this study, I have benefited from the guidance, patience, and encouragement of a number of people.

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