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Awareness Marketing: Cause Marketing Without Contribution

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ABSTRACT

Much research has examined the benefit of brands that participate in cause marketing initiatives and give a portion of proceeds or product to a charity. However, what has been lacking from this investigation is how consumers respond when brands raise awareness for a cause but do not take any further action to contribute resources to the cause – what we term awareness marketing. Through five studies, we examine awareness marketing specifically among the potentially divisive context of social justice causes. We show that consumers with higher levels of religiosity are more likely to support products marketed with awareness marketing, that brand authenticity perceptions explain this relationship, and that these effects exist only for products marketed using awareness marketing (not for all products in general). Importantly, providing authenticity cues in marketing efforts increases lesser religious consumers' authenticity perceptions and the resulting purchase intentions to the level of higher religiosity consumers.

Keywords: awareness marketing; advertising; perceived brand authenticity; social justice; religiosity

INTRODUCTION

In 2020, Crayola introduced a new product – a “Colors of the World” series of art supplies (crayons, markers, coloring books) that featured colors representing different skin tones in an effort to raise awareness for racial equity (Osmanski, 2021). What is unique about this move is that no financial donations or products were being given to the cause being promoted, but rather only an effort to raise awareness for the need for equality. This raises many questions – how do consumers respond differently to companies that are raising awareness using cause marketing but no direct tangible support is being given to causes? Which consumers are more receptive to such efforts, and why? And what can be done to increase receptiveness among consumers that originally may be less receptive? Our research seeks to answer these questions.

BODY OF PAPER

Conceptual Development and Hypotheses

We build on the literature on cause-related marketing, which is a form of corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Berglind & Nakata, 2005). In this paper, we introduce a new form of cause-related marketing that is not donation-based, which we term *awareness marketing*. More specifically, awareness marketing represents any tactics a business takes as a for-profit business to raise awareness for a cause without donation of financial or other resources to the cause.

In addition to investigating a new form of marketing (awareness marketing), we also seek to understand what types of consumers are most responsive to this marketing. Jose, Khare, and Buchanan (2018) argue that an important component of understanding consumer reaction to CSR initiatives is morality, given that evaluations of a campaign's authenticity are based on morality judgments. One of the most prominent sources of moral values is religion (Smith, James, & Griffiths, 2021). Fitting with belief congruence theory where individuals seek to act in ways that align with their core values and beliefs (Rokeach & Rothman, 1965), religiosity has been consistently shown to positively influence response to cause-related marketing campaigns. Religiosity has also been associated with assigning moral agency to companies (Brammer, Williams, & Zinkin, 2007; Cui, Jo, & Velasquez, 2019) and having more positive authenticity perceptions of marketing activities (Minton, 2019). Thus, we expect that religiosity has a positive influence on purchase intentions for a product marketed using awareness marketing (H1). Additionally, the influence of religiosity on purchase intentions exists for products marketed with awareness marketing, but not for products marketed without awareness marketing (H2).

We also expect that perceived brand authenticity mediates the relationship between religiosity and purchase intentions for products marketed using awareness marketing (H3). Additionally, cause type should moderate the relationship between religiosity and purchase intentions, such that causes that are in conflict (alignment) with religious values result in lower (higher) purchase intentions (H4). Given the basis of our effects in authenticity, we propose that products marketed using awareness marketing that contain an authenticity cue will result in similar levels of perceived brand authenticity for consumers of all religiosity levels (H5).

Study Results & Discussion

We tested our hypotheses through a series of five studies. Study 1 provided initial support for our main effect in testing religiosity's influence on purchase intentions for a product containing awareness marketing (supporting H1). To enhance external validity, the stimuli for Study 1 was an actual product – the Crayola Colors of the World art supplies described in the introduction. Study 2 confirmed that these effects of religiosity exist for products using awareness marketing but not for products without awareness marketing (supporting H2). Study 3 then primed religion to better isolate the effects (supporting H1) and identified perceived brand authenticity as mediating the effects (supporting H3). Study 4 tested the moderating influence of cause type to identify that only causes that align with religious values lead to higher authenticity perceptions and evaluations of awareness marketing

(supporting H4). Study 5 then proposed tactics that can be used by marketers to improve authenticity perceptions and the resulting purchase intentions among consumers with lower levels of religiosity using authenticity cues in marketing (supporting H5). Importantly, each of our studies used different marketing stimuli and causes to show greater generalizability of effects.

Theoretically, our research contributes unique insight to belief congruence theory (Rokeach & Rothman, 1965) and the literature on moral agency (Edwards, Delany, Townsend, & Swisher, 2011) by showing that companies can be perceived to have moral agency, and the source of this can be viewed as coming from God by highly religious consumers. Practically, marketers need to be aware that cause-related marketing comes in many different forms, one of which we introduce in our research – awareness marketing. Companies do not have to donate financial resources or other supplies to causes in order to engage in cause-related marketing that can improve consumer perceptions towards a product. However, marketers should be cautious when engaging in awareness marketing because it is not universally seen as authentic by all consumers. They should integrate authenticity cues in product packaging when using awareness marketing. This can be done through simple tactics like stating how many years the company has been operating or providing the history of their company in marketing communications.

REFERENCES

Available upon request

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Elizabeth A. Minton is an associate professor of marketing at the University of Wyoming (UW) who conducts research on religion's influence on consumer behavior. She has publications in the *Journal of Advertising*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Psychology & Marketing*, and *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, among others, as well as a coauthored book on religion and marketing. Before joining UW, she worked in the tourism industry in Alaska. She holds degrees from the University of Oregon (PhD), Idaho State University (MBA), and the University of Alaska (BBA).

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