International Journal of Marketing and Management Research
Vol. 8, Issue 7, July 2017, Impact Factor; 5.108 ISSN: (2229-6883)
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IF EVERYONE'S #1, THEN WHO IS #1? – CONSUMER MARKETING RATIONALES FOR ADVERTISING STELLAR CLAIMS

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ABSTRACT

Advertising claims of being the best and #1 by multiple firms does present quite the conundrum as to whether and how regular and top-echelon brands optimize value from their promotions. While such claims subtly and overtly draw powerful attention from consumers, their efficacy is bound by several influencing factors pertaining to the ad as well as the viewer. This paper explains the implementation of such superlative claims through application of certain prominent consumer marketing rationales like the argument strategies implemented by firms in developing their promotions mix, the elaboration models for persuasion techniques in ad perception and buyer behavior, the information signaling economics in play when advertising such stellar claims, the schemer schema dynamics between the firm and the target market, and the habituation tedium continuum effects of such claims.

KEYWORDS: *Advertising Claims, Argument, Persuasion Routes, Signaling, Schemer-Schema, Repetition*

INTRODUCTION

"We're the number one, finest, greatest, top, foremost, leading, preeminent, premier, prime, unsurpassed, unbeaten perfect product for you". What a rush! Isn't it the truly deserving and recognized market leaders who deserve these labels? Or is it any brand with adequate advertising dollars that can jump onto this bandwagon? Well, quite the rhetoric! The dawn of human civilization beckoned forth the first marketers hawking their wares to others. It also was the beginning of those sellers hyping their products to the consumers with claims about being the best. Does this typically flowery superfluous language in the ad's appeal work? Is it selectively paid heed to, or disconcertingly brushed aside by the discernable audience? This paper analyzes the rationales marketers use in applying this kind of puffery and hype; why it works, why it doesn't, and what limitations exist on its use and effectiveness.

The marketing effectiveness in claiming that one's brand is the best or number one or better than the competition is undeniable in the consumer advertising industry. Its operationalization is being explained in this paper through application of certain prominent consumer marketing rationales like the argument strategies implemented by firms in developing their promotions mix, the elaboration models for persuasion techniques in ad perception and buyer behavior, the information signaling economics in play when advertising such stellar claims, the schemer schema dynamics between the firm and the target market, and the habituation tedium continuum effects of such claims.

THE ARGUMENT STRATEGIES RATIONALE

Tellis (2004) describes different mechanisms of argument utilized by companies in their advertising campaign formulation. The three argument strategies of 'comparative', 'competitive position', and 'supportive' (Tellis, 2004) explanations work together to describe marketers' #1 claim seeking endeavors. The comparative argument message compares the target brand to some competitive standards which include direct competitors, recognized competing brands, unnamed competing brands, or general industry standards (Tellis, 2004). Examples of such advertising would include taste tests against a direct competitor, and statements such as "best in class", "best and most durable weather resistant paint available on the market". Comparative advertising is strictly regulated under various legal rules and must be factual and verifiable. The competitive position argument conveys the market position status of a brand relative to the rival named in the comparative ad (Tellis, 2004). This type of advertising would declare for instance, "our product is the #1 seller beating our competitor by a two to one margin". While competitive position advertising is effective for especially dominant brands with larger market shares and lower entry barriers to market, it can often work against the dominant brand by giving more publicity and exposure to the rival brand in the ad. The

supportive argument involves an affirmation of the positive attributes of a brand without any comparison, refutation, inoculation, framing, or rhetoric (Tellis, 2004). An example of this type of ad would be "most durable, lowest cost". It is appropriate and particularly effective for leading or dominant brands which rely on evidence and consumers' appeal to reason in their message content for reinforcing their stature and emphasize the very attributes of the product and brand that helped gain their superior status in the marketplace. The argument rationale strategy is effective because it provides the consumer with a direct comparison of competing brands and makes the decision seem logical. Logical decision making also plays a role in the Elaboration Persuasion rationale.

THE ELABORATION PERSUASION RATIONALE

Petty and Cacioppo (1986) established their Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion that lays out two routes to persuasion, namely central and peripheral, in the hemispheric processing of advertising stimuli adopted by the human brain. Their widely applied research describes that the central route consists of thoughtful consideration of the arguments' rationale and evaluation. This is in contrast with the peripheral route which uses subtle cues in the message and medium that calls for lesser cognitive effort. Petty, Cacioppo and Goldman (1981) determine personal involvement as an essential factor in the effects borne by advertising stimuli for driving dispositions to action. Petty, Cacioppo and Schumann (1983) instituted the moderating role of involvement in playing a critical interaction element for driving the central and peripheral processing tendencies of ad response behavior. The central route to processing ad information consciously requires the viewer to be an active participant in the persuasion process and possess the motivation and ability to decipher the advertising claims in the firms' messages. These tendencies either arising from the ad's stimuli or rooted as traits of the viewer's personal psyche manifest in the extent of involvement adopted by the viewer in the absorption and retention of the message elements. Distraction or lack of capability to comprehend information in the message could potentially generate lack of involvement in direct, concrete understanding which results in peripheral route processing. There is an indirect relationship between central and peripheral processing. The more the consumer engages in rational and cognitive central processing, the lesser potential for them to be diverted along the peripheral route. Thus it is unwise for an advertiser to have a highly detailed advertisement requiring thoughtful introspection by the consumer paired with a peripheral message. Peripheral route processing leans on non-verbal, pictorial, ephemeral, or any such passive elements of the advertising communication schema in the message or the associated environment connected with those claims.

Depending on the type of offerings and nature of appeal needed to optimally communicate the message to their target market, firms have relied on both central and peripheral processing

mechanisms for effectively influencing consumer decisions. Often a consumer will view ads like being #1 in a primarily low-involvement mode to make a purchasing decision. Thereby, the consumer is less willing to research the peripheral claim, and susceptible misled by a false or misleading claim. This tendency of the consumer to use a heuristic of being number one as a symbol of overall product quality or desirability works to the advantage of established or dominant brands in the market (Tellis, 2004). These priming tactics by such claims of superior status of the product and brand help optimize the efficiency of the ads' exposure effects and leads to better recall and preference by the viewer (Schmitt, 1994). Hence, such #1 claims work more as peripheral operators to capture most viewers' attention, but call for little ability on those viewers' part to evaluate message content. Thus, viewers are more likely to respond to such peripheral cues.

Also, the moderating effect of viewers' involvement and extent of motivation in the message reception process contributes towards the ads effectiveness. Such claims to fame appeals do not engage the viewer's cognition or intellect for deciphering the information and contextual tapestry within the ad. While the consumer is less motivated to investigate such peripheral claims, such claims have to have veracity for legal reasons as well as repeat purchase decisions. A consumer buying a brand that claims they have the best floor polish on the market and then is disappointed with the dull shine will be a lot less likely to buy that product again regardless of any future product promotional claims. In this sense, the old adage of "once a liar, always a liar" comes into the consumer psyche. Ironically, the peripheral processing of such #1 claim also runs the risk of being ignored as meaningless filler by the consumer if the market saturates the advertising mediums with such claims. Many marketers recognize this risk and are only relying on persuasion via the catchy undertones of these claims to fame as peripheral stimuli to engage the audience for attitude formation and for signaling. Practically, humans' selective processing of information and retention of factual stimuli factors in tandem whereby these claims may override more pertinent aspects of the advertising message in terms of engagement to drive attention and behavior. Quite the conundrum therefore presents itself in the manifestation effects of these superlative claims on consumers' information absorption and diffusion dynamics. While the #1 claims trigger more of the peripheral route to processing ad stimuli and thus do not engage the consumer to research the validity of such claims, the over use of the #1 appeal reduces the consumer's reaction to it as an effective signal.

THE INFORMATION SIGNALING RATIONALE

Advertising claims bear implication from the economics of information (Stigler, 1961; Nelson, 1981) and signaling theory (Spence, 1974, 1976) perspectives. In these rationales, firms can monitor the extent of their #1claims as deemed plausible for their business and let the market be aware of the

manner in which they control their advertising. The concrete unique selling proposition and brand differentiating message (Stewart and Furse, 1985) generally constitute the pillar for positioning the advertising campaign. Advertising basically serves as that critical component of the firm's promotions mix to signal its core competencies which convey those essential points of difference to the market to indicate the brand's value proposition. Signaling is the process by which an advertiser demonstrates the product's core competencies and conveys those essential points of difference to the market. Signaling is employed essentially as a unique strategic information tool used by the manufacturers of new products of high quality to communicate their high value niches and bridge undesirable communication gaps from competitors (Koku, 1995). Signaling is employed by leading product brands to show they are the number one seller, or first to market. However, even niche brands can use signaling to show how their unique position or niche is better than that of their competition. For example, a luxury hotel might state you get what you pay for and have peripheral processing pictures of impressive hotel suites, prime beach locations, and luxurious amenities. In these contexts, a firm's claim to fame as #1 reflects a signal of superiority and dominance in its respective domain of industry. Kirmani (1997) suggests that advertising serves as a signal of quality as in higher levels of advertising telling viewers about product of high quality. A great deal of extant secondary data exists within syndicated sources of information mined by marketing research companies involved in advertising analytics like A. C. Nielsen, I.R.I., N.P.D., B.B.D.O, O.M., McKensie, and the kind which project corporations' advertising expenditures and their brand equity positions in terms of the most-valued brands or the like. Empirical evaluations of these pooled data metrics may very well indicate statistically significant correlations in many cases between the top brands' positions and their monies spent on promotion campaigns for leveraging the power of the brands.

Koku (1995) points to three important conditions necessary for signaling: the need for some amount of information asymmetry in the marketplace, benefits of signaling that outweigh its costs, and an equilibrium whereby genuine signals of true nature do not get mimicked by free riders. The ad message must convey holistically or concretely those attributes which serve as information structures to plug the gaps in conveying the firm's reasons for its brand being number one. Lacking niches or insignificant points of difference when portrayed extravagantly by a firm via such non-relevant claims of being the best or among the top echelons send flawed signals to the buyer. Beyond a certain line of sight, it is surely recognized as an inferior signal that generates market's doubt and disbelief to have derogatory impact on viewer attitude and suppositions of the brand. Further, such inferior signal don't come cheap to the firm as the costs for claiming to be the best should weigh against their brand position in the market when assessing whether or not indeed their

claim to fame persists. Continuing advertising research, which empirically tracks the market effects of these claims and their impacts on patronage intentions and buyer behavior, must address the efficacy of the ad expenditures and resource allocations toward sustaining the signaling benefits of these claims with regard to the brand's comparative stature against similar competitors who also claim to be number one. In essence, the power of the claim emanates from the intrigue that the signal generates in the eye of the viewer, so as to impact meaningful perceptions arising from these claims.

Given the extent of information widely available in the marketplace today and the increasing levels of knowledge and awareness of the consumer, marketers should recognize that consumers will inevitably be cognizant of marketers' attempts to influence them through use of signaling tactics. Such tactics can run the gamut from the obvious claim that "we are the best product" to the more subtle ploy of using a flawless, airbrushed model to sell skin cream. Marketers must be careful to have legitimacy in their claims to fame because consumers, who find that the product does not live up to the hype, rarely make a repeat purchase. Also, firms' 'truth in advertising' when promoting their brands' competitive stature also signals of their action and commitment toward corporate social responsibility (Spence, 1973, 1974).

THE SCHEMER-SCHEMA RATIONALE

This conjecture draws a strong connection to the 'schemer-schema' perspective proposed by Wright (1986), wherein consumers develop intuitive theories about marketers' influence tactics. Consumers learn to identify and interpret advertising and sales presentations by firms, and that knowledge allows them to cope and adaptively respond to those persuasion attempts (Sternberg, Roediger and Halpern, 2006). This process keeps the consumer vigilant of the firm's ulterior motives of their advertising communications, and makes the consumer able to see through the tactics used by the marketer (Grunert and Thogersen, 2005). To this effect, consumers certainly are aware of those discernable attributes and characteristics of products and brands which aim toward the consumer's desire for prestige and status. The savvy buyer in the marketplace is watching and learning constantly, and not simply acquiescing or absorbing just about every communication from the seller at pure face value. It is critical to realize that firms' image management and brand appeal play upon buyers' psyche through varied quality and perception indicators beyond just the advertised publicized notions of claiming to be the best. Every brand's call to glory would eventually become nothing more than a mere cliché manifesting in a bandwagon effect being latched onto by multiple competitors. Any firm operating under the assumption that information asymmetry be prevalent in the market and be leveraged to gain consumer attention via super ceding message content is in

most instances on track for a rude awakening. The prolific media and sources of information to facilitate familiarity and pervasiveness of concrete as well as light-veined information-based advertising have severely mitigated those barriers which would in yesteryears gate or disguise artifacts of connectivity between brands and customers. Less than meaningful puffery in jargon and flight-based claims resorted to by firms in their advertising communications will many a times directly or subtly be recognized by the consumers with skepticism in their opinions of the brand. Indeed, the market has seen evidence of this with products of many different types saying they are "new and improved". However, the effect on the consumer of a "new and improved" product advertisement demonstrates that it is one of the least effective methods of signaling, as it may bear persuasion ability upfront but its effect is short lived as such super generates diminished recall potential (Stewart and Koslow, 1989). In addition, the ubiquity of easy access to information by the consumer can deter marketers from making spurious product claims. In the age of Google, a consumer is just a window away from debunking a marketer's claim that they are the bestselling brand on the market. Thus, the schemer schema mechanism does truly manifest in the consumer effectively engaging and deciphering ad cues and underlying connotations of advertised claims. Knowing that consumers know what firms' actions are and what their potential repercussions, positive or negative, will be, firms must proactively try to reduce or control the extent of hyperbole in light of the market's awareness, to reinforce their message and gain the consumer's trust and brand loyalty.

THE HABITUATION-TEDIUM RATIONALE

Repetition effects on advertising persuasion in terms of these #1 claims can be explained along the habituation-tedium continuum described by Tellis (2004). With repeated exposures to these #1 claims as one of the core communication components in the ad's stimuli, habituation occurs early on due to the intrigue, familiarity, liking, and affinity that the genuine power of superlative claims generates in the viewer. However, with repetitive exposure to these #1 claims, tedium, boredom, and decreased attention to these appeals set in. There is a diminishing marginal utility in this type of advertising. However, due to the psychological effects of basking in reflected glory and the notion that once we form an opinion we tend to ignore information that contradicts that opinion, the advertising is effective at its initial stage and long into the future. Habituation and tedium mediate audiences' ad responsiveness, leading to the inverted U-shaped curve relationship between the advertiser's repetition of ad stimuli and the viewers' response to these ad stimuli (Tellis, 2004). Campaign developers must realize the critical need to understand the thresholds and inflection zone

where habituation begins to drift toward tedium as influenced by audiences' draw and believability of their #1 claim.

Kirmani (1997) shows that excessive advertising stressing too much on high quality can land up triggering consumers' suspicions about quality. Quality can manifest as a holistic construct emanating right from the core product offering to the associated services, the organization as a whole, its brand, and brand image. Such assumptions by consumers would also lead to an inverted U-shaped response to advertising (Tellis, 2004), whereby repeated overdone exposures yield in negative insight toward the brand. Studies have shown that consumers view with suspicion any product that must continually and ad nasuem reinforce that they are the best. The consumer mind is certain to wonder that if firms are truly the best would they need to keep convincing them of this.

DIRECTIVE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The narrative in this paper explicates the efficacy of firms' use of stellar claims to optimize the influence of their advertising message on customer attention and brand recall. While such claims subtly and overtly draw powerful attention from consumers, their efficacy is bound by several influencing factors pertaining to the ad and also the viewer, as described by the above rationales. However, these consumer marketing dynamics, when exploited beyond reasonable legal, regulatory, and ethical chords of conduct by firms, bear derogatory effects on the target audience. Future research on this topic will concentrate on recognizing and evaluating potential violations and misrepresentations from ethical and legal perspectives pertaining to usage of such superlative claims in the consumer advertising industry.

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