Cause-Related Marketing: An Extension Of The Congruity Concept

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Abstract

This paper considers the concept of congruity or “fit” in a cause-related marketing (CRM) context. At present, there is a gap in the literature that explores how nonprofit-for-profit pairings affect a consumer’s response to and evaluation of CRM campaigns. This paper develops the concept of “fit” with particular attention being paid to three dimensions, namely, cognitive, emotional and behavioural congruity and the role these concepts play in determining consumers’ perception of the “relatedness” of products and causes.

Introduction

Organisations have an ever-increasing need to differentiate themselves and their products with many turning to the use of marketing and promotional campaigns with a social dimension (Handelman and Arnold 1999). Cause-Related Marketing (CRM) is one such promotional tool which is defined as “the process of formulating and implementing marketing activities that are characterized by an offer from the firm to contribute a specified amount to a designated cause when customers engage in revenue-providing exchanges that satisfy organizational and individual objectives” (Varadarajan and Menon 1988, p. 60). Typically, this is achieved by stating an amount of money (proportional to sales) will be donated to a charity each time a purchase of the product is made by the consumer (Olsen, Pracejus and Brown 2003).

From a CRM context, researchers have examined several elements of CRM including structure (typology) and degree of consumer participation (Webb and Mohr 1998), product type and the importance of the cause (Lafferty 1996), donation amount (Dahl and Lavack 1995; Strahilevitz and Myers 1998), gender-specific support (Cui, et al. 2003), geographic scope (Ross, Patterson and Stutts 1992) and whether CRM campaigns influence consumer choice (Barone, Miyazaki and Taylor 2000). Popular press (Benezra 1996; Duff 2003; Owens 2003) and anecdotal evidence suggest that congruity is a crucial factor in the success of CRM campaigns, but it has been poorly and inconsistently conceptualised. Therefore, the primary objective of this paper is to shed light on the concept of congruity and the role of multiple probabilistic judgments and inferences in consumer decision-making in order to produce a richer and well-conceptualised view of congruity based on cognitive, emotional and behavioural congruity.

Literature Review

The Concept of Congruity

A growing body of research suggests that differences in congruity can influence the evaluation of the product and the brand alliance (Tybout and Artz 1994). Brand alliance congruity refers uniquely to the “relatedness” of the product categories referred to or implied by the brand alliance. Prior brand extension research (Aaker and Keller 1990; Park, Milberg and Lawson 1991) observed that product category congruity generates a positive brand attitude when it directly relates to how well the product is judged to represent the brand.
category. It is expected that attitudes toward the brand alliance are enhanced when a relatively high degree of product congruity exists. Simonin and Ruth (1998) found product fit, brand image fit and general attitudes towards individual brands are positively related to attitudes toward the alliance. Boush and Loken (1991) demonstrated that evaluations of brand extensions correlated with the ratings of the extension’s similarity to the brand’s current products (brand extension typicality). However, extremely unrepresentative brand extensions elicit negative attitude ratings. Milberg, Park and McCarthy (1997) documented that negative feedback effects occurred when (a) extensions were perceived as belonging to a product category dissimilar from those associated with the family brand and (b) extension attribute information was inconsistent with image beliefs associated with the family brand. Therefore, consumers’ perception of product “fit”, or the extent to which consumers perceive the two product categories to be compatible, is expected to play a significant role in how consumers respond to a brand alliance.

**Cause-Related Marketing and Congruity**

CRM research relating to congruity has covered a number of key areas including the perceived congruity with the core business of the forprofit organisation (Ellen, Mohr and Webb 2000; Haley 1996); congruity between the consumer and the forprofit organisation (Sen and Bhattacharya 2001); and congruity between the product and the cause agent (Menon and Kahn 2001). The congruity principle is also shown to affect consumer attitudes as it suggests that a cause and product co-alignment will be successful when there are complementary goals and interests between the brand and the cause (Andreasen 1996; Barone, Miyazaki and Taylor 2000). Overall, congruity in a CRM context has been loosely defined in the literature based on common values and goals, attribute complementary, emotional compatibility and target market commonality, however, the literature fails to provide an adequate definition of congruity implying no clear understanding of the role congruity plays in shaping consumers evaluation of CRM campaigns. Therefore, it is important to further develop our knowledge of the role of congruity in a CRM context.

Menon and Kahn (2003) examined the importance of congruity in CRM compared to advocacy advertising and found it to be an important attribute in consumers’ evaluation of corporate social responsibility. Hamlin and Wilson (2004) argued that the degree of ‘fit’ does have a significant effect on consumers’ evaluation in low involvement purchase situations which created an impact by disrupting heuristics assessment (Hamlin and Wilson 2004). Pracejus and Olsen (2002) addressed the issue of perceived congruity between the alliance partners and examined the trade-offs (price and attributes) consumers make to support the cause. They found that the congruity between the brand and the cause did have a direct impact on the success of a CRM campaign.

However, ill-conceived “matchings” can potentially damage a positive brand image. This congruity principle will be ineffective in cases when a brand pairs with a specific cause due to high emotional appeal in which consumers do not perceive an appropriate match between the two participating organisations (Strahilevitz and Myers 1998) or when consumers perceive the alliance to be “trivial”. Therefore, the suspicion or lack of belief may be evident if the organisation linked to the cause is in some sense negatively correlated with existing brand associations (Hoeffler and Keller 2002). Therefore, when the congruity is perceived to be weak, the offer is likely to be perceived as inconsistent and perhaps opportunistic (d’Astous and Landreville 2003). Chandon, Wansink and Laurent (2000) suggested that incongruent alliances perceived as having a weak (or no) link between the participating organisations imply consumers need to engage in greater cognitive elaboration of the presented information.
in order to determine the reasons for the alliance. Therefore, it is clear that perceived congruity or incongruity between the forprofit organisation and the nonprofit cause is an important attribute that should be taken into consideration prior to implementing a CRM campaign (Pracejus and Olsen 2002).

**Cause-Related Marketing Congruity Conceptual Model Development**

The literature review revealed that brands and causes display complex interactions in determining consumer responses to nonprofit-forprofit pairings. Previous papers on “congruity” tended to treat this as a singular concept and therefore did not address this complexity. Based on observations of actual pairings, we propose that congruity is actually a multidimensional construct which should be understood in terms of different dimensions of congruity, namely, cognitive, emotional and behavioural congruity. We propose that these dimensions play different roles in shaping consumers evaluation of CRM campaigns. Figure 1 outlines a model of the impact of congruity on consumer attitudes toward the CRM campaign and the forprofit and nonprofit organisations. This model proposes that consumer attitudes towards the CRM campaign and the participating organisations may be influenced by cognitive, emotional and behavioural congruity, in isolation or in conjunction with other variables, ultimately having a positive or negative impact on purchase intent.

**Figure 1: Cause-Related Marketing Congruity Model**

**Cognitive Congruity**

The role of consumers’ cognitive resources (ability and motivation) is particularly significant in moderating the relationship between congruity and consumer evaluations which is further extenuated by role familiarity and prior knowledge. Familiarity is typically measured in terms of general awareness with research showing that increased familiarity with products or brands results in differential effects in information processing and brand evaluation (Alba and Hutchinson 1987; Fazio, Powell and Williams 1989; Ratneshwar, Shocker and Stewart 1987). For familiar brands, the relative degree of liking for the brand is well established and stable because brand-related experiences and associations are extensive (Bettman and Sujan 1987). For relatively unfamiliar brands, in contrast, pre-existing attitudes may be either unformed or weak in terms of attitude strength and accessibility (Fazio, et al. 1982). Such findings are consistent with Park, Jun and Shocker (1996) who found that alliances between two dissimilar
brands but whose attributes complemented each other (Godiva cakemix by Slim-Fast) were evaluated more favourably than those involving brands with similar attitude evaluations (Godiva cakemix by Häagen-Dazs).

Prior knowledge can also influence the way people process information. Experts elaborate on messages in an evaluative manner, whereas novices tend to process messages more literally (Maheswaran and Sternthal 1990). Johnson (1994) found that under low-relevance conditions, increased knowledge tended to increase message processing, but under high-relevance conditions, the opposite occurred. When consumers are moderately motivated and try to integrate the entire message information through the use of prior knowledge of the product, central processing of the message will result. Consumers tend to relate their own experience and personal relevance to the message at the deeper level and finally consumers tend to embellish the message information and add positive or negative attributes (Chebat, Charlebois and Gelinas-Chebat 2001). As a consequence, prior knowledge of a cause can enable more objective information processing since stored knowledge tends to be biased in favour of the initial thought or opinion (Taylor and Fiske 1984) in either a positive or negative manner. An example of cognitive congruity is the case of Avon cosmetics pairing with a breast cancer cause. From a female’s perspective, there is a congruent link between gender (female) and product category (cosmetics) and usage patterns.

**Emotional Congruity**

Emotional congruity can be viewed from a number of perspectives, namely, emotional, empathic and symbolic meaning. The CRM campaign can elicit empathic emotion by presenting cognitive cues within the message content which provides the consumer with additional information that is used to interpret the need situation. This could result in the perception that the motivation to help comes from sources within the message such as intrinsic motivation or personal history or experience with the cause. Cause importance can increase the level of personal relevance (involvement) and become an important determinant of the extent of elaboration the consumer engages in upon being exposed to a CRM message. If a cause is personally relevant to a consumer, it becomes more important and this may influence consumer behaviour through increased elaboration about the offer.

A further explanation could be due to the fact that empathic emotion in itself induces the motivation to help. Increased empathic emotion could produce a self-centred, egoistic desire (extrinsic motivation) to reduce the feeling of guilt by helping the beneficiary or increased empathic emotion could create an other-oriented, altruistic desire to have the distress of the person in need reduced (intrinsic motivation) by demonstrating prosocial behaviour (Krebs 1978). An example of emotional congruity is Hallmark Cards link with breast cancer research. In an emotional context, firstly, females tend to purchase cards that express emotions and feelings; secondly, the campaign conveys an emotional link between mother and daughter (as depicted in the CRM campaign); and finally, people who are inflicted by breast cancer are predominantly women, therefore, there is the emotional attachment with the cause.

In addition, symbolic values and meanings are also important in the CRM context in terms of how the consumer responds to and evaluates the CRM alliance. However, a consumer’s relatedness to the symbolic meaning conveyed in the CRM message can only be effective when the recipient of the message understands and shares the same meaning or values. Symbolic meanings are derived through the socialisation process where individuals learn to agree on shared meanings of some symbols or objects and also to develop individual symbolic interpretations of their own (Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998). The individual, in turn, may
interpret these meanings as self-relevant or congruent with their own values and meanings and thus adopt these products as their own (McCracken 1986). Brands, or in the context of this paper, products or causes can become powerful carriers of symbolic values and meanings for the consumer. When symbolic meaning is used effectively in a CRM context, it can transform brands into successful and profitable icons. For example, the use of the “pink ribbon” or the colour pink in breast cancer-related CRM campaigns is an example of symbolic congruity.

**Behavioural Congruity**

Behavioural congruity will be addressed from an Attribution Theory perspective in terms of how people make causal inferences about the behaviour of others (Davis 1994; Weiner 2000). When a consumer makes an attribution, the purpose is to help achieve a cognitive understanding for why something has occurred. The common ideas concern people’s interpretation of behaviour in terms of its causes which in turn play an important role in determining reactions to the specific behaviour (Kelley and Michela 1980). It reflects the meaning people give to their own and others’ actions in terms of the causes perceived to underlie the behaviour’s occurrence (Kelley 1972a).

Consumers may further assess whether the organisation is extrinsically or intrinsically-motivated. Extrinsically motivated organisations seek rewards from the environment (e.g., profit maximisation). In contrast, intrinsically motivated behaviour is enacted because the task itself is rewarding. Actions are perceived as genuine expressions of social responsibility if they are perceived as intrinsically motivated (Ellen, Mohr and Webb 2000). When the behaviour being evaluated is consistent with prosocial behaviour, extrinsic motives can be viewed as egoistic or self-interested and intrinsic motives can be thought of as altruistic. The goal of altruistically motivated behaviour is to improve the welfare of others and consequently the behaviour is viewed as intrinsically rewarding. On the other hand, if the helping behaviour is seen as the means to attaining the extrinsic reward it is perceived as motivated by self-interest or even as egoistic (Bendapudi, Singh and Bendapudi 1996). For example, Capilano Honey’s association with the Fred Hollow’s Foundation may be construed by some as being behaviourally incongruent but the Royal Flying Doctor’s Service linking with Panadol is behaviourally congruent.

**Conclusion and Further Direction**

Due to the increasing interest in corporate social responsibility and “giving back to the community”, CRM campaigns have become quite prevalent in the marketplace. It has remained as yet unresolved in the literature how congruity between causes and brands influences consumer responses to CRM campaigns. Research findings have been inconsistent in terms of how consumers’ perceptions, attitudes, beliefs and evaluations play a role in assigning meaning to CRM campaigns and how these evaluations translate into different responses. Therefore, it is important to further study whether and how congruity and “fit” come into play when evaluating CRM campaigns and whether these variables work in conjunction with “fit”, for example the feeling of empathy toward the beneficiary; personal feeling of guilt; or cause importance. Research investigating these issues is currently being developed and will consist of an experiment with three congruity dimensions as factors that vary across a set of designed advertisements. The outcomes from the research will contribute to a better determination of appropriate partners for strategic social alliances of forprofit and nonprofit organisations and the designing of campaigns to maximise support from consumers.
References


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