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Best Practice

Tackling global challenges through cause-related marketing: How brands should promote their support to social causes

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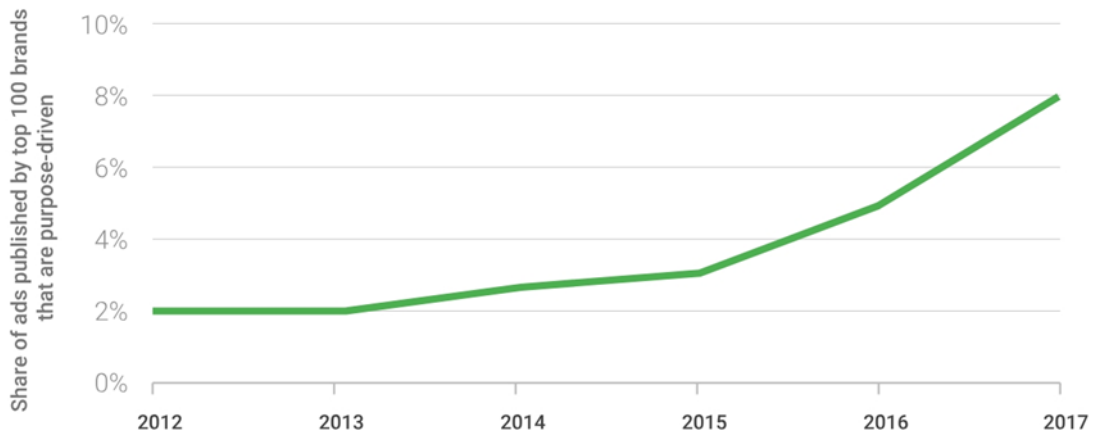
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Corporate social sustainability characterises considerable investment for companies. As part of their sustainability-related initiatives, companies support global social causes related to, for instance, poverty, environmental change, peace and justice. Such cause-related efforts of companies are often promoted via advertising campaigns appealing to consumers' guilt emotion. Using such campaigns, companies seek to encourage consumer identification with the brand as well as purchasing behaviour. A key question is how consumers respond to guilt-arousing messages in cause-related advertising. Crucially, what level of guilt appeal intensity is most effective in cause marketing campaigns?

The growing popularity of cause-related ad campaigns

Getting involved in societal welfare is nowadays a priority for the businesses. Cause marketing has gained popularity over the years for brands that 'do good' through corporate social responsibility (Figure 1). In cause marketing, companies donate (financial) resources in support of important social initiatives and/or global societal causes related to, for instance, child abuse, hunger, poverty, and environmental change. By creating associations between the brand and the social cause, win-win benefits are ideally generated for the brand and society at large. The above social efforts are typically promoted via branded advertising campaigns, which allow companies to leverage gains in reputation, consumer identification with the brand/company, and improved financial performance.

Figure 1: Growth of Cause-Related Advertising Among the Top 100 Brands



Source: Think with Google (2017)

Cause marketing is predicted to reach **\$2.23 billion in 2019**, a projected increase of 4.6% over 2018.

64% of consumers choose, switch, avoid or boycott a brand based on its stand on societal issues.

76% of young people said they have purchased (53%) or would consider purchasing (23%) a brand/product to show support for the issues the brand supported.

Source: Engage for Good (2018)

Using guilt-appeals in cause-related ad campaigns

Cause-related advertising campaigns appealing to consumer guilt are increasingly common. A notable example is IKEA's fundraising campaign in which the replica of a war-damaged home in Syria was created at several IKEA stores. Whilst conveying Syrian citizens' plight, the replica sought to encourage donations to the Red Cross by appealing to consumers' guilt. With a similar purpose, Unilever used highly sympathetic language and real-life testimonies in its #ShareAMeal campaign in order to communicate the company's support to the *Feeding America* charity and their work in fighting child hunger. Using vivid imagery, strong language, and melancholic music, several brands nowadays employ guilt-arousing messages of high intensity in their advertising campaigns.

Given the popularity of guilt appeals, what represents the optimal level of appeal intensity in

cause marketing campaigns is a vital question. Psychological research shows that the intensity of emotional appeals matters; emotion-related appeals vary in their impact, depending on intensity levels. Failing to set the emotional appeal at optimal intensity level can lead to inferences of manipulation and consumer backlash, both posing a threat to the brand's image and reputation. This can be particularly risky in cause marketing campaigns, whereby brands try to convey an image of being caring, not just profit-driven entities.

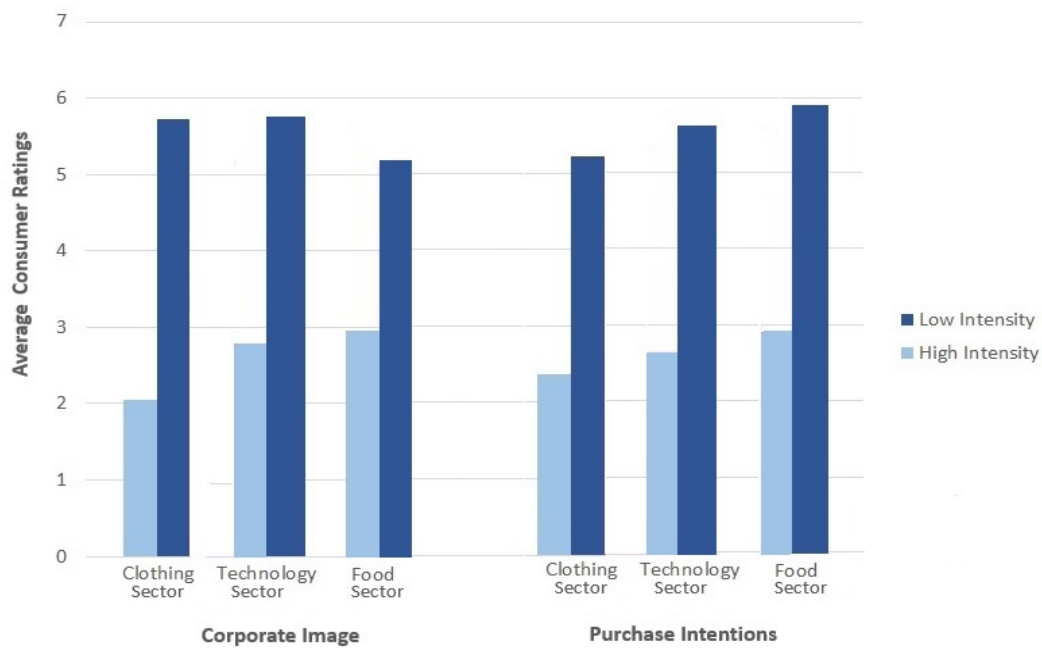
Evidence from our recent empirical research reveals that consumers do not identify with the advertised brand if exposed to intense, 'in-your-face' guilt-arousing messages. Despite the well-intentioned rationale underpinning cause marketing initiatives, consumers infer negative motives behind the company's decision to support a social cause when exposed to powerful guilt appeals.

Whilst cause-related efforts of businesses are laudable, emotional appeals embedded in brands' communication of such efforts have a key role in shaping consumer perceptions. Based on findings from our research, we identify four key applications for companies seeking to employ guilt appeals effectively in cause marketing campaigns.

1. Attune guilt appeals at low intensity levels

Our research shows that the intensity level of guilt appeals in cause marketing impacts consumer perceptions and behavioural intentions. Compared to high intensity appeals, low intensity ones are more effective at creating positive corporate image perceptions and at encouraging purchase intentions. The effect replicates across cause marketing campaigns of brands operating in three different contexts – clothing, technology and food (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Better Outcomes for Low Intensity Guilt Appeals



Source: Singh, Crisafulli and Quamina (2018)

The key take-away here is to be cautious about the way in which guilt-arousing messages are created. It is crucial to avoid overt, high intensity appeals as these can damage the brand image. Extensive pre-testing of advertising copies, focusing particularly on the intensity of guilt appeals embedded within the advert can be beneficial.

An example of a company that effectively employs low intensity guilt appeals is the non-profit charity, Save the Children. The charity has moved away from emotionally-charged, guilt-arousing images in advertisements, such as representations of sad-eyed and malnourished children, and/or emotive taglines such as ‘just three pounds can change a life’ – tactics traditionally employed in cause marketing campaigns of charities seeking to encourage donations. Instead, the charity now uses ‘softer’ and empowering storytelling and testimonials in order to communicate the plight of children around the world.

2. Communicate the brand’s genuine motives

A second concern for companies should be about the perceptions of the audience to whom cause-marketing campaigns are targeted. Findings from our research indicate that low intensity guilt appeals are effective in cause marketing campaigns if the target audience

perceives genuine motives behind the company's decision to support a social cause. Perceptions of ulterior motives, on the other hand, adversely affect the brand image and consumers' propensity to purchase the brand.

Creative agencies designing cause marketing campaigns should carefully assess whether the brand's genuine motives are conveyed to consumers. KFC, for example, faced substantial consumer backlash when launching its 'Buckets for the Cure' initiative in support of breast cancer awareness. Although well-intentioned, the campaign did not have the desired effect. Many consumers questioned the intentions of the brand, leading to social media comments such as, 'yet another company claiming to care about breast cancer by promoting a product under false pretences' or 'what right does a company which makes millions from selling fat and sodium-laden products, which by the way are linked to cancer, have educating people about the disease?'

While brands are increasingly being asked to show responsible behaviour and commitment to social causes, consumers remain largely sceptical about the motives behind such practices. Cause marketing campaigns appealing to consumers' guilt can only be effective if these are able to communicate that the brand has genuine motives for societal welfare. Consumer inferences of ulterior motives can be pre-empted through creating advertisements with low-intensity images, language, and music aimed at insulating potential inferences about profit-driven motives of the brand and of its social efforts.

3. Ensure cause-brand compatibility

Decisions on how to best design cause marketing campaigns arousing consumer guilt warrant another critical consideration: the advertised brand and the social cause should be compatible. Our research shows that perceptions of the brand as being ill-intentioned in its societal commitment and driven by ulterior motives are widespread among consumers evaluating cause marketing campaigns of technology and clothing brands. The effect, however, is absent when consumers are exposed to cause marketing campaigns of food brands.

Food brands appear to be perceived as highly compatible with social causes related to, for instance, fighting child hunger. Notable examples of food brands that seem to have carefully considered their compatibility to the sponsored social cause include, for instance, Kellogg's in their commitment to providing food to people in need, also communicated in the campaign, 'Breakfast for better days'. Likewise, General Mills' work on alleviating hunger,

reduce food waste, and increase food security, as communicated in the Feeding America campaign, is exemplary. Both examples indicate that food brands can reap benefits from cause marketing campaigns, on the basis that such campaigns employ guilt-arousing messages of low intensity and the selected social causes are compatible with the brand's identity.

A key consideration for brands is to carefully select the social cause to sponsor, especially when championing controversial social causes. The 2017 Pepsi advertising campaign featuring the model Kendall Jenner advocating social unity is an example. The campaign backfired and was 'pulled'; consumers did not directly see the brand's compatibility with the cause and accused Pepsi of exploiting a social issue.

4. Be realistic about the outcomes

A key expected outcome of cause marketing campaigns concerns enhanced consumer identification with the company and/or the brand. Evidence from marketing research suggests that consumer-company identification represents a fundamental psychological process underlying consumer response to cause marketing. Findings from our research reveal that consumer-company identification is, in practice, an unrealistic outcome for companies if advertising messages include guilt appeals of high intensity. Cause marketing campaigns including high intensity guilt appeals do not seem to address consumers' self-definitional needs, but rather prevent consumers from identifying themselves with the brand. This is particularly the case for technology brands seeking to communicate their efforts in supporting social causes. Before launching a campaign that employs guilt appeals, brands should set realistic campaign outcomes.

A final note

Cause marketing is a powerful tool for brands to get involved in socially responsible behaviour for tackling global societal challenges. We provide insights for optimising the use of guilt-arousing messages in creating successful cause marketing campaigns. The campaign can alienate the audiences if the appeal is high in intensity, and if the selected cause is perceived as incompatible with the brand and/or product being advertised. Empirical research suggests that intense appeals can backfire as consumers become suspicious of the motives behind the brand's social efforts. Our research shows that guilt-arousing messages

in cause marketing campaigns can foster consumer identification with the brand, when appeals are low in intensity. The above underscores the importance for brand managers and creative agencies to set realistic expectations on the likely outcomes of cause marketing campaigns leveraging on guilt appeals. The use of low intensity appeals, proactive communication of genuine motives of the brand, and alignment of the brand with the social cause, are pivotal to the success of cause-related advertising campaigns.

Further Readings on Warc.com

Chang, C. T. (2012). Are guilt appeals a panacea in green advertising? The right formula of issue proximity and environmental consciousness. *International Journal of Advertising*, 31(4), 741-771.

Singh, J., Crisafulli, B. and Quamina, L (2019). How Intensity of Cause-Related Marketing Guilt Appeals Influences Consumers: The Roles of Company Motive and Consumer Identification with the Brand. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 58(4), (Digital first; DOI: 10.2501/JAR-2018-049).

Bios

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Need to know

- Cause marketing is a widely used strategy for brands and charities seeking to promote their efforts in addressing social challenges around the world.
- Cause marketing campaigns can help brands to promote their sustainable practices by including low intensity appeals to guilt emotion of receivers.
- Cause marketing campaigns including low intensity guilt-arousing messages are effective at strengthening consumer's identification with the brand, which in turn enhances corporate brand image and intention to purchase the brand.
- High intensity guilt-arousing messages in cause marketing campaigns by contrast trigger inferences of negative motives of the company and should be avoided.
- Pre-testing cause marketing advertising copies to understand how receivers perceive the brand's motives is advisable.