

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF COMPARATIVE ADVERTISING
ON THE ADVERTISED BRAND AND ON THE COMPARED BRAND

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ABSTRACT

Previous research on the persuasive impact of comparative advertising has produced inconsistent results. In general, comparative advertising is considered to be an effective method of communicating the benefits of a new brand, while its effect is understood to be a limited one in promoting established brands of convenience goods. It can be expected that comparative advertising claims may influence both the advertised brand and the compared brand. However, little research has examined whether the comparative advertising claims influence the compared brand(s). Experimental results reveal that not only the advertised brand but also the compared brand were influenced by the use of comparative claims. Study findings suggest that the use of comparative advertising may be not only ineffective but also negative in that it may contribute to lending positive attitudes toward the compared brand. It is important to note that the effectiveness of comparative advertising should be measured in relation to the competing brand(s) in the market.

INTRODUCTION

Advertising practitioners have shown increased interest in using comparative advertising [Phillips 1983]. Some estimates indicate 35 to 40 percent of all ads are comparative in some sense [Neiman 1987], and some firms are returning to comparative strategies in the belief that they are more effective than non-comparative approaches [Winters, 1987]. In a recent survey of advertisers conducted by Muehling, Stein, and Raven

(1989) "allowing a small unknown firm to successfully compete with much larger firms" was often mentioned as one of the greater values of comparative advertising.

Yet academic research provides little evidence to encourage such extensive use of comparative advertising. In fact, the effectiveness of comparative advertising has been the subject of heated debates in the literature for nearly two decades [Turgeon and Barnaby 1988]. Some view that comparative advertising is an effective method of communicating benefits of new brands [Droge and Darmon 1987]. Others indicate that comparative and noncomparative ads do not differ in their impact [Ash and Wee 1983]. Still others suggest that comparative advertising is ineffective for an established brand [Roger and Williams 1989].

It seems logical to expect that comparative claims may influence the consumers' attitudes toward the compared brand as well as the advertised brand. However, little research has examined whether and how the comparative claims influence consumers' attitudes toward the compared brand(s). It is believed that if the comparative advertising claims are intended to be used as a way of positioning the brand vis a vis competition, the effectiveness of such effort should be evaluated in relation to the competition.

This paper reports the results of an exploratory experiment that was conducted to examine the persuasive effectiveness of comparative advertising for a specific convenience product brand on

potential consumers. As an exploratory study, this research is confined to measuring the effectiveness of the experimental products' advertising strategy as it might affect the perception of compared brands and of the experimental brand itself.

Information obtained in this study will aid in understanding the consumers' responses to comparative advertising. Furthermore, it is expected that information on the potential impact of comparative advertising on the compared brand will contribute a valuable input for managerial decisions facing advertising managers.

BACKGROUND STUDY

The majority of research findings available are inconsistent. They indicate that while comparative advertising is generally perceived less favorably than non-comparative advertising [Swinyard 1981], it nevertheless is generally regarded as being more involving and useful in the decision-making process [Earl and Pride 1980] [Goodwin and Etgar 1980].

In general, the literature suggests that the effectiveness of comparative advertising varies depending on product category [Assael 1981] and on the competing brand's market position [Iyer 1988] [Rogers and Williams 1989].

Comparative advertising is expected to have a more limited role for consumer packaged goods compared to shopping goods for the reason that the convenience goods do not usually advertise differences in quality, style, price, or other features between brands [Ogilvy and Mather 1976]. Shopping goods, such as major appliances and automobiles, could find comparative advertising to represent a potentially powerful alternative because it presents consumers with key differences in product attributes [Prasad 1976].

Other studies suggest that the effec-

tiveness of comparative advertising varies depending on the competing brand's market position. Most evidences indicate that comparative advertising is particularly beneficial for new brands; when a comparative format is used there seems to be greater purchase intentions [Iyer 1988], more favorable attitudes toward the new brand [Iyer 1988], and greater perceived similarity between the challenger and market leader brands [Droge and Darmon 1987]. However, for products other than new brands, brand attitude and brand preference suffer from the use of comparative advertising [Rogers and Williams 1989].

The literature therefore seems to find comparative advertising message for an existing convenience product brand to be a limited one. There has been no empirical study investigating the effectiveness of comparative advertising in brand comparison. It is viewed that if comparative advertising is to be used for competitive brand positioning, evaluation of such strategy should also be in relation to other competing brands.

Based on previous literature, a set of hypotheses are developed reflecting the limited role of comparative advertising: There will be no significant difference among the ranks of three competitive brands' scores on evaluation of (H1), attitudes toward (H2), and on intentions to purchase (H3) those brands prior to and after the treatments.

The hypotheses testing and methodology are presented in the following section.

METHODOLOGY

The exploratory research design used is a before and after experiment using a control group. The study sample consisted of two groups of students recruited from two sections of an introductory advertising class. Each group was assigned into either an experimental group or a control group. College students are not representative of average consumers, but the exploratory nature of

the study and the fact that only before and after measurements of the promotional effects are investigated allow more latitude of sample choice, provided that results are not generalized but rather serve as a starting point for future research. As indicated in Table 1, more than 90% of the respondents reported that they used the product. The table also shows that there was not significant difference among the two groups in terms of sex, frequency of shave, experience with disposable razors and the use of different brands of razors. Furthermore, the two experimental groups did not differ as to their use, knowledge and preference for different types of disposable razors. Therefore, it was considered that the two subsamples were comparable and would be adequate to measure, within an exploratory study, the effects of comparative advertising on consumers' attitudes toward a specific product brand.

TABLE 1
Demographic Breakdown and Product Usage by Experimental Group

Group Responses	Control Group	Comparative Advertising Group
Sex:		
Male	15	10
Female	22	15

Total	35	25
$\chi^2 = .26894 \quad p = .277239$		
Frequency of Shave:		
Heavy	11	7
Medium	12	14
Light	12	4

Total	35	25
$\chi^2 = 5.6206 \quad p = .6885$		
Experience with Disposable Razors:		
Yes	32 ^a	23 ^a
No	1	2
Don't Remember	1	..

Total	35	25
$\chi^2 = 4.2820 \quad p = .3693$		
Brand of Use:		
Brand B ^b	18	6
Brand C	11	10
Brand A and others	6	9

Total	35	25
$\chi^2 = 9.4674 \quad p = .1490$		

^a In sum, 100% of respondents reported they used disposable razors.
^b The brand B is the brand used in the experimental treatments.

The product chosen for use in the experiment is a disposable personal care product (i.e., disposable razors). The product category can be characterized as a relatively mature market with a slow market growth dominated by a few established brands. A specific brand of disposable razors was selected among the few most popular brands in the market. Mediemark Research Incorporated's studies (1989) estimated that the testing brand holds the second largest share of volume with approximately 10% difference from that of the market leader in the disposable razor market.

In the study, the control group received no treatment. The experimental group was exposed to a comparative television commercial in which direct comparison was made in relation to the leading competitor's brand. In the commercial, two brands were compared through blind testing of quality of share in a barber shop setting. It advocates that the quality of the advertised brand is as good as that of the compared brand, while offering a much lower price. A total period of two weeks was used to conduct the experiment. Shortly after the before measurement was taken, the experimental treatment was conducted. One week after the first treatment, another experimental treatment was conducted. A week later, the after measurement was taken following the third treatment.

The data were collected using self-reporting questionnaires. The questionnaire was designed to measure the overall evaluation of competing brands, global attitude toward brands and the subjects' intentions to buy. Likert-type scales, using adjective ratings, were selected as the instruments for attitude measurement. The bipolar adjective ratings were chosen because such scales have been widely used in attitude studies and are resistant to influences caused by the method of administration [Hawkins, Albaum and Gerald 1974]. A five-point scale was selected to avoid the habitual random responses [Peabody

1962).

Therefore, the data generated from the questionnaire are measured on five-point intervals, ranging from the lowest 1 to the highest 5. In the study, the subjects were asked to compare three brands on a scale; the testing brand's scores are considered to be meaningful in relationship to those of other brands. A portion of the study instrument is presented in Appendix I.

The effectiveness of comparative advertising on attitude change was judged by the pre-post comparison of consumers' preferences of three competing brands regarding their evaluation of, attitudes toward, and intentions to purchase three brands. The data were transformed to ordinal measures for the purpose of the analysis. A rank order statistics, the Friedman Two-Way Analysis of Variance, was used to test the forementioned hypotheses.

The following discussion of the results of the study provides valuable insights for the evaluation of the comparative advertising claim under investigation.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Table 2 illustrates the results of Friedman Two-Way ANOVA tests. It shows that prior to the treatments, there was no significant difference among the ranks of three brands' scores on all three dependent measures, and that the control group showed no significant difference both in pre and post measurements. However, the comparative advertising group showed some significant differences among three brands in the post-treatment measures: the comparative advertising group showed significant differences in overall attitudes toward the three brands ($p < .05$).

As a result, one of the three null hypotheses regarding the post-treatment measures (i.e., in each of two experimental groups, there is no significant difference among the ranks of three

brands in terms of overall attitudes in post-measurements), was rejected. The comparative advertising treatments showed a change in the groups' ranking of the three disposable razor brands in terms of overall attitudes toward the brand. Table 2 also indicates that the comparative advertising used in the experiment contributed positively to attitudes toward the compared brand's but negatively to the testing brand. The following section discusses the implication of such findings.

TABLE 2

The Results of the Friedman Two-Way ANOVA: The Pre-Post Comparison of the Rank of Three Brands in Evaluation, Attitude and Buying Intention in Each Experimental Group

	Before		After	
	Mean Ranks	Chi-Square	Mean Ranks	Chi-Square
Good/Bad (Evaluation)				
Control Group				
Brand A	2.00		2.15	
Brand B	2.03	.059	2.01	1.632
Brand C	1.97		1.84	
Advertising Group				
Brand A	1.98		2.12	
Brand B	2.14	.804	2.20	3.920
Brand C	1.88		1.68	
Favorable/Unfavorable (Attitude)				
Control Group				
Brand A	2.07		2.19	
Brand B	1.91	.443	1.99	2.309
Brand C	1.72		1.82	
Advertising Group				
Brand A	1.94		2.10	
Brand B	2.20	1.680	2.32	7.220 _a
Brand C	1.84		1.58	
Probable/Improbable (Intention to Buy)				
Control Group				
Brand A	2.10		2.24	
Brand B	1.94	.529	1.87	3.471
Brand C	1.94		1.87	
Advertising Group				
Brand A	2.08		2.02	
Brand B	2.14	1.840	2.24	3.140
Brand C	1.78		1.74	

Degrees of Freedom = 2

^a Significant at .05 level

Note: The smaller the rank, the better the brand's rank. Brand B was the testing brand and Brand C, the compared brand.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

The results of brand comparison indicate that significant change was found in the attitudes toward the brands in the case of comparative advertising group. As

can be noted from Table 2, although the testing brand's position remained somewhat stable, brand C's (the leading brand which was compared in the ad) position was noticeably improved from pre-measures to post-measures in the experimental group. This seems to indicate that the testing brands comparative advertising efforts were ineffective in two ways: First, it failed to improve the consumers' attitudes toward the advertised brand; second, it generated more positive attitudes toward the compared brand.

The result of this study is contrary to the expectations of advertisers. A possible explanation for such an outcome may be that given the product category, (i.e., convenience good) and the testing brand's market position (i.e., established minor brand), the comparative advertising message might have improved the consumers' image of the compared brand rather than that of the advertised brand.

It is important to note that while the comparative advertising message influenced the brand comparison in terms of overall attitudes (i.e., favorability), it did not influence the brand comparison in terms of evaluations (i.e., goodness) and buying intentions. The reason for this result might be such that in the operationalization, the product evaluation was related more to the quality of the product while attitude was related to the emotional attachment to the product. This result tends to suggest that the negative emotional impact of comparative advertising can be detrimental to the advertiser's brand franchise-building efforts.

The study findings caution advertisers against the blind adoption of comparative advertising message. Rather, comparative advertising claims should be carefully evaluated, especially when the product is a convenience good (such as disposable razors) and when the brand is already established with a minor position in the market.

It is also important to point out several limitations of the research. The study was exploratory in nature, the subjects were college students, the study examined only one product category with treatments on one specific brand, and the effectiveness of the treatments were measured only for the short term. Future research should deal with a broader range of target consumers, with various product categories, and measure the long term effectiveness of various comparative claim as well as non-comparative claim. In addition, the effectiveness of the alternative comparative claims should be measured and evaluated in relation to the competing brands(s).

APPENDIX

Questions Used to Measure Evaluation of, Attitudes Toward, and Intentions to Purchase Three Competing Brands

The following questions are dealing with your overall attitude toward each brand of disposable razors. Please indicate the position of each brand on the given five point scale.

Example: I believe that SAF, Health, Hi color TV sets are
 Very S : Z/G : : : : Very
 Good (1) (2) (3) (4) (5) Bad

I believe that Brand A, Brand B, Brand C disposable razors are:
 Very Good (1) (2) (3) (4) (5) Very Bad

My attitude toward Brand A, Brand B, Brand C disposable razors is:
 Very Favorable (1) (2) (3) (4) (5) Very Unfavorable

The following questions concern your intention to buy disposable razors. Read through each statement and mark the blank that best represents your intention.

I intend to buy Brand A disposable razors when I next shop for razors.
 Very Probable (1) (2) (3) (4) (5) Very Improbable

I intend to buy Brand B disposable razors when I next shop for razors.
 Very Probable (1) (2) (3) (4) (5) Very Improbable

I intend to buy Brand C disposable razors when I next shop for razors.
 Very Probable (1) (2) (3) (4) (5) Very Improbable

Sex of respondent: (1) Male ()
 (2) Female ()

What is your age? _____

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR COOPERATION!

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