

## ABSTRACT

### COMPARATIVE ADVERTISING: AN INVESTIGATION OF ITS INFORMATIONAL DIMENSIONS

Robert R. Harmon, Portland State University  
Nabil Y. Razzouk, California State University, San Bernadino  
Bruce L. Stern, Portland State University

#### INTRODUCTION

In the last ten years, there has been an increasing interest in the impact of comparative advertising. This development is a direct result of the 1972 FTC pronouncement that encouraged advertisers to name their competitors rather than refer to them as "Brand X." The purpose of the FTC statement was to enable the consumer to receive more information in order to make a more informed choice between competing products.

The issue addressed in this paper is whether or not comparative magazine advertisements are more informative than noncomparative advertisements. An ad is informative if it provides cues which enable a consumer to make a more intelligent purchase decision after exposure to the ad than before seeing it. Although the incidence of comparative advertising has been increasing, little has been done to assess the informativeness of its content. Previous research has focused on the informativeness of advertising in general and not on the informativeness of comparative vs. noncomparative ads.

#### METHOD

This study used a classification system based on 15 criteria that represented categories of advertising information potentially of use to consumers. The 15 categories were: (1) Independent Research, (2) Company Research, (3) New Ideas, (4) Price, (5) Quality, (6) Performance, (7) Components/Contents, (8) Availability, (9) Special Offers, (10) Taste, (11) Nutrition, (12) Packaging or Shape, (13) Guarantees/Warranties, (14) Safety and (15) Energy (Resnik and Stern 1977).

Data for the study were generated from Ladies Home Journal, Newsweek, Esquire and Reader's Digest. These magazines are nationally distributed with varied editorial appeal. All full-page ads in each issue for the year 1980 were included in the analysis. A total of 2,395 ads were content analyzed. The following research questions were investigated:

1. Are comparative advertisements more informative than noncomparative advertisements?
2. What is the nature of the information content in comparative ads?
3. Does the number of products compared influence the degree of informativeness of comparative advertisements?
4. Which product groups have the greatest numbers of informative comparative advertisements?

#### RESULTS

The results of the study strongly indicated that comparative magazine ads are more informative than their noncomparative counterparts. 90.7 percent of the comparative ads contained at least one information cue. Only 59.7 percent of the noncomparative ads had at least one information cue.

The nature of the information cues found in comparative ads related to primary product attributes or research-based justification of claims. Product performance accounted for 23.5 percent of the comparative information cues. Cues concerning company research (20.3%), components or contents (19.9%), independent research (12.2%), quality (10.6%) and price (5.8%) were also important.

The comparison of two products is the most common format for comparative ads. 81.8 percent of the comparative ads were of this type. There was a tendency for ads that compared more than two products to be considered as more informative than ads that compared just two products. The number of information cues present was greater in these cases.

Medicine and durable products had the highest proportion of ads that were both comparative and informative. Personal care and laundry and household products had a high proportion of informative ads although most of the ads were not comparative.

#### CONCLUSION

The primary contribution of this study is the finding that comparative advertisements are indeed more informative than noncomparative advertisements. This finding supports the original intent of the FTC when it encouraged comparison in advertising in order to provide the consumer with more information to make purchase decisions. This rational approach to consumer decision making would also be expected to lead to greater purchase satisfaction.

Information cues concerning product performance, research, components, quality and price were most often stressed in the magazine ads. These categories of information represent basic areas of interest to the consumer in the purchase decision. The heavy reliance on research-related cues is indicative of a desire by advertisers to document their product claims as well as satisfy regulatory requirements.

A comparison of two products is the most popular format. Medicine and durable products had the highest proportions of informative comparative ads. Food and drink ads had the lowest proportions.

Although this study did demonstrate the superior information content of comparative ads, it did not address the importance of the cues or their effectiveness in facilitating persuasion. Future research might be directed to this issue.

#### REFERENCES

- Resnik, Alan and Bruce Stern (1977), "An Analysis of Information Content in Television Advertising," Journal of Marketing, Vol. 41, 50-53.