

EFFECTS OF THREATENING ADVERTISING AND PRIOR INFORMATION ON PRODUCT RATINGS

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In practice, many advertisements employ threats or "fear appeals" based on the social or physical consequences of not using such products as mouth wash or furniture polish. In theory, the Yale studies of persuasion define "threats" as messages warning about a possible danger and "fear" as an emotional reaction to a danger. Further, the theory suggests: that fear arouses tension in members of the audience, and that relief of tension brought about by accepting the communicator's recommendation reinforces the attitude change.

Since few studies have examined threat in relation to an actual product, the discussion of threat appeals in the marketing literature depends almost entirely upon non-commercial messages (involving primarily health problems such as smoking or dental hygiene). In these experiments, high, medium and low levels of fear have been shown to be most effective in changing attitudes. To explain differences in experimental results, the theory says that the optimum fear level shifts with the interaction of other communicator, audience and message variables in the communications process. One such variable is familiarity.

The present study extends the investigation of threats into printed ads for a specific brand of automobile tires. The first hypothesis proposed that an advertisement for tires using threat as an appeal would produce more favorable product attitudes than a less threatening message. The second proposed that familiarity with the effectiveness of the product would enhance product ratings if the information is favorable and interfere if the information is unfavorable. The threatening message involved: (1) a product, (2) the prospect of product failure, and (3) a recommendation to purchase from the manufacturer.

Subjects were obtained from two sources: 60 were predominately male undergraduate students who were interviewed in a group context, and 60 were randomly selected housewives living in a married student housing complex who were interviewed in their own homes. The procedure was the same for each subject: (a) reading an article, (b) reading an advertisement, and (c) filling out a questionnaire.

The experiment used a 3x2x2 factorial design, employing random assignment of subjects to each of the cells and after-only measurement of the dependent variable. Three levels of prior information represented the first factor. ("Familiarity" was created by having the subjects read articles from a "popular magazine." One was irrelevant to the threat, one was

favorable toward the product, and the third was unfavorable.) Two levels of threat comprised the second factor. (The moderate threat involved "blow-outs", and the neutral ad made no reference to "blow-outs.") The two groups of subjects represented the third factor. As a dependent variable, product ratings were obtained on several product attributes which would presumably affect purchase decisions.

The experimental treatments were evaluated by the subjects. They rated the threat ad to be significantly more threatening than the neutral ad. They rated the favorable article to be significantly more favorable and the unfavorable article to be significantly less favorable than the irrelevant article.

Summated product ratings were subjected to an analysis of variance. A significant independent effect was demonstrated by the threat treatment; thus the second hypothesis was also supported in a sense. However, the results indicated little possibility of an interaction between the threat and information treatments. Students provided lower ratings in all cells, but the difference between students and housewives was not significant.

As with many laboratory experiments involving attitude change, the results of this study can be generalized only so far: a single product was involved, one threat was used, the sample was small, the subjects were not necessarily representative of the U.S. population, etc. In the absence of other fear appeal studies in a "marketing" context, the value of this study lies in demonstrating that, for a brand name product, a fear appeal can create more positive attitudes toward the product. This study can be seen as a modest first step in expanding the traditional studies on fear appeals into the realm of mass media commercials.