

Research Article

The impact of perceptual congruence on the effectiveness of cause-related marketing campaigns

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Abstract

In the cause-related marketing (CRM) literature, the degree of fit between a firm and cause has been shown to positively impact the effectiveness of CRM campaigns. Throughout the literature, however, firm-cause fit has been operationalized as the relatedness of conceptual attributes such as brand image and positioning (i.e., conceptual congruence). Across three studies, the authors demonstrate that the relatedness of perceptual attributes such as color (i.e., perceptual congruence) can also enhance the effectiveness of CRM campaigns. Study 1 shows that perceptual congruence between a firm and cause positively affects perceptions of overall fit and participation intentions. Study 2 provides evidence that perceptual congruence impacts CRM effectiveness through a fit-as-fluency mechanism. Finally, Study 3 demonstrates the moderating effect of elaboration on the relationship between fit type (perceptual vs. conceptual congruence) and participation intentions. Consistent with previous findings, elaboration positively affects participation intentions when the fit type is conceptual, but the results of Study 3 indicate that elaboration negatively impacts participation intentions when the fit type is perceptual.

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Introduction

As cause-related marketing (CRM) has become an increasingly common method of practicing corporate social responsibility, much attention has been directed toward understanding the role of firm-cause fit in overall campaign effectiveness. In the CRM literature, the positive impact of firm-cause fit has been well documented across a number of different studies. For example, research has shown that high levels of firm-cause fit can increase overall evaluations of the sponsoring firm (Ellen, Webb, & Mohr, 2006) and the CRM campaign

(Pracejus & Olsen, 2004), enhance firm credibility (Rifon, Choi, Trimble, & Li, 2004), and compensate for the sponsorship of less desirable causes (Barone, Norman, & Miyazaki, 2007). Most recently, Alcañiz, Cáceres, and Pérez (2010) found that greater degrees of firm-cause fit enhanced perceptions of firm competence in managing its CRM activities. Given the many positive benefits of firm-cause fit, understanding the nuances of what constitutes a “good” fit is critical in launching successful CRM campaigns that benefit both the firms and social welfare.

Although the consideration of fit has generally been defined as a broad assessment of the firm-cause relationship (e.g., Nan & Heo, 2007), it has often been narrowly operationalized as the *conceptual* congruence between a firm and cause at the organizational level. With few exceptions, researchers tend to focus on the relatedness of conceptual attributes (e.g., corporate values, brand image, and product

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positioning) that imply a transferability of expertise or assets between a firm and sponsored cause. For example, experimental manipulations of firm-cause fit have included the pairings of orange juice with the Healthy Diet Research Association (Nan & Heo, 2007), school supplies with the National Education Association (Robinson, Irmak, & Jayachandran, 2012), and pharmaceuticals with breast cancer awareness (Barone et al., 2007). This focus on conceptual attributes, however, does not take into account other types of congruence that may exist (e.g., *perceptual congruence*, which we define as the overlap of perceptual attributes such as color, size, and shape between a firm and cause that do not imply a transferability of expertise). Even when characteristics such as color or visual similarity have been discussed within the context of firm-cause fit (e.g., Zdravkovic, Magnusson, & Stanley, 2010), perceptual attributes have yet to be experimentally manipulated for the purpose of examining their unique effects on CRM campaigns and the mechanisms by which they exert influence. Consequently, the full impact of perceptual attributes on broader assessments of firm-cause fit and the resultant responses to CRM campaigns remain unknown.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that perceptual attributes play an important role in the perception of firm-cause fit. The AIDS relief effort of the Product Red campaign, for example, has generated millions of dollars in support for humanitarian efforts in Africa and involves many high-profile firms like Coca-Cola. Although the pairing of Coca-Cola and Product Red lacks conceptual congruence (i.e., Coca-Cola's brand image and corporate values are not related to those of an AIDS relief organization), the iconic red color of Coca-Cola Classic maps directly onto the visual qualities of the Product Red campaign. Based upon the premise that a firm must fit its cause in a successful CRM campaign, it appears that perceptual congruence may be the basis by which firm-cause fit is perceived in this example. Consequently, we propose that conceptual congruence is not the sole basis of firm-cause fit; rather, conceptual congruence addresses only a subset of attributes and features that influence a consumer's assessment of firm-cause fit.

Although the CRM literature has yet to fully address the potential impact of perceptual congruence, there are findings in the fields of marketing and psychology that support related effects. For example, Tversky (1977) characterizes objects (e.g., automobiles) as sets of both tangible attributes (e.g., size, color, or shape) and intangible attributes (e.g., luxury, prestige, quality), and judgments of similarity map both attribute types from one object to another. In line with Tversky's feature matching model, Lefkoff-Hagius and Mason (1993) find that consumers use three distinct categories of attributes when judging the similarity of products. In their typology, characteristic attributes define physical properties (e.g., color), beneficial attributes define utility (e.g., product functions), and image attributes define abstract meanings and associations (e.g., the positioning of a product). Across a number of product categories, Lefkoff-Hagius and Mason find that characteristic attributes consistently receive more weight than beneficial and image attributes during similarity judgments. Yet, within the

context of CRM, the current operationalization of fit as conceptual congruence does not address the impact of characteristic attributes (i.e., physical properties) on perceptions of firm-cause fit.

In the related area of brand extensions, there is also evidence for the impact of perceptual congruence on subsequent evaluations. For example, Park, Milberg, and Lawson (1991) found that perceived fit (i.e., between a parent brand and proposed extensions) is a function of both product-feature similarity (i.e., relatedness of perceptual attributes) and brand-concept-consistency (i.e., relatedness of conceptual attributes). Likewise, Bridges, Keller, and Sood (2000) found that consumers use both attribute-based associations (e.g., physical features) and non-attribute-based associations (e.g., user base) when evaluating brand extension fit. Furthermore, extensions from one category to another with shared physical characteristics (e.g., watches and purses both contain leather) were evaluated more favorably when attribute-based associations were emphasized. Finally, Zhang and Sood (2002) found that children use both "deep" attributes (i.e., semantic cues) and "surface" attributes (i.e., perceptual cues) when evaluating brand extensions, and perceptual cues like phonetic similarity (e.g., Coca-Cola "Gola" iced tea) were found to have positive effects on brand extension ratings. Extending these findings to the CRM literature, we hypothesize that, even under situations of low or ambiguous conceptual congruence, relatedness between the perceptual attributes of a firm and cause will also result in higher levels of perceived firm-cause fit.

H1. Perceptual congruence between a firm and cause will positively affect perceptions of firm-cause fit in a CRM campaign.

Firm-cause fit and participation intentions

Throughout the CRM literature, the positive effect of firm-cause fit on relevant marketing outcomes has been consistently demonstrated. Nan and Heo (2007), for example, found a positive effect of high fit on ad and brand evaluations for consumers high in brand consciousness. Similarly, Pracejus and Olsen (2004) found that increasing the level of fit between a firm and cause resulted in greater choice share for the sponsoring firm. Finally, Barone et al. (2007) found that high levels of fit allowed firms to overcome the disadvantage of sponsoring causes that were viewed less favorably. Together, these results suggest that high firm-cause fit will positively impact the effectiveness of CRM campaigns. Accordingly, the recommendation for firms has been to limit CRM initiatives to causes that are conceptually congruent with their business. However, if perceptual congruence contributes to overall perception of firm-cause fit, we hypothesize that perceptual congruence will also have a positive effect on participation intentions, even in situations of low or ambiguous conceptual congruence.

H2. Perceptual congruence between a firm and cause will positively affect participation intentions in a CRM campaign.

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