Sustainability communication: The effect of message construals on consumers' attitudes towards green restaurants

Nathaniel D. Line [a,*], Lydia Hanks [b], Lu Zhang [c]

[a] Florida State University, Dedman School of Hospitality, B4113 University Center, 288 Champions Way, Tallahassee, FL 32306, United States
[b] Florida State University, Dedman School of Hospitality, B4114 University Center, 288 Champions Way, Tallahassee, FL 32306, United States
[c] Michigan State University, The School of Hospitality Business, 645N Shaw Lane, Room 241, East Lansing, MI 48824, United States

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

As consumer preferences for environmentally conscious products have intensified in recent years, scholars have begun to more deeply explore the complex relationship between green practices and consumer behavior in the hospitality industry. Recently, this stream of research has been extended to the restaurant industry where consumers have become increasingly concerned about corporate social responsibility in general, and sustainable operations in particular. However, while there is general agreement about the importance of promoting a company's sustainability message from a consumer marketing standpoint, an essential underlying question remains unanswered: What is it about sustainability messaging that leads to positive consumer attitudes? The purpose of this research is to explore this question via the complementary theoretical perspectives of construal level theory and information processing theory. Data collected from a sample of restaurant consumers in the United States suggest that consumers process information differently according to variations in the construals of a company's sustainability message. The results indicate that messages congruent with the consumer's perception of sustainability result in a more positive attitude toward the company.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

While academic attempts to better understand the connection between sustainability and consumer behavior in the domain of hospitality marketing have increased in recent years, a majority of the extant research has been conducted within the context of the lodging industry. Although such research has been essential in furthering the understanding of consumer behavior in response to sustainable (or green) hospitality products, relatively less attention has been directed toward understanding consumer responses to green initiatives in the restaurant and foodservice industries. Notably, in a comprehensive synthesis of research published in top hospitality journals, Line and Runyan (2012) found exactly zero published studies on the interrelationship among consumer behavior, green practices and the restaurant industry.

However, as consumer preferences for environmentally conscious practices have intensified in recent years (Han et al., 2009; Jang et al., 2011), several studies have begun to more deeply explore the complex relationship between green practices and consumer behavior in the restaurant industry (e.g., Berezan et al., 2013; Dewald et al., 2014; DiPietro et al., 2013; Hu et al., 2010; Jeong et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2013; Namkung and Jang, 2013). Yet, despite the contributions of these studies to understanding the connection between sustainability and marketing, an essential underlying question remains unanswered: What is it about sustainability messaging that leads to positive consumer attitudes? Are all sustainability messages created equal? Or do consumers react differently to subtle distinctions in the communication of the message?

Recent conceptual research suggests that the answer to such questions lies in the content of the organization's sustainability message (see de Grosbois, 2012; Lee and Oh, 2014). Sustainability is a somewhat nebulous construct, at least at the consumer level, and research has demonstrated that individuals harbor very different perceptions about what it means to be eco-friendly, green, and/or environmentally sustainable (Dewald et al., 2014). As such,

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: nline@business.fsu.edu (N.D. Line), lhanks@business.fsu.edu (L. Hanks), luzhang@msu.edu (L. Zhang).

organizations often take deliberate steps to communicate their sustainability efforts in the marketplace (Ham and Lee, 2011). However, companies can choose to frame these sustainability messages in any number of ways. For example, a message can be framed as globally beneficial or locally beneficial. Likewise, the message can be framed as either yielding near term benefits or long term benefits. Furthermore, such benefits can be positioned as accruing to either ingroup or outgroup recipients.

Message content pertaining to constructs such as time, place, and reference group can have important implications for the consumer-level interpretation of an organization's sustainability message (Lee and Oh, 2014). Because consumers react to messages based on individual interpretations of the associated content (Trope et al., 2007), it is important to understand the effects of sustainability message construals on consumers' responses to the message. Accordingly, the purpose of this research is to better understand the effects of environmentally focused corporate social responsibility (CSR) messages on customers' attitudes toward a restaurant company. Based on the complementary perspectives of construal level theory (Liberman and Trope, 1998; Trope and Liberman, 2003, 2010, 2011) and information processing theory (Chaiken, 1980, 1987; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986), the present study makes a contribution to the literature by examining the ways in which the congruence between customers' construals of CSR messaging impacts information processing and subsequent attitudes toward the company.

Construal level theory (CLT) suggests that communication messages are interpreted, at least in part, based on the psychological distance of the relevant phenomena as interpreted by the receiver of the message. Conceptually, psychological distance is a multi-dimensional construct inclusive of several dimensions, including temporal distance, spatial distance, and social distance (Trope et al., 2007). Because a sustainability message is often composed of a referent time, place, and beneficiary, CLT is a particularly useful lens through which to view the sustainability communication process. The tenets of CLT suggest that the more psychologically distant the referent object of a message, the less likely the message receiver is to construe that object as salient and/or actionable (Trope et al., 2007). Based on the related notion of information processing, it is suggested that the construal of a restaurant's sustainability message will affect the manner in which the message's information is processed. Specifically, the proposition is put forth that the congruence between an individual's perceptions of sustainability and the construal of an organization's sustainability message will affect attitudes toward the organization. Tests of the hypotheses inherent to this proposition suggest that consumers react differently to variations in message construals. In addition to their theoretical value, the results of these tests provide practical implications for restaurant marketers that want to maximize the marketing effects of their sustainability platform.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. CSR and sustainability

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs have become ubiquitous in today's marketing environment; and the number of companies participating in such programs continues to grow (Vlachos et al., 2009). Contemporary CSR initiatives take a number of forms, including free trade promotion, animal welfare, environmental protection, working conditions, diversity initiatives, recycling programs, the use of green materials, support of community events, and general philanthropy (Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001; Vlachos et al., 2009). Effective implementations of these types of CSR programs can enhance a company's reputation with

consumers, leading to more favorable evaluations of the company (Lii and Lee, 2012).

Generally speaking, CSR programs are an effort to appeal to the value systems of a company's target customers by demonstrating that the organization is committed to making a positive impact on society. Accordingly, engaging in CSR is one way for a company to generate positive attitudes in the minds of consumers. Because consumers use CSR programs as a basis for cognitive and affective evaluations of a company (Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Verplanken and Herabadi, 2001), positive attitudes toward the company are formed as customers become aware of the company's CSR initiatives.

In hospitality, prior research on CSR has mainly focused on the impact of CSR communication on firms' financial performances (e.g., Chen and Lin, 2015a,b; Inoue and Lee, 2011; Kang et al., 2010; Youn et al., 2015) and customers' attitudes and behavioral intentions (e.g., Gao and Mattila, 2014; Kim et al., 2012; Zhang, 2014). Regarding financial performance, Youn et al. (2015) examine the link between CSR and corporate financial performance (CFP) and propose firm size as a moderator. The results of their study indicate that firm size moderates the effect of positive CSR on CFP but not for negative CSR in the context of restaurant. Relatedly, Chen and Lin (2015b) used value enhancement and agency cost theories to identify the motives of corporate philanthropy in the hospitality industry. Their results suggest that both value enhancement and agency cost determinants are significant factors in explaining the discretionary behavior of corporate philanthropy in Taiwan. In the area of consumer behavior, Kim et al. (2012) examined the relationship between regulatory focus and CSR messages, and found that when the ads portrayed a message inducing prevention hope, an altruistic CSR activity is more effective than a strategic one. Similarly, Siu et al. (2014) explored the effect of CSR in the context of service failure. Findings from a survey of restaurant patrons indicated that favorable CSR perception can help mitigate the negative effects of internal cause attribution on customer identification and post-recovery satisfaction.

Recent research suggests, however, that not all CSR messages are created equally (see Lee and Oh, 2014). Such research suggests that subtle differences in the presentation and framing of a company's message may affect the extent to which the goal of the message itself (i.e., positive attitude formation among target customers) is achieved. As follows, the evaluation of one important form of CSR communication, the company's environmental sustainability platform, is considered from the complementary perspectives of construal level theory and information processing theory.

2.2. Construal level theory

Construal level theory (CLT) (Liberman and Trope, 1998; Trope and Liberman, 2003, 2010, 2011) is an account of the extent to which psychological distance affects the interpretation of information, as well the as attitudes and behaviors subsequent to that interpretation. At the most basic level, CLT suggests that the more psychologically distant an object is from the individual, the more abstract is the construal. Abstract construals refer to superordinate, big-picture aspects, with the focus being on the gestalt of the situation, overall impressions, and the central features of an object. This type of thinking does not focus on details or peripheral information, but rather on a holistic impression of the situation. However, as an object or event becomes psychologically proximal, individuals tend to process information at a more concrete level. Unlike abstract construals, concrete construals are concerned with details, supporting context, peripheral information, and secondary features. Such construals are a more focused, critical, and detail-oriented processing of the information at hand.