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Article

Cause-related marketing: An experimental study about how the product type and the perceived fit may influence the consumer response

Marketing con causa: un estudio experimental sobre cómo el tipo de producto y el ajuste percibido pueden afectar a la respuesta del consumidor

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ABSTRACT

Although previous cause-related marketing literature has examined the role of the nature of the product and the perceived fit between the product and the cause, there is no clear consensus yet regarding the effect of these variables. This study contributes to existing literature by shedding light on the role that these two key factors have on consumer response. A 2 (utilitarian products vs. hedonic products) × 2 (perceived fit: high vs. low) between-subjects factorial design was used to test the hypotheses. The results indicate that the nature of the promoted product used in the cause-related marketing campaign influences both brand attitude and purchase intention. Specifically, the attitude towards the brand was greater for the hedonic products than the utilitarian ones. By contrast, cause-related marketing campaigns linked to utilitarian products lead to higher purchase intentions. In addition, perceived fit between the product and the cause seems to play a key role, as this variable positively influences both the credibility of the campaign and the attitude towards the brand. The results provide useful guidelines for marketers in designing their cause-related marketing initiatives.

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Introduction

Cause-related marketing (CRM) initiatives have become increasingly popular among organizations. This strategy implies supporting a social cause to promote the achievement of marketing objectives (Barone, Norman, & Miyazaki, 2000). CRM implementation can be undertaken in different forms (Gupta & Pirsch, 2006a; Liu & Ko, 2011). One of the most common forms involves the donation of a portion of the corporation's profits from each product sold to a cause. In this sense, CRM is defined by Varadarajan and Menon (1988, p. 60) as "the process of formulating and implementing marketing activities that are characterized by an offer from the firm to contribute a specified amount to a designated cause when customers engage in revenue-providing exchanges that satisfy organizational and individual objectives".

Supporting a specific cause can have several advantages. For instance, cause marketing programmes allow companies to create a link with customers and show a commitment to social responsibility. Unlike other marketing communications tools, CRM is also a powerful way to reach consumers on an emotional level (Roy, 2010). This promotional strategy can improve and sustain a favourable image and reputation among consumers, establish differentiation from competitors and add value to the brand (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Wymer & Samu, 2009). All these benefits can, in sum, positively influence consumer attitude and purchase behaviour. However, recent research has shown that, compared to other corporate social responsibility (CSR) actions, such as sponsorship or philanthropy, CRM activities are more likely to be viewed with suspicion (Lii & Lee, 2012; Sheikh & Beise-Zee, 2011), as CRM initiatives generally require consumers to make a purchase; therefore, the link between the cause and the company's profits can result in a less favourable evaluation.

Given the relevance and business emphasis on using CRM initiatives, it is important to explore the main factors associated with

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successful CRM campaigns. Among the multiple factors that may have a bearing on the effectiveness of CRM, two are of particular interest: the type of product and the perceived fit between the product and the cause. The evaluation of CRM initiatives is likely to depend on the type of product used (i.e. hedonic vs. utilitarian) (Strahilevitz & Myers, 1998). Likewise, perceived fit, which refers to the degree of proximity or congruence between the product and the cause, has been assumed to be one of the most influential with respect to the ultimate success of the partnership (Lafferty, 2007). Controversy exists, however, regarding the influence of these variables. For instance, while some authors have found that consumer response to CRM is more favourable when the products are hedonic rather than utilitarian (Strahilevitz & Myers, 1998), others have not replicated these results (Subrahmanyam, 2004; Wymer & Samu, 2009). Likewise, advice on the level of fit between the product and the cause is mixed, with some calling for a high level of fit and others advocating a moderate or low product-cause fit level (Barone et al., 2000). In addition, both factors (the type of product and perceived fit) can simultaneously influence three levels of consumer response: cognitive, affective and behavioural (Roy, 2010). Research, however, has generally addressed the analysis of consumer responses individually.

In this context, this study assesses whether the nature of the product and the fit between the product and the cause influence: (1) the credibility of the CRM campaign (cognitive consumer response); (2) the attitude towards the brand (affective consumer response); and, (3) the purchase intention (behavioural consumer response). In addition, we aim at comparing the nature of the product, that is to say, hedonic and utilitarian products in order to better understand the results of this study.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. First, we present the theoretical background of the study and formulate the hypotheses. We then describe the research method, followed by an analysis of the empirical results. Finally, conclusions and implications for researchers and managers are provided, along with the limitations of the study and directions for future research.

Literature review

As with other managerially controllable factors, such as price, distribution and advertising, CRM campaigns influence cognitive, affective, and behavioural consumer responses (He, Zhu, Gouran, & Kolo, 2016; Huertas-García, Gázquez-Abad, & Lengler, 2014; Roy, 2010). To increase the efficacy of CRM, the growing literature on this topic has analyzed the impact that several factors have on consumer responses to these initiatives.

For instance, some authors have studied cause characteristics, such as the familiarity, the importance and the geographic scope of the cause (Cui, Trent, Sullivan, & Matiru, 2003; Grau & Folse, 2007; Hou, Du, & Li, 2008; Lafferty & Edmondson, 2009). Researchers have also explored the role of the variables related to the campaigns, such as the donation size (Chang, 2008; Moosmayer & Fuljahn, 2010; Pracejus, Olsen, & Brown, 2003, 2004), the clarity of the message (Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006), the dominance or emphasis given to the cause in the message (Samu & Wymer, 2009), or the duration of the campaign and the amount of resources invested (van den Brink, Odekerken-Schröder, & Pauwels, 2006). Similarly, other researchers have analyzed the influence of characteristics relating to the company, such as its corporate credibility (Kim, Kim, & Han, 2005; Lafferty, 2007), or related to the non-profit organization, such as its image (Arora & Henderson, 2007). Finally, other authors have examined the impact of consumer characteristics on their responses to CRM, such as consumer scepticism (Vanhamme & Grobben, 2009), concern for appearances (Basil & Weber, 2006),

consumers' temporal orientation (Tangari, Folse, Burton, & Kees, 2010) and other socio-demographic variables (Cui et al., 2003).

While these previous studies have offered new insights into consumer responses to CRM, there is a general consensus among scholars that more research is needed (Aldás, Andreu, & Currás, 2013; Lafferty & Edmondson, 2009). Specifically, among the multiple variables that may affect the influence of a CRM programme, two are of particular interest: the nature of the product, and the fit between the product and the cause. These variables have been identified in prior research as potentially relevant factors influencing CRM success (Lafferty, 2007; Strahilevitz & Myers, 1998). However, as noted earlier, the results are still controversial. In addition, as these variables are under companies' control, they are relevant to managers when designing CRM campaigns. In the next section, we explore how these two variables may influence cognitive, affective and behavioural consumer responses to CRM programmes.

Nature of the product: hedonic vs. utilitarian

The evaluation of CRM initiatives is likely to depend on the type of product used (i.e. hedonic vs. utilitarian). While hedonic products, such as ice cream, chocolates or concert tickets, are generally linked to experiential consumption, utilitarian products, such as laundry detergent or toothpaste, are viewed as more functional and instrumental. Therefore, hedonic products are judged in terms of how much pleasure they provide, whereas utilitarian products are judged in terms of how well they function.

Previous research has shown that the success of CRM campaigns is higher when the strategy is used with hedonic products rather than utilitarian ones (Chang, 2008; Strahilevitz & Myers, 1998). For instance, Strahilevitz and Myers (1998) found that donations to charity were more effective for promoting frivolous products (i.e. hedonic products) than in promoting practical products (i.e. utilitarian products). On the contrary, monetary incentives (i.e. price discounts) were preferred when they were bundled with utilitarian or practical products. This result can be explained by the fact that hedonic products are more likely than utilitarian products to arouse both pleasure and guilt (Kivetz & Simonson, 2002; Zheng & Kivetz, 2009). According to the field of social psychology, guilt is a negative emotion that a person may wish to overcome by means of some prosocial behaviour (e.g. Batson & Coke, 1981). Therefore, the feeling of guilt can be mitigated if the hedonic purchase is linked to a cause. In contrast, CRM campaigns linked to practical products tend to generate fewer emotional responses. Thus, the evaluation and purchase decisions for these types of products are usually more rational and focused on cues related to the product itself (Chang, 2008).

Based on the reasoning above, it is expected that consumers will demonstrate more positive cognitive, affective and behavioural responses when CRM initiatives are used in hedonic products. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1. CRM linked to hedonic products (vs. utilitarian) will lead to: (a) higher campaign credibility; (b) a more positive attitude towards the brand; and (c) higher purchase intention.

Perceived fit between the product and the cause

Perceived fit refers to the perceived degree of proximity or congruence between the promoted product and the cause. The influence of perceived fit has been studied within multiple research streams in marketing, such as brand extensions (e.g. Aaker & Keller, 1990; De Jong & van der Meer, 2015; Völckner & Sattler, 2006), co-branding (Simonin & Ruth, 1998), corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Bigné, Currás-Pérez, & Aldás-Manzano, 2012; Pérez

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