Russell Ackoff Doctoral Student Fellowship for Research on Human Decision Processes and Risk Management: 2008 Application

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Requested Support:
$ 2500.00
The Effects of Drug and Supplement Marketing on a Healthy Lifestyle

Descriptive Summary of Project

Though obesity has been declared a public health epidemic in the United States, risky, high-fat eating remains attractive to many Americans (Seiders and Petty, 2004; Wadden, Foster, and Brownell, 2002). A wide assortment of weight management and fat-fighting products has proliferated, but despite their appeal to consumers, recent research suggests that they may have unintended consequences that actually undermine consumers' tendency to engage in healthy, low-fat eating behaviors. Hence marketing of such remedies may unwittingly exacerbate risky consumer decision making.

Bolton, Cohen, and Bloom (2006) have found that problem status (or the relative attractiveness of the problem domain—high-fat eating in this case) moderates the effects of remedy marketing messages on consumers. Specifically, remedy messages actually undermine risk avoidance and increase risky behaviors, particularly for those consumers most at risk. Though this boomerang effect exists across several domains, Bolton, Reed, Volpp, and Armstrong (2007) recently extended this work, focusing on the health domain and identifying the psychological mechanisms that drive the boomerang. They found that drug marketing boomerangs and sabotages healthy lifestyle intentions in consumers via two mechanisms: a) drugs reduce risk perceptions and lessen the perceived importance of, and thus the motivation to engage in, complementary health-protective behaviors b) drugs are associated with poor health, reducing consumer self-efficacy and perceived ability to engage in complementary behaviors. Their results suggest that this boomerang effect on healthy lifestyle intentions does not hold for supplements as opposed to drugs, and furthermore, can be neutralized with a corrective intervention that addresses both motivation and ability to engage in health-protective behaviors in concert (Bolton et al., 2007).

I hope to utilize the support of the Ackoff Fellowship to build on these streams of research and gain further insight into the effects of drug and supplement marketing of fat-fighting remedies in the domain of weight management and risky versus healthy eating. Whereas past research (Bolton et al., 2006; 2007) in boomerang effects has studied behavioral intentions and utilized hypothetical third-party scenarios, my study will examine the effects of drug marketing on actual consumption behavior. Furthermore, I hope to extend the generalized understanding of this effect by refining our focus to risky and healthy eating.

The financial support of $2500 that I am seeking will be used for two purposes within this research project: to fund data collection and to share the results of my research at a marketing conference. Data will be collected in a series of experiments in the Wharton Behavioral Lab, and calibration issues may call for several iterations. While cost per participant varies, I may require $3 per participant in order to properly fund this research, given that studying food consumption may be costlier and more labor intensive than other studies. In addition, I anticipate that this research might be of interest to the marketing community, and I hope to present my results at a conference: the Association for Consumer Research. Next year’s conference is in San Francisco, and I estimate that lodging and air travel to and from the conference will cost about $400 each. While the Marketing Department allocates some funding for research and travel, it is sufficient to cover only a small portion of the research I intend to conduct over the course of my studies, and no more than two conferences. Any incurred expenses that the Russell Ackoff Doctoral Student Fellowship does not cover will thus be paid out-of-pocket or by any funds remaining in my departmental research budget.
References


