

Russell Ackoff Doctoral Student Fellowship for Research on Human Decision Processes and Risk Management: 2009 Application

Escaping the Crosshairs: Reactance to Identity Marketing

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Descriptive Summary of Project

Researchers and practitioners alike have long acknowledged the importance and potential of marketing messages that target consumers on the basis of identities they hold. A sizeable literature has established that consumers' identities drive them to select constellations of products and services that maintain and strengthen those identities (e.g., Forehand Deshpande & Reed 2002; Shavitt 1990).

Given that consumers are attracted to brands and products that reflect the identities that they possess (Forehand et al. 2002), brand managers are presumably smart to attempt to position brands and products in order to reflect particular social identities: fostering this sense of connection may lead to a deeper, more persistent sense of consumer loyalty in purchase decisions (Reed 2004). Moreover, stronger identity marketing appeals should be more effective in engendering such a deep connection. Achieving a sense of congruence or fit between the product, marketing appeal, and the consumer is thus seen as mutually beneficial, helping both the company and the consumer (Sirgy 1982). But can targeted identity marketing messages have a dark side?

The current research examines when identity marketing may backfire. In particular, I suggest that if messages are too strongly targeted, consumers may react against them, leading to negative outcomes for both the brand and the consumer. In making purchase decisions to construct and communicate their identities, consumers are motivated to protect their sense of individual agency, such that they can ensure that their expressions of identity are intrinsically motivated and not influenced by external factors (Kivetz 2005; Lepper 1981). Targeted identity appeals that use categorical language and threaten choice or intrinsic expression may restrict perceived consumer freedom. Thus, they may provoke reactance, which is defined as "the motivational state that is hypothesized to occur when a freedom is eliminated or threatened with elimination" (Brehm & Brehm 1981, p. 37). In other words, if messages are too strongly targeted, thus infringing on the consumer's ownership of the identity or threatening its intrinsic expression, they may provoke reactance in consumers.

Three experiments begin to test this theorizing. Results thus far suggest that consumers may react against strongly targeted identity marketing messages when the targeted identity is salient. However, marketing managers do not anticipate the possibility of reactance to identity marketing messages, and may unwittingly prefer messages likely to provoke reactance. Furthermore, findings suggest that this phenomenon has implications for both the brand and the consumer. Reduced perceptions of freedom to express the targeted identity lead consumers to reduce purchase likelihood and evaluations of the product. Moreover, after viewing a strongly targeted appeal that provokes reactance, consumers may de-emphasize the targeted identity, and value other products expressing that identity significantly less in subsequent, unrelated decisions.

I hope to utilize the support of the Ackoff Fellowship to build on this research by exploring the persistence of these effects on the consumer, and how they influence subsequent decisions. Furthermore, I hope to examine how these effects differ across domains, and as identity centrality varies. For instance, in more consequential domains such as health, messages that provoke reactance may result in significantly riskier decisions by consumers. Lastly, I hope to test this phenomenon in the context of general theories of skepticism, persuasion knowledge, and hypothesis-testing. Though researchers have suggested that psychological reactance is an important construct to study in the field of consumer behavior (Clee & Wicklund 1980), the topic has received scant empirical attention. The current research is the first empirical examination of reactance in the context of identity marketing. Following Kivetz (2005), I believe that psychological reactance is a mechanism critical to consumer functioning within the marketplace, and hope to more closely examine its influence in this context.

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