THE INFLUENCE OF MEDIUM AND VIVIDNESS: A PRINT VERSUS ONLINE CATALOG EXAMINATION

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ABSTRACT

Estimates suggest that overall Web-based sales could increase from $1 billion today to well over $375 billion within three to five years (Morgan Stanley 1997; Reda 1995; Wilensky 1995). Many believe that the new technology creates innovative means of interfacing with customers. The Web provides much more than just a new medium through which organizations can communicate with their publics. It has created a virtual environment in which users/customers interact with an organization and its market offerings (Deighton 1996). The promise of greater interactivity as a result of this medium has enticed many organizations onto the Web (Deighton 1996; Harris 1997; Cook and Coupey 1998).

The purpose of this study is to examine two underlying research questions. First, we intend to explore the issue of whether or not the medium through which information is presented influences consumer's perceptions toward, and their intentions to patronize, a retailer. Secondly, we wish to examine how differing levels of vividness employed within a Web-based medium influence consumer's attitude toward, and their intentions to patronize, a retailer. We believe that differences in the level of vividness result in significantly different consumer responses.

Theoretical Development

Medium: Interactivity rests upon the interaction between the user and the system. To understand the interaction between the Web and a user, it is necessary to examine the interface between the two units. Human computer interaction (HCI) theory can provide an underlying framework for the advancement of theory within a Web-based environment. Girgensohn and Lee (1997) indicate that the Web offers only limited interactivity and versatility as a platform for network applications. Further, they suggest that the interactivity of the Web is limited by the HCI input devices and forms.

Vividness: Hoffman and Novak (1996) suggest that interactivity occurs within a computer-mediated environment (CME). Steuer (1992) suggests that telepresence (a state of high involvement) can be created in computer mediated environments. Telepresence is a function of design elements of the media, such as vividness (Hoffman and Novak 1996; Sheridan 1992).

Research Procedures

An apparel retailer's print and online catalogs were used as the stimuli. Careful attention was paid to ensure that the retailer was targeting the intended subject pool. Further, a regional retailer was used to minimize pre-exposure bias. The online catalog was modified into low and high vivid treatment conditions. A between-subjects research design was employed. Three treatment conditions were used (print, low vivid online catalog, and high vivid online catalog). The sample consisted of ninety-three undergraduate students.

Analysis and Results

The print medium of the catalog was more involving than the low vivid version of the online catalog. Post-treatment attitude toward the retailer was significantly more positive in the print catalog treatment. Consumer's perceptions of the quality of the retailer's products were more favorable in the print medium of the catalog than the low vivid online version. Further, we found that participants exposed to the print medium of the catalog had more positive shopping intentions when compared to the low vivid online treatment.

We found that the high vivid version of the online catalog was more involving than the low vivid version of the online catalog. Post-treatment attitude toward the retailer was significantly more positive after viewing the high vivid version of the online catalog. In addition, consumer's perceived the retailer's products more positively in the high vivid treatment. Finally, shopping intentions toward the retailer were more positive in the high vivid treatment group than in the low vivid treatment group.

Conclusion

The Web and its influence on business has received much attention by both academics and practitioners over the past decade. The lure of interacting with users has created a movement toward the establishment of Web sites. This study demonstrates that the Web, in and of

itself, is but a vehicle through which the promise of interactivity can be achieved. It also demonstrates that, with proper design, organizations may be able to stimulate involvement that could result in more positive attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. Thus, it is important that researchers closely examine the role of medium and site design elements within this new environment.

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