

CAUSE MARKETING ALLIANCES: CORPORATE ASSOCIATIONS AND CONSUMER RESPONSES

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ABSTRACT

Shimp, Stuart, and Engle (1991) noted that associative learning is the mechanism that generates consumer thoughts and feelings towards brands. Grossman (1997) established a connection between associative learning concepts and co-branding. Brown and Dacin (1997) found that corporate social responsibility associations (e.g., corporate giving and community involvement) influence the overall evaluation of the company, which in turn can affect how consumers evaluate products from the company. Aaker (1991) established that brand associations are anything linked in memory to a brand, and that brands with a high number of positive associations have high levels of brand equity. He also cautioned that ill-conceived pairings can potentially damage a positive image.

The argument is made in this study that associative learning can be used in cause marketing to negatively or positively affect company trust, brand equity, perceptions of product quality, and behavioral intentions toward the brand through appropriate or inappropriate selection of a corporate cause. In the same respect, a non-

profit organization would be expected to benefit from greater increases in the consumers' perceptions of the importance of a cause and their intentions to support that cause by association with a company possessing a good reputation versus a mediocre reputation.

Much to the surprise of the researcher, the corporate sponsor with the mediocre reputation experienced much larger improvements in trust, brand equity, behavioral intentions, and perceptions of product quality than the sponsor with the good reputation. However, behavioral intentions and product quality ratings for the mediocre brand, while significantly improved, did not come close to ratings the company with the good reputation had even before the experiment started.

Results of the study indicate that non-profits who align themselves with companies with good reputations will benefit more from increased consumer support and perceptions of social importance than if they are sponsored by a company with a mediocre reputation. However, association with a mediocre sponsor did not seem to "hurt" the non-profit.

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