CONSUMER RESPONSES TO CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY (CSR) INITIATIVES

Examining the Role of Brand-Cause Fit in Cause-Related Marketing

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ABSTRACT: Through a controlled experiment, this study demonstrates that an ad with an embedded cause-related marketing (CRM) message, compared with a similar one without a CRM message, elicits more favorable consumer attitude toward the company. This is so regardless of the level of fit between the sponsoring brand and the social cause. Furthermore, when the embedded CRM message involves high versus low brand/cause fit, consumer attitudes toward the ad and the brand are more favorable. Such positive effect of brand/cause fit, however, only emerges for consumers who are high in brand consciousness; for those who are low in brand consciousness, brand/cause fit has no impact on ad or brand evaluations. Theoretical and practical implications of the findings are discussed.

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives have become increasingly popular among American corporations. A common form of such activity, referred to as cause-related marketing (CRM), involves a company's promise to donate a certain amount of money to a nonprofit organization or a social cause when customers purchase its products/services. A well-known CRM program has been General Mill's ongoing Yoplait campaign with the slogan "Save Lids to Save Lives," which promises to donate 10¢ to the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation for each yogurt lid returned by customers. To date, this CRM campaign has raised over 10 million dollars for the foundation.

Varandarajan and Menon (1988) categorize CRM among CSR initiatives that "Do Better by Doing Good." In other words, CRM not only increases the company's revenues but also contributes to societal welfare. They define CRM 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. (Varandarajan and Menon 1998, p. 60)

CRM is perhaps more prevalent nowadays than ever before. From the classic American Express campaign launched in 1983 to the recent Yoplait "Save Lids to Save Life" program,

thousands of companies have engaged in CRM. A survey conducted by the PMA (Promotion Marketing Association) and Gable Group (2000) revealed that CRM was being used by over 85% of the organization's corporate members. The prevalence of CRM has drawn research attention from both the industry and academia. Researchers are confronted with two prominent issues. The first concerns consumers' general responses to CRM. That is, do consumers generally think of and react to this form of marketing tactic favorably? The second issue has to do with the relative effects of different types of CRM. Although both issues could be addressed from the perspective of either the company or the nonprofit organization involved, research to date has primarily focused on implications for the sponsoring company (e.g., consumer attitudes, purchase intentions, sales, etc.).

In addressing the first issue, researchers have relied on anecdotal stories, case studies, and surveys that directly ask consumers what they think of CRM and the parties involved, as well as the extent to which their buying behaviors are likely to be influenced by a company's CRM programs. While such research has shown that consumers' general responses to CRM tend to be positive (e.g., RSW 1993; Webb and Mohr 1998), one may wonder about the utility of adopting a CRM strategy compared to a baseline condition where no CRM tactic is used. For instance, will an ad be more effective in terms of enhancing consumer attitudes toward the company and the brand when it has a CRM component versus when it doesn't have this feature? Indeed, without a standard of comparison, it is

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difficult to gauge the impact of CRM on consumer responses. Thus, more research that takes a *relative* approach comparing CRM and a baseline condition is needed to examine consumer responses to CRM.

The relative effects of different types of CRM, on the other hand, have been more commonly investigated through controlled experiments. This research stream has typically focused on a typology of CRM defined by features of the sponsoring brand/product/company (e.g., a utilitarian versus hedonic product; Strahilevitz and Myers 1998) or characteristics of the involved social cause (e.g., cause familiarity; Lafferty and Goldsmith 2005). However, a unique CRM campaign can also be defined by relationships between the sponsoring brand and the social cause. One such relationship is the level of "fit" between the brand and the cause, which could potentially influence consumer responses to the campaign.

The importance of brand/cause fit in CRM has been suggested by marketing scholars (e.g., Drumwright 1996; Strahilevitz and Myers 1998). The communication effects of "fit" have also been a focal research topic in other related areas such as event sponsorship (e.g., Rifon et al. 2004), brand extension (e.g., Aaker and Keller 1990), and celebrity endorsement (e.g., Kamins and Gupta 1994). Yet there has been surprisingly scant research addressing the role of brand/cause fit in determining the effects of CRM. Such research is important, however, on both theoretical and practical accounts. On a theoretical level, it could better our understanding of the communication effects of "fit" in new contexts. Practically speaking, such research could provide potential guidance for practitioners in selecting appropriate nonprofit partners or social causes in CRM programs.

This study, therefore, has two goals. First, it examines the relative effects of CRM versus a baseline condition where no such strategy is used. It is proposed here that regardless of brand/cause fit, exposure to an advertising message with a CRM component will lead to more favorable consumer responses than exposure to a similar ad without a CRM component. A second purpose of this study is to investigate the relative effects of a CRM program involving high brand/cause fit versus one that has low brand/cause fit. While it is expected that higher brand/cause fit will elicit more favorable consumer responses, this study further suggests that consumers with high brand consciousness are more sensitive to brand/cause fit, and are thus more influenced by this cue than their counterparts with relatively low brand consciousness. These propositions were tested through a controlled experiment.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Consumer Responses to CRM

Since its debut in 1983, CRM has generated extensive discussion in the trade literature (e.g., Braedon 1985; Freeman and Walley 1998; Smith and Stodghill 1994). Led by a few conceptual pieces (e.g., Drumwright 1996; Varandarajan and Menon 1988), scholarly work began to emerge in the 1990s (e.g., Ross, Patterson, and Stutts 1992; Smith and Alcorn 1991; Strahilevitz and Myers 1998; Webb and Mohr 1998). Recently, there has been a growing research interest in CRM (e.g., Barone, Miyazaki, and Taylor 2000; Dean 2004; Hamlin and Wilson 2004; Lafferty and Goldsmith 2005; Polonsky and Wood 2001; Pracejus, Olsen, and Brown 2003; Pracejus and Olsen 2004; Yechiam et al. 2002).

Consumers' General Responses to CRM

Earlier research has focused on consumers' general responses to CRM (e.g., Ross, Patterson, and Stutts 1992; Smith and Alcorn 1991; Webb and Mohr 1998). A variety of consumer responses, including perceptions of and attitudes toward the company/brand/product, as well as the nonprofit organization (NPO) involved in a CRM campaign, have been examined. Surveys and interviews were the most common methods for these studies. Research indicates that consumer attitudes toward companies sponsoring CRM are largely positive (Webb and Mohr 1998). Consumers tend to believe that companies sponsoring CRM are socially responsible (Ross, Patterson, and Stutts 1992). In addition, willingness to purchase a company's product is also positively influenced by the company's CRM activities (Smith and Alcorn 1991).

While these research findings are encouraging to companies using CRM strategies, the *absolute* nature of the measures makes it difficult to quantify the amount of positive effects that CRM has on consumer responses. In other words, it is hard to draw any conclusions with regard to the effects of CRM on consumer responses without a standard of comparison. For instance, it is not readily clear whether an ad with a CRM component could elicit significantly more positive consumer reactions relative to a similar ad without the CRM message. This issue has not become a research focus until recently (e.g., Hamlin and Wilson 2004; Lafferty and Goldsmith 2005). In Hamlin and Wilson's (2004) study, research participants were exposed to a milk ad either with or without a CRM component. Comparing consumer responses to the regular ad and the ad with a CRM component, the researchers found that the CRM cue had no effects on consumer evaluations of the product and purchase intention. In another study, Lafferty and Goldsmith (2005) adopted a pre- and posttest approach, comparing consumer evaluations of a brand before and after exposure to an ad for this brand with a CRM component. The researchers found that postexposure attitudes toward the brand were significantly more positive than pre-exposure evaluations. While this study in essence used a relative approach to examining the effects of CRM, its design allowed an alternative explanation for the findings. Specifically, because research participants were not

shown any stimuli during the pre-exposure time, the difference between pre-exposure and postexposure attitudes could be attributed to the mere effect of having been shown an ad during the postexposure time (e.g., the mere exposure effect; Zajonc 1968), rather than to the impact of the CRM message.

Clearly, more research is needed to examine the effects of CRM on consumer responses relative to a baseline condition to permit a more quantifiable depiction of the utility of this marketing tactic. Regardless of what baseline condition is chosen for the purpose of comparison, care should be taken to maximize the comparability between the CRM condition and the baseline condition such that any differential effects resulting from exposure to the two different stimuli can be reliably attributed to the CRM message.

Consumer Responses to Different Types of CRM

Research on CRM is also marked by a particular interest in the effects of different types of CRM on consumer responses (e.g., Barone, Miyazaki, and Taylor 2000; Dean 2004; Lafferty and Goldsmith 2005; Ross, Patterson, and Stutts 1992; Strahilevitz and Myers 1998; Yechiam et al. 2002). In general, two categories of independent variables have received the most attention: features associated with the brand and characteristics related to the social cause. Research has shown that a CRM program involving a hedonic product (e.g., ice cream, concert tickets, etc.) is more effective in eliciting willingness to purchase and stimulating actual purchases than one that is associated with a utilitarian product (e.g., laundry detergent, toothpaste, etc.) (Strahilevitz and Myers 1998, Experiment 2 and 3). Barone, Miyazaki, and Taylor (2000) demonstrate that consumers prefer a brand that shows an altruistic motivation to support a social cause to a comparable brand that forms alliance with a social cause for the purpose of generating sales. On the other hand, consumer evaluations of the company or the brand appear to be less susceptible to the influence of the characteristics associated with the social cause (Lafferty and Goldsmith 2005, p. 425). Ross, Patterson, and Stutts (1992) suggest that consumer attitudes toward a firm engaging in CRM would be more favorable when the CRM program involves a local social cause than when it involves one that is national. This hypothesis was not confirmed by empirical data, however. Additional research on the potential effects of a variety of other characteristics associated with the social cause may generate alternative findings.

While previous research has provided insight into the impact of brand-related and cause-related features on consumer responses to CRM, much less is known about the potential effects of brand–cause relationships. In particular, it is not clear how the level of "fit" between the brand and the cause might influence the effects of a CRM program. Although the importance of brand/cause fit in CRM has been suggested by academic researchers (e.g., Drumwright 1996; Strahilevitz and Myers 1998) and in the trade literature (e.g., Bainbridge 2001; Gray 2000), with only a few recent attempts (Hamlin and Wilson 2004; Pracejus and Olsen 2004), little empirical evidence exists that either supports or negates this common assertion. Pracejus and Olsen (2004) focus on the effects of brand/cause fit on consumer choice behaviors and demonstrate that consumers are more likely to choose a product featured in a CRM program with high versus low brand/cause fit. Hamlin and Wilson's (2004) study was inconclusive with regard to the effects of brand/cause fit on consumers' brand evaluations.

The Role of Brand/Cause Fit

A common marketing strategy has been to associate a product with an object possessing positive attributes. For instance, in event sponsorship, a product is often associated with an event that is well liked by the public. Celebrity endorsement, on the other hand, typically pairs a product with a well-regarded public figure. The increasingly popular brand-extension strategy ties a new product with an existing reputable brand. In a similar vein, in CRM, a product is paired with a nonprofit organization or a social cause, toward which people generally hold positive attitudes. For all these marketing strategies, the matching, or "fit," between the product and the object it is associated with has been regarded as a critical issue (Aaker and Keller 1990; Drumwright 1996; Kamins and Gupta 1994; Rifon et al. 2004).

Despite the amount of discussion about "fit," there has been little consensus as to what the nature of "fit" is. The discussion often proceeds separately in different application areas rather than forming a broad research dialogue across fields. One commonality among the various perspectives regarding fit, however, is that perceived fit has multiple cognitive bases. In the brand-extension literature, perceived fit between a new product and the parent brand has been conceptualized as originating from multiple sources such as feature similarities and image consistency (Park, Milberg, and Lawson 1991). Perceived fit can also be influenced by an individual's idiosyncratic theories (Dawar 1992). In event sponsorship, researchers suggest that perceptions of fit could result from either "functional based similarity" (Gwinner 1997), which occurs when the sponsor's product is used during the event, or "image based similarity" (Benezra 1996), which represents the matching of core values between the sponsor and the event.

In CRM, brand/cause fit can also originate from multiple sources. A brand could fit with a social cause if both serve a similar consumer base (e.g., the General Mills campaign that ties Yoplait yogurt and the fight against breast cancer). Fit could be high if a brand and a social cause share a similar value (e.g., Johnson & Johnson first aid products and the American Red Cross). This paper adopts the multidimensional view of fit and

defines brand/cause fit in CRM as the overall perceived relatedness of the brand and the cause with multiple cognitive bases.

HYPOTHESES

When a product is associated with a positively evaluated object, affect transfer will occur. Affect transfer is the process wherein people's preexisting affect associated with one object is transferred to a closely related object, toward which people may not hold prior affect (Shimp 1981). Affect transfer has been commonly observed in various marketing contexts. Research in brand extension indicates that consumers often respond favorably to a new product that is introduced by an existing reputable brand (Aaker and Keller 1990). Similarly, in event sponsorship, consumers' positive affect toward the event often results in favorable evaluations of the sponsoring product (Crimmins and Horn 1996). Keller (2003, p. 595) named the affect transfer as the brand-leveraging process, wherein marketers attempt to increase the equity of their brands by borrowing equity from others.

In CRM, the association between a brand and a social cause could lead to a similar affect transfer process: consumers' general positive attitudes toward the nonprofit organization could be transferred to the sponsoring brand. In addition, as the brand promises to donate money to the social cause, consumers may perceive the brand to be altruistic, which could result in more favorable brand evaluations. Furthermore, for consumers who themselves are altruistic, perceived altruism of the brand can result in a sense of connectedness or social identification, which is the inference that the sponsoring brand or company has certain desirable traits that resonate with one's sense of self (Lichtenstein, Drumwright, and Braig 2004; Mael and Ashforth 1992). All these mechanisms suggest that consumers will respond more favorably to a company/brand engaging in CRM versus a similar one that does not engage in this philanthropic activity, and this should be so regardless of the level of brand/cause fit. Hence, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Exposure to an advertising message with a CRM component involving high brand/cause fit will lead to more favorable (a) attitude toward the ad, (b) attitude toward the brand, and (c) attitude toward the company than exposure to a similar advertising message without a CRM component.

H2: Exposure to an advertising message with a CRM component involving low brand/cause fit will lead to more favorable (a) attitude toward the ad, (b) attitude toward the brand, and (c) attitude toward the company than exposure to a similar advertising message without a CRM component.

Research has also shown that the affect transfer process can be facilitated when the level of fit between the product and the positively evaluated object with which it is associated is relatively high. In brand-extension research, it has been well documented that the transfer of a parent brand's evaluations to a new extension becomes greater as the parent brand and the extension are perceived more similarly (Aaker and Keller 1990; Boush and Loken 1991). The same facilitating effect of fit has been noted for event sponsorship (Gwinner 1997). A direct consequence of the facilitating effect of fit is that attitudes toward a well-fitted product will be more favorable than attitudes toward an ill-fitted product in strategic pairing. Based on the above reasoning, when two brands both engage in CRM, the one that has a high level of fit with the social cause should be viewed more favorably than the one that has a low level of fit. Thus, the following hypothesis is posited:

H3: Exposure to an advertising message with a CRM component involving high (versus low) brand/cause fit will lead to more favorable (a) attitude toward the ad, (b) attitude toward the brand, and (c) attitude toward the company.

Hoeffler and Keller (2002) suggest that CRM is a promising tool for building brand equity. According to Keller (1998), brand equity is the differential effect that brand knowledge has on customer response to marketing activity. Brand knowledge is represented in memory as a brand node to which a variety of associations are linked (e.g., product functions, user image). Hoeffler and Keller (2002) pointed out that CRM could build brand equity by enhancing user image, since users of brands engaging in CRM are generally perceived as being generous and altruistic.

Compared to a CRM program that has low brand/cause fit, a CRM initiative exhibiting high brand/cause fit defines user image in a more consistent way. For example, a brand of orange juice, which is closely associated with the idea of a healthy diet, could engage in CRM that involves a social cause in the area of either healthy diet or traffic safety. When the social cause is related to a healthy diet (i.e., brand/cause fit is high), brand-user image is likely to be unambiguous and well defined (e.g., generous people who care about a healthy diet). In contrast, when the social cause is related to traffic safety, brand-user image will be relatively ambiguous (e.g., generous people who care about a healthy diet and traffic safety).

Ambiguity in brand-user image could be more important for some people than for others. In particular, it is likely to be more relevant for consumers with high brand consciousness than for those with low brand consciousness. Brand consciousness has been commonly defined as an individual trait characterized by the degree to which a consumer is oriented toward buying well-known branded products (Shim and Gehrt 1996; Sproles and Kendall 1986). Core to being brand conscious is the idea that the brands one uses are a reflection of one's own personalities. This tendency has been well documented in the broader literature of product symbolism, which suggests that consumers perceive purchase and consumption of products

to be vehicles for self-expression (Belk 1988; Sirgy 1985). Consumers with high brand consciousness should be highly sensitive to the user image a brand conveys. To the extent that the image is positive and unambiguous, these consumers will hold a positive attitude toward the brand. If the user image conveyed by a brand is ambiguous, however, highly brand-conscious consumers may perceive risks in adopting the brand, which arise from the uncertainties with regard to how they would be perceived by others when using the brand. Such perceived risks or uncertainties could lead to a less favorable attitude toward the brand. In contrast, consumers who are low in brand consciousness are not concerned about the user image conveyed by a brand, and thus are less sensitive to ambiguity in brand-user image. The above discussion leads to the following hypothesis:

> *H4: The impact of the level of brand/cause fit (high versus low) on (a) attitude toward the ad, (b) attitude toward the brand, and (c) attitude toward the company will be more pronounced for individuals high (versus low) in brand consciousness.*

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

An experiment was conducted to test the hypotheses. One hundred undergraduate students recruited from introductory communication classes in a large Midwestern university participated in exchange for extra credits. The experiment was conducted in a research lab. Participants were randomly assigned to three experimental conditions: a high brand/cause fit condition, a low brand/cause fit condition, and a control group (i.e., a regular ad condition).

On arrival at the research lab, each participant was given a booklet, which contained the experimental stimuli and a questionnaire. Participants were told that the purpose of the study was to find out how college students respond to a new brand of orange juice that had recently been introduced to the market and that they were going to see an advertisement for this new product and answer a few questions afterward. The experimental stimulus was in the form of a ¾-page black-and-white print ad. It featured an image of the product (i.e., Sunshine Orange Juice) on a sky blue background. A headline (i.e., "Naturally rich in vitamin C") and a product description in a smaller font (i.e., "Sunshine Orange Juice is naturally rich in the antioxidant vitamin C, an ingredient known for preventing some heart diseases.") appeared in the middle of the ad. Company Web site information was placed at the bottom of the ad. All these features of the ad were the same across the three experimental conditions. The only difference was in the space between the product description and the Web site information: For the regular ad condition, no information was shown, whereas in the other two conditions, a CRM message was inserted (see the Appendix for the three ads used in the experiment). After viewing the ad, participants filled out a questionnaire that included measures of advertising effects, confounding variables, manipulation check, brand consciousness, and simple demographics.

Manipulation of Brand/Cause Fit

Brand/cause fit was manipulated by varying the nonprofit organization involved in the CRM (e.g., Hamlin and Wilson 2004; Lafferty and Goldsmith 2005). Since orange juice is often perceived as a healthy drink, it would be appropriate to choose a health-related nonprofit organization as a matching partner. Thus, in the high brand/cause fit condition, the involved nonprofit organization was the Healthy Diet Research Association. As a way of augmenting brand/cause fit, the product description emphasized Sunshine Orange Juice's healthy ingredients that are beneficial for one's heart health. The exact wording of the CRM message was as follows: "Sunshine Orange Juice is a sponsor of the Healthy Diet Research Association. For every bottle of juice sold, we donate 5 cents to this worthy cause."

In the low brand/cause fit condition, the involved nonprofit organization was the Traffic Safety Research Association. The wording of the CRM message was a replication of that appearing in the high-fit condition, except for the name of the nonprofit organization.

Both nonprofit organizations were fictitious and were expected to be unfamiliar to the participants. The hypothetical nature of the organizations could reduce variations in participants' previous experiences with the organizations, and thus, the confounding of brand/cause fit and experience-related variables. A pretest with a small body of students not part of the group involved in the experiment indicated similar perceptions of and attitudes toward the two organizations and social causes.

Measures

Consumer Responses

Three evaluative consumer responses were taken: attitude toward the ad, attitude toward the brand, and attitude toward the company. Attitude toward the ad was measured by three items on a 1 to 7 scale anchored by the adjectives dislike/like, unfavorable/favorable, and negative/positive (Cronbach's α = .93). Attitude toward the brand was measured similarly by three items on a 1 to 7 scale: dislike/like, unfavorable/favorable, and negative/positive (Cronbach's α = .93). Attitude toward the company was measured by four items on a 1 to 7 scale anchored by the adjectives dislike/like, unfavorable/favorable, nega-

tive/positive, and socially irresponsible/socially responsible (Cronbach's α = .91). Since each measure showed a relatively high internal consistency, items measuring the same construct were averaged to form an index for that construct.

Brand Consciousness

Brand consciousness was measured by three items adapted from DDB Needham Lifestyle Surveys (see Nelson and McLeod 2005 for similar measure). Participants were asked to indicate their agreement with each of the following statements on a 1 to 7 scale (1 being strongly disagree and 7 being strongly agree): (1) "I pay attention to the brand names of the products I buy," (2) "sometimes I am willing to pay more money for a product because of its brand name," and (3) "I believe the brands I buy are a reflection of who I am" (Cronbach's α = .74). The three items were averaged to form an index for brand consciousness.

Manipulation Check

To check if brand/cause fit was successfully manipulated, participants were asked to indicate their agreement with each of the following statements: (1) "I think that Sunshine Orange Juice donating to [the name of the nonprofit organization depending on the experimental condition] represents a good match between the product and the cause," and (2) "I think that donations to [the name of the nonprofit organization depending on the experimental condition] are appropriate for Sunshine Orange Juice." As stated previously, this study adopts a multidimensional view of brand/cause fit. Thus, rather than focusing on a specific aspect of brand/cause fit, the statements were framed broadly to capture a wide range of cognitive bases for perceived fit.

Potential Confounding Variables

The way brand/cause fit was manipulated in this study (i.e., varying the nonprofit organization) potentially introduced a number of confounding variables. These were primarily participants' perceptions of and attitudes toward the social cause and the organization. Thus, items were included in the questionnaire that provided measures for participants' general attitude toward the organization and perceived personal relevance of the social cause. The former was measured by three items on a 1 to 7 scale anchored by the adjectives dislike/like, unfavorable/favorable, and negative/positive (Cronbach's α = .92). The latter was measured by a single question that asked participants the extent to which they personally care about the social cause. Although the organizations were fictitious, a measure of familiarity with the organization was also included to guard against participants' possible confusion involving the organization featured in the ad and other organizations they knew or had heard about.

RESULTS

Manipulation Check

For the manipulation check, a MANOVA (multivariate analysis of variance) was conducted, where the independent variable was brand/cause fit and the dependent variables were perceived match between the brand and the cause and perceived appropriateness of the alliance. The analysis revealed a significant effect of brand/cause fit on the dependent variables: Wilks's λ = .42, $F(2, 64)$ = 44.22, $p < .001$. Univariate test results indicated that perceived match between the brand and the cause was significantly higher when brand/cause fit was high (i.e., when the organization was the Healthy Diet Research Association) than when it was low (i.e., when the organization was the Traffic Safety Research Association): $M_{\text{healthy diet}}$ = 5.39, $M_{\text{traffic safety}}$ = 2.35, $F(1, 65)$ = 88.58, $p < .001$. In addition, perceived appropriateness of the alliance was significantly higher when the organization was health oriented than when it was unrelated to health: $M_{\text{healthy diet}}$ = 5.27, $M_{\text{traffic safety}}$ = 3.03, $F(1, 65)$ = 34.34, $p < .001$. These findings suggested that brand/cause fit was successfully manipulated.

Confounding Checks

To see whether the manipulation of brand/cause fit resulted in different perceptions of or attitudes toward the organization and the cause involved, a MANOVA was performed, where the independent variable was brand/cause fit and the dependent variables were the three potential confounding variables (i.e., general attitude, perceived relevance, and familiarity). The multivariate test result was nonsignificant ($p > .70$). Univariate test results indicated no significant effects of the brand/cause fit manipulation on general attitude toward the organization, perceived personal relevance of the social cause, and familiarity with the organization. Both groups held a relatively positive attitude toward the organization ($M_{\text{healthy diet}}$ = 4.67, M_{traffic} = 4.56, $p > .60$), indicated a relatively high personal relevance of the social cause ($M_{\text{healthy diet}}$ = 5.58, $M_{\text{traffic safety}}$ = 5.26, $p > .30$), and were unfamiliar with the organization ($M_{\text{healthy diet}}$ = 1.48, $M_{\text{traffic safety}}$ = 1.58, $p > .60$).

Hypothesis Testing

H1 and H2

H1 predicted that exposure to an advertising message with a CRM component involving *high* brand/cause fit would lead to more favorable (a) attitude toward the ad, (b) attitude toward the brand, and (c) attitude toward the company than exposure to a similar advertising message without a CRM component. To test this hypothesis, a series of one-way ANOVAs (analyses

TABLE I
A Summary of Statistical Tests

	Dependent variables		
	(a) Attitude toward the ad	**(b) Attitude toward the brand**	**(c) Attitude toward the company**
The high-fit condition versus the regular ad condition (H1)	$F(1, 64) = .14$	$F(1, 64) = .99$	$F(1, 64) = 5.05$**
The low-fit condition versus the regular ad condition (H2)	$F(1, 65) = .20$	$F(1, 65) = .56$	$F(1, 65) = 3.08$*
Main effect of brand/cause fit (H3)	$F(1, 63) = .32$	$F(1, 63) = 2.19$	$F(1, 63) = .17$
Main effect of brand consciousness (not hypothesized)	$F(1, 63) = 3.91$**	$F(1, 63) = .26$	$F(1, 63) = 4.62$**
Interaction of brand/cause fit and brand consciousness (H4)	$F(1, 63) = 5.02$**	$F(1, 63) = 6.85$**	$F(1, 63) = 1.61$

$*p < .10.$

$**p \leq .05.$

of variance) comparing the high brand/cause fit condition and the regular ad condition on the three evaluative responses were conducted. No significant differences in attitude toward the ad ($M_{\text{high fit}} = 5.03$, $M_{\text{regular ad}} = 4.90$, $p > .70$) or attitude toward the brand ($M_{\text{high fit}} = 5.61$, $M_{\text{regular ad}} = 5.32$, $p > .30$) were found across conditions. Thus, H1a and H1b were not supported. The test results, however, did reveal a significant effect of experimental condition on attitude toward the company such that the attitude was more favorable under the high brand/cause fit condition than under the regular ad condition, $M_{\text{high fit}} = 5.30$, $M_{\text{regular ad}} = 4.69$, $F(1, 64) = 5.05$, $p < .03$. This finding lent support for H1c.

In a similar vein, H2 predicted that exposure to an advertising message with a CRM component involving *low* brand/cause fit would lead to more favorable (a) attitude toward the ad, (b) attitude toward the brand, and (c) attitude toward the company than exposure to a similar advertising message without a CRM component. A series of one-way ANOVAs comparing the low brand/cause fit condition and the regular ad condition on the three evaluative responses were conducted to test this hypothesis. Again, no significant differences in attitude toward the ad ($M_{\text{low fit}} = 4.75$, $M_{\text{regular ad}} = 4.90$, $p > .60$) or attitude toward the brand ($M_{\text{low fit}} = 5.16$, $M_{\text{regular ad}} = 5.32$, $p > .50$) were found across conditions. Thus, H2a and H2b were not supported. Furthermore, attitude toward the company was more favorable under the low brand/cause fit condition than under the regular ad condition ($M_{\text{low fit}} = 5.14$, $M_{\text{regular ad}} = 4.69$), although the effect only approached the conventional level of significance, $F(1, 65) = 3.08$, $p < .09$. Thus, H2c received weak support. See Table 1 for a summary of the hypothesis tests and Table 2 for means and standard deviations of all dependent variables.

H3 and H4

H3 suggested that exposure to an advertising message with a CRM component involving high (versus low) brand/cause fit will lead to more favorable (a) attitude toward the ad, (b) attitude toward the brand, and (c) attitude toward the company. H4 further posited that these relationships would be moderated by an individual's brand consciousness such that the impact of brand/cause fit on (a) attitude toward the ad, (b) attitude toward the brand, and (c) attitude toward the company would be more pronounced for individuals high (versus low) in brand consciousness. Before testing the hypotheses, participants were divided into a high brand consciousness group and a low brand consciousness group based on a median split.

Hypotheses 3 and 4 were tested simultaneously through a MANOVA, where the independent variables were brand/cause fit (high versus low) and brand consciousness (high versus low), and the dependent variables were attitude toward the ad, attitude toward the brand, and attitude toward the company. An unexpected main effect of brand consciousness emerged: Wilks's $\lambda = .88$, $F(3, 61) = 2.82$, $p < .05$. Univariate test results indicated that brand consciousness had a positive effect on attitude toward the ad, $M_{\text{high bc}} = 5.15$, $M_{\text{low bc}} = 4.55$, $F(1, 63) = 3.91$, $p = .05$, and attitude toward the company, $M_{\text{high bc}} = 5.45$, $M_{\text{low bc}} = 4.91$, $F(1, 63) = 4.62$, $p < .04$, but not attitude toward the brand ($p > .60$). The expected main effect of brand/cause fit, on the other hand, did not emerge. It appeared that brand/cause fit had no systematic effect on any of the dependent variables (p's $> .14$). Thus, H3 was largely unsupported.

The analyses, however, did reveal a significant interaction

TABLE 2
Means and Standard Deviations of All Dependent Variables

| | High brand consciousness | | | Low brand consciousness | |
	Regular ad condition	High-fit condition	Low-fit condition	High-fit condition	Low-fit condition
Attitude toward the ad	4.90 (1.42)	5.58 (1.18)	4.72 (1.60)	4.29 (1.33)	4.80 (1.44)
Attitude toward the brand	5.32 (1.28)	5.93 (.81)	4.93 (1.01)	5.17 (1.12)	5.44 (1.04)
Attitude toward the company	4.69 (1.10)	5.66 (1.06)	5.24 (.90)	4.80 (.96)	5.02 (1.13)

FIGURE 1
The Interaction Between Brand/Cause Fit and Brand Consciousness (Dependent Variable: Attitude Toward the Ad)

FIGURE 2
The Interaction Between Brand/Cause Fit and Brand Consciousness (Dependent Variable: Attitude Toward the Brand)

between the level of brand/cause fit and brand consciousness: Wilks's λ = .88, $F(3, 61)$ = 2.76, p = .05. Univariate test results indicated that the interaction was significant for attitude toward the ad, $F(1, 63)$ = 5.02, $p < .03$ (see Figure 1), and attitude toward the brand, $F(1, 63)$ = 6.85, $p < .02$ (see Figure 2), but not attitude toward the company ($p > .20$). Additional analyses revealed that for participants who were high in brand consciousness, the level of brand/cause fit had a positive effect on attitude toward the ad, $M_{high\ fit}$ = 5.58, $M_{low\ fit}$ = 4.72, $F(1, 63)$ = 4.56, $p < .04$, and attitude toward the brand, $M_{high\ fit}$ = 5.93, $M_{low\ fit}$ = 4.93, $F(1, 63)$ = 9.70, $p < .01$. For those who were low in brand consciousness, however, the level of brand/cause fit had no effect on either attitude toward the ad ($M_{high\ fit}$ = 4.29, $M_{low\ fit}$ = 4.80, $p > .20$) or attitude toward the brand ($M_{high\ fit}$ = 5.17, $M_{low\ fit}$ = 5.44, $p > .40$). Collectively, these findings provided support for H4a and H4b. H4c was not supported. See Table 1 for a summary of the hypothesis tests and Table 2 for means and standard deviations of all dependent variables.

DISCUSSION

Conclusions and Implications

Does an ad with a CRM message elicit more favorable consumer responses compared with a similar ad without a CRM component? The answer to this question appears to be a qualified "yes." This study indicates that a positive impact of CRM occurs primarily on consumers' attitudes toward the company, rather than their attitudes toward the ad or the brand. The experiment found that participants who were exposed to an ad with a CRM message held significantly more favorable attitudes toward the company compared with those exposed to a regular ad without a CRM component. As expected, this was so regardless of the level of brand/cause fit involved in the CRM program. It appears that the addition of a CRM component, whether it involves high or low brand/cause fit, to a regular ad message is beneficial in that it enhances the sponsoring company's overall image. Thus, complementing previous

research on consumers' general responses to CRM with focus on *absolute* measures of effects, this study provides insight into the *relative* effects of the CRM tactic and a baseline condition where no CRM is used, thus offering a clearer picture of the utility of CRM. A word of caution, however, is that the elevating effect of a CRM message on attitudes toward the company may be less substantial when brand/cause fit is low rather than high. This study found the expected positive effect of an ad with a low-fit CRM message (versus the baseline condition) on attitudes toward the company that only approached the conventional level of significance.

From a practical point of view, the findings here should be considered encouraging to companies currently engaging in CRM and those considering initiating CRM. It is clear that consumers respond favorably to CRM. The advantage of a communication message with an embedded CRM component over a similar message without a CRM component primarily resides in its ability to elicit more favorable consumer attitudes toward the company. Thus, the decision of engaging versus disengaging in CRM is more relevant when the priority is to enhance company image than when the priority is to build brand equity.

In terms of the relative effects of different types of CRM, this study shows no systematic effects of brand/cause fit on consumer responses. A CRM program with high brand/cause fit, compared with one of low brand/cause fit, is no more effective in eliciting positive attitudes toward the company, the ad, or the brand. The null effects, however, may be due to the complexity of the relationships, which needs to be captured with more complex theoretical models. This research proposes such a model, taking into consideration an individual trait, namely brand consciousness, when theorizing about the effect of brand/cause fit. As anticipated, significant interactions between brand/cause fit and brand consciousness emerged. More specifically, for participants with high brand consciousness, high brand/cause fit led to more positive attitude toward the ad and attitude toward the brand than low brand/cause fit. In contrast, for those who were low in brand consciousness, brand/cause fit had no impact on either ad or brand evaluations. Attitude toward the company, however, was not affected by the interaction.

This study thus demonstrates the effects of brand/cause fit on consumer responses to CRM. An important contribution of this research is the identification of brand consciousness as an individual trait that moderates the relationships between brand/cause fit and consumer evaluative responses toward the ad message and the sponsoring brand. Complementing previous research on the effects of "fit" under various marketing contexts (e.g., brand extension, event sponsorship), this research shows how "fit" can also be relevant for CRM, a research question that has received limited empirical scrutiny. In doing so, it expands our understanding of the nature

of "fit"; the moderation framework proposed here could indeed be relevant for brand extension or event sponsorship research.

It is interesting to note that in this study, attitude toward the company was not found to be affected by either the main effect of brand/cause fit or the interaction of brand/cause fit and brand consciousness. It thus appears that when the relative effects of different types of CRM are of concern, differential effects tend to be found for consumer responses toward proximal message sources (e.g., the ad and the brand) rather than distal message sources (e.g., the company or the advertiser). As suggested previously, when the relative effects of a CRM ad and a regular ad are evaluated, differential effects are more likely to be found for consumer responses toward distant rather than proximal message sources. Therefore, practically speaking, the decision of what sorts of CRM to engage in is more relevant when the priority is to build brand equity than when the priority is to enhance company image.

Limitations and Future Studies

Several limitations of this study need to be acknowledged. One major limitation of the experiment is the use of a fictitious brand and social causes, which was purported to strengthen the internal validity of the experimental design, but nonetheless poses threats to external validity. In reality, it is highly unlikely that consumers would be exposed to a CRM program involving both an unfamiliar brand and an unfamiliar cause. An alternative experimental design could address this limitation by using existing brands and/or social causes. Research participants' prior knowledge about the brands and/or social causes could then be statistically controlled. It is important to note, however, that this alternative design is not without limitations; it somehow sacrifices internal validity for the sake of achieving external validity.

On a related note, a fruitful direction for future research may be along the lines of examining the joint effects of brand/cause fit and consumers' existing perceptions of/attitudes toward the sponsoring brand/social cause. That is, rather than control for these extraneous variables, future studies could manipulate these factors and see whether these variables have an impact on the relationships between brand/cause fit and consumer responses.

Internal validity of this study could be strengthened by including a number of replicate groups for both the high-fit and low-fit conditions. That is, multiple nonprofit organizations that are a good or bad fit for the sponsoring brand could be used. Analyses could then be conducted on an aggregate level to reduce the impact of idiosyncratic differences between any two organizations on the dependent variables.

Another limitation of this study is the relatively small sample size. This is a concern both in terms of external validity and statistical power. First, it is difficult to generalize results

from an experiment employing a small student sample to a larger, more representative population. Thus, the robustness of the results from this study needs to be tested in future studies conducted with a larger, more representative sample. Second, a small sample size tends to be associated with a relatively low statistical power. In the case of H3, which predicted a significant effect of brand/cause fit on consumer responses, a post hoc power analysis indicated that the power to detect a small effect (d = .25) at the significance level of α = .05 was a small .18. Thus, several null effects observed in this study might be due to a relatively low statistical power, rather than a true absence of the effects. Whereas using a larger sample size can effectively address this concern, one should also keep in mind that the observed null effects may simply be due to a true absence of the effects.

It should be noted that the current study has examined the effects of brand/cause fit in CRM exclusively from the perspective of the brand/company involved. A perhaps equally, if not more, critical question is how brand/cause fit might influence consumer reactions to the nonprofit organization involved in a CRM program. Research addressing this question is rare, but the issue has become increasingly salient (Anderson 1996; Lafferty and Goldsmith 2005). Future studies along this line may generate knowledge useful for the management of nonprofit organizations and for social welfare in general. This study is also somehow limited in its exclusive focus on nonprofit organizations as possible social alliances for private companies engaging in CRM. In reality, CRM practice has been much broader. Direct collaborations between private companies and the public sector or public institutions (e.g., government agencies, universities, etc.) as alternative forms of CRM deserve future research attention.[1]

Finally, brand/cause fit is conceptualized in this study as the overall perceived relatedness of the brand and the cause with multiple cognitive bases. Unfortunately, such a broad treatment of brand/cause fit limits the opportunity to examine the effects of different types of brand/cause fit. As suggested previously, a brand could fit with a social cause to the extent that both serve a similar consumer base or that both share a similar value. Could brand/cause fit of a different nature have differential effects on consumer responses to a CRM message? Clearly, this is an intriguing research question that awaits future exploration.[2]

Corporate investments in cause-related marketing in recent years have been considerable and are still on the rise. The increasing popularity of cause-related marketing calls for systematic research that could potentially provide managerial guidance for corporate decision marketers as well as nonprofit organization leaders. On the other hand, the phenomenon of cause-related marketing offers new marketing concepts and poses thought-provoking research questions; in and of itself, it is a fascinating topic for academic endeavors.
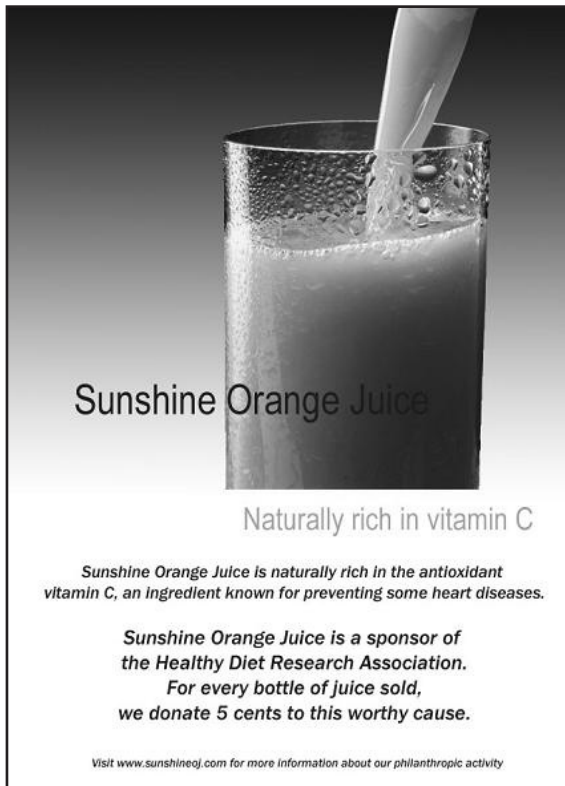
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APPENDIX

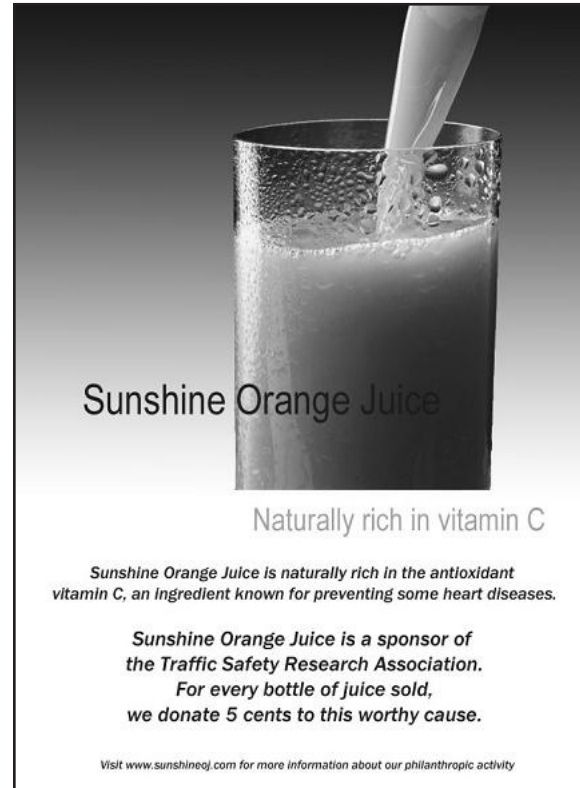### Experimental Stimuli

The High-Fit Condition

The Low-Fit Condition

The Regular Ad Condition