UNDERSTANDING THE R IN CSR: ARE RETAILERS OR MANUFACTURERS MOST RESPONSIBLE FOR PROMOTING HEALTHIER EATING?

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ABSTRACT

Fighting obesity has been an issue of growing importance in the US and elsewhere in recent decades. Most marketing research efforts addressing this problem have focused on consumers' intrinsic motivations toward (or against) behavior change, applying different behavior change models. Relatively little has been explored on how external influences, e.g. perceived Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) of manufacturers and retailers, can both help consumers reach their dieting goals and avoid damage to corporate reputations.

Building on existing CSR literature about motivations and abilities of organizations to undertake socially responsible actions, this paper adds to the body of knowledge by helping to understand how consumers' perceptions of organizations' motives and abilities to promote healthy eating shape consumers' expectations in regard to CSR actions. Perceived motives include a firm's CSR image, its overall image, relationships, and profits, while perceived abilities relate to power, persuasion and resources availability. Additionally, the paper provides insights for practitioners by inquiring about who is perceived to be the most responsible for promotion of healthier patterns: manufacturers or retailers.

In order to address research questions a study involving qualitative and quantitative stages of consumer research was undertaken. The qualitative stage comprised open ended elicitation questionnaires sent to 54 consumers aged 18-75 within a commercial Internet survey panel. The quantitative stage comprised of an online survey (n=654) administered by an Internet panel data agency to achieve UK national representation, in terms of gender, age and main regions. Data analysis included Principal Component Analysis for the purpose of classification of components for Motives and Abilities, and regression analysis which helped to understand the influence of perceived motives and abilities on expected CSR actions in this area.

Linear regression results yield interesting outcomes in terms of perceived motives and abilities, supporting the hypothesized influences on expected actions. However, the predictive strength of the motives for expected actions differs between manufacturers and retailers. For manufacturers, motives with the strongest predictive power are respectively: positive CSR image, positive image of the company, establishing and maintaining consumer relationships, and profitability. For retailers, the most predictive are respectively customer relationships, CSR image, and positive image of the company. Interestingly, profitability is not significant for retailers and for manufacturers it has the lowest Beta coefficient at relatively low significance level.

Finally, the paper proposes a broader research framework to assist future researchers in this area. It is based on the initial qualitative phase, the results of this consumer survey, and on two focus groups with senior industry insight specialists. It indicates that consumers not only have certain expectations in regard to expected CSR actions of various firms, but that they also tend to attribute responsibility and blame for not undertaking enough healthy eating-related CSR initiatives. These findings yield practical implications and suggest courses of action for different stakeholders, by indicating the areas where more responsible actions might be needed, in order to combat negative consumer evaluations.

References available upon request