

CARRY-OVER EFFECTS IN PROFESSIONAL ADVERTISING
AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC POLICY

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Abstract

There are indications that attitudes of individual professionals toward advertising within their profession may be influenced by advertising practices of professionals in another category.

relationship between advertising in one profession and the change of attitudes toward advertising in other professions. This change, as well, was not in the direction expected.

Introduction

When the Supreme Court of the United States decided on the case of John Bates and Van O'Steen v. State Bar of Arizona, it cleared the way for professionals to advertise without the interference of organizations with which they are professionally affiliated. The above decision was hailed as a landmark accomplishment especially by consumer action groups. These groups surmised that professional advertising would lead to price competition which, in turn, would result in better deals for the consumers. Professional advertising was also expected to make the consumers more aware and better informed about professionals and professional services. The additional knowledge was expected to improve consumer decision-making in the purchase of professional services.

From the beginning, major professional organizations such as the American Medical Association and the American Bar Association did not share the optimism of the consumer action groups. These organizations predicted that the supreme court ruling would have very little if any impact on the price structure or the competitiveness of the professions. The general consensus among the professional organizations was that professional advertising, although legal, would "die a slow death" from benign neglect. In the first three years following the supreme court ruling, advertising in most professions was sporadic at best. This suggested that to a large extent, the professional organizations were correct in their predictions. One profession seems to have significantly capitalized on the ruling enabling the professionals to advertise. Chiropractic services have gained substantial public awareness since they stepped up their multimedia advertising campaigns. Preliminary research conducted in the State of North Carolina for preparation for this paper indicate that patronage for chiropractors has grown at a very high rate especially within localities where aggressive campaigns have been undertaken.

Since this apparent correlation between professional advertising and growth appears to indicate that aggressive promotion by professionals can produce positive results, it would be reasonable to expect that other professionals would at least reassess their attitudes toward advertising in their respective professions. If this were the case, then current or recent surveys of professionals would show an increase in favorable attitudes toward advertising.

This paper reports the results of a recent survey of three categories of professionals in North Carolina namely, lawyers, doctors, and accountants. The results showed a change in attitudes toward advertising but not in the direction expected. Furthermore, depth interviews and projective questioning revealed a strong

Research Procedure

The sample of 88 subjects used in this study consisted of 34 lawyers, 29 medical doctors, and 25 accountants. The names were randomly selected from the local directories.

The questionnaire used in the study consisted of two parts. One part was objective, determinate and closed-ended. This section was used to obtain basic responses pertaining to the questions posed earlier. The questions in this section were dichotomous in nature, requiring a yes or no answer. The second part of the questionnaire was subjective and open-ended. It was used to probe for underlying feelings and bases for the answers provided in the prior section.

The questionnaire was administered in person over a period of one month.

The analysis was in two parts as well. The objective responses were tabulated to obtain basic descriptive characteristics. They were then analyzed further using the t-test to provide a test of the relevant hypotheses. A correlation analysis among the variables representing the various issues discussed was conducted.

Results, Conclusions, and Implications

This study indicated that all the professional categories interviewed had not significantly changed their advertising frequency or style since the court ruling. This was definitely not due to ignorance of the law or the ignorance about advertising practices of others. Subjects in all categories were surprisingly well informed. Peer pressure in form of fear of alienation and ridicule by colleagues was the strongest apparent deterrent to professional advertising. Individual perceptions about advertising was the second strongest deterrent. As for aggressiveness by chiropractors, it appears to have hardened anti-advertising attitudes among all the categories of professionals interviewed.

The apparent policy implication of this research is that while changing laws may be a necessary condition for inducing more frequent and more aggressive advertising by professionals, it is not a sufficient condition. The legal changes must be accompanied by changes in attitudes.