

The Effectiveness of “Typical-User” Testimonial Advertisements on Black and White Browsers’ Evaluations of Products on Commercial Websites: Do They Really Work?

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This study tests the effectiveness of testimonial advertisements on black and white browsers’ evaluations of a high-end product on a commercial website. The results demonstrate that, although white browsers in general respond no differently to a commercial site whether it features a black character testimonial advertisement, white character testimonial advertisement, or no testimonial advertisement, black browsers do respond differently to commercial sites based on the race of the character used in the testimonial advertisements. Specifically, the findings indicate that black browsers identified more strongly with black character testimonials, were more likely to believe a site was targeting them when the site contained black testimonials, and recalled more product information from a site that featured black character testimonials vis-à-vis a site with either white character testimonials or no testimonials. The theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed.

THE INTRODUCTION OF AN ENDORSER in advertisements has been shown to lead to more favorable attitudes toward an advertisement than an advertisement without an endorser (Raju, Rajagopal, and Unnava, 2002). Despite the enormous clutter of advertisements in the media, endorsers attract attention to advertisements (Atkin and Block, 1983) and serve as an information cue to consumers, indicating whether the product information is worth attention (Mittelstaedt, Riesz, and Burns, 2000). Although endorsers can take a variety of forms such as product experts, celebrities, and typical ordinary users, much of the research on endorsers has been directly tied to the use of celebrities (for a review see Till, 2001), while a dearth of research has focused specifically on “typical user” testimonial advertisements.

Typical user testimonials generally have ordinary satisfied customers discuss their own experiences with the brand and the benefits of using it

(Belch and Belch, 1998). This person is neither a celebrity nor an expert but rather an average user speaking for the brand (O’Guinn, Allen, and Semeniuk, 2000). According to Belch and Belch (1998), many businesses prefer to have their messages delivered by way of testimonials where consumers praise the product or service based on their personal experience with it.

The literature in this area suggests that people welcome testimonials (Westphal, 2000), like to read or hear from real ordinary people who have experience using the product, and give significant weight to these opinions (Rieck, 2000). Moreover, surveys demonstrate that because consumers are likely to trust, believe, and have confidence in the words of a satisfied customer (Raphel, 1997), typical-user testimonial advertisements given by satisfied users lead potential customers to read, believe, and purchase products (Murray, 1997). Although testimonials appear powerful and

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