

TRUST APPEALS AND THE POTENTIAL TO MISLEAD: A REVIEW OF CERTIFICATIONS AND SEALS OF APPROVAL ON CONSUMER PACKAGED FOOD LABELS

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ABSTRACT

Research has shown that trust appeals have the potential to mislead consumers. This study extends this research by reviewing characteristics of trust appeals used on consumer packaged food labels. A content analysis identified the following characteristics: (1) different sources for the appeal (i.e., first- or third-party), (2) different verification standards (i.e., first-party, independent, none), (3) different monetary fees for third-party appeals (i.e., fees based on sales volume, fees based on the cost of administering the certification), and (4) graphical cues that imply an award that does not exist. Directions for future research and implications for public policy and consumer awareness are also presented.

INTRODUCTION

Trust appeals are marketing claims that either implicitly or explicitly attest to the quality of a brand. [7] One such appeal is a product certification. Unfortunately, the literature indicates that consumers have a tendency to overstate the meaning of such appeals. As such, examining characteristics of certifications that could contribute to misleading consumer impressions is a worthwhile objective. The purpose of this study is to address this issue. We begin with a review of the existing literature to provide a foundation for an analysis of certifications used on food labels. The results are then presented along with suggestions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Issue 1: Source of the Appeal

Trust appeals in the form of a certification or seal of approval have been shown to have a persuasive influence on consumers' attitudes toward the brand. [1] In general, consumers view such appeals as an indication of the brand's quality. Prior evidence also suggests that consumers cannot readily evaluate the validity of a trust appeal [6] [9]. If consumers place value on third-party trust appeals *and* if consumers are unable to distinguish between first-party and third-party marks, the use of first-party marks is likely to mislead consumers, unless appropriate information disclosure is provided.

Research regarding information disclosure has been sparse. Aiken and Boush [1], for example, found that third-party trustmarks had the greatest effect on perceived trustworthiness when compared to an on-air commercial. Sheffet [10] also examined the effect of information disclosure and found that disclosure from a first-party source (i.e., the advertising firm) was *more* effective than disclosure from a third-party source (i.e., a governmental agency).

Issue 2: Verification Standards

There is no known federal requirement that products be independently tested in order to receive a certification. Since independent testing is not required, it would seem to have important implications for

public policy, especially if the lack of testing is not disclosed to consumers. Bennet and McCrohan [2], for example, note that “assessments from impartial experts tend to have a high degree of credibility because they exhibit both ‘expertness’ and ‘trustworthiness’ [5, p. 401] [8] [13]. A lack of independent testing would seem to undermine the presumed intent of these trust appeals.

Issue 3: Monetary compensation for third-party appeals

Bennett and McCrohan [2] suggest that the practice of using certifications to generate revenue might influence consumers’ perceptions of impartiality. In the absence of such disclosure, the potential to mislead consumers (even if unintentional) is likely to be greater than if disclosure is provided.

Issue 4: Graphic symbolism

The potential for a graphic symbol to create confusion can be explained by the concept of a claim/belief interaction. Gardner [3] contended that consumers can misinterpret certifications when they are presented in an abbreviated form. Extending this to the use of graphic symbolism, the use of a *Blue Ribbon* without disclosing that it is not an actual award, could be considered a claim/belief interaction since the blue ribbon symbolizes “first place.” Smith [12, p. 13] notes that “when advertising copy and pictures focus on different product attributes, the pictures disproportionately influence inferences.” As such, presenting a relatively weak verbal claim alongside a symbolically strong, but technically meaningless symbol, could lead to consumer confusion.

METHOD

To understand the nature of trust appeals, we examined the labels of consumer packaged food products. Because this is an exploratory study, we relied on a review of branded products at three large grocery retailers. Researchers examined brands on each aisle to identify any markings that indicated a trust appeal. The objective was not to obtain an audit; rather, it was to acquire a sufficient number and variety of claims that would allow an evaluation of differentiating characteristics.

RESULTS

The results of the exploratory analysis indicate that the source of the appeal is not always obvious. For example, first-party appeals often use graphical cues such as checkmarks to signify the product meets some standard. When used in conjunction with a verbal cue (e.g., “Sensible Snacking”), the presentation could conceivably suggest that the brand has been endorsed by an independent third party. Additionally, while it might be assumed that third-party marks require independent verification, this investigation found that this is not always the case. Although explicit claims need to be truthful, we found that some third-party certifications do not require independent testing. Future research may want to conduct copy test research to examine if this issue influences consumer impressions.

We also found that graphics are often used to convey the image of an award or certification that, upon close inspection, is revealed to be relatively meaningless. Given prior research on the influence of symbolism in consumer behavior, future research should examine the extent to which consumers might be influenced by such tactics. That is, can a meaningless claim lead to meaningful differentiation? The fact that manufacturers use this technique suggests that they expect it to be effective. Future research is needed to determine whether or not such tactics can create misleading impressions.

With regard to monetary compensation, we found that some third-party certifications base their fees on the sales volume of the brand while others establish a fee based merely on the cost of administering the certification. The practice of using certifications to generate revenue would seem to undermine the

presumed objectivity of the granting agency. Future research will want to examine whether or not consumers' impressions are influenced by this practice.

The analysis also revealed that brands often use graphics that project the image of an award or prize that does not exist. Blue ribbons and gold banners were two of the common symbols used by manufactures. These were always accompanied by phrases ranging from mere puffery (e.g., "America's Favorite") to descriptions of the ingredients (e.g., "Real Idaho Potatoes"). Although puffery is legal because it is considered unlikely to mislead consumers, future research might want to examine the extent to which graphical interactions influence this likelihood. Significant interaction effects would have important implications for the regulation of puffery claims.

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