

Spring 5-10-2012

Effects of “EcoEagle” Advertising Campaign on the Students of the University of Southern Mississippi

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The University of Southern Mississippi

Effects of “EcoEagle” Advertising Campaign on the Students
of the University of Southern Mississippi

by

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A Thesis

Submitted to the Honors College of
The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Bachelor of Arts
in the School of Mass Communication and Journalism

March 2012

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Abstract

Advertising is at the core of the human experience. An ever-present facet in the life of every person, Advertising provides an excellent opportunity to transmit valuable information to audiences that normally would not be exposed to the desired message. At The University of Southern Mississippi, the university administration desired to educate students about the values and benefits of environmentally conscious decision-making. With this goal in mind, the university created the “EcoEagle” advertising campaign, a targeted approach designed to engage students through a variety of advertising media, with the desired end result of a more environmentally conscious student body. Now several years into the program, this study seeks to identify the effectiveness of the EcoEagle program, as well as the progress of the students affected by the current advertising. Using a basic survey method that examines a variety of exposure metrics, this study finds that many students were positively affected by the advertising campaign. Even more significantly, this study found that many students were unable to pinpoint a single source of advertising that influenced them until asked in a different way, representing an interesting advertisement impression. Final results indicated that posted campus advertisements were the most effective vehicles for information, even when not directly recalled. Data also suggested that on-campus students were more likely to encounter these materials and respond, as opposed to commuter students who were largely only exposed to email communications.

Introduction

The presence of advertising is impossible to ignore, whether it be on television, radio, or through print advertisements. Throughout the years, the primary objective of any advertisement has been to sell a product or service, and that still continues through today. However, over the past 20 years, there has been an increase in the amount of advertisements that haven't been selling the usual products and services, but new products and ideas (Dick, 2003). Recently, these adverts have come to include the ideas of environmentally conscious living, which is commonly referred to as "Going Green" or "Thinking Green". Focusing on actions like recycling and power conservation, these advertisements have targeted a younger demographic (Dahm, 2009).

As environmental issues remain in the forefront of American society, the demand for environmentally conscious products by consumers continues to increase (Stafford, 2002). As regular consumers are introduced to the concept of "Green" living, the related ideas are flowing to businesses and, almost more importantly, college campuses. Current and potential consumers are identified within college students, and extreme amounts of advertising pressure is placed on the students as a way to encourage "green" practices, both now and in the future. Supplementing the external pressures to purchase, there has been a significant rise in the amount of internal pressure on students to act in a "green" manner, in the form of environmental advertising campaigns, like the "EcoEagle" campaign taking place on the campuses of the University of Southern Mississippi. Other colleges and universities around the country are affected by this shift in mindset as well. Groups like *The Princeton Review* have found that over 280 schools in the country have committed to expanding their commitment to environmental responsibility (Princeton

Review, 2010). This increase in student focused advertising has occurred as a direct result of recent environmental disasters, including the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill, increases in air pollution, and (very recently) the BP Gulf Oil Spill (Ottman, 1998). After the Exxon Valdez spill in the early 1980s, research showed that youth and education are the most important factors in the decision to consume environmentally friendly goods (Suplico, 2009). The EcoEagle campaign has originated as a way to encourage students, faculty, and staff to take more environmentally conscious decisions like recycling of waste materials, more effective usage of energy, and reduction of consumer waste. This campaign has been advertised through university e-mails, print media placed throughout campus, and information distributed through social networking sites like Facebook. The potential of this program is immense, and our survey was conducted to show which portions of the campaign are actively engaging the Southern Miss student body, which portions are ineffective, and how students can be more effectively targeted to encourage environmentally friendly actions. The following research articles will be used to help support this viewpoint, as well as provide a basis for research to determine the reasoning behind student actions regarding environmentalism, both at The University of Southern Mississippi and at Universities across the country.

Literature Review

The primary goal of the current research was to find out whether environmental consciousness and action by students on campus would increase as a result of repeated exposure to powerful multi-format advertisements on campus. In order to address our questions, several related issues were studied, including media exposure, message format and peer influence.

Effectiveness of Green Advertising

Advertising can be described in a variety of ways, from verbal communication to materials distributed amongst groups of people, to videos seen on television and the Internet. Specifically, advertising is an effective means of conveying the differentiating advantages of a brand (Soscia, 2009). Advertising has existed for almost as long as products have existed to be sold. As society grows and advances, the methods of advertisement have grown and developed along with it. Concepts like social networking and online-based sales pitches are now commonplace sources of advertisements. Social networking has been a popular target in recent years, as more and more potential consumers are exposed to hundreds of ad impressions a day. Popular venues like Facebook give advertisers the opportunity to expose younger audiences to their product in a way that will encourage them to purchase when they have the buying power to do so (Charski, 2000). Even within popular entertainment, advertising exists in the form of product placement. While before considered to be a niche method of sales, product placement has now proven to generate billions of dollars of revenue through the use of subtle entertainment placement or celebrity endorsement (Homer, 2009).

In the case of the “EcoEagle” campaign, there is no brand to advertise, but there is a desire to sell an idea. Environmental responsibility in the case of this study will encompass the use and desire to use available facilities like recycling bins, acting in an environmentally conscious manner (power efficiency, etc.), and reducing waste. Environmentally conscious students are encouraged to look not only at how a product or action affects the environment, but also how it could eventually impact their surroundings. For example, students drinking from a red plastic cup might understand that they should not discard the cup on the ground, but by throwing the cup into a landfill, they are doing similar amounts of damage to the environment. A key factor for students to assess will be to see how conscious they are of the entire life cycle of a product, from creation to eventual destruction or re-use. “Green” living [is being] forced to include the idea of knowing the entire ecological life cycle of a product (Orange, 2010). Students are also encouraged to act in a conservative manner. The EcoEagle campaign has focused not just on popular topics like recycling, but also issues like power saving and conscious power usage. Students are notorious for wasting energy, but studies show that students who even just turn off the lights in their residence hall rooms every night instead of leaving them on can have drastic savings in their power usage (Schaper, 2010). Other actions encouraged are turning off computers when they are not in use, turning off water faucets, and reducing the use of disposable plastic containers. Actions that are growing increasingly more common amongst the purchasing adults of the country are now being pitched to these college students as a way to encourage positive energy usage. Several studies have found environmental advertising campaigns and adjusted campus practices could affect audiences’ “green behavior”. An example of this was at Washington

University, where the majority of on-campus communiqué was migrated to e-mail and social networking platforms, which reduced a majority of their printing costs. And unexpected by beneficial side affect was that it encouraged campus students to do the same, leading to environmental consciousness, even on a small scale (Kolowich, 2009).

Therefore, the first research question in this study was:

RQ 1: Have students at the University of Southern Mississippi become more environmentally conscious as a result of the EcoEagle campaign?

Media Exposure and Green Campaign Effectiveness

A significant issue that will potentially affect the outcome of the research will be the location of the students in question. It's foolish to think that all of the students that will be surveyed are living on campus. In fact, many older students freely elect to live in housing not owned or support by the University. This affects both their exposure to the advertisements, but also their predisposition to "green" issues. Because they are less likely to be exposed to EcoEagle materials than students who live in a university operated residence hall environment, their propensity to act in a particular way is greatly reduced, regardless of their views on green living. This may lead to support our research questions by showing that students who do participate are influenced and encouraged by advertising materials and the pressure from their peers. In fact, previous research shows that people who live in densely populated areas like cities or Universities are fifty percent more likely to act in an environmentally conscious manner than those who live in alternate areas (Kahn, 2009).

RQ 2: Does location of residence have an effect on students' environmental consciousness?

Other factors that have influenced the effectiveness of this campaign include the manner in which the materials are disseminated, specifically, the format that the EcoEagle advertising campaign is viewed in by USM students. Studies have shown that effective environmental advertising is able to effectively leverage the image of the Earth as a nice and pleasant place in order to encourage environmentally sound actions (Hartmann, 2009). Online advertising has had the benefit of being rich in content and easy to change (MacMillan, 2009), but by asking where students receive the majority of their information on EcoEagle, a determination of whether that marketing style is effective or not can be determined. With that in mind, properly examining the advertising format and asking questions that can determine which advertisement (if any) encouraged green action, we can determine what was and wasn't effective in reaching students and encouraging environmentally conscious behavior. This directly correlates to the location of the student's residence. This question addresses the hypothesis that students that live on campus will be exposed more to the EcoEagle campaign materials, and will therefore be more environmentally conscious than their off-campus counterparts. Other factors include the format of the ad, as students that live on campus are hypothesized to be exposed to posted print advertisements more than those who commute, giving them increased advertisement impressions.

RQ 3: Does the format of the environmental advertising messages have an effect on students' environmental consciousness?

Peer Influence

Other important factors that help describe the green consumer include their propensity to inform others of their purchases, or to put this into the context of my

hypothesis, their propensity to influence the decisions of others. Many green consumers identified themselves as being the “go-to” person for their friends and family when it comes to making consumer decisions, which places them in a unique position of being very powerful in terms of advertising power. Their views and observations regarding advertising helps to influence those around them, making the conscious green consumer very important to the effectiveness of an advertising campaign. This is critical to the hypothesis that students are acting out of guilt because it illustrates the power that a few students on campus can have over their peers. If a small amount of students are excited about a product (or in this case, an initiative like EcoEagle), they could easily encourage hundreds of students to engage in similar actions.

In a study by Stafford (1996), predispositions towards green advertising were examined by surveying two groups of people, college-aged consumers and working adult consumers. The goal was to see if either group was more predisposed to want to make environmentally conscious decisions, as well as to see if a specific green issue was more likely to illicit a response over another. The study addresses the predispositions of these students and whether their predisposition would affect fellow students. The study found that for each of the seven questions about responses and intention to consume, the college-aged students were much more likely to be interested or consume the “green” media than the working adults. Examples include the differences between college students and adults in attitude towards a health conscious “green” advertisement (17.93 compared to 15.82), or a similar difference between college students and adults in a “green” advertisement focusing on wildlife conservation (16.7 compared to 15.43).

RQ 4: Does peer influence have an effect on students' environmental consciousness?

Method

Design

For the purposes of this study, the survey method was the most effective way in which to collect and effectively analyze the needed data. By using a standard set of questions, we were able to assign significance to particular answers, and then correlate them to our different respondents.

Sample/Procedure

The data collection occurred in such a way as to provide the greatest spectrum of information to analyze. This was accomplished through a mass, web-based survey distributed to the entire student body. The survey was completed with assistance from the USM Office of Sustainability. This was chosen primarily for the large amounts of potential data, as the potential pool of students is roughly 10,000-15,000. The Office of Sustainability was also chosen to administer the survey to expedite the research process. There was no need for IRB approval when the survey was attached to the pre-existing Sustainability survey. There were 366 respondents, of which 142 were students. The measurement that was used is a 5-point scale in which to gauge responses to questions that will examine student reception of EcoEagle processes and awareness. This method of sampling was selected because it allowed us to poll more people in a much easier fashion than if we were to gather a physical group of students. This allows students to fill out the survey on their own time, which incentivized the process. On top of the first incentive, the promise of a prize to be awarded to a random survey participant was used as a way to encourage participation in the survey process. The survey was announced in April of 2011 and concluded at the close of the 2010-2011 school year.

By using this data collection style, we hoped to see a significant increase in the reliability of the data, simply because there was to be large amounts of raw data from the online survey that was representative of the large student body at Southern Miss.

Unfortunately, we also encountered one of our study limitations through this method. In using the Department of Sustainability survey, we were forced to accept whatever results were returned. This led to smaller data sets than we initially expected.

Measures

The main variables that we wanted to observe were exposure to media, influence of media on behavior, and peer influence. Our research questions sought to address these in a concise way, by specifically addressing each of these variables. By focusing on each variable individually, it was significantly easier to discover relationships between the variables and the reported data. Media Exposure focused primarily on the format of the received message. This could include email communication, printed flyers, billboards, Internet advertisements, etc. Media influence on behavior would be measured on responses that indicated environmental action both before and after viewing EcoEagle materials. Peer Influence was measured on scales for both an individual students' influence on others, as well as how the influence of others affected an individual. This helped determine if the EcoEagle campaign actually encouraged or created a shift in attitude in the students at Southern Miss.

Results

The goal of the current study was to determine the effectiveness of the EcoEagle advertising campaign at the University of Southern Mississippi, and to use these results as a way to model the effectiveness of similar campaigns on other college campuses. Of the 366 responses to the survey we collected, 142 of those responses were from respondents identifying themselves as students. This translates to roughly 37.7% of our respondents belonging to our target.

Students' Green Consciousness

The primary research question (RQ1) was to determine whether students became more environmentally conscious as a result of the EcoEagle campaign. While the collected data can individually help to answer questions, viewing the data as a whole unit helps to answer both our research questions and provide a basis for determining the effectiveness of the EcoEagle campaign. Of those respondents, 75.4% feel that there are environmental issues facing the campus of The University of Southern Mississippi. Comparing those responses with other answers helps to paint a picture of where the EcoEagle campaign fits into the landscape of the University.

Students responded in a relatively positive manner, with just over half (51.4%) stating that the EcoEagle campaign had “helped them develop a more sustainable lifestyle”. When broken down into more specific questions, 52% of respondents said they engaged in acts like “practicing water conservation daily”. Only 26% of those admitted to carpooling daily, with a significant amount (39%) admitting to only carpooling once a week.

Media Exposure and Campaign Effectiveness

RQ2 asks if media exposure and location of residence has an effect on environmental consciousness. Based on the data received, it appears that many of the students (55%) who were exposed to the EcoEagle materials were affected. Within the group of on-campus students, over half of the respondents affirmed their desire to act in an environmentally conscious manner. This indicates a marked impact. While many students stated that they received the majority of their information via email, it was apparent that they unconsciously were learning from the printed materials placed throughout the campus.

To find out if location of residence had any impact on students' environmental concern, a Chi-square analysis was run and no significant differences were found between location of residence and environmental concern, $\chi^2(1, 129) = 1.23, p > .05$.

A simple t-test was run using location of residence as the grouping variable and students' concern for alternative energy as the dependent variable to determine if the location of residence had any impact on students' concern for alternative energy. Marginal difference was found between students who lived on campus and students who lived off campus in terms of their concern with new energy, $t(1, 129) = 2.14, p < .05$. Students who lived on campus ($M = 2.19, SD = .95$) were more concerned with utilizing alternative energy than those who lived off campus ($M = 1.86, SD = .81$), even though both groups reported low scores on the 5-point scale.

RQ3 addresses the format of the advertisement. Due to limitations in the format of the survey (discussed further in the Discussion session), Chi-Square and t-Test was impossible on the recorded data. However, basic frequency testing was possible, with the

largest contingency of answers indicating that students experienced the most exposure to the EcoEagle campaign through print advertisements (31%). The closest alternative was through “Word-of-Mouth” exposure, measured at 17%. Sixty-five percent of our respondents stated that email was one of their sources of information on the EcoEagle campaign. This was initially confusing, as it was directly contradictory to how the researcher felt the data would play out. However, after further investigation, an interesting anomaly became apparent. While students were more likely to include e-mail as their remembered source of EcoEagle contact, when asked where they received the MAJORITY of their EcoEagle information, they responded with “Print Ad”.

This actually works to reinforce the research questions, as it shows that while they may recall the e-mails, their primary evoked advertisements are from the print adverts placed around the campus. This is an excellent example of the advertisement working on a subconscious level among the student body, which is arguably more effective than an obvious recollection.

Peer Influence and Campaign Effectiveness

Research Question #4 addresses peer influence on students’ environmental concern. In an almost identical amount, students reported both encouraging and being encouraged to act in an environmentally friendly manner (61.3% and 62.7%, respectively). With more than half of the respondents reporting in this way, it appears that many students have developed new activities not just as a result of the EcoEagle campaign, but as a result of word of mouth interaction based on its content.

A Chi-square analysis between students’ environmental concern and peer influence was run to determine relationships between students’ who expressed

environmental concern and whether they were influenced by their peers, and significant differences were found between students who were influenced by peers and those who were not, $\chi^2(1, 127) = 8.66, p < .05$. Students who were influenced by peers expressed more environmental concern (74.5%) than their peers who reported not being influenced (44.0%).

A Chi-square analysis was run between students' environmental concern and their attempt to influence their peers, and significant differences were found between students who have influenced peers and those who have not, $\chi^2(1,127) = 26.29, p < .01$. Students who have influenced peers expressed more environmental concern (80.4%) than their peers who reported not being influenced (28.0%).

A simple t-test was run using peer influence as the grouping variable and students' concern for alternative energy as the dependent variable, and some difference was found between students who were influenced by peers and students who were not in terms of their concern with new energy, $t(1, 125) = -.95, p < .05$.

A simple t-test was run using attempts to influence peers as the grouping variable and students' concern for alternative energy as the dependent variable, and marginal differences were found between students who have influenced by peers and students who have not in terms of their concern with new energy, $t(1, 125) = -.95, p < .05$. However, Students who have influenced peers ($M = 1.97, SD = .80$) were less concerned with utilizing alternative energy than those who have not influenced peers ($M = 2.13, SD = 1.01$), even though both groups reported low scores on the 5-point scale.

Discussion

Based on all of these measurements, we can begin to address the primary research question – have students at The University of Southern Mississippi become environmentally conscious as a result of the EcoEagle campaign? It appears from the reported data that many students admit to being more environmentally conscious after viewing the EcoEagle materials. Implying causation, we can assume that many students on campus have benefitted from the presence of the environmental advertising through the EcoEagle campaign. From slight benefits to full scale behavioral change, it is clear that the advertisements (whatever the media vehicle used) has created some form of change amongst the student body. However, the data also points to potential weaknesses in the program. As previously discussed, many students recalled the e-mails sent by the Department of Sustainability, but not the on campus print advertisements. This leads the researcher to believe that while they notice that they're receiving e-mail correspondence, the actual information is through the non-descript print advertisements. This creates the need to do two things: Improve the e-mail correspondence to actually transmit information and to create print advertisements that continue to educate while actually creating evocable mind share in the students. While the benefit of any electronic correspondence has been seen, it's justifiable to think that increasing the effectiveness of the e-mail blasts by any percentage will see a related boost in effectiveness in student outreach. The same could be said for print media around campus. Provided that a creative and eye-catching idea could be created to attract students, it's possible to have print advertisements that not only subconsciously encourage these activities, but also retain some mind share. This mind share could then be translated into motivation to both

act in an environmentally conscious manner and incentive to motivate those around them to do the same.

There were several limitations to this study. The two primary limitations were related to participants and quality of the survey. Both limitations were brought on as a result of the method used to push the survey out as quickly as possible. The researchers used a pre-existing survey designed by the Department of Sustainability on the campus of The University of Southern Mississippi. Because of this choice, the ability to specifically tailor the survey was limited to the designs of the Department of Sustainability.

Participation was also affected by previous disinterest in the Sustainability survey. This could be remedied in the future by designing a standalone survey that would operate independently of preexisting departments on campus. The limitation in the survey quality created specific problems when we attempted to answer our third research question, referring to the formats of the advertisement. Because of the question and answer format used by the Department of Sustainability, only basic frequency calculations were possible. This prevented deeper evaluation of the data in terms of correlations between message format, exposure, and student residence.

Other possibilities to enhance this research in the future include the inclusion of personal interviews of students. With a larger research team, there is the potential for more complete and thorough answers from the respondents if members of the research team individually interviewed them.

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