



Fear Appeals: Amelioration of Ethical Suspicion

KEYWORDS

Fear appeals, ethical fear appeal, fear advertising

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ABSTRACT *Fear based advertising is a specific type of social marketing that employs scare tactics or other anxiety-producing mechanisms to highlight the dangers of engaging in a certain practice. Discussions of fear appeals in marketing have commonly centered on the cognitive and social mechanism by which the introduction of anxiety in the context of a message can successfully persuade an audience. Despite the extensive use of fear appeals in advertising, the marketing literature has given a very little attention to the ethicality of these persuasions. However, fear appeals have been criticized as being unethical, manipulative, eliciting negative responses from viewers and exposing them to offensive images against their will. This criticism gives indication for amelioration of fear appeals. The rationale for this article is to explore the ethicality of fear appeals & forward improvements in ethical use of fear appeals.*

1. Introduction

Persuasion is one of the most basic forms of communication (Severin and Tankard, 2001). It is basically the process of changing people's minds. Whether it be a politician grasping for the final vote or a major advertiser striving to increase sales of a certain product or an environmentalist organization eager to convince people to recycle, it is a common occurrence. One may be persuaded and may not even know about it. It isn't necessarily a conscious action; persuasion can occur subconsciously as well.

One way of influencing people through persuasive messages is through the use of fear appeals. They are used to threaten or arouse fear in an audience in order to stimulate attitude change. An example of a fear appeal in the 90's is the "Brain on Drugs" campaign, where a fried egg represented the damaging effects of drugs on teenagers' brains. With the increase of technology and media power, more instances are encountered involving fear appeals. Fear appeals are not only used to sell products, but they are used to promote health, hygiene and other things. Researchers have examined several variables that have been thought, at one time or another, to influence the persuasive effect of fear appeals. These variables are the perceived threat, the strength of the fear elicited, perceived efficacy, individual characteristics and defence mechanisms. Discussions of fear appeals in marketing have commonly centred on the cognitive & social mechanisms by which the introduction of anxiety in the context of message can successfully persuade an audience. The marketing literature has given very little attention to the ethicality of these persuasive devices.

2. Fear Appeal

Evidently, fear appeals are built upon fear- "a distressing emotion aroused by impending danger, evil pail, whether the threat is real or imagined. Since the beginnings of mankind, this emotional state has evolved as a survival mechanism to protect humans from life-threatening situations and due to the circuits in our brain, fear is often times more powerful than reason.

Fear appears to be an intriguing topic for people of all kinds, be it novelists, philosophers or psychologists. It must be quite hard to find a novel in which fear does not play a prominent role; without fear there would probably be not much of a story to tell. Fear is an emotion that is pre-programmed into all humans as an instinctual response to potential danger.

According to Donovan & Henley (2003), there are two types of fear: anticipatory and inhibitory. The former is elicited by

exposure to vivid, horrible images, while the latter results from arousing the individual's anticipation of what is likely to happen if they ignore the recommended course of action. The fear appeal has two basic ingredients that are a threat component and an action component. It must convince the audience that particular negative consequences can occur if certain behaviours are not performed and they have the ability to follow the message recommendations (self-efficacy) and that the behavioural strategy specified in the fear appeal can eliminate the threat and response-efficacy is enhanced when the presentation provides audience-relevant examples of the message recommendations actually removing the threat of injury.

Fear-based advertising is a specific type of social marketing that employs scare tactics or other anxiety-producing mechanisms to highlight the dangers of engaging or not engaging in a certain practice, like smoking or drunken driving. Not surprisingly, fear-based advertising is not without its discontents. Different countries have different tolerances for the amount of fear and negativity. These messages start with the presentation of the negative consequences of certain behaviour and one's vulnerability to it. This message is then followed by a recommendation in which a solution is offered. In using fear appeals, some negative behaviour is usually associated with a negative effect, like smoking and lung cancer, or a positive behaviour, unpractised, is associated with a negative effect, like brushing teeth and cavities & the communicator will try to persuade the audience in avoiding the negative effect by practicing the positive behaviour. (LaTour, Snipes and Bliss, 1996).

Ideas about the potential benefits of fear are mixed. Some are confident that fear is guided by irrationality and cannot lead to anything good, others contend that fear is needed to stay safe. Appeal to fear is a fallacy in which a person attempts to create support for an idea by using deception and propaganda in attempt to increase fear and prejudice.

The fear literature suffers from a tendency to conflate the concepts of fear, which is a response and threat which is a stimulus (Donovan & Henley, 1997; LaTour & Rotfeld, 1997). There is widespread failure to specify how stimulus materials may arouse fear, and a lack of clarity about what high, moderate and low levels of threat really are (Moore & Harris, 1996; Tanner, Hunt, & Eppright, 1991) A defining feature of threat appeals is that they warn of the negative consequences that will accrue to message recipients if they do not alter their behaviour (Janis & Feshbach, 1953; Leventhal, 1971; Rogers, 1975; Witte, 1992).

3. Ethicality of Fear Appeals

Fear appeals increase advertisement effectiveness, so little attention is given to their ethicality. To large extent, ethical assessment of fear appeals has been based on intuition with structured guidance available to aid in developing reactions from varied audiences. The aim to explore fear appeal is to increase its persuasiveness without engendering perceptions or attitudes that are negative or unethical. The use of fear appeals raises several ethical issues.

The use of threatening messages can create unnecessary anxiety among audience members (Spence 1972). This incorporates personal bias & culture based attitudes & values, making it somewhat difficult to define (Boddewyn and Kunz 1991). Many critics consider the use of fear appeals unethical if the advertised solution does not eliminate the threat (Quinn 1992). Many critics (Hyman & Tansey, 1990) have argued that fear appeals are unethical when they expose a person against his will to harmful or seriously offensive images.

Fear appeal may be viewed unethical by consumers, even when used for social causes. Research indicate that the advertisements perceived as most unethical did not generate the greatest amount of fear, suggesting there are other significant factors that individual consider when making moral judgement of fear appeal. Unethical fear appeals can damage credibility of advertisers & create unfounded fears among audience members.

Laczniak & Murphy (1993) proposed that certain questions should be used to evaluate the ethics of marketing practices. They are: does the contemplated action violate the law? Is the action against the moral obligation? Is the intention of contemplated action harmful? Are there any major damages to people that result from contemplated action & so on. If the answer to all these queries is yes, then marketer's action is probably unethical.

3.1 Ethical theories of Moral Philosophy

There is no simple & clear explanation of why particular advertisement is in zone of ethicality doubt. For solving such query & to generate ethically sound fear appeals, ethical theories of moral philosophy would be reasonable start. The ethical theories can be grouped as teleology, deontology & relativism (Reidenbach & Robin, 1990, Snipes 1999).

Teleological philosophies determine moral worth of behaviour by its consequences. The most applicable teleological theories are egoism & utilitarianism. Egoism theory implies that individuals should focus on consequences to themselves when making an ethical evaluation and if evaluation considers all society, then it is utilitarianism. Teleological examination of fear appeals suggest that an advertisement pass the test of ethicality if it stops an individual from something which results in benefiting the society & this should supersede any other ethical concern one may have against use of fear appeals.

Deontological philosophies emphasize the importance of methods & intentions, ultimately judging individual acts by nature of act itself. Use of fear appeals is less likely to be considered ethical when using this approach. If the act of inspiring fear & anxiety is deemed harmful & if the intrusive character of such messages makes it unacceptable by certain decency standards, fear appeals should not be used.

Relativism philosophies states that all normative beliefs are function of culture & hence no universal ethical rules exist that apply to everyone. Use of fear appeals may be ethical in Western societies but may not be in developing countries where advertising message may be accepted less critically.

Of course, consumers are unlikely to refer to such conceptual framework when exposed to advertising messages. So, it should be assumed that individuals use of variety of prin-

ciples when making ethical assumptions. The entire responsibility of ethical usage of fear appeal rests on the shoulders on marketers.

4. Amelioration of the effects & usage of fear appeal

The aim of most fear appeal campaigns is to change people's behaviour, or, at least, their attitudes toward certain behaviour. The major responsibility of fear appeal is to increase people's perceptions of risk and their perceived vulnerability and motivate them to avoid that in future.

Many researchers have criticised fear appeal as being unethical, manipulative and eliciting negative responses from viewers & exposing viewers to offensive images against their will. Questions such as whether the use of fear appeals is even ethically justified and if so, under what conditions or circumstances or are there any types of emotional appeals more ethically defensible than others arise.

The ethical dilemma of fear appeal has been an issue long debated for, it has been tackled from different areas and different perspectives and yet, no end- result to solve the dispute has been done. So, it is essential requirement to make ethical use of fear appeal.

Some ways to improve ethicality of fear appeal are:

a) Need of qualitative research: In order to develop effective threat appeal messages, more qualitative research is required to ascertain the perceived susceptibility and efficacy among the target population and to assess the preference for solutions to alleviate the threat.

b) Understanding persuasion process: It is essential to identify the factors or steps in the process of persuasion that influences attitude change than explaining how or why these factors matter. It is also essential to understand audience attitudes & then it must be related to listeners' perceptions of persuasive messages.

c) Designing positive perceptions: Audiences differ in their attitudes towards advertising and in their ethical evaluation of an advertisement. The challenge is to design a persuasive communication while creating perceptions or attitudes that are positive or ethical; for example, avoiding dramatic advertisements which exploit the vulnerability of smokers. Balancing of persuasion and ethics is important when individuals who do not like an advertisement may have a negative attitude toward the product itself.

d) Adoption of self-efficacy: Self-efficacy is important to adopt the recommendation conveyed by the advertiser. It also affects the perception about the morality of advertising. It can be inferred that increasing confidence in the consumer's ability to cope with a threatening situation is very logical strategy to be adopted by advertisers to improve the fear ethicality.

e) Alternatives to fear appeal: Social marketing campaigns often use fear appeals in an attempt to encourage certain behaviours, with varying degrees of success but there are other negative emotional appeals such as guilt, shame or positive emotional appeals which can be explored & they have great potential in affecting attitude resulting in behavioural change.

f) Improving relationship between sender & receiver: Threats are unethical since their effectiveness depends on creating a state of "psychological distress" in receivers. Threats tend to ignore status differences in relationships that is relationship of equality between sender and receiver is always more ethically defensible. So, it is necessary to improve the relationship between sender & receiver.

g) Incorporate emotional & cognitive responses: Emotional and cognitive elements both must be incorporated into

ethical fear appeals because these elements of persuasion have an influential role in the persuasion process & are inter-related.

h) Morale & self-esteem of addressee: The effectiveness of a fear appeal is also dependent on the morale and self-esteem of the addressee, as the more susceptible the individual is and confident about following the recommended behaviour, the better it is.

i) Pre- testing fear appeal: Marketer should carefully use threat in designing their advertising as it is difficult to identify which specific factors individuals will consider when making ethical judgement. So, it is important to pre-test threatening message before launching any advertising campaign aimed at combating undesirable behaviour as it will help to determine whether the campaign was considered ethical by perceived audience. It is also essential to differentiate among the type of threat, source and medium of communication and strength of fear. Less the ambiguity regarding differentiation, more the effective and ethical the fear appeal is.

j) Understanding audience belief and responses. Arousing fear in individuals in order to spark change is a more complicated process than it was once thought to be. People handle fear differently and also handle fear differently in different situations and also what causes fear in one person may be ignored by another. Before ethicality, it is essential to understand the belief of audience. It is also essential that advertisers must be aware of positive and negative reactions from target audience towards the advertisement. It is found that religious message using fear appeals is evaluated more favourably than one using low fear appeals. It means that if listener's religious beliefs are stronger then fear appeal is more ethically evaluated.

k) Understanding the prior experience of audience: Prior experience can influence its ethical assessment of fear appeal. Researchers have found that stronger the negative affect experienced, the more extreme the evaluative reactions towards advertisements.

l) Increase the strength of claim: Fear appeal may cause young adults to behave in the opposite way rather than what is advocated in the message. For them, fear appeals should be stronger rather than moderate. Claim strength increases message effectiveness when messages are either positively or negatively arousing. When messages are calm, claim strength has small effect on negative messages.

m) Equilibrium between execution & ethical approach of fear appeal: All the elements of execution must convey the message and should not interfere with the ethical elements

of communication. While maintaining the equilibrium between execution and ethicality, fear appeal should not overstate or mislead.

n) Tracking of long term impact of fear appeals: Reaction to fear appeal does not remain static but keep on changing. Many times, responses are re-evaluated or modified during the process of campaign. Too much repetition may affect acceptance and tolerance level and may also damage source of message. It is also essential that particular issue using fear appeal should always move on the same track.

o) Case to case analysis of fear ethicality: It is important to assess a fear appeal stimulus on case to case basis. It is necessary to pre- test on target audience to know perceived ethicality variable. So, every case should be treated separately.

p) Stringent government regulations: In an attempt to moderate the intensity of advertisement in the media, government should put more specific rules and regulations covering all aspects because the current regulations are easy to get around. Code of conduct should be used to guide fear appeals. Without proper justification, marketers should not approach advertisement with fear base especially in case of children & health areas.

5. Conclusion

For years in row, marketers have used fear appeals successfully, without considering its ethicality. Their main goal in using fear appeal is to create high threat and high efficacy message. It is worth mentioning, however, that fear appeals are not without risks. The right balance of threat and efficacy for one person may elicit no reaction or backfire for somebody else, causing avoidance, denial, anger towards the message, or boomerang effects. While the concept is simple, its implementation is complex and challenging, since individuals vary greatly. Fear appeals might not always be ethically appropriate in long run, threats do more harm than good and they disturb the already disturbed. Now, it is high time, that both commercial and social marketers should exercise caution and discretion over the use of persuasive fear appeals. Even if fear appeals proved many times to be highly efficient, they should never be a persuader's first resort.

Clearly, more research is needed on fear appeals, attitude accessibility, and defense mechanisms that result from fear messages. The effect of long-term and repeated fear campaigns is severely under-researched and must be explored. Learning and wear-in effects, wear-out effects as a result of irritation and habituation and the feeling of inappropriateness of fear strategies may all have an impact on the efficacy of fear appeal in the long run so these all need to be explored.

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