

Using Commitments to Drive Consistency: Enhancing the Effectiveness of Cause-related Marketing Communications

RAJIV VAIDYANATHAN & PRAVEEN AGGARWAL

Department of Management Studies, University of Minnesota Duluth, Duluth, MN, USA

ABSTRACT *Research has consistently found that, despite a high degree of expressed concern about the environment, few individuals are willing to follow-up this concern with behavioural actions in support of the environment, particularly when these actions require the individuals to absorb some costs. Using the theoretical framework of commitment–consistency theory, two studies were conducted in order to examine the effect of a small, active commitment to an environmental cause on consumer preference for an advertised product that supported that cause. The empirical results show strong support for the fact that persuading consumers to make an active commitment to a cause can serve as an important prerequisite for behavioural consistency (in terms of the willingness to buy a product). Further, the paper adds to the evidence on self-perception theory as an underlying mechanism for the effectiveness of the technique. It is also found that, although commitment increases willingness to buy a product related to the cause, the effect works only when the cost associated with supporting the cause is minimal. The implications for marketing communications theory and practice are discussed.*

KEY WORDS: Cause-related marketing, commitment–consistency theory, environmentalism, foot-in-the-door technique, consumer behaviour

Introduction

Corporations have long been interested in using a variety of marketing communications techniques for inducing compliance behaviour among members of their target groups. This compliance can take various forms. For example, a non-profit organization may be interested in inducing teenagers to cease (or abstain from) smoking, a relief organization may want its target audience to donate money or resources and a for-profit organization may want people to prefer and purchase its

Correspondence Address: Rajiv Vaidyanathan, Department of Management Studies, University of Minnesota Duluth, 110 SBE, 412 Library Drive, Duluth, MN 55812-2496, USA. Fax: +1 218 726 7578; Tel.: +1 218 726 6817; Email: rvaidyan@umn.edu

1352-7266 Print/1466-4445 Online/05/040231–16 © 2005 Taylor & Francis

DOI: 10.1080/0144619052000345600

products. In the context of influence and compliance, research has shown that a seemingly small and harmless commitment can induce significant behavioural change (Cialdini, 2001). According to commitment–consistency theory, persuading people to comply with a small and seemingly harmless request greatly increases their likelihood of complying with a subsequent, larger request. Within the domain of commitment–consistency theory an interesting way that has been extensively studied in social psychology for inducing compliance is the ‘foot-in-the-door’ technique (Snyder and Cunningham, 1975; Uranowitz, 1975; Seligman *et al.*, 1976; Burger, 1999). The basic premise of this technique is that, once a person complies with a small request, it becomes more probable that she/he will comply with a more substantial, related request.

This study, which was conducted in the context of cause-related product marketing, examined the effect of a small and harmless commitment (elicited using targeted marketing communications) on behavioural intentions. Specifically, this study tested whether a small commitment to an environmental cause induced changes in purchase intentions consistent with that commitment. The study is interesting from many perspectives. First, the ‘small commitment’ technique provides a strong marketing communications tool for inducing behavioural changes. It is managerially relevant for examining the efficacy of this technique. Second, consumer interest in green marketing has increased significantly in recent years. Green marketing, however, is not a cost-free option. Often buyers have to make do with a product that is of slightly lower quality (as in the case of recycled paper), spend extra money (as in buying organic foods) or exert extra effort (as in recycling cans and bottles) in order to support the cause. Marketers have also complained that, although customers say they support green marketing, many of them are not actually willing to share the cost of it (Mandese, 1991). Hence, it would be interesting to examine whether this technique can be applied using marketing communications for convincing customers to commit to such causes and share the responsibility of carrying them through. Finally, from a theoretical perspective, there are still some gaps in our understanding of the boundary conditions of commitment–consistency theory and the processes underlying its effectiveness. This study attempts to address and fill some of these gaps.

Environmental Consumerism and Commitment–Consistency Theory

Environmental consumerism can take two essential forms. First, consumers can take steps to conserve natural resources and protect the environment from further damage through their purchase and consumption behaviour (also called green buying). Examples of such measures would be using recyclable and biodegradable materials, using energy-conserving products and buying products manufactured with ‘safer’ production (e.g. less polluting) techniques. This would also include post-consumption environmentally friendly behaviours such as recycling paper, metal and plastic, proper disposal of harmful products such as solvents and spent batteries and proper disposal of waste. Second, environmental consumerism includes those actions of consumers that go beyond the immediate consumption experience. This would include such activities as supporting organizations that fight for environmental protection, volunteering for ‘environment-enhancing’ activities such as beach litter

removal, engaging in political activism to protect the environment and making donations to organizations that work for protection of the environment.

Using two experiments, this research investigated consumers' willingness to support environmental causes (linked to their product purchases) through charitable donations to organizations actively engaged in environmental protection. The paper focuses on cause-related marketing. Varadarajan and Menon (1988) defined cause-related marketing as 'the process of formulating and implementing marketing activities that are characterized by an offer from the firm to contribute a specified amount to a designated cause when customers engage in revenue-producing exchanges that satisfy organizational and individual objectives' (p. 60). The research examined whether commitment-consistency theory can effectively be applied to increasing consumer support for products linked to such exchanges. Specifically, the study explored the use of marketing communications in creating a link between a product and the charitable cause it supports and influencing future purchase behaviour pertaining to that product. The study examined whether making a small commitment to a cause has an effect on people's willingness to buy products from companies that make charitable contributions to that cause. Despite the empirical support enjoyed by commitment-consistency theory, there are some studies that have failed to find such evidence, particularly in the context of donations to charitable causes. The studies have generally shown that, if the second request is perceived as being particularly effortful relative to the first request, compliance drops dramatically. Foss and Dempsey (1979) failed to observe the consistency effect in their experiments. They first attempted to get a small commitment followed by a request to donate blood. Their results were not supportive of the theory.

In addition, the research also examined how this willingness changes when the customer has to pay extra for the donation versus when the donation is made by the company without any apparent incremental cost to the customer. The motivation for conducting this additional analysis was as follows. Several studies have found no correlation between pro-environment attitude and pro-environment behaviour (see for example Vining and Ebreo, 1990; Oskamp *et al.*, 1991). In particular, the foot-in-the-door technique has been found to be ineffective, prompting researchers to conclude that the theory may have some boundary conditions (see for example Foss and Dempsey, 1979; Harari *et al.*, 1980). One variable that has been shown to reduce compliance with the second request is the amount of effort needed to comply with the second request. If the second request is seen as too demanding, it may counteract the positive effects of the initial commitment (Cialdini and Ascani, 1976). In this study, the paper first examines the impact of commitment-consistency theory on generating support for environmental causes. It then explores how this intent to support the cause changes when the customer is asked to shoulder a greater burden of the cost of supporting the cause.

Prior Experimental Evidence

While commitment-consistency theory refers to the general idea of using a commitment for influencing future related behaviours, the foot-in-the-door technique is a specific application of this theory where getting subjects to agree to an initial, small request increases their likelihood of agreeing to a larger, related,

subsequent request. However, the arguments underlying the presumed effectiveness of this technique are similar to those underlying the commitment–consistency theory. Several studies have been conducted in the past in order to examine the existence of and boundary conditions for commitment–consistency theory, particularly for the foot-in-the-door technique. There appears to be abundant empirical evidence in support of its existence. Freedman and Fraser's (1966) seminal work found that compliance with a small initial request positively influenced compliance with a larger, related, subsequent request. Similarly, Goethals and Reckman (1973) showed that students distorted their recall of their initial answers on an issue after attending a discussion group that was designed to alter their opinion. Students were asked to recall how they originally answered questions on an issue (bussing). After encountering persuasive arguments designed to change their opinion, the study found that not only did the students change their attitudes, they also perceived their original attitudes as being more consistent with their new attitudes than they really were. In a different context, Stults and Messé (1985) demonstrated that a public announcement of intention affected subsequent behaviour, as subjects strove to project a consistent public image. Sherman (1980) examined the impact of one's own predicted behaviour on actual behaviour and found that subjects were more likely to engage in their self-predicted behaviour in order to be consistent, even when such behaviour was not their 'normal' behaviour. A study performed by Schwarzwald *et al.* (1983) showed that people who signed a petition for the establishment of a social club for handicapped individuals were more willing to donate to and comply with large donation requests than people who were not previously approached about the petition. In marketing, Tybout (1978) examined the effectiveness of foot-in-the-door and other influence strategies on gaining consumer acceptance for a new service and found that the technique's effectiveness was a function of source credibility. More recently, research has examined the effectiveness of the foot-in-the-door technique in increasing subjects' intent to become organ donors (Girandola, 2002). Although most social psychological research on the technique has focused on its effectiveness in an interpersonal, social interaction it has also been tested and shown to be effective in a computer-mediated context. A small commitment made on-line resulted in an increase in compliance with a subsequent charitable solicitation (Guéguen and Jacob, 2001). The effectiveness of this technique in a marketing communications context has not been tested. Its success in the computer-mediated context leads the authors to believe that the technique could potentially be used within a marketing communications context for influencing consumer behaviour.

How Does Commitment–Consistency Work?

Cialdini's (2001) commitment–consistency theory provides an elegant overview of the phenomenon of influence through small commitments. Because consistency is valued in society, people have a strong desire to appear and be consistent in their behaviours. Thus, performing a behaviour pressures the subject to perform future behaviours that are consistent with the initial behaviour. As a compliance technique, small commitments can be used effectively by convincing subjects to perform a seemingly insignificant task to which they are likely to agree without giving it much thought. Once subjects agree to do a small task they also end up agreeing to the next

bigger task in order to remain consistent in their behaviour. The need for being consistent is driven by a variety of related underlying processes (Burger, 1999). The process most commonly used to explain why commitment–consistency theory works is drawn from self-perception theory (Bem, 1972). According to this theory, individuals generally hold only weak or hazy attitudes and use self-observation of their behaviour for inferring their attitudes. That is, on complying with an initial request, people infer that they must feel favourably about the issue and are more likely to comply with related future requests as a result of this inference.

This is particularly important in the context of information processing when involvement is low. Consumers may act first and then form their beliefs and attitudes based on their action (Clow and Baack, 2002). Interestingly, according to the dissonance/attribution response hierarchy (Ray, 1973) presented in the Belch and Belch (2004) advertising text, this same action-driven response is possible even when topical involvement is high but perceived product differentiation is low. In other words, when the consequences of making a mistake are relatively low, consumers may readily agree to statements in support of a charitable cause. Once they have acted, consumers may use their observation of this action to infer that they have a favourable attitude towards that charitable cause, which then affects their future behaviour towards a product linked to the cause.

In a detailed analysis of over three decades of research on the foot-in-the-door technique, Burger (1999) presented an explanation for the inconsistent results shown in prior research. He suggested that there are multiple related and interacting psychological processes that underlie the operation of the technique. Some of these processes enhance the effectiveness of the technique and others inhibit it. For example, self-perception effects, the need for consistency, subject attribution for the behaviour and resistance to renegeing on commitments all enhance the effect, while reactance against multiple requests without reciprocation, conformity to established norms and attributions may reduce the effect. Using meta-analytic techniques, Burger (1999) found support for all these processes and suggested that multiple simultaneous processes may be driving the results reported in the literature.

Given that the processes underlying the commitment–consistency effect have already been extensively examined, this paper focuses instead on the effectiveness of this theory for influencing purchase intentions in a marketing communications context. Specifically, it examines how linking a charitable cause to a product enhances the product's evaluation after a subject makes a commitment to support the cause.

Study 1

In the first study, the paper examines commitment–consistency theory in a marketing communications context using the 'small commitment' technique and determines whether the psychological pressure caused by the initial commitment translates into a greater purchase intention for a product related to the initial commitment. Specifically, the research studies whether a small initial commitment to an environmental cause influences the willingness to buy a product that is advertised as supporting that cause. The study asked subjects to declare their attitudes towards an environmental issue (protection of rainforests) actively. Given the nature of the

issue and the seeming harmlessness of declaring their positive attitude towards rainforest protection on a questionnaire, it was assumed that most of them would say that they were favourably inclined to protecting the rainforests. The subjects were then exposed to an advertisement for a product for which the seller made a donation to protect the rainforests with each purchase and asked how willing they would be to buy the product. It was expected that subjects who actively committed to supporting rainforest protection prior to exposure to the advertisement stimulus would be more willing to buy the 'cause-related' product as compared to subjects not making any such commitment. Therefore, the first hypothesis of this study can be stated as follows.

H₁: Making a small, active commitment to an environmental cause results in a greater willingness to buy a product that advertises a donation to that cause.

In his review of the foot-in-the-door studies, Burger (1999) explained that one of the predictions derived from self-perception theory is that the degree of compliance with the second request would be directly related to the similarity between the first and second requests. That is, if commitment to a certain cause alters the subject's self-perception about his or her beliefs about that cause it should not increase compliance towards a request pertaining to an unrelated cause. In one of their experiments, Freedman and Fraser (1966) provided evidence in support of this prediction by showing that a commitment to display a small sign encouraging driver safety resulted in increased compliance to display a large lawn sign asking people to drive carefully. However, when the initial request was for a different cause – keeping California beautiful – the compliance rate was much lower (48% against 76% for similar requests). Although the difference in percentages was not statistically significant (which the authors attributed to the small sample size), this interesting difference was not studied in more detail. In the words of Burger (1999), 'Although Freedman and Fraser (1966) provided evidence consistent with the prediction in their original study, this obvious variable has gone relatively unexamined ever since' (p. 311).

Prior research is also unclear whether the attitude change as a result of self-perception is towards a specific target or towards a more general cause (Burger, 1999). That is, does a small commitment towards rainforest protection result in altered attitudes only about rainforest protection behaviours or does it result in a more favourable attitude towards charitable causes in general? In this study, this important and thus far unexplored issue was explored by testing whether a declaration of attitudes towards one cause had any significant effect on behavioural intention towards some other cause. Consistent with the self-perception process, the authors believe that making an active commitment to one cause (rainforest protection) would not result in an increased willingness to buy a product that advertises a donation to another cause (juvenile crime prevention). Thus, the second hypothesis is as follows.

H₂: Making an active commitment to a cause will not result in an increased willingness to buy a product that promotes itself as supporting some other unrelated cause.

Study 1 was designed for validating the effectiveness of commitment–consistency theory within a marketing communications context. It also explored the boundary conditions of the theory by examining whether, after expressing their willingness to buy the product that supports the cause, subjects preferred a cash rebate rather than a donation to that cause.

Method

In order to test the effect of commitment on subsequent behaviour, it was decided to ask subjects in the experimental condition questions about their general support of an environmental cause (protection of rainforests) prior to exposure to the advertisement stimulus. The subjects were simply asked to agree or disagree with a set of non-threatening statements regarding the cause. Given the nature of the issue, the researchers were fairly confident that most subjects would be favourably inclined towards it. This belief was based on the results of an informal pilot and was also borne out by a *post hoc* analysis of their responses. The pilot study also compared the subjects' commitment to rainforests and juvenile crime prevention and the two were found to be statistically similar.

Experimental Stimuli

On receiving the experiment booklet the subjects were presented with statements supporting the protection of rainforests. This part was designed to make the subjects express an active commitment to the cause. They were then presented with a print advertisement that bundled a commonly purchased household product with a contribution to the environmental cause. The print advertisement was for liquid laundry detergent and the advertisement prominently displayed the fact that the manufacturer would make a donation of \$1 towards the environmental cause for every purchase. The subjects in the control condition were shown the advertisement directly without having to answer any questions about commitment to the cause. In order to test the second hypothesis two sets of advertisements were prepared. In one case the donation was to the cause (protection of rainforests) to which the subjects had committed before seeing the advertisement. In the second set the proposed donation was to an unrelated cause (prevention of juvenile crime). Finally, in order to examine the subjects' willingness to part with money another version of the questionnaire asked the subjects if they preferred to receive cash back or donate the money to the cause. The advertisements were realistic.

Experimental Design and Data Collection

The subjects were a group of 98 individuals that included homemakers, students, professionals and technical and clerical workers. The subjects were randomly assigned to one of the following four conditions.

1. Condition 1 (commitment to rainforests→donation to rainforests). The subjects first made a commitment to rainforests. They were then shown an

- advertisement for a product with a proposed donation to rainforest protection with each purchase.
2. Condition 2 (no prior commitment to rainforests→donation to rainforests). The subjects were asked no questions about their commitment to rainforests. They were simply shown the advertisement for a product with a proposed donation to rainforest protection with each purchase.
 3. Condition 3 (commitment to rainforests→donation to juvenile crime prevention). The subjects first made an active commitment to rainforests. They were then shown an advertisement for a product with a proposed donation to juvenile crime prevention with each purchase.
 4. Condition 4 (commitment to rainforests→donation to rainforests or cash rebate). The subjects first made an active commitment to rainforests. They were then shown the advertisement and were given the option of either donating \$1 to the protection of rainforests or taking \$1 off the product's selling price.

In each of the conditions the subjects first answered some basic demographic questions. After exposure to the advertisement the subjects were asked a series of questions that included willingness to buy the advertised product and value perceptions. In condition 4 additional questions were asked about the subjects' preference for donating to a cause versus receiving a cash rebate.

The study compared the willingness to buy the product between conditions 1 and 2 in order to test hypothesis 1, while a comparison of the results for conditions 1 and 3 (given the pilot study's finding that the two causes elicit similar commitment) was used for testing the second hypothesis. An examination of the choices made in condition 4 provided some preliminary answers to the study's exploratory question: given a choice, will people committing to a cause prefer a donation to the cause over a cash discount?

Study 2

The first study did not address the issue of the source of a donation. In other words, it was not explicitly stated whether the buyer or the company was making the donation. The implicit assumption was that the charitable contribution would not raise the cost of the product to the buyer. The exploratory part of the study indicated that the subjects were more favourably inclined to opt for a cash back option instead of making a donation to the cause. This seems to suggest that the initial commitment will have an effect on the willingness to buy only if the company is making the donation. If the subjects have to pay from their own pockets for supporting the cause, they may be reluctant to do so. Thus, the second study was designed to test the following hypothesis.

- H₃: Making an active commitment to an environmental cause results in a greater willingness to buy a product that donates to such a cause only if the donation does not entail an additional cost to the customer.

Study 2 Design

The design of this study was similar to that of the first study. However, two additional factors were included in this study. The first factor was the source of a donation. In one condition the subjects were told that the company was making the donation at no increased expense to them. Specifically, they were told that ‘the company will make the donation without increasing the price of the detergent for you’. In the other condition the subjects were told that the donation would be an added cost for the customer. They were told that they would be paying more than they usually pay for their detergent purchase and that ‘the extra [money] that you will pay for the detergent will go as a donation’ to the cause. The study also controlled for the size of the donation by including two levels of donation: \$1.00 and \$0.50 for a \$7.99 purchase. Thus, the study had a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ between-subject design (commitment \times donation source \times donation amount).

Results*Study 1*

Before conducting the substantive analysis the average commitment level to the cause of rainforest protection was checked. The premise, given the nature of the issue, was that most respondents would express a favourable attitude towards it. As noted in Table 1, the average commitment to rainforest protection was high and statistically similar across the three groups that were asked questions related to it (commitment was assessed on five-point scales). It is important to note the underlying theoretical assumption here, namely that it is the act of making a small active commitment to the rainforest that makes subjects more willing to buy a product that donates to the cause to which they have just committed. Overall, it was expected that the subjects in all conditions would be equally committed to rainforest protection and this is what was found. The study also performed another check in order to ensure that the subjects found the ‘value of the product’ to be consistent across the four conditions. As shown in Table 1, the subjects did not differ statistically in their assessment of the value of the product across these conditions.

Willingness to buy the advertised product was assessed using three items. An average of the item values was used for representing this measure. The data were analysed using the ANOVA technique. As noted in Tables 2 and 3, the results show strong support for hypotheses 1 and 2. The subjects who expressed their commitment

Table 1. Commitment to rainforests and value of the product (on a scale of 1–5)

Condition	Average commitment	Average product value
1	3.87 ^a	3.71 ^a
2	N/A ^b	3.52 ^a
3	3.96 ^a	3.43 ^a
4	3.72 ^a	3.74 ^a

^aAll values are statistically similar within a column.

^bCommitment not assessed.

Table 2. Willingness to buy: study 1

Condition	Willingness to buy
1	3.35
2	2.72
3	2.41

Table 3. Support for the hypotheses: study 1

Hypothesis	Difference
H ₁ : difference (1 and 2)	0.73 ^a
H ₂ : difference (1 and 3)	0.94 ^a

^aSignificant at $p < 0.05$.

to rainforests were significantly more willing to buy a product that supported the protection of rainforests than did the subjects who did not express any such commitment (condition 1 versus condition 2). Similarly, the subjects who made a commitment to rainforests demonstrated far less willingness to buy a product supporting juvenile crime prevention compared to a product supporting the protection of rainforests (condition 1 versus condition 3).

The condition 4 results were particularly interesting. Despite having expressed a commitment to the protection of rainforests, 80% of the subjects opted for a cash rebate of \$1 rather than donating that dollar to protecting rainforests. Thus, it appears that the compliance-inducing power of the commitment is not strong enough to overcome subjects' preference for cash back.

Study 2

One hundred and fifty-three undergraduate students at a midwestern US university were randomly assigned to the eight experimental conditions. The analysis indicated no effect for the size of the donation and all subsequent analyses were performed for the remaining 2×2 design. The means and cell sizes (in parentheses) for each cell are reported in Table 4.

In order to test hypothesis 3, the study compared the difference in means for the two commitment conditions. When the source of the donation was the subjects' own funds, the willingness to buy the product was statistically equivalent across the two

Table 4. Willingness to buy: study 2

	Commitment=no	Commitment=yes
Donation source=own	4.35 (39)	4.15 (39)
Donation source=company	4.32 (39)	5.09 (36)

conditions (4.35 versus 4.15) ($p=0.60$). However, when the source of the donation was the company, commitment had a strong positive impact on the willingness to buy (4.32 versus 5.09) ($p<0.03$). Thus, the data support hypothesis 3, as the subjects seemed to follow through with the commitment only if doing so did not entail a direct out-of-pocket expense. The study further confirmed this finding by running two separate ANOVAs for the two groups (based on the donation source). As expected, it was found that, when the company donated to the cause, commitment had a strong influence on the willingness to buy ($F_{1,74}=5.46$ and $p<0.03$), whereas when subjects had to pay more for the product in order to support the cause commitment had no significant influence on their willingness to buy the product. Thus, study 2 supported the findings of the original study and also added an important qualifier to its findings. After having expressed a commitment to a cause, the subjects tended to be more favourably disposed to supporting an advertised product that contributes to that cause. However, this effect worked only in those situations where the subjects did not perceive a direct additional cost to supporting the cause. This finding is illustrated in Fig. 1.

Discussion

Study 1

Study 1 showed quite clearly that persuading subjects to make an active commitment to a cause positively influences their willingness to buy a product that advertises itself as supporting that cause. In other words, an initial commitment to a cause results in a more favourable attitude towards a product that associates itself with that charitable cause in its marketing communications.

The results also provide indirect evidence in support of self-perception theory as the underlying psychological process for this effect. It was found that an active commitment towards one cause (rainforest protection) had a minimal effect on

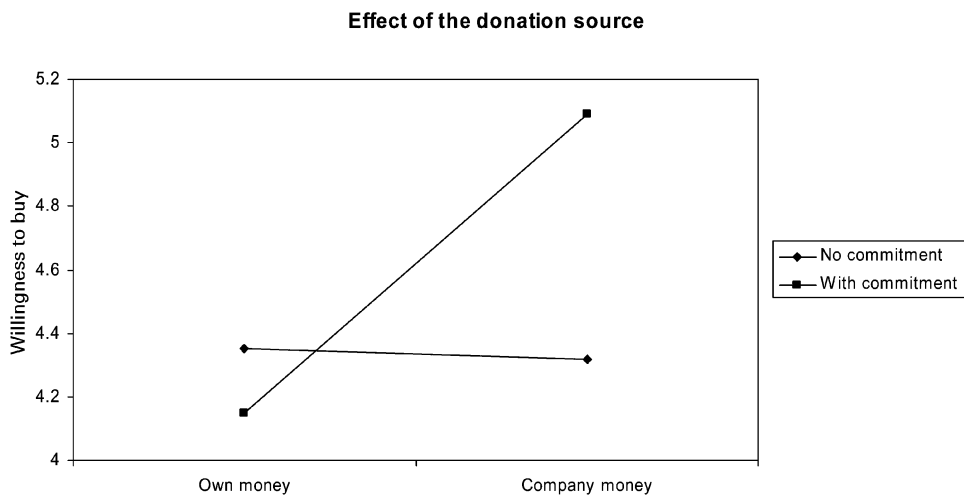


Figure 1. Effect of the donation source on commitment effectiveness: study 2

behaviour related to another unrelated cause (juvenile crime prevention). It is interesting to note here that the willingness to buy for conditions 2 and 3 was statistically the same. Thus, the commitment to rainforests made no difference at all to behaviour related to juvenile crime prevention. In other words, subjects who expressed no commitment to any cause behaved similarly to those who made a commitment to an unrelated cause.

The study also found some exploratory evidence that, while consumers' commitment can increase their willingness to buy a product related to the cause they have committed to, it does not result in a significant preference for donating cash to the cause as opposed to putting that cash in their own pockets. This result is somewhat counter-intuitive, as one would have expected the respondents to 'put their money where their mouth is'. It was decided to conduct a second study to explore this issue further. The study was designed to determine whether the source of the money for the charitable contribution (subjects' own money versus company-funded contribution) had any influence on the effectiveness of commitment-consistency theory.

Study 2

The preliminary finding in study 1 was that the subjects who expressed a commitment to the protection of rainforests were more likely to buy products that support this cause. However, when given the option of taking a \$1 cash rebate instead of making the donation, most preferred the cash rebate. In study 2, when the subjects who made a commitment to a cause were told that they would have to shoulder the cost of a charitable contribution to that cause, they were no more willing to buy the product than the subjects who did not make any such commitment. In fact, the subjects who made a commitment had a slightly lower (though not statistically significant) willingness to buy the product than those who did not make a commitment. This could be indicative of a reactance effect where the subjects who made the commitment felt they were being taken advantage of when they were immediately asked to pay a premium to buy a product supporting the cause.

It is also possible that the link between a charitable donation and product purchase is stronger for some products than others. Strahilevitz and Myers (1998) examined the effectiveness of using donations to charity as an incentive for purchasing a product. They theorized that the purchased product fulfils a desired need, whereas the donation to charity generates the altruistic, good feeling referred to as the 'warm glow' associated with contributing to a worthy cause. They hypothesized that the altruistic, feel-good donation strategy would be more effective in the case of hedonic rather than practical products. The subjects in their study were given either a point-of-purchase cash rebate or a donation-to-charity incentive at the time of purchase. The cash rebate coupon redemptions were higher for the practical purchase than the hedonic purchase. Given that this study's product, a laundry detergent, was a utilitarian purchase, the findings are consistent with those of Strahilevitz and Myers (1998). It is possible that the subjects would have opted for donations instead of cash rebates if a hedonic product had been chosen.

Conclusion

This paper finds support for the effectiveness of commitment–consistency theory in the context of consumer reactions to products advertised as supporting environmental causes. Two studies provided evidence that behavioural consistency after a commitment extends to the domain of purchase intentions. That is, in order to be consistent with their expressed commitments, people are willing to modify their purchase intentions. For example, when the subjects expressed commitment to rainforests they also expressed greater willingness to support products that contributed to rainforest protection. To show that the effect is cause specific, the study demonstrated that commitment to one cause had no significant impact on behavioural intention towards a product contributing to another cause. A commitment to rainforests did not increase the attractiveness of a product supporting juvenile crime prevention. The study also explored some boundary conditions for its effectiveness in a marketing communications context. The positive effect of a commitment was not strong enough to cause people to put their own money towards a product supporting the cause.

In the context of the foot-in-the-door technique, Burger (1999) suggested that one psychological process that may inhibit the effectiveness of the technique is psychological reactance. That is, by immediately following an initial request with a second, larger request, norms of reciprocity may be violated and subjects may react against the second request and thereby be less willing to comply with the second request. Thus, allowing for a delay between the commitment and the subsequent desired behaviour might enhance the effectiveness of the foot-in-the-door technique. One study examining this effect concluded that compliance with a second request was higher when either a different person made the second request or when there was a delay (that experiment used a delay of 2 days) between the first and second requests (Chartrand *et al.*, 1999). In the context of this paper's studies, this may suggest that the small commitments technique may actually be more effective in 'real world' settings where there will inevitably be a time delay between when companies can obtain consumer commitment and when they can present their marketing communications associating their product with the cause. In both of this paper's studies, the first 'request' (making a commitment to a cause) was immediately followed by the second request (the advertisement for the purchase of a product contributing to the cause). It is possible that a reactance effect was observed when the subjects were asked to shoulder the cost of the contribution. Thus, in the real world, with a temporal and spatial delay between the presentation of the two requests, the commitment may be effective in persuading consumers to pay the cost of contributing to the cause while still increasing their willingness to buy the product. An interesting next step would be to test the findings of this study in a field experiment that also considers the normal 'time delay' in order to determine whether this enhances the effects found here. While a controlled laboratory experiment was appropriate for increasing the internal validity of this study, a well-designed field experiment would go a long way towards establishing the external validity of this research.

Extensive research in social psychology has examined the effectiveness of small commitments in increasing the likelihood of compliance with subsequent, related

requests. Another body of research has examined the idea of 'green marketing' and the surprising lack of consistency between people's reported environmental consciousness and environmentally conscious behaviour. This paper brings these two streams of research together and demonstrates that marketers may be able to use commitment-consistency theory effectively for (1) increasing consumer preference for their product and (2) making consumers follow through behaviourally with their professed commitment to environmental causes. Based on a review of recent studies, Hume (1991) concluded that there is a significant gap between the stated beliefs and actual pro-environment actions of consumers. In one study, almost three-quarters of all respondents claimed that they would pay more for 'green' products, but only 14% actually bought goods made from recycled materials (see Mainieri *et al.*, 1997). It appears that making consumers actively commit to the green cause may actually result in greater follow through on that claim.

This study showed strong empirical evidence that consumers induced to make small and seemingly harmless active commitments to an environmental cause are more likely to remain consistent with that commitment and have greater intention to purchase products that support that cause. Marketing communications can be designed to make environmental efforts pay off in greater sales if they can persuade consumers to make an active commitment to their cause. This commitment can be relatively small. Most people would agree to 'caring about the environment' or be willing to support the 'reduction of harmful environmental pollutants'. There are several ways marketers can use marketing communications for gaining the initial commitment that can then be leveraged into influencing purchase intentions. For example, it is not unusual for marketers to sponsor essay or slogan contests that allow respondents to win prizes for making small active commitments to a product or brand. Alternatively, it may be more appropriate for marketers to take advantage of commitments already made by consumers. For example, a marketing communications strategy may include appearing at an environmental fair and highlighting their contribution to the cause. Consumers have already committed to the cause actively and publicly simply by attending the fair. Handing out a coupon or a flyer that highlights the cause-related contribution made by the organization may allow the company to reap the benefits of this commitment. The research here suggests that the linked product may gain an advantage over the competition, given the consumer's commitment to the cause and the organization's contribution to that cause.

This study provides a theoretical framework and subsequent empirical support for a commitment-consistency theory-based reaction to consumer commitments on cause-related issues. Irrespective of the level of concern felt by consumers for the environment, they may be willing to buy a product supporting that cause when their concern has been made salient with an active commitment. However, if the consumers are asked to choose between saving money and supporting an environmental cause, most are likely to opt for the former.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the significant contributions of Chris Edwardson, Daniel Marandola and Shari Marshik to the execution of this project.

The authors would also like to thank the University of Minnesota Duluth Chancellor's Small Grant Program for financial assistance in the completion of this project.

References

- Belch, G. E. & Belch, M. A. (2004) *Advertising and Promotion: An Integrated Marketing Communications Perspective*, 6th edn (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill/Irwin).
- Bem, D. J. (1972) Self-perception theory, in: L. Berkowitz (Ed.) *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 6th edn (New York, NY: Academic).
- Burger, J. M. (1999) The foot-in-the-door compliance procedure: a multiple-process analysis and review, *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 3(4), pp. 303–325.
- Chartrand, T., Pinckert, S. & Burger, J. M. (1999) The effects of time delay and requester on the foot-in-the-door technique, *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 29, pp. 211–221.
- Cialdini, R. B. (2001) *Influence: Science and Practice*, 4th edn (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon).
- Cialdini, R. B. & Ascani, K. (1976) Test of a concession procedure for inducing verbal, behavioral and further compliance with the request to give blood, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 61, pp. 295–300.
- Clow, K. E. & Baack, D. (2002) *Integrated Advertising, Promotion, & Marketing Communications* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall).
- Foss, R. & Dempsey, C. (1979) Blood donations and the foot-in-the-door technique, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 37(4), pp. 580–590.
- Freedman, J. L. & Fraser, S. C. (1966) Compliance without pressure, the foot-in-the-door technique, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 4, pp. 195–202.
- Girandola, F. (2002) Sequential requests and organ donation, *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 142(2), pp. 171–178.
- Goethals, G. & Reckman, R. (1973) The perception of consistency in attitudes, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 9, pp. 491–501.
- Guéguen, N. & Jacob, C. (2001) Fund-raising on the web: the effect of an electronic foot-in-the-door on donation, *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 4(6), pp. 705–709.
- Harari, H., Mohr, D. & Hosey, K. (1980) Faculty helpfulness to students: a comparison of compliance techniques, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 6, pp. 373–377.
- Hume, S. (1991) Consumer doubletalk makes companies wary, *Advertising Age*, 62(46), pp. GR4.
- Mainieri, T., Barnett, E. G., Valdero, T. R., Unipan, J. B. & Oskamp, S. (1997) Green buying: the influence of environmental concern on consumer behavior, *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 137(2), pp. 189–204.
- Mandese, J. (1991) New study finds green confusion, *Advertising Age*, 62(45), pp. 1 and 56.
- Oskamp, S., Harrington, M. J., Edwards, T. C., Sherwood, D. L., Okuda, S. M. & Swanson, D. C. (1991) Factors influencing household recycling behavior, *Environment and Behavior*, 23, pp. 494–519.
- Ray, M. L. (1973) Communication and the hierarchy of effects, in: P. Clarke (Ed.) *New Models for Mass Communication Research*, pp. 147–175 (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage).
- Schwarzwald, J., Bizman, A. & Raz, M. (1983) The foot-in-the-door paradigm: effects of second request size on donation probability and donor generosity, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 9, pp. 443–450.
- Seligman, C., Bush, M. & Kirsch, K. (1976) Relationship compliance in the foot-in-the-door paradigm and size of the first request, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 33, pp. 517–520.
- Sherman, S. (1980) On the self-erasing nature of errors of predictions, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 39(2), pp. 211–221.
- Snyder, M. & Cunningham, M. R. (1975) To comply or not comply: testing the self-perception explanation of the foot-in-the-door phenomenon, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 31, pp. 64–67.
- Strahilevitz, M. & Myers, J. (1998) Donations to charities as purchase incentives: how well they work may depend on what you are trying to sell, *Journal of Consumer Research*, 24, pp. 434–446.
- Stults, D. M. & Messé, L. A. (1985) Behavioral consistency: the impact of public versus private statements of intentions, *Journal of Social Psychology*, 125(2), pp. 277–278.

- Tybout, A. (1978) Relative effectiveness of three behavioral influence strategies as supplements to persuasion in a marketing context, *Journal of Marketing Research*, 15, pp. 229–242.
- Uranowitz, S. W. (1975) Helping and self-attributions: a field experiment, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 31, pp. 852–854.
- Varadarajan, P. R. & Menon, A. (1988) Cause-related marketing: a co-alignment of marketing strategy and corporate philanthropy, *Journal of Marketing*, 52, pp. 58–74.
- Vining, J. & Ebreo, A. (1990) What makes a recycler? A comparison of recyclers and non-recyclers, *Environment and Behavior*, 22, pp. 55–73.

Notes on Contributors

Rajiv Vaidyanathan is an associate professor of marketing at the University of Minnesota Duluth. He received his PhD from Washington State University. His research interests include the examination of how consumers perceive prices and evaluate advertised deals as well as the marketing implications of electronic commerce. His research has been published in several journals including the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Journal of Product and Brand Management*, *Journal of Promotion Management* and *Journal of Business and Psychology*, as well as in the proceedings of several national and international marketing conferences. He also currently serves as executive director of the Association for Consumer Research.

Praveen Aggarwal is an associate professor of marketing at the University of Minnesota Duluth. He received his PhD from Syracuse University. His research interests include consumer choice behaviour, assisted decision making and price promotion strategies. His research has been published in several journals including the *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, *Journal of Marketing Management*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Journal of Consumer Behavior*, *Marketing Management Journal* and *Journal of Product and Brand Management*, as well as in the proceedings of several national and international marketing conferences.

Copyright of Journal of Marketing Communications is the property of Routledge, Ltd.. The copyright in an individual article may be maintained by the author in certain cases. Content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.