Marie-Hélène Abbo
Ecole Supérieure de Commerce de Pau

Marketing Professor, Head of the Marketing Program and member of the IRMAPE scientific research laboratory at ESC Pau Business School

Groupe ESC PAU
Campus Universitaire
3, rue Saint John Perse
BP 7512
64075 PAU CEDEX

Tel: 33 (0)5 59 92 64 64
Fax: 33 (0)5 59 92 64 55

Email: marie-helene.abbo@esc-pau.fr

Evolution of Brand Associations after a Co-Branding Initiative between a Brand and a Cause: A French Exploratory Case Study.

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to examine the evolution of brand associations after the partnering of a brand with a cause, in order to contribute to the theories regarding issues of Cause-Related Marketing (CRM). A review of the most relevant literature on branding, co-branding and cause-related marketing is proposed, revealing a real lack of academic research on CRM in France, whereas more and more companies are adopting these practices. Semi-directive interviews based on a French qualitative research procedure were administered to potential consumers of the French brand involved. The research findings on the evolution of the brand associations are compared to the theories previously developed and finally, managerial implications, study limitations and further research areas are presented.

KEY WORDS: Co-branding - Brand associations - CRM (Cause-Related Marketing) - Consumer skepticism - Brand structure - CCB (Cause Co-Branding).

RESUME

Le but de cet article de recherche est d'étudier l'évolution des associations liées à la marque suite à un partenariat avec une cause défendue par une association caritative, en vue de contribuer aux théories du 'Cause-Related Marketing' (CRM). Une revue de la littérature sur la marque, le co-marquage et le 'Cause-Related Marketing' est proposée, révélant un manque réel de travaux académiques sur ce thème en France, alors que les pratiques managériales se développent de plus en plus en ce sens. Des entretiens semi-directifs ont été administrés à des consommateurs potentiels de la marque française étudiée. Les résultats de la recherche sur l'évolution des associations liées à la marque sont ensuite comparés aux théories précédemment exposées. Enfin, les implications managériales, les limites de l'étude et les domaines de recherche qui restent à explorer, sont présentés.

MOTS CLES: Co-marquage - Associations à la marque - CRM (Cause-Related Marketing) - Scepticisme - Structure de marque - CCB (Cause Co-Branding).

INTRODUCTION

A brand is defined by the American Marketing Association as being a "name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors". Organizations develop brands as a way to attract and keep customers by promoting value, image or lifestyle included in their brand identity. Managers are nowadays aware that brands have become real strategic assets demanding more and more attention (Aaker, 1991) but today's business environment is pushing companies to launch products on mature and oversaturated markets where consumers are made to choose between offers with similar levels of quality, price and services. Therefore, simply offering the best quality product at the right price is certainly not enough in the eyes of the consumer (Mason, 1993). The 21st century consumer needs something extra to be able to differentiate the products in today's business jungle. This context leads companies to consider new directions to position their firms and brands, for the future. What could possibly increase the value of their brands?

Various strategies are already being used to boost the potential of brands such as brand extensions and co-branding (Rooney, 1995). Consumers are becoming more and more aware of these branding strategies and at the same time have become more and more sophisticated in their purchasing behavior, entailing higher expectations. So what could possibly make the difference in the eyes of the consumer? In recent years, scholars and managers have become aware of the upcoming strategic implications of integrating social issues into business practices. Indeed, the Cone/Roper Executive Study (2002) indicates managers' fast-growing interest in these practices. For instance, in 2001, American companies spent $9 billion on social initiatives (Cone et al., 2003). This community involvement awareness is also perceptible among consumers who care more about the welfare of society. All over the world, citizens as well as consumers are directly or indirectly confronted with daily poverty, pollution, and mass consumption regardless of ethics, human and/or environmental values. These concerns have a real impact on the way people think about themselves as well as their need to pay attention to each other. Today's consumers wish to ally caring with core life-style decisions in addition to increasing empathy for the troubles of others. In this optic, several reports maintain that 84% of Americans and 86% of Europeans would be likely to switch to a brand associated with a good cause (Cone, 2002; Hillard, 1999). This current business context has brought new marketing trends into the spotlight such as Corporate Societal Marketing (CSM), Cause-Related Marketing (CRM) or Cause Branding (CB) which consist, more or less, in integrating social issues into the company's practices, or in bringing a brand and a cause together for a specific campaign or operation (Gourville and Rangan, 2004). This new phenomenon illustrates the merger between corporate strategy and the will and need to be socially responsible (Smith and Alcorn, 1991). Thus, we can say that the economic world is experiencing a huge shift of paradigm moving from a profit-maximization to a profit-optimization ideology, which urges the new generation of corporate leaders to consider the very 'en vogue' and trendy 3P's in their decision-making process: Planet, People and Profit (Srivastava and Venkateswaran, 2000). Bill Gates for example, is one of the 11% of the world's richest people to give 7% of his whole fortune to philanthropic foundations. In India, one of the world's fastest-growing economies, Ratan Tata, Chairman of Tata Group (the country's second-largest conglomerate with a revenue of $17.8 billion in the financial year ending 2005), declares to McKinsey Mumbai Director: "I think it is wrong for a company in India to operate (…) without any additional responsibilities, as if it were operating in the United States, let's say. And even in the United States, I think if you had an enlightened corporation that went into the Deep South, you would see more of a sense of social responsibility, of doing more for the community, than the company might accept in New York City or Boston. Because it is inevitable that you need to be a good corporate citizen in that kind of environment. And companies that are not good corporate citizens—those that don't hold to standards and that allow the environment and the community to suffer—are really criminals in today's world".

The tendency of very rich people giving such huge amounts (a total of $285 million in 2006) seems to be explained by the fact that they wish to give back to society what it gave them in order to succeed (11th edition of the World Wealth Report). Consequently, in order to match consumers' concerns, Hoeffler and Keller (2002) suggest that executives, who have to preserve their competitive edge, should integrate the social dimension by linking their brand to an existing cause. For them, this kind of alliance should be managed as a standard co-branding strategy. So, even if co-branding has already been explored in various ways (Rooney, 1995; Cegarra and Michel, 2001; Abbo, 2006), few empirical investigations have examined it in a CRM context nor measured the influence it could possibly have on the brand. Michel (2000) has proved that traditional co-branding initiatives have an influence on the consumers' brand attitudes by entailing an evolution in the brand associations after this kind of alliance. No previous research seems to prove this in a CRM context. Thus, in today's business context where managers are showing more and more interest in integrating social issues into their practices, it is necessary to investigate this research field. Therefore, the objective of this exploratory study is to examine the evolution of brand associations after the alliance of a brand with a cause that we name a Cause Co-Branding (CCB) initiative. An essential aspect to investigate is whether managers can blindly undertake this kind of strategy and expect positive outcomes, or whether specific care needs to be taken in order to preserve their brand. "Does doing good always mean doing well...?"

This paper will unfold in a structured manner. First of all we will depict previous theoretical research on these issues defining the main concepts related to the subject, that is to say, branding, co-branding, cause-related marketing and define what we name a cause co-branding initiative. Secondly, we will describe the methodology used for our research. This consists in explaining how and why we use a French procedure in order to generate brand associations from potential consumers. Then we expose our empirical research in order to emphasize the results obtained through our research. Finally, we undertake the analysis of the results which lead us to conclusions including theoretical and practical implications, our contributions and the limitations of this paper.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Regarding the brand literature area, two main periods can be distinguished: before and after 1990. Before 1990, the brand is considered as a simple attribute of the product that has an effect on the preference and the choice of products. The American Marketing Association defines a brand as "a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors". According to many managers the consumer is only looking for product benefits and finds what he/she wants thanks to the brand name itself. However, in today's business environment, brands seem to have become much more than this and have gained a real place on the markets all over the world and are considered as primary sources of competitive advantage and valuable strategic assets (Aaker, 1996). But the creation of new brands and the maintaining of market shares are more and more difficult and expensive for managers and this engenders several implications. They continually look for new means of exploiting their brands, a capital to be managed with appropriate marketing tools and strategies. According to Rooney (1995), a branding strategy is essentially aimed at building the brand image, increasing the brand's value to the customer which leads to brand loyalty. Effectively, once consumers become accustomed to a certain brand, they do not readily accept substitutes. So even if branding is not the answer to all the problems facing businesses today, it has become a marketing priority (Kotler et al., 2006). It brings in a reflexion on the value of the brand and on the separation brand-product. Then it encourages for further research on the brand. Finally one specific concept becomes central to research: brand-equity, the marketing value of the brand. This implies that consumers buy not only a product, but a 'branded' product. Consumers become aware of the value a brand can have and how this value can be transposed to their self. Conceptual and empirical research is therefore undertaken in order to find out what brand-equity really is, how to measure it, how it impacts on consumer behaviour and how it can be implied in marketing strategies. In the 1990's, the concept of brand equity is defined by Farquhar as "the added value a brand brings to a product". The Marketing Science Institute (1988) defines it as the "associations and consumer behaviors toward the brand, the distribution and the firm, which enable the branded products to make much more important volumes and margins than they would without the brand, which gives them a strong advantage, supported and differentiated vis-à-vis their competitors." This means that a specific performance is given to the brand, beyond that of the product, it is also long term and competitive. Aaker (1996) establishes general categories of brand assets that give rise to a brand's equity: (1) brand loyalty, (2) brand awareness, (3) perceived quality, (4) brand associations, and (5) other proprietary brand assets such as patents, trade marks, and established channel relationships.

As previously mentioned in the definition of brand equity, it involves 'associations and consumer behaviors toward the brand'. Associations are informational nodes linked to the brand node in memory, which contribute to and ultimately define the brand's image to the consumer. These associations play an important role in consumers' product evaluations and choices, helping them make purchase decisions (Broniarczyk and Alba, 1994). These brand associations are at the center of any branding strategy as they have been proved to be essential for the brand, and the consumer. But how are these brand associations organized? What role do they play in the brand meaning? Are some brand associations more stable than others? The concept of brand associations stems from cognitive psychology theories. According to Keller (1993), cognitive psychologists 'believe memory is extremely durable' and that information is stored in this memory composed of associations. Keller (1993) considers brand knowledge as a conceptualization of 'brand nodes in memory to which a variety of associations are linked'. He also defines brand image as 'the perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory'. Thus, the meaning of the brand to the consumer is held in the brand nodes in memory. So, one way of enhancing brand equity, according to Keller (1993), would be to create a familiar brand name and a positive brand image, that is to say favorable, strong, and unique brand associations.

If the concept of brand associations stems from cognitive psychology theories, it is essential to note that it is also at the center of social representation theories (Moscovici 1961, Abric 1994). According to Moliner (1996), representation is not simply a reproduction of certain aspects of real, but is more a reconstitution of real according to the expectations and the own interest of the individual. According to the central core theory by Abric (1994), these social representation theories consist in considering an object as being organized around a central meaning. Michel (2000) successfully adapted this conceptual framework to the brand, evoking a brand structure consisting of associations organized in a central core and a peripheral system (Figure 1). The central core is defined as a stable, un-negotiable, and non-transformable part of the representations, which ensures brand durability. According to Michel (2000), the brand central core combines all the elements perceived by a majority of consumers as being fixed to the brand. It constitutes the focal component of the brand, determining its meaning and structure. The peripheral system, which revolves around the central core, is much more flexible (Abric, 1994). Indeed, it represents the interface between the brand's central core and the concrete situation in which the brand evolves. Therefore, it enables the brand to adapt to any environmental or market fluctuations. So, according to Michel (2000), the perception of a brand can be presented as a group of associations organized in an individual's memory around the brand itself representing the knowledge of this brand.

The objective of this exploratory study is to discover the evolution of these brand associations when a brand and a cause get together for a CCB (Cause Co-Branding) initiative. Does the consumer perceive the brand differently after a partnership with a cause?

Before getting involved with social entities and causes, brands first of all looked to increase their brand equity by trying to boost the potential of their brands through strategies such as brand extensions and co-branding initiatives. First of all, a brand extension is 'the use of an already known brand name for a product of a significantly different nature and function to the original products' (Cegarra et Merunka, 1993). Brand extensions are used in order to increase market share, increase survival probability, enhance advertising efficiency, increase brand evaluation, and better brand image. But managers tend to recognize that all brands have their limits and that it would be dangerous to extend them too much. This has encouraged an increasing number of firms to "consider co-branding ventures in preference to single-handedly undertaking risky and expensive brand extension, expansion or diversification plans" (Boad, 1999).

Therefore, co-branding has become a very popular strategy. Its objective is to increase brand equity by trying to benefit from other brands' assets. As a particular type of brand alliance, co-branding may modify consumers' evaluations and perceptions of the brands involved. According to Simonin and Ruth (1998), brand alliances have the potential to modify subsequent attitudes toward the partner brands: "judgments about the brand alliance are likely to be affected by prior attitudes toward each brand". They further argue that brand alliances influence how the partner brands are evaluated by developing new associations. In other words, brand alliance evaluations have spillover effects on attitudes toward each partner. Moreover, brand alliances could represent strategic marketing opportunities to add to or alter a brand's specific associations (Broniarczyk and Alba, 1994).

The literature distinguishes two types of co-branding: (1) ingredient branding which incorporates key attributes of one brand into another brand such as know-how or ingredients (Desai and Keller, 2002) and (2) symbolic co-branding which associates two brands in order to gain additional symbolic attributes (Cegarra and Michel, 2001). According to Cegarra and Michel (2001), whatever the kind of collaboration, brand alliances represent a strategic and tactical tool for companies. So, managers have understood the impact these kind of co-branding initiatives can have on their brands and therefore on consumers. At the same time, they have become aware of the consumers' sophisticated buying behaviour and are doing their best to meet their new and high expectations. All over the world citizens have progressively been sensitized to the necessity of considering social issues as they are directly or indirectly confronted with daily poverty, pollution, and mass consumption regardless of ethics, human and/or environmental values. This is why today's consumers seem to behave positively toward a brand supporting a good cause. Indeed, a business that demonstrates responsiveness to social concerns and gives proportionately more to charity than other firms, receives higher reputation ratings by its publics (Fombrun and Shanley, 1990). Furthermore, one third of Americans consider a company's responsible business practices the most important factor in deciding whether or not to buy a brand. Hence, from the consumers' perspective, sustaining a cause program has become a "must" in the marketplace for companies which are willing to remain competitive and keep their customers. This is why the notion of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) which refers to 'corporate social actions whose purpose is to satisfy social needs', has gained momentum over the years (Angelidis and Ibrahim, 1993). Progressively, cause-related marketing initiatives have evolved from a short-term tactic used to boost sales, into a powerful positioning discipline, used to raise brand equity and enhance corporate image with significant bottom-line and community impacts (Till and Nowak, 2000). In other words, CSR is viewed as an investment that improves the long-term performance of the corporation (Stroup and Neubert, 1987) and an important element for the embodiment of the brand. New CSR marketing communication campaigns have been designed to inform, communicate, and positively affect stakeholders' associations (Till and Nowak, 2000). These initiatives are commonly known as Cause Marketing or Cause-Related Marketing (CRM). For Varadarajan and Menon (1988), CRM is characterized as a marketing program that attempts to achieve two main objectives: (1) improve corporate performance and (2) help worthy causes by linking fund raising for the benefit of a cause to the purchase of the firm's products and/or services. From a marketer's perspective, CRM consists in strengthening consumer demand (Smith and Alcorn, 1991). Till and Nowak (2000) emphasize this standpoint, stipulating that CRM is an effective communication tool used to increase customer loyalty and build brand image.

By the late 90's, Cause Marketing became a more common practice. Consumers are rewarding companies that are differentiating their products and services by integrating social issues.

According to the Cone/Roper Corporate Citizenship Study (2002), 92% of Americans have a more positive image of companies that support causes they care about. More than eight out of ten Americans would be likely to switch brands to one associated with a good cause, if price and quality were similar (84% in 2002 vs 81% in 2001). Cone (2003) also indicates that women more than men, consider social issues as extremely important for companies. Over the years, CRM has evolved from “Cause Promotion” to a new approach that Cone (2000) calls “Cause Branding”, a business strategy that integrates a social cause or issue into a corporate brand’s personality and organizational identity. Cause Branding Programs are built on the unique values and culture of each company and can truly differentiate a brand, providing it with long-term, sustainable competitive advantage.

Keller (2003) stipulates that a Cause Marketing Program can build brand awareness via recall and recognition, enhances brand image in terms of attributes such as user imagery (e.g. kind and generous) and brand personality (e.g. sincere), evokes brand feelings (e.g. social approval and self-respect), establishes brand attitudes (e.g. credibility judgments such as trustworthy and likable), and creates experiences (e.g. through a sense of community and participation in cause-related activities).

Hoeffler and Keller (2002) identify three main cause marketing strategies whose focus is to create mutually beneficial situations. Firstly, this kind of co-branding consists in linking the brand to an existing cause. The alliance between America Airlines and the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation is frequently held up as an example of such a strategy. This paper is principally focused on this scheme. Secondly, self-branding refers to the creation of an entirely new organization to deliver benefits associated with the cause. Ronald McDonald House Charities illustrates perfectly this strategy. Lastly, joint branding turns to a firm that partners with a cause in order to create a specific program promoting exclusively the cause, as with American Express’s Charge Against Hunger program in conjunction with the Share Our Strength Foundation. According to the existing literature on co-branding and CRM concepts are not clearly defined. In this paper we will focus on a kind of alliance that we will call CCB (Cause Co-Branding) in which the brand and the cause cosign a product or service sold to the consumer. Part of the price of this product/service is given to the cause by the brand trying to create a win-win-win situation for the brand, the cause and the consumer. But, a positive effect on the

consumer is not always guaranteed. Some consumers may indeed be skeptical toward these kinds of initiatives.
Actually, consumers look closely at companies who make claims regarding involvement in social issues (Bronn and Vrioni, 2000). These authors consider that there is a level of consumer skepticism that often makes consumers doubt what a firm is saying. They infer that this can lead consumers to reject claims made in CRM campaigns and that it can affect their purchasing behaviour. According to the Oxford Dictionary (1982), a 'skeptic' is a person who is inclined to question the truth of facts, inferences, etc. According to Mohr et al. (1998), skepticism is one of the two constructs that aid in explaining people's reactions to communications, cynicism is the second. A highly skeptical person will perceive the accuracy of a claim to be low; a person with the low level of skepticism will rate the accuracy of a claim to be higher. Webb and Mohr's (1998) research suggests that consumers with a high level of skepticism will be less likely to respond positively to CRM campaigns than consumers with a low level of skepticism toward CRM. The most commonly encountered reasons that encourage skepticism are 'cause exploitative intentions', questionable honesty and fairness of promotion.

As Cause Marketing has progressed, it has become clear to managers and researchers that consumers are highly influenced by Cause Marketing campaigns and partnerships (Sagawa and Segal, 2000; Adkins, 2000). But in France, academic literature on CRM is very poor and requires specific attention from researchers. The objective of this paper is to make a modest attempt to fill this gap and help to better understand how French consumers can be influenced by a CCB campaign. Is the impact always positive for the brand? Are managers thinking these strategies through properly in order to understand the impact of their decisions? Is this new marketing trend a win-win-win situation? The ultimate question in this research to be answered is: "Is doing good always doing well...?"

PROBLEM STATEMENT

This French exploratory study seeks to examine the evolution of brand associations after a Cause Co-Branding initiative as a standard co-branding operation. Co-branding theories have been largely developed and studied in the past. The concept we name 'Cause Co-Branding' (CCB) is

something new in France and therefore supported by very little research. In this context, our aim is to explore if the specificities of CCB are similar to those of standard co-branding. If this is the case, then it will be essential to carry out quantitative research on the subject.
As examined in the co-branding literature cited above, this kind of CCB initiative can influence consumer attitudes toward the brand involved, creating new associations for this brand (Simonin and Ruth, 1998), and this can lead consumers to brand loyalty (Rooney, 1995) and develop positive judgments to a brand supportive of a good cause (Cone, 2002; Hillard, 1999).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To enlighten these theories, a before-after experimental design was conducted in this specific context on a convenient sample. Derived from a marketing strategy, the methodology used is widely applied in the analysis of the consequences of a standard co-branding strategy (Aaker and Keller, 1990). The qualitative research is inspired by a methodology used by Michel in her main research area: brand structure. This method originates from the central core theory advanced by Abric (1994): "Any kind of representation is organized around a central core, […], around which peripheral elements are organized". Michel was the first to adapt these social representation theories to the brand.

We chose a real CCB alliance between a French brand, Volvic, and a cause, UNICEF. Acquired by the French group Danone, Volvic produces and markets bottled natural mineral water all over the world. Its water comes directly from a protected area located in the middle of the Massif Central Mountains in the region of Auvergne in France. UNICEF (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund) is mandated by the United Nations General Assembly to advocate for the protection of children's rights, to help meet their basic needs and expand their opportunities to reach their full potential. The CCB operation between the brand and the cause consisted in the brand Volvic to provide 10 liters of fresh water for the African desert region named Sahel for each liter of bottled Volvic water sold. This initiative named '1 liter for 10 liters" started in France on February 15th 2006 and ended on June 15th 2006, after being advertised on TV, in magazines, via the Internet and on Volvic bottle labels. The stimulus used for the study was emanated from the 2006 TV spot campaign. A period of 10 days was left between the first interview (T1) and the second interview (T2 with stimulus). See the process described in figure 2.

First of all, an interview guide was created in order to generate the associations linked to the brand Volvic. The methodology used here was adapted from Broniarczyk and Alba (1994). It consists in generating associations linked to the brand through “direct quotations”, that is to say anything and everything that comes to the interviewee’s mind when asked about the brand. The main problem with this method is that due to the lack of context, some associations may be forgotten in the consumer’s memory. Therefore, it is necessary to complete the ‘direct quotations’ with ‘semi-directive interviews’ where the consumer is driven to look for associations that could be hidden in his/her long-term memory. According to Abric (1994) brand associations should be investigated in a setting that allows respondents to reply freely by producing spontaneous associations. For this reason, interviews took place in a respondent familiar area, such as the workplace or home.

The treatment experiment group used for this study was composed of 18 French potential consumers, 9 women and 9 men. The exact same people were interviewed before and after exposure to the Volvic-UNICEF TV campaign.

After the first step of generating associations it was interesting to determine whether they were part of the brand’s central core or part of its peripheral system. In order to do this we used the ‘refutation technique’ advanced by Moliner (1988) in the area of social representations. For each association generated, the interviewee was asked to answer by either YES or NO to the following question: “If a product is not associated with…. (the association), can it be Volvic brand related?” For example, if the interviewee generated the association ‘water’ in the first step of the interview then he/she was asked the following question on the basis of the ‘refutation technique’ in the second part of the interview: “If a product is not “water” can it be Volvic brand related?” This refutation technique enables to determine if the spontaneous association given by the interviewee is linked to the brand central core - when the answer is NO or to its peripheral system - when the answer is YES (Michel, 2000).

The stimulus was introduced 10 days later (T2). The interviewee was shown the 20-second TV advertisement promoting the Volvic-UNICEF partnership in 2006. On exactly the same basis as for T1 the interviewee was asked what spontaneous associations come to his/her mind regarding the brand Volvic, then, the refutation technique was applied.
The comparison of results from T1 and T2 enabled us to see if there was any evolution in the consumer's brand perception and any change in their purchase intention. The evolution, if any, between the associations from T1 and T2 could be discussed.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Before exposure to the stimulus (T1), 140 associations linked to the brand Volvic were spontaneously generated by 18 potential consumers, corresponding to an average of 7.78 quotations per interviewee. Associations that were cited more than three times were retained for the study, corresponding to 92.8% of the total number of quotations. Each and every association had been previously determined as being either part of the central core either part of the peripheral system ('refutation technique', Moliner, 1988). After a content analysis, the retained quotations were gathered into 13 association units. In order to define whether the unit was part of the central core of the brand, or part of its peripheral system, we took into account the answers of the refutation technique by the consumer for each association in the unit. Out of the total 13 association units, 6 were defined as being part of the brand's central core, 5 as being part of its peripheral system, and 2 in between. See the Volvic brand structure in figure 3.

Ten days later (T2), the exact same sample was exposed to the CCB initiative with UNICEF through the use of a TV advertisement. As soon as they had seen the film the questions from T1 were identically repeated. A total of 126 associations related to the brand Volvic were instinctively engendered. This outcome represents an average of 5.85 quotations per interviewee. In exactly the same way as for T1, the associations that had been enumerated more than three times were retained, concerning 87.3% of the total number of quotations. The refutation technique and content analysis enabled us to gather the quotations into 15 association units: 6 of them were related to the central core of the brand, 8 to its peripheral system, and 1 in between.

In this experiment, the exposure to the Volvic-UNICEF alliance engendered a change in the brand associations. First of all their number decreased, and secondly, new ones appeared. Indeed, in comparison with the associations initially given on the brand at T1, at T2, 10 days later and after exposure to the partnership, the number of associations related to Volvic decreased from 140 to 126 and 4 new associations appeared: "Africa", "Solidarity/UNICEF", "Skepticism" and "Antagonism". Thus, as expected for this study, the initial brand associations given for Volvic evolve after the exposure to the stimulus (evolution of the cognitive dimension of the attitude toward the brand), which tends to confirm the assumptions made by Simonin and Ruth (1998) stating that brand alliances influence the way the partner brands are evaluated by developing new associations. This seems to be the case even in a CCB context.

In order to understand this evolution of brand associations more thoroughly as well as the possible change in consumers' brand attitudes, it is necessary to look more closely at what has changed after exposure to the partnership. First of all, we can observe that the central core of the brand stays more or less intact after exposure to the stimulus.

At T1, 6 associations compose the central core. At T2, 4 out of these 6 central associations remain in place, "Water", "Natural", "Purity", and "Mountain", and 2 other already existing associations enter: "Bottle" which was between the central core and the peripheral system at T1, and "Health/Well-being" which was in the peripheral system. Moreover, "Freshness" totally disappears from the brand structure and "Auvergne" moves from the central core to the borderline of the peripheral system. No radical change for the central core seems to be noted. This tends to confirm Michel's (2000) theory on the stability of the central core of the brand after a co-branding strategy. These results show that it also seems to be the case in a CCB context. Secondly, we can observe that the peripheral system entails the most significant evolution after exposure to the partnership. 5 initial associations are present at T1 whereas 8 are present at T2. 3 out of the 5 initial associations remain tied to the peripheral system at T2: "Volcano", "Advertising/Communication" and "Youth". Another association, "Greenness", leaves the borderline between the central core and the peripheral system to completely enter the brand's peripheral system. Another one, "Taste", completely disappears from the brand structure and 4 new associations appear at T2: "Africa", "Solidarity/UNICEF", "Skepticism" and "Antagonism". These results seem to support Michel's (2000) approach which stipulates that the central core of a brand stays in general stable, on the opposite to its peripheral system which is more flexible and tends to match the fluctuations of the environment. This theory also seems to be valid in a CCB context.

This evolution of the peripheral system between T1 and T2 presumes a variation in the consumers' attitude toward the brand. The emergence of new associations after exposure to the Volvic-UNICEF stimulus leads us to suppose that the partnership has an impact on the consumers. In this current case, both positive ("Solidarity/UNICEF") and negative ("skepticism" and "antagonism") associations appear. So, as unexpected for this experiment, Cone's (2002) and Hillard's (1999) conclusions on positive judgments about a brand supportive of a good cause seem to be invalidated. Here, in this current case, negative associations have been mentioned, implying that 'doing good does not always mean doing well' in the eyes of several consumers. This phenomenon could come from a problem of trust which can have a significant effect on the consumers' intentions to support a brand adopting a social or environmental cause (Nowak *et al.*, 1999; Osterhus, 1997). Consumers may become skeptical of Cause-Related Marketing claims when advertising and source credibility are questioned (Thorson *et al.*, 1995). If the brand already has a negative image, consumers may not trust the business's motives for professing pro-social or pro-environmental policies.

Another interesting result of this exploratory study that needs to be underlined is the fact that the interviewees who seem to be skeptical about the partnership are current consumers of the brand. Only 1 out of 5 Volvic consumers belonging to the sample declared to be willing to purchase more Volvic water after being exposed to the stimulus. In this experiment, for Volvic water consumers, the partnership does not necessarily make them want to purchase more Volvic products. This outcome seems to reject Rooney's (1995) theory connecting co-branding strategy to brand loyalty. On the other hand, 6 out of the 13 non-consumers declared to be willing to purchase more Volvic water after being exposed to the stimulus. The partnership therefore seems to have a more positive effect on non-consumers, who are willing to purchase the brand in order to participate in this CCB initiative. Cautious interpretation must be made on this point. Does it mean that thanks to the partnership the brand has gained new consumers? Does it mean that that person will continue to purchase the brand even when the operation comes to an end? Is that person buying the bottled water (Volvic) for the sake of the cause (UNICEF), or is he/she simply buying himself/herself a socially concerned conscience? All these questions need to be investigated in order to thoroughly understand the impact of the cause co-branding strategy.

Finally, previous research mentions that women feel more concerned about social issues in their daily purchase decisions than men do. The results of this exploratory study show that 5 out of the 7 potential consumers claiming their intentions to purchase Volvic water after seeing the stimulus were women. As presumed, Cone's (2000) gender assertions seem to be supported.

CONCLUSION AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

This French exploratory study focuses on a special kind of alliance that we name CCB (Cause Co Branding), in which the brand and the cause cosign a product or service sold to the consumer. Part of the price of this product is given to the cause by the brand creating a win-win-win situation for the brand, the cause and the customer involved. The results seem to provide evidence that a CCB partnership can have an impact on the brand associations consumers have in mind. Thanks to Michel's (2000) research, we know that brand associations can, and most certainly do, change after a co-branding operation. The aim of this exploratory study is to try to see if it is similar in a CCB context. The results obtained seem to encourage us in that way. But one must remain careful with these results which need to be investigated more in depth, for example by bringing quantitative research into the picture. Most research on this co-branding phenomenon shows that if a brand is appreciated, then the evolution of associations will be positive. In our case, after exposure to the stimulus, new associations effectively appear, including negative ones. This is what needs to be emphasized in this exploratory study. It proves that brand managers need to pay specific attention and be very careful when they undertake a co-branding initiative with a cause. This study shows that '*doing good is not always doing well*'. Indeed, they could be damaging the brand without realizing it. In this kind of scenario, the intention of the brand is obviously to make everybody involved in the process happy. In this case that means UNICEF, by enabling the cause to provide water in Africa, the consumer, by enabling him/her to actively participate in a humanitarian action, and the brand itself, by enhancing brand image and increasing sales over a determined period of time. Enhancing the image of the brand seems to be the most difficult and dangerous task for brand managers. In our current exploratory study the advent of ‘antagonism’ and ‘skepticism’ in the brand’s associations means that the stimulus had a negative effect on several consumers. Before coming to any final conclusion about this result, it could be necessary to identify the origin of this negative effect. Is it coming from the Volvic-UNICEF partnership itself or is it the effect of all brand-cause partnerships in general? Is it an effect of the advertising strategy or a problem of brand trust? Is the consumer seeing or learning what he really wants to see or to know about this partnership and the way it works?

Another point to be underlined in this exploratory study is the loyalty aspect. In terms of strategy, co-branding is typically used by marketers to enhance brand equity and to lead to brand loyalty (Rooney, 1995). In this experiment, it seems that co-branding with a cause is more effective to attract new customers than to reinforce brand loyalty (Ghewy et al., 2006). The fact that only 1 Volvic consumer out of 5 declared to be willing to purchase more Volvic water after being exposed to the stimulus, and that 6 out of 13 non-consumers declared the same, could mean that this kind of partnership does not always make current consumers more loyal, and does not necessarily retain them. Unexpectedly, in this experiment, they are the most skeptical toward the partnership. They are familiar with the brand and do not necessarily recognize it in this kind of program. On the other hand, the results tend to make us think that this kind of partnership may attract new consumers. Indeed, those who are unfamiliar with the brand seem to appreciate the action and are ready to buy Volvic products, at least for the duration of the co-branding program. But are they genuinely happy to participate in the action, or are they simply buying themselves a ‘good citizen conscience’?

Finally, the experimental findings suggest that a cause co-branding initiative suits female more than male expectations, which seems to be a specific characteristic of a CCB context. Women seem to be more receptive to this kind of initiative. In the first advertising campaign, the ambassador of the operation is an actor (Gerard Klein) and the child focused on in the African village is a little boy. In the second CCB Volvic advertising campaign (2007), an actress (Veronique Jannot) has become the ambassador and the film focuses on a little girl and women in the village. This underlines our assumption that women are more sensitive to this kind of program, and the brand seems to have already taken this aspect into consideration by currently targeting more on women.

We can say that this exploratory research offers implications for both marketing practice and theory. In terms of practical implications, the findings indicate that a standard co-branding strategy between two brands can be transposed to a cause co-branding approach. Regarding academic implications, while simple co-branding and cause co-branding mechanisms look alike, co-branding measurement tools, that have already been tested, can be applied to research on co-branding between a brand and a cause. Consequently, semi-directive interviews can be designed replicating valid survey instruments and measurement scales already used in a standard co-branding context, including gender variables.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This qualitative research is exploratory in nature and is limited in its scope. Nevertheless, the results provide a platform for future research in the CRM area. This subject is very new in France. These results now encourage us to investigate with quantitative research in order to prove that co-branding theories are relevant, or not, in a CCB context. On the other hand, it would be clearly interesting to measure the level of French skepticism regarding CRM partnerships in general and the way to communicate on it, in order to convince the consumer of the honesty and fairness of the brand intentions. This would imply using wider samples, valid survey instruments and theoretically proved measurement scales.

Once the emergence of "French skepticism" and "antagonism" is proved and deeper research on French attitudes toward CRM co-branding programs are conducted by academics, further studies could also be worth being undertaken in the United States, a highly developed country, or in India, an emerging country, where such practices are much more frequent than in France. It could better explain the specificity of French mindset which could tend to make French people more suspicious about CCB campaigns, opening a new and interesting area of knowledge on brand alliances between Non Profit Organizations and For Profit ones, helping managers to make the right choices. In-depth cross cultural studies of CCB strategy and its growing relationships with For-Profit brands in different regions of the world are thus needed. This would help toward a better understanding of how cultural differences affect CRM strategy choices. Moreover, advanced research could help investigate brand associations in different product and services categories. Different types of causes (humanitarian, social, health…) also need to be brought into the picture. This exploratory study is focused on the evolution of the associations related to the brand and the consumers' attitudes after a CCB initiative without taking into account the impact such a program can have on the other partner, that is to say the cause. As a consequence, it would be necessary to investigate the effects a co-branding initiative has on the cause partner and on the consumer. This would also enable to enlighten a 'win-win-win' scenario with a Cause-Co-Branding initiative and determine whether or not the three parties involved benefit from this trendy kind of partnership.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marie-Hélène Abbo is a Professor, Head of the Marketing Program and member of the IRMAPE scientific research laboratory at ESC Pau Business School. She is a former Brand Manager of a well-known Pharmaceutical Group in France. She holds a Postgraduate Degree in Business Sciences from the University of Toulouse (France). Her primary research interests are co-branding and cause-related marketing from a consumer perspective. She grants special thanks to Gaëlle Sancerne and Rachel Nicholson, Marketing Research Assistants, for their active and helpful collaboration to this paper.

Tables and Figures

Figure 1
The Brand Central Core and the Brand Peripheral System (Michel, 2000)

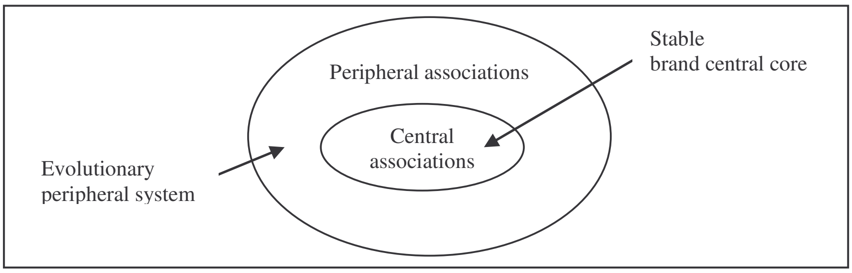

Figure 2
Experimental Design (Adapted from Michel, 2000)

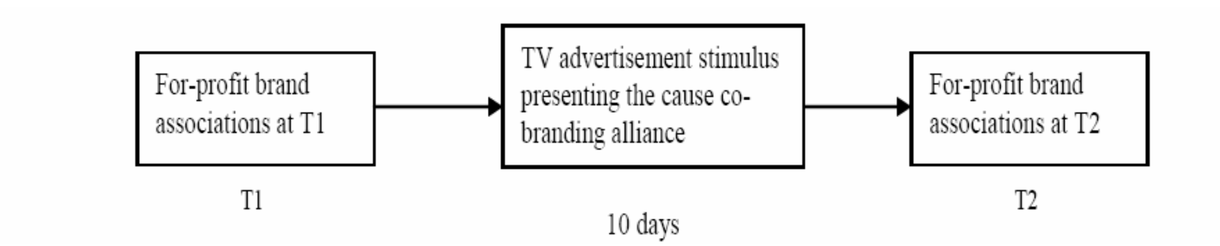

Figure 3

Evolution of Volvic brand associations after the partnership with UNICEF