ABANDONING PURPOSE: HOW REPUTATION SHAPES CONSUMER ATTRIBUTIONS

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Abstract

Brands increasingly integrate social causes into their advertising, often positioning themselves as advocates for sociopolitical issues. However, social purpose engagement is not static. Firms sometimes retreat from previously supported causes, potentially disappointing consumers. Drawing on expectation violation and attribution theories, this research examines how abandoning (vs. continuing) a social purpose initiative impacts consumers' attributions of a brand's motivation to do good for society. We further investigate how social purpose brand (SPB) reputation shapes these inferences and whether explanatory messaging can mitigate negative effects. Across two experiments, we find that purpose abandonment reduces social purpose attributions. This negative effect is stronger for high-SPBs; however, high-SPBs can partially restore positive attributions by providing situational explanations for their abandonment (vs. low-SPBs, who do not benefit from these explanations).