Chapter 8

Sitcoms Make You Laugh and Recycle: Exploring the Concept of Behavior Placements

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ABSTRACT

Social marketing and product placement are two common marketing practices. Consumers are seeing the merging of these two concepts through television programming’s behavior placements, which are the incorporation of social behaviors into television program storylines to sway viewers to adopt these actions. A major television network has adapted this concept by incorporating environmentally themed messages into its programming. The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the concept of “behavior placements” and discuss the effect of these embedded messages on consumers’ green attitudes and intentions. Through an example featured in the television sitcom The Office, the research supports the advancement of the behavior placement concept. Implications and future research directions are presented.

INTRODUCTION

Drive a hybrid vehicle. Get rid of plastic water bottles in the workplace by using reusable water bottles. Buy locally grown organic fruits and vegetables. Change light bulbs to CFL versions. Turn off the power strip instead of keeping it on standby. Buy organic baby clothing and products like diapers. Organize a group bike ride. All of these environmental behaviors have been discussed and even featured on NBC Universal television programs. The concept of a behavior placement was developed “to sway viewers to adopt actions they see modeled in their favorite shows” (Chozick, 2010). The subtle messaging brings mainstream concerns, like environmental issues, to the public.

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Since 2007, NBC Universal has featured environmental behaviors throughout the broadcast year, but in particular, these behaviors are featured twice a year in its primetime and daytime programming through its Green Week Initiative, which is part of its larger “Green is Universal” corporate campaign. Industry estimates show that $20 million in advertising revenue was generated from 20 sponsors during this one week (Chozick, 2010). In 2008, the network added more promotions to its Green Week with “go green” NBC logos and messaging of NBC’s support for the environment. The President of NBC Primetime Entertainment Angela Bromstad explained that the writers of NBC primetime programming are only requested to incorporate an environmental topic into the storyline, not make the program filled with environmental dialogue (Chozick, 2010). At the time of this publication, the three other major networks, ABC, CBS and Fox, have not developed their programming around the behavior placement concept.

NBC has realized the value in environmental messaging since consumers are known for exhibiting serious environmental concerns with more than 75 percent of consumers considering themselves to be “environmentalists” (Osterhus, 1997; Saad, 2006). However, estimates in 2009 showed 160 million consumers have yet to purchase a green product (Stengel, 2009). In addition, it can be challenging to persuade consumers to act in an environmentally friendly manner when the messages generally call for a benefit to society, not to the individual consumer receiving the message (Kronrod, Grinstein, & Wathieu, 2012). A general concern for the environment does not translate into green purchasing behavior (Kaiser, 1998; Kaiser, Wolfing & Fuhrer, 1999), thus indicating an attitude-behavior gap evident in consumers’ green behaviors, a topic not addressed in the academic literature.

This chapter attempts to address this gap by providing insight into whether a behavioral message embedded in the storyline of popular TV shows can influence consumers. The conceptual model identified (see Figure 1) was developed to better understand consumers’ attitudes towards the behaviors portrayed on a television show through a unique form of product placement called behavior placement, and whether viewing green behaviors lead consumers to embrace those behaviors.

This chapter addresses the following research questions:

1. How do consumers perceive behavior placements in television programming? Do behavior placements in television programming influence potential behaviors?
2. How do the roles of perceived realism, skepticism toward the behavior placement in a television program and the environmental consciousness of viewers influence attitudes and potential behaviors?

This chapter begins with a brief discussion of behavior placements as they relate to product placements, followed by a discussion of attitudes toward behavior placement, perceived realism of the environmental behavior in a show’s segment, skepticism in the persuasion knowledge model and environmental consciousness. The solutions resulting from the exploratory research that evaluated attitudes toward an environmental behavior placement, perceived realism and skepticism as they relate to a behavior placement in a specific television program and the impact of environmental consciousness are reported with recommendations of the usefulness of the behavior placement concept. Lastly, a discussion of limitations and possible implications for the future research of behavior placements are presented.

BACKGROUND

In the 1970s, marketing academicians Philip Kotler and Gerald Zaltman (1971) introduced the concept of “social marketing,” realizing that the same marketing principles used to sell products to consumers