

Alcoholic Beverage Warnings in Print and Broadcast Advertisements

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ABSTRACT

Two experiments investigated the efficacy of warnings in mass-media advertising in print (magazine) or broadcast (television) alcoholic beverage advertisements. The first experiment presented print warnings in the context of magazine advertisements, and specifically examined the effects of warning conspicuousness (large bold black print on a white background vs. 60% smaller print on the advertisement background) and configuration (a plain rectangle vs. an identical rectangle with a signal icon vs. an arrow pointing into a circle) surrounding the text. Ten warnings containing two to four lesser-known facts about the hazards of alcohol consumption were presented to subjects using an incidental exposure procedure in which they made a generic attention-gettingness rating of each two-page spread of the magazine without being informed that the study concerned warnings. A seventh condition with no warnings served as a control. The results showed that participants exposed to the conspicuous print warnings performed better on subsequent (unexpected) memory and knowledge tests than those exposed to less conspicuous warnings. Less conspicuous warnings were generally no better than no warnings. There was no effect of configuration.

In the second experiment, five warnings were presented in the context of alcoholic beverage commercials as part of a televised sports program. Examined were the effects of modality of presentation (presence vs. absence of voice and/or print warnings) and time of presentation (during vs. immediately following the commercial). A cover story was used to conceal the purpose of the study to permit incidental exposure to the warnings. Subjects were told that the research concerned people's interest in and preference for different types of television programs, and their viewing habits. After watching the television program, subjects were tested for their memory and knowledge of alcohol consumption hazards. The results showed that subjects viewing both-modality (print and voice) warnings generally performed better than those exposed to voice-only and no warnings. In only one comparison did print-only warnings produce significantly lower performance than both-modality warnings. Though print-only warnings produced better performance than voice-only warnings, both single-modality warning conditions produced higher performance than no warnings. No effect of time of presentation was found.

The most important finding of this research is that warnings in mass-media advertising can communicate safety and health information, as shown by differences in test scores between participants who were exposed visually and/or auditorily to warnings and those who were not exposed. However, the experiments also showed that the effectiveness of warnings in advertisements depends on the way they are presented. There were some warning conditions in which subjects were no more knowledgeable about the hazards of alcohol consumption than participants in the no warning control conditions. Though alcoholic beverage advertisements were used as the vehicle to present warning in the present research, the results may be applicable to advertisement warnings for other kinds of consumer products (e.g., medicines). The results show that the mere presence of a warning in advertising does not guarantee that its message will be conveyed and remembered. Warning effectiveness depends on its salience and the medium in which it is presented.