

The Effect of Adbusting on Brands

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Abstract

Adbusting, a form of advertising activism where a group or an individual alters existing brand communication (e.g., a billboard ad) to promote social causes (e.g., anti-climate change) or de-nounce the targeted brand (e.g., its labor standards), challenges brand managers. Through adbusting the brand involuntarily becomes a vehicle for messages promoted by a third party. However, adbusting may have positive effects on the busted brand: the incongruity of the message with consumers' existing brand schemata may raise ad awareness and increase buzz through social media amplification. However, if the brand is targeted itself (vs. a social cause) its brand perceptions might deteriorate. A panel of real-world adbusts and three experimental studies show that the net effect of positive awareness and negative brand perception depends on the characteristics of the adbust. While brands profit from adbusts targeted at social causes, purchase intent might decline if the brand itself is targeted.

Keywords: *adbusting; advertising activism; subvertising*

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