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AN EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS OF INFORMATION CONTENT OF CORPORATE WEB PAGES AS ADVERTISING MEDIA

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In the face of the popularity enjoyed by the Internet and the World Wide Web (WWW), many companies today find it almost obligatory to maintain a Web site (Harper 1996). The Internet allows marketers to target and communicate with highly involved and interested consumers, domestic and global (Mehta 1995).

In the case of television advertising, the advertising enters the potential buyers' environment in an uninitiated way. In the case of Web advertising, the potential buyer must initiate the access to the corporate Web pages. Hence, the Web as an advertising media demands a much stronger access motivation than television advertising. So the need for a more meaningful information content is perhaps greater in the case of Web advertising compared to other avenues.

To our knowledge, no systematic research has been conducted to date to understand how this new media is being used from the marketing and advertising perspective. In this paper, we build upon the literature in electronic commerce and past research in marketing and advertising with the motivation of understanding how company Web pages are being used as advertising media to communicate with potential customers. Our primary objective in this paper is to investigate the usefulness of textual information provided through company Web pages.

This research follows Wolfe, Gephart and Johnson's (1993) recommendation for using computer-facilitated qualitative data analysis (CQDA) for analysis of information content. The article is based in part on the Resnik and Stern (1977) study that established a classification system for advertising information based on fourteen criteria or "cues," which represented categories of information potentially useful to the consumer. The fourteen cue scheme (consisting of price or value, quality, performance, components or contents, availability, special offer, taste, package or shape, guarantee or warranty, safety, nutrition, independent research, company-sponsored research, new ideas) represents a highly objective scheme for evaluating overt information content and acts as a useful tool for analysis. Its terms are easily understandable and uniformly recognizable (Stern, Krugman and Resnik 1981).

To be considered informative, a corporate Web page needs to contain any one of fourteen information cues. The results of our analysis (based on 45 Fortune 1000 companies) indicate that 85.71 percent of the Web pages were informative, containing at least one cue. Only 64.29 percent of the Web pages contained at least two cues and 57.14 percent contained at least three cues. In our analysis, we have found that performance was the most frequently appearing cue closely followed by price or value and quality. This is not surprising since consumers would be most interested in how a product would perform and how much it costs or the associated quality. What is surprising is the comparatively low percentage (48.9) of Web pages containing all of these three important cues. Our results imply that corporations would do well by incorporating more of these useful informational cues in their Web pages.

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