

A Strategy to Communicate Corporate Social Responsibility: Cause Related Marketing and its Dark Side

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ABSTRACT

Cause related marketing (CRM) is a strategy that aims to communicate a company's striving for corporate social responsibility and to improve brand image. A strategy to increase consumers' emotional involvement toward a product–cause association is to describe the cause in vivid terms. In two experiments we investigated how vivid messages might increase the effectiveness of CRM strategy. We sought to demonstrate that a vivid description of the cause could influence consumers' preferences and trust in the effective use of money collected by selling the product. Experiment 1 results showed that individuals prefer products associated with a vivid message of the social cause rather than products associated with a pallid message. Experiment 2 results suggested that vivid messages induce more positive affective reactions and a higher trust in the effective use of money than pallid ones. In the final section, the implications of CRM for corporate social responsibility are discussed. Copyright © 2008 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd and ERP Environment.

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Introduction

IN RECENT YEARS, MORE AND MORE COMPANIES ALL AROUND THE WORLD HAVE BEEN ASSOCIATING THEIR PRODUCTS WITH some sort of charitable project. Doing so, companies aim to create a positive brand image and to increase market share. Such a strategy has been called 'cause related marketing' (CRM; Varadarajan and Menon, 1988), that is the process of formulating and implementing marketing activities that are characterized by an offer from the firm to contribute a specified amount to a designated cause when customers engage in revenue-providing exchanges that satisfy organizational and individual objectives. It is commonly accepted that CRM is a communication tool that should help companies to highlight their standards of corporate social responsibility and their involvement with specific social issues (Bronn and Vrioni, 2001). Such a strategy is considered an effective way to prove the firm's commitment toward the solution of important social concerns. Therefore, corporate social responsibility may be promoted through cause related marketing activities that describe the extent to which the

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brand and the products of a company are consistent with the values and expectations of the public (Lerner and Fryxell, 1988; Welford, 2002).

Adopting a cause can give a brand or a product a credo or belief system and result in a significantly improved consumer attitude (Lavack and Kropp, 2003) and purchase intention (Pringle and Thompson, 1999).

The goal of CRM is to integrate previous attitudes toward the brand and the cause with the new information provided by the association and joint evaluation of both as suggested by the information integration theory (Anderson, 1981). A marketing strategy to increase consumers' emotional involvement toward the product-charitable cause link is to make use of vivid communication formats, that is, emotionally provoking messages, which should help people to create more detailed mental images than pallid messages. Such a strategy might increase the effectiveness of so-called 'transactional programs' (Berglind and Nakata, 2005), that is, programs in which for every unit of product sold a corporation contributes a share of proceeds to a particular social cause. In such a situation, using vivid communication formats should enhance customers' willingness to choose a product involved in a CRM program. As a consequence, this strategy may help in collecting more money to devolve in favor of the charitable cause.

The Vividness Effect

The present study aims to further understand how vivid messages might increase the effectiveness of transactional programs in the domain of cause related marketing. It has been argued repeatedly in the literature that messages are more memorable and persuasive if they include vivid information (Dikson, 1982; Kisielius and Sternthal, 1984, 1986; Nisbett and Ross, 1980; Taylor and Thompson, 1982). According to Nisbett and Ross (1980), the vividness of a message is identified by its capability 'to attract and hold attention and to excite the imagination'. These authors considered information as vivid to the extent that it is emotionally interesting, concrete and imagery provoking, or proximate in a sensory, temporal or spatial way. They also claimed that such information has more impact than pallid information on the process of judgment. Moreover, Nisbett and Ross as well as other authors (e.g. Fiske and Taylor, 1991; Taylor and Thompson, 1982) suggested several mechanisms by which vividness could enhance information impact on judgments. Vivid messages might produce memorable imagery, specific emotions and generalized arousal, which, in turn, induce people to engage in a deeper cognitive elaboration.

Despite a large consensus about the vividness effect, previous findings have been unclear and there is no conclusive evidence about this phenomenon (Dikson, 1982; Wright and Rip, 1980). Early results seemed consistent with the expected memorial advantage of vivid information over pallid information (Collins *et al.*, 1988). However, subsequent research failed most of the time in its quest to demonstrate that vivid information is more persuasive than pallid information (Taylor and Thompson, 1982).

Many different explanations have been provided to account for the lack of a general vividness effect. One of these explanations claimed that previous experiments used weak operationalizations of vividness (Bone and Ellen, 1990; Sherer and Rogers, 1984). There is evidence that this claim is acceptable; however, such an explanation cannot explain the findings suggesting that vivid messages can be significantly less persuasive than pallid ones (Frey and Eagly, 1993; Kisielius and Sternthal, 1984). If vivid information is generally more persuasive than pallid information, then weak manipulations should hide this difference but should not make vivid messages less persuasive (Smith and Shaffer, 2003).

An alternative explanation suggests that vivid messages are more persuasive only when attention is divided among different stimuli. Therefore, failures to show a vividness effect should be ascribed to experimental designs in which the demand for cognitive resources is too low. Previous research has shown several different patterns of outcome. For example, vivid messages are more persuasive than pallid messages for low levels of resource allocation. However, increasing the level of resources allocated to the message, the difference between vivid and pallid information is no more significant (Rook, 1987). Contrary to this first pattern of results, other studies showed that increasing the resources allocated to the message enhances the effect of vivid information (McGill and Anand, 1989), or even that vivid messages are more persuasive than pallid ones irrespective of the level of resources allocated (Shedler and Manis, 1986).

More recently, other explanations have been proposed. Keller and Block (1997) investigated a resource-matching hypothesis. According to this hypothesis, the persuasive impact of a message is maximized when the resources

allocated to the elaboration of the communication content match those required by the task. The results of Keller and Block showed that if vivid information imposed relatively few processing demands then increasing the resources allocated to message processing initially enhanced the persuasive impact of vivid information and then reduced it. At the same time, this increase in resource allocation induced a linear increase in the persuasiveness of the pallid, more resource demanding, message. As expected, the pattern of results reversed on introducing vivid messages that were more resource demanding than pallid messages.

Finally, Smith and Shaffer (2003) proposed a model based on the congruence between the vivid message and the imagery content that it elicits. In their model, the extent to which the imagery elicited by the vivid message is congruent or incongruent with the message should determine whether the vividness increases or decreases message processing, therefore explaining both findings suggesting that vivid messages enhance persuasion and findings suggesting that vivid information undermines it. Consistently, Smith and Shaffer found that vivid–incongruent imagery can inhibit message processing, whereas vivid–congruent imagery may promote such processing.

In the present study we applied the vividness effect with the aim of showing a different perception for CRM projects that were identical but for the level of detail used to describe them. Therefore, we tried to use a vivid–congruent imagery strategy to avoid a null, or even negative, effect of vividness. Experiment 1 will show that vividness can enhance people's willingness to contribute to a CRM program, whereas Experiment 2 will show that vividness induces a more positive affective reaction toward the CRM program and also a higher trust in the effective use of the amount of money raised by selling a product.

Experiment 1

Experiment 1 aims to show that people's preferences for a product, devolving part of its price to a charitable cause, are influenced by how vivid is the description of this charitable cause.

Participants were presented with a pair of products supporting a charitable cause. One product was associated with a charity described using a vivid message ('vivid product') whereas the other product was associated with a charity described using a pallid message ('pallid product'). Participants were asked to either choose a product, rate their willingness to pay (WTP) or rate the percentage of other customers choosing the 'vivid product.' We expected the 'vivid product' to be preferred to the product associated with a pallid message in all conditions. In addition, people should be willing to pay a higher price for the 'vivid product' than for the 'pallid' one and they should think that most of the other customers are willing to choose the 'vivid product' as well.

Therefore, Experiment 1 hypotheses are the following.

Hypothesis 1. If a charitable cause is described in vivid terms, then it should induce people to choose products associated with it rather than products associated with pallid descriptions of the same charitable cause.

Hypothesis 2. If a charitable cause is described in vivid terms, then it should induce people to pay more for products associated with it rather than products associated with pallid descriptions of the same charitable cause.

Hypothesis 3. If a charitable cause is described in vivid terms, then it should induce participants to judge products associated with it as widely preferred among other people.

Method

Participants

Six hundred and ten undergraduate students voluntarily participated in the experiment (37.7% males; mean age 22 years).

Design and Procedure

Participants were presented with one of three pairs of products: two spaghetti brands, two toothpastes and two cell phone recharges. Each product was described presenting its price and the charitable cause it was supporting (see

Appendix A). In the message presenting the charitable cause it was also explained that the product was devolving five percent of its revenues to the charity. Within each pair, products had the same price and were supporting similar charitable causes. The 'pallid product' was associated with a general description of the charitable cause (e.g. a campaign against world starvation), whereas the 'vivid product' was associated with a more detailed description of the same charitable cause (e.g. the international campaign to help Ethiopian malnourished and starving population victims of serious food deprivation). A pre-test was made to define the exact wording to use for the vivid descriptions. A group of students was presented with some general charitable aims and a list of words. They were then asked to select five words they would have used to describe the general charitable cause in more vivid terms. In addition, they were asked to order these words from the most to the least emotionally provoking. The charitable causes presented in the pre-test were then used as pallid messages in Experiment 1. The first charitable program concerned the world fight against starvation. Among the words listed, participants judged the following as the most emotionally provoking: food deprivation ($M_{\text{rank}} = 2.33$), malnourished ($M_{\text{rank}} = 2.43$), starving ($M_{\text{rank}} = 2.64$) and victims ($M_{\text{rank}} = 2.78$). The second charitable program was concerned with a project supporting medical research and participants rated the following words as the most emotionally provoking: research ($M_{\text{rank}} = 2.09$), medical laboratories ($M_{\text{rank}} = 2.40$), cancer ($M_{\text{rank}} = 2.44$) and medical equipment ($M_{\text{rank}} = 2.50$). The third and last charitable program was concerned with the rebuilding needed after the tsunami that hit Southeast Asia on 26 December 2004 (data collections for both the pre-test and Experiment 1 took place in early 2005). Participants judged the following words as the most emotionally provoking: tsunami ($M_{\text{rank}} = 2.39$) and Christmas ($M_{\text{rank}} = 2.40$).

As stated before, vivid messages in Experiment 1 were built up using the words respondents selected in the pre-test. The spaghetti brands were associated with vivid and pallid descriptions of the charitable program concerning the world fight against starvation. The toothpaste brands were associated with descriptions of the charitable program for medical research. The cell phone recharges were associated with descriptions of charitable programs for the post-seaquake in Southeast Asia (see Appendix A).

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three task conditions: choice, WTP and judgment of other consumers' choice. In the choice condition, participants were asked to choose between the 'vivid product' and the 'pallid product.' In the WTP condition, participants provided the amount of money they were willing to pay for the 'vivid product' whereas they were provided with the price of the 'pallid product.' Finally in the last condition, participants rated the number of consumers (as a percentage) willing to buy the 'vivid product'.

Results

Choice Condition

Hypothesis 1 stated that participants should have chosen the 'vivid product' more often than the 'pallid' one. Results supported this hypothesis. The majority of participants chose the 'vivid product': respectively, 63 versus 36% ($\chi^2(1, 47) = 3.40$; $p = 0.058$) for the spaghetti brand; 88 versus 12% ($\chi^2(1, 50) = 28.88$; $p < 0.01$) for the toothpaste and 79.2 versus 20.8% ($\chi^2(1, 48) = 16.33$; $p < 0.01$) for the cell phone recharge.

Willingness to Pay

Hypothesis 2 stated that participants should have been willing to pay a higher price for the 'vivid product' than the 'pallid product'. Again results supported our hypothesis, since participants were willing to pay a higher price for the 'vivid product' than each 'pallid product': respectively, €0.82 for the 'vivid' spaghetti brand (versus €0.65 associated with the 'pallid product'), $t(49) = 3.43$; $p < 0.01$; €2.54 for the 'vivid' toothpaste brand (versus €2.10 associated with the 'pallid product'), $t(46) = 5.44$; $p < 0.01$; and €30.31 for the 'vivid' cell phone recharge (versus €25.00 associated with the 'pallid' one), $t(48) = 3.20$; $p < 0.02$.

Judgment of Other Consumers' Choice

Hypothesis 3 stated that participants should have judged the 'vivid product' as widely preferred among other consumers. Results supported Hypothesis 3 for all products. Participants rated the number of other consumers willing

to buy the 'vivid product' significantly higher than the number of people willing to buy the 'pallid' one: respectively, 59.27% for spaghetti, $t(47) = 19.62$; $p < 0.01$; 69.31% for the toothpaste, $t(47) = 25.44$; $p < 0.01$; and 65.95% for the cell phone recharge, $t(46) = 24.37$; $p < 0.01$.

Discussion

Experiment 1 aimed to assess whether the vividness of the information used to inform consumers about the CRM program might have an effect on people's preferences. Results supported our hypotheses and showed that both participants' choices and judgments were influenced by the type of message used to communicate a CRM program.

However, in Experiment 1 there is an important limitation since the manipulation of vividness was based on the results of the pre-test but no manipulation check was done. Therefore, we cannot be sure that participants perceived vivid messages as more detailed, imaginable and emotionally provoking than pallid messages. On the basis of Experiment 1 results, it is possible to state that people's preferences are influenced by the format used to describe the charitable project but not whether they depend on the vividness of the message or some other factor. Experiment 2 will address this limitation and extend the explanation of the effect of vividness on people's preferences for products supporting charitable causes.

Experiment 2

In Experiment 2, we aim to investigate whether participants actually perceive the vivid message as more clear, detailed and imaginable than the pallid one. It was hypothesized that people would rate vivid messages as more precise, vivid and concrete than pallid messages. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 is the following.

Hypothesis 1. If a message is described using more details than a second message, then participants should rate it as more vivid and specific.

In addition, if people perceive the vivid message as more specific and concrete then they should have a clearer mental image of the charitable cause than people presented with a pallid message. In turn, if vivid and more detailed information helps people to create a better mental image of the event then their emotional involvement with the charitable project should be higher than that of people presented with the pallid message. Slovic *et al.* (2002) suggested that people make evaluations by attaching an emotional value to the mental images of the stimuli; therefore, a stronger emotional reaction should correspond to a more vivid mental image (Nisbett and Ross, 1980). As stated by Slovic *et al.* (2002), affect is a valenced feeling and has a powerful role in motivating people's choices and behaviors. Therefore, we hypothesized that a vivid message should induce more positive feelings than a pallid one. The second hypothesis is the following.

Hypothesis 2. If a product is associated with a charitable program perceived as more vivid, then participants will have a more positive emotional reaction toward it than toward the product associated with a charitable program perceived as pallid.

If a more vivid message induces more positive feelings than a pallid message, then people should more easily find reasons to think that money collected by selling the 'vivid product' will be used more effectively than money collected by selling the 'pallid product'. Previous studies showed that in many cases people choose products characterized by the highest number of favorable reasons, despite the fact of being identical to other available options or even inferior (Shafir *et al.*, 1993).

In addition, Chaiken and Eagly (1979) showed that vivid messages help to increase the credibility of the source. As a consequence, people should have different degrees of confidence about the way money will be used depending on the format of the message (vivid versus pallid). Therefore, Hypothesis 3 is the following.

Hypothesis 3. If a product is associated with a charitable cause perceived as more vivid, then participants should be more confident about the effective use of the money collected by selling this product rather than the 'pallid' one.

This latter hypothesis is not a trivial one, since CRM, more than other marketing strategies, may lead consumers toward dangerous misperceptions. If Hypothesis 3 is supported then it means that the simple association of a

brand with a vivid message about a charitable cause makes it look more trustable, even if no information is provided about the concrete way in which donations will be used. We also believe it is important to understand what makes a CRM program trustable to fully exploit the potential of such a strategy.

Method

Participants

One hundred and eighteen students voluntarily participated in the experiment (30.5% males; mean age 22 years).

Design and Procedure

Participants were presented with two out of three conditions used in Experiment 1: choice and willingness to pay. They were randomly assigned to either one or the other condition. The pairs of products were the same as presented in the previous experiment. Again products were described providing the same price and either a vivid or pallid description of the same charitable program. As in Experiment 1, each pair of products was associated with a different charitable program. However, we decided to change the specific charitable programs associated with each pair of products to assess whether the pattern of results found in Experiment 1 was actually induced by the vividness factor or whether depended on the special link created between products and charitable causes (e.g. spaghetti brands devolving money in favor of the world fight against starvation; on the effects of the link between product and social cause, see Pracejus and Olsen, 2004) (for the materials used in Experiment 2, see Appendix B).

In both conditions, participants were asked to fill in a semantic differential composed by the following six dimensions: precise/vague, dark/bright, vivid/pallid, concrete/abstract, generic/specific, and strong/weak. The semantic differential was used to assess whether participants actually perceived vivid messages as more precise and detailed than pallid messages. In addition, participants were asked to rate for both products within each pair 'how good or bad a feeling do you have toward the charitable program associated with product A (B)?' Answers were provided on a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from -3 to 3 (-3 equal to 'completely bad', 0 equal to 'neither bad nor good' and 3 equal to 'completely good'). The following question asked participants to rate 'how sure or unsure are you that money collected by selling product A (B) will be used effectively to support the described charitable cause?' on a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from -3 to 3 (-3 equal to 'completely unsure', 0 equal to 'neither unsure nor sure' and 3 equal to 'completely sure').

Results

Choice Condition

In the choice condition participants' choices closely paralleled the pattern of results already found in Experiment 1. For three out of three pairs of products, participants chose more often the 'vivid product' than the 'pallid' one: respectively, 88.4 versus 11.6% for spaghetti ($\chi^2(1, 75) = 25.33; p < 0.01$); 73.7 versus 26.3% for the toothpaste ($\chi^2(1, 61) = 12.79; p < 0.01$) and 87.8 versus 12.2% for the cell phone recharge ($\chi^2(1, 69) = 27.94; p < 0.01$).

Hypothesis 1 stated that people should have perceived the descriptions of the charitable programs as differently vivid. Participants' ratings of the semantic differentials showed that this hypothesis was supported. Three out of three vivid messages were judged as more vivid than the pallid counterparts (see Table 1): respectively, $t(57) = 5.36, p < 0.01$, for the two spaghetti brands, $t(60) = 7.60, p < 0.01$, for the two toothpaste brands and $t(60) = 8.50, p < 0.01$, for the two cell phone recharges. The pattern of results on each specific dimension composing the semantic differential showed that the difference between 'vivid products' and 'pallid products' was always significant ($p < 0.01$ for all the products across all six dimensions).

Hypothesis 2 suggested that a vivid description of the charitable program should induce a stronger emotion than the pallid description of the same program. Again, results supported the hypothesis. For three out of three products the vivid message induced participants to feel significantly more positive affective reactions than the pallid

Product	N	Mean	SD
Spaghetti 'pallid format'	58	4.13	1.34
Spaghetti 'vivid format'	58	2.63	1.26
Toothpaste 'pallid format'	61	4.66	0.92
Toothpaste 'vivid format'	61	3.02	1.46
Cell phone recharge 'pallid format'	61	4.79	1.08
Cell phone recharge 'vivid format'	61	2.61	1.25

Table 1. Mean ratings and standard deviations of the aggregate scores found on the semantic differential in the choice condition

Lower average ratings mean higher vividness.

Product	N	Mean	SD
Spaghetti 'pallid format'	58	0.76	1.10
Spaghetti 'vivid format'	58	1.62	1.14
Toothpaste 'pallid format'	61	0.62	1.13
Toothpaste 'vivid format'	61	1.39	0.93
Cell phone recharge 'pallid format'	61	1.02	0.95
Cell phone recharge 'vivid format'	61	1.79	1.28

Table 2. Mean ratings and standard deviations of participants' affective reactions toward each charitable cause

Effective use of money	N	Mean	SD
Spaghetti 'pallid format'	57	-0.05	1.17
Spaghetti 'vivid format'	57	0.93	1.33
Toothpaste 'pallid format'	61	-0.52	1.42
Toothpaste 'vivid format'	61	0.74	1.50
Cell phone recharge 'pallid format'	61	-0.18	1.23
Cell phone recharge 'vivid format'	61	0.80	1.47

Table 3. Mean ratings and standard deviations of how confident participants were about the effective use of money collected by selling each product

message (see Table 2): $t(57) = -5.65$, $p < 0.01$, for spaghetti; $t(60) = -5.79$, $p < 0.01$, for the toothpaste and $t(60) = -4.89$, $p < 0.01$, for the cell phone recharge.

Hypothesis 3 stated that if a product is associated with a charitable program perceived as more vivid then participants should be more confident about the effective use of the money collected by selling this 'vivid product' than about the use of the money raised by selling the 'pallid product'. Results showed that this hypothesis has been supported for all three products. Three out of three vivid messages induced participants to feel more confident about the effective use of money raised by selling the products associated with these messages (see Table 3): $t(56) = -4.85$, $p < 0.01$, for spaghetti; $t(60) = -6.92$, $p < 0.01$, for the toothpaste and $t(60) = -5.60$, $p < 0.01$, for the cell phone recharge.

Willingness to Pay

Participants were willing to pay significantly higher prices for 'vivid products' than for 'pallid products': respectively, €0.77 (versus €0.65 associated with the 'pallid product'), $t(54) = 5.19$, $p < 0.01$, for spaghetti; €2.24 (versus

€2.10 associated with the 'pallid product'), $t(54) = 2.47$, $p < 0.02$, for the toothpaste and €27.47 (versus €25.00 associated with the 'pallid product'), $t(53) = 3.93$, $p < 0.01$, for the cell phone recharge.

Again, results supported Hypothesis 1. Three out of three vivid messages were rated as more vivid than their pallid counterparts (see Table 4): $t(56) = 8.60$, $p < 0.01$, for the spaghetti; $t(56) = 11.80$, $p < 0.01$, for the toothpaste and $t(56) = 12.61$, $p < 0.01$, for the cell phone recharge. The pattern of results was also confirmed on each specific dimension composing the semantic differential ($p < 0.01$ on all scales for all three products).

Results also supported Hypothesis 2 for three out of three products (see Table 5): respectively, $t(56) = -4.87$, $p < 0.01$, for spaghetti; $t(55) = -4.76$, $p < 0.01$, for the toothpaste and $t(56) = -8.55$, $p < 0.01$, for the cell phone recharge.

In the WTP condition, Hypothesis 3 was supported as well. 'Vivid products' induced higher confidence ratings on the effective use of the money than 'pallid products' (see Table 6): $t(56) = -2.13$, $p < 0.04$, for spaghetti; $t(55) = -5.48$, $p < 0.01$, for the toothpaste and $t(56) = -5.68$, $p < 0.01$, for the cell phone recharge.

Product	N	Mean	SD
Spaghetti 'pallid format'	57	4.18	1.32
Spaghetti 'vivid format'	57	2.41	1.06
Toothpaste 'pallid format'	57	4.77	1.25
Toothpaste 'vivid format'	57	2.30	0.97
Cell phone recharge 'pallid format'	57	5.24	1.20
Cell phone recharge 'vivid format'	57	2.60	1.31

Table 4. Mean ratings and standard deviations of the aggregate scores found on the semantic differential in the WTP condition

Lower average ratings mean higher vividness.

Product	N	Mean	SD
Spaghetti 'pallid format'	57	1.16	1.06
Spaghetti 'vivid format'	57	1.67	1.02
Toothpaste 'pallid format'	56	0.13	0.87
Toothpaste 'vivid format'	56	1.75	1.02
Cell phone recharge 'pallid format'	57	0.82	0.97
Cell phone recharge 'vivid format'	57	1.75	0.98

Table 5. Mean ratings and standard deviations of participants' affective reactions toward each charitable cause

Product	N	Mean	SD
Spaghetti 'pallid format'	57	-0.12	1.35
Spaghetti 'vivid format'	57	0.19	1.43
Toothpaste 'pallid format'	56	-0.77	1.29
Toothpaste 'vivid format'	56	0.27	1.43
Cell phone recharge 'pallid format'	57	-0.46	1.21
Cell phone recharge 'vivid format'	57	0.58	1.41

Table 6. Mean ratings and standard deviations of how confident participants were about the effective use of money collected by selling each product

Discussion

In Experiment 2 we aimed to address some limitations of the previous experiment and also to extend our understanding of the effect of vivid messages on consumers' perception of CRM programs. Despite switching the charitable programs among the three different product categories, participants were still more willing to choose 'vivid products' than 'pallid' ones. The same pattern of result was found in the WTP condition as well. In addition, results found in Experiment 2 supported the effect of vivid messages in a more reliable way, since the manipulation of vividness was checked on the sample participating in the experiment. In both choice and WTP conditions, participants perceived vivid messages as clearer and more detailed, concrete and vivid than pallid messages.

One of the aims of Experiment 2 was also to demonstrate that vivid messages induce more positive feelings toward the charitable cause than pallid messages. This was actually the case, since people answered that they felt significantly more positive affective reactions in relation to 'vivid products'. This is a relevant result since the intensity of the affective reactions is likely to induce participants to perceive 'vivid products' as significantly more trustworthy than pallid products. Consistently, participants not only chose more often and were willing to pay higher amounts of money for 'vivid products' than for 'pallid' ones, but they also rated 'vivid products' as more likely to use the money in an effective way.

General Discussion and Managerial Implication

The aim of the present study was to assess whether the vividness effect has a role in shaping consumers' preferences for different CRM programs. Despite a wide use of vivid information in advertising and much speculation about how this information influences people, there are studies showing that vividness may have a small impact on people's judgments (e.g. Smith and Shaffer, 2003; Keller and Block, 1997; Frey and Eagly, 1993). In the present study a strong effect of vivid messages has been found in both Experiments 1 and 2. Participants not only found vivid messages clearer and more emotionally compelling than pallid messages, but they also preferred 'vivid products' to 'pallid' ones. In addition, Experiment 1 showed that participants seem to think that their preferences are also shared by most other consumers.

In advertising, the use of vivid messages about a product core attributes can influence consumers' preferences and evaluations of the product. The present findings showed that people's preference for a product could be induced by describing in vivid terms not only the product's core features, but also attributes such as its social responsibility, which are less related to the intrinsic quality of the product itself.

Some limits of the present study prevent us from generalizing the findings to real world consumers' behavior. Among these limitations, one of the most relevant is the use of fictitious scenarios, which helped us to isolate the different effect of vivid versus pallid messages, but prevented us from testing the vividness effect on a more ecological context as well. In real world purchasing, consumers are often choosing between more than two products, which are differentiated along many different dimensions.

In addition, we did not use real brands to describe our products, and it is likely that real brands have an impact on the effectiveness of CRM programs. The brand itself is a relevant feature of the product, since people might attach to it their feelings of trustiness. Using real brands the effect of vivid information might be reduced if a vivid message is associated with an unpopular brand. On the other hand, it might also be strengthened if a vivid message is associated with a popular brand (Lefferty and Goldsmith, 2005). Additional research is required to further understand which specific factors might strengthen or weaken the results found in the present study.

The present study suggested that vividness could actually increase the money raised in favor of a socially responsible activity and enlarge, at the same time, the product market shares. Such evidence is consistent with more and more enterprises all around the world associating their products with some sort of charitable causes. This kind of strategy has the aim of building a positive brand awareness and attitude by sponsoring socially responsible activities (Jalleh *et al.*, 2002). Therefore, presenting CRM programs throughout vivid messages could easily become a communication strategy to differentiate products from competitors and to improve their image. As shown by the results found in the WTP condition, participants were willing to pay a higher price for a product associated with vivid information, which means that vividness could increase the value that consumers attach to a product and

also their willingness to donate. For this reason, it is desirable if the present findings induce companies not only to pursue the development of brand image but also to make the association between products and charitable aims an effective way to support socially responsible causes.

In fact, the present study also showed a 'dark side' of CRM, since people seemed to trust more the use of money raised by selling 'vivid products' compared with 'pallid' ones, even if no information about the concrete use of the donations was provided. Such ease of influencing people's perception of the effective use of a donation raises several ethical concerns. In their striving for more and more profits many companies might not respect consumers' rights and try to take advantage of their willingness to support important socially responsible projects. Sometimes there is the danger that partnerships between companies and not-for-profit entities may be disproportional. In other words, companies can use the image of not-for-profit entities for their promotions without giving much of substance in return.

For example, American Express was criticized for both the 'Charge against hunger' and the 'Statue of Liberty' campaigns because more money was spent advertising the campaigns than was contributed to the social causes (Smith and Stodghill, 1994). After the tsunami that hit the South-Eastern region of Asia, Telecom Italia, one of the biggest Italian telecommunication companies, launched a campaign to collect one Euro for every text message sent from the cell phones of their customers. However, it turned out that the phone company was charging extra fees for the text messages and was contributing the extra charges and only a very small part of its usual revenues. Obviously, this is not always the case and there are many examples of companies that are deeply involved in programs aiming to support important socially responsible causes (e.g. Danone and Toyota). Nevertheless, it is still surprising how easily our trust in a project might be misguided.

In their ever-increasing need to differentiate themselves and their products, many companies are turning to the use of cause related marketing not only as a marketing strategy, but also as a way to communicate more effectively their effort to achieve high standards of corporate social responsibility through the affiliation with non-profit organizations and the decision to support important social cause (Arts, 2002). In other words, companies that seek to promote and comply with pro-social practices should look for effective marketing and communication tools in order to stand out as renowned social responsible firms (McMurtrie, 2005). In this respect, the most obvious link between CRM and CSR is through their implication for the company's reputation, which has a relevant role in helping the firm to effectively fulfill the expectations of multiple stakeholders.

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Appendix A. Product–Social Cause Association in Experiment 1

Spaghetti

500 g package of Spaghetti brand 'A' (vivid message) €0.65
 (Brand 'A' commits itself to devolve 5% of the price of the product to support the international campaign to help Ethiopian malnourished and starving population victims of serious food deprivation).

500 g package of Spaghetti brand 'B' (pallid message) €0.65
 (Brand 'B' commits itself to devolve 5% of the price of the product to support the international world fight against starvation).

Toothpaste

Toothpaste brand 'A' (vivid message) €2.10
 (Brand 'A' commits itself to devolve 5% of the price of the product to purchase advanced medical equipment for Italian medical research laboratories, which are working to find a new treatment against cancer).

Toothpaste brand 'B' (pallid message) €2.10
 (Brand 'B' commits itself to devolve 5% of the price of the product in favor of medical research).

Cell Phone Recharge

Cell phone recharge brand 'A' (vivid message) €25.00
 (Brand 'A' commits itself to devolve 5% of the price of the cell phone recharge to support the rebuilding of schools and hospitals destroyed by the tsunami which hit Southeast Asia during Christmas 2004).

Cell phone recharge brand 'B' (pallid message) €25.00
 (Brand 'B' commits itself to devolve 5% of the price of the cell phone recharge to support Southeast Asia regions destroyed by the seaquake).

Appendix B. Product–Social Cause Association in Experiment 2

Spaghetti

500 g package of Spaghetti brand 'A' (vivid message) €0.65
 (Brand 'A' commits itself to devolve 5% of the price of the product to support the rebuilding of schools and hospitals destroyed by the tsunami which hit Southeast Asia during Christmas 2004).

500 g package of Spaghetti brand 'B' (pallid message) €0.65
 (Brand 'B' commits itself to devolve 5% of the price of the product to support Southeast Asia regions destroyed by the seaquake).

Toothpaste

Toothpaste brand 'A' (vivid message) €2.10
 (Brand 'A' commits itself to devolve 5% of the price of the product to support the international campaign to help Ethiopian malnourished and starving population victims of serious food deprivation).

Toothpaste brand 'B' (pallid message) €2.10
 (Brand 'B' commits itself to devolve 5% of the price of the product to support the international world fight against starvation).

Cell Phone Recharge

Cell phone recharge brand 'A' (vivid message) €25.00
 (Brand 'A' commits itself to devolve 5% of the price of the cell phone recharge to purchase advanced medical equipment for Italian medical research laboratories, which are working to find a new treatment against cancer).

Cell phone recharge brand 'B' (pallid message) €25.00
 (Brand 'B' commits itself to devolve 5% of the price of the cell phone recharge in favor of medical research).