

**Effects of Consumer Testimonials in
Weight Loss, Dietary Supplement and
Business Opportunity Advertisements**

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Introduction

A research study was designed to investigate the effects on consumers of testimonials in print advertisements. Some of the questions addressed in the study were:

- C Do consumers interpret testimonials to imply that the product will enable new users to achieve results similar to those portrayed by the testimonialists in the advertisement?
- C Do consumers interpret testimonials to imply that the product will enable a substantial proportion of new users to achieve results similar to those portrayed by the testimonialists in the advertisement? In other words, do testimonials communicate “typicality”?
- C Do disclosures moderate the effects of testimonials on communication of these messages?

Method

Sixteen hundred and twenty-four (1624) interviews were conducted in 12 geographically diverse markets: Arlington, VA; Austin, TX; Boston, MA; Chicago, IL; Colorado Springs, CO; Edison, NJ; Los Angeles, CA; Poughkeepsie, NY; Schenectady, NY; Orlando, FL; Toledo, OH; and Wichita, KS. Respondents were exposed to an ad for a fictitious brand of either a weight-loss program (WeightGuard), a dietary supplement for lowering cholesterol, (Cardio Guard), or a business opportunity (Vending Solutions). (See Appendix A for the ads.) Five hundred and eighty-two (582) interviews were conducted for the weight loss program; 522 interviews were conducted for the dietary supplement, and 520 interviews were conducted for the business opportunity (vending machine business). Interviews were conducted in shopping malls between November 2002 and February 2003. The study was “double blind”; neither the interviewers nor

the respondents were aware of the identity of the client or the purpose of the study. Respondents were paid \$2.00 for their participation in the study.

Design

The study consisted of two sub-designs -- one for the weight loss program and the other for the dietary supplement and business opportunity. In the sub-design for the weight loss program, all respondents saw an advertisement consisting of five testimonials by individuals who stated that they had experienced weight loss using WeightGuard. Two variables were manipulated: the amount of weight loss claimed by the testimonialists (two levels: 24-36 pounds and 48-72 pounds) and the disclosure included in the ad (four levels: no disclosure, “Results not typical,” “These testimonials are based on the experiences of a few people. You are not likely to have similar results,” and “The average WeightGuard user loses about 10 pounds in three months”).¹ In addition, there was one “no numbers” condition: the testimonialists reported results that were not quantified (e.g., “WeightGuard has made a difference. I have lost weight in the short time since I started.”) and there was no accompanying disclosure.

In the sub-design for the dietary supplement and business opportunity, the average cholesterol loss claimed was 60 points and the average money made was \$2400 per month, respectively. Four variables were manipulated: product type (two levels: dietary supplement and business opportunity), testimonial message (two levels: single testimonial and five testimonials), variance in results reported by the five testimonialists (two levels: low variance

¹ The disclosures were prominently displayed in the ads, the lettering was in red, bold, 14 point type, and a red asterisk was used in the text of the ad to call attention to the disclosure.

and high variance),² and the disclosure included in the ad (two levels: no disclosure and “Results not typical”). There were four additional conditions (two for each product): two “company assertion” conditions involving a claim made by the company (e.g., “Daily use of Cardio Guard lowers cholesterol levels by 60 points”) without testimonials; and two “no numbers” conditions

company that markets a weight-loss product, medication, or program. For the dietary supplement product, potential respondents had to have been “concerned” or “very concerned” about their cholesterol level and to have done something to help lower or maintain their cholesterol level. In addition, potential respondents were excluded if they or members of their households worked for a store or company that markets pharmaceutical products or were in the health care or medical field. For the business opportunity, potential respondents either had to currently operate or be interested in operating a small business. In addition, potential respondents were excluded if they or members of their households worked for a company that markets new business opportunities or were in the accounting/financial services field.

Age and gender quotas were established for each of the three products based on demographic data about the potential target audience. For the weight-loss program, the age quota was half 18-44 years old and half 45 years and older, and the gender quota was one-third male and two-thirds female. For the cholesterol-lowering dietary supplement, the age quota was one-third 18-44 years old and two-thirds 45 years and older, and the gender quota was half male and half female. For the business opportunity, the age quota was half 18-44 years old and half 45 years and older, and the gender quota was two-thirds male and one-third female.

Those potential respondents who were qualified to participate in the study based on their responses to the screening questionnaire and who satisfied the age/sex quotas were administered the main questionnaire.

Main Questionnaire

The main questionnaires for the three products followed the same format (Appendix C). Respondents were interviewed individually. They were given a one-page print advertisement for a hypothetical product and asked to “read it carefully and let me know when you are finished.”

The advertisement was then removed from sight. Then, respondents were asked a series of open-ended and closed-ended ad communication questions. Respondents were told “If you don’t know an answer, that’s o.k., just say

numerical response was used as a conservative measure of ad communication.

Table 1 presents the findings. For each treatment condition, the table shows the percentage of respondents indicating that the ad suggested that new users of WeightGuard can expect to lose at least a specific amount of weight (at least 10 pounds, at least 20 pounds, etc.) in three months. These results show that:

- C The ads communicated to a substantial percentage of respondents that the advertised product would enable new users to achieve results similar to those portrayed by the testimonialists in the 670 Fibre 2 h 062dj47a051q397d092630jse70Mh005ah



least 24 pounds (38%) was substantially less than for the other two disclosure conditions (75% and 76%). There were similar results for the 48-72 pound ad; the percentage of respondents exposed to the “average 10 pounds” disclosure who said new users could expect to lose at least 48 pounds was 15% compared to 55% and 48% for the other two disclosure conditions. However, the data also show that a substantial proportion of respondents still took claims of weight loss significantly higher than the 10 pounds mentioned in the disclosure. For example:

- C 42% respondents exposed to the “average 10 pounds” disclosure in the 24-36 pound ad said that new users could expect to lose at least 20 pounds.
- C 27% respondents exposed to the “average 10 pounds” disclosure in the 48-72 pound ad said that new users could expect to lose at least 20 pounds

Communication of Typicality

Respondents who indicated that the ad communicated a quantitative weight loss claim (i.e., said “yes” to Q3) and provided a single numerical response were then asked the “typicality” question for the numerical response they provided (Q3c). Those respondents who provided more than one numerical response were asked the “typicality” question for the lowest and highest numbers they provided (Q3d and Q3e):

Q3c/d/e: Based on what was suggested, how many new users of WeightGuard can expect to lose at least ___ pounds in three months?

Respondents were provided with the following response options: “all,” “almost all,” “most,” “about half,” “some,” “very few,” “none,” or “don’t know or not sure.”

Table 2 presents the data for the “typicality” measure. The table shows, for each treatment condition, the percentage of respondents indicating that the ad suggested that all/almost all/most/about half of new users of WeightGuard can expect to lose at least a specific amount of weight (at least 10 pounds, at least 20 pounds, etc.). These results show that:

- C A substantial proportion of the respondents exposed to the 24-36 pound weight loss ad without any disclosure said it communicated that at least half of new users

could expect to lose 24 pounds or more (40%). Similarly, a substantial proportion of the respondents exposed to the 48-72 pound weight loss ad without any disclosure said it communicated that at least half of new users could expect to lose 48 pounds or more (36%).

- C The “results not typical” and “experiences of a few” disclosures did not significantly lower these proportions (compared to the corresponding “no disclosure” conditions) for the 24-36 pound ad. While the “results not typical” and “experiences of a few” disclosures lowered these proportions somewhat (compared to the corresponding “no disclosure” conditions) for the 48-72 pound ad, in only 2 out of 22 comparisons in Table 2 was the difference statistically significant. Furthermore, despite the disclosures, consumers took away the message that the advertised products would enable at least half of new users to achieve results similar to those portrayed by the testimonialists. For example, 44% of the respondents exposed to the 24-36 pound weight loss ad with the “results not typical” disclosure said it communicated that at least half of new users could expect to lose 24 pounds or more and 23% of the respondents exposed to the 48-72 pound weight loss ad with the “experiences of a few” disclosure said it communicated that at least half of new users could expect to lose 48 pounds or more.

- C The “average 10 pounds” disclosure tended to be more effective than the other two disclosures in reducing the percentage of respondents saying that the advertised product would enable at least half of new users to achieve results similar to those portrayed by the testimonialists in the advertisements. For example, the percentage of respondents exposed to the “average 10 pounds” disclosure in the 24-36 pound ad who said that the ad communicated that at least half of new users could expect to lose 24 pounds or more (26%) was substantially less than for the “results not typical disclosure” (44%) but not for the “experiences of a few” disclosure (38%). Also, the percentage of respondents exposed to the “average 10 pounds” disclosure in the 48-72 pound ad who said that the ad communicated that at least half of new users could expect to lose 48 pounds or more (3%) was substantially less than for the other two disclosure conditions (23% and 28%).

Opinions

Although not a focus of the study, the effects of testimonials on consumers’ opinions were also examined. All respondents, regardless of their responses to the communication and/or typicality questions, were told:

So far, I have asked you some questions about what the ad said or suggested. Now I’d like to ask you some questions concerning your

personal opinion about WeightGuard.

Respondents were then asked the following question:

Q6: In your opinion, how many pounds, on average, would you expect new users of WeightGuard to lose in three months?

The response options were: less than 10 pounds, about 10 pounds, about 20 pounds, ..., about 100 pounds, more than 100 pounds, other, and don't know or not sure.

Table 3 presents the findings. For each treatment condition, the table shows the percentage of respondents who stated their opinion that new users of WeightGuard can expect to lose at least a specific amount of weight (10 pounds or more, 20 pounds or more, etc.) in three months. These results show that:

- C In the absence of a disclosure, 67% of the respondents exposed to the 24-36 pound weight loss ad with multiple testimonials expressed the opinion that new users of WeightGuard could expect to lose at least 20 pounds. In addition, in the absence of a disclosure, 39% of the respondents exposed to the 48-72 pound weight loss ad with multiple testimonials opined that new users of the product could expect to lose at least 40 pounds.
- C The “results not typical” and “experiences of a few” disclosures did not significantly reduce these proportions for either the 24-36 pound ad or the 48-72 pound ad.
- C The “average 10 pounds” disclosure was more effective than the other two disclosures in reducing the percentage of respondents who expressed the opinion that WeightGuard would enable new users to lose weight. However, substantial proportions of respondents (more than 40%) still opined that new users would lose significantly more than the 10 pounds mentioned in the disclosure.

Dietary Supplement and Business Opportunity

Measures of ad communication, “typicality,” and opinions for the dietary supplement and business opportunity were similar to those for the weight loss program. Whereas the questionnaire for the weight loss program referred to number of pounds, the dietary supplement

- C The “results not typical” disclosure did not significantly reduce these proportions for either the single or the multiple testimonial ads for either product.

Communication of Typicality

Table 5 shows the results for “typicality.” These data show that:

- C In the absence of a disclosure, 33% of the respondents exposed to the 60-point single testimonial cholesterol ad indicated the ad communicated that at least half of new users of the product could expect to lower their cholesterol by at least 60 points. In addition, in the absence of a disclosure, 40% of the respondents exposed to the \$2400 single testimonial business opportunity ad indicated the ad communicated that at least half of new users of the product could expect to earn at least \$2400.
- C In comparison to the single testimonial cholesterol ad without a disclosure, the company assertion ad resulted in a greater proportion of respondents indicating that at least half of new users could expect to lower their cholesterol by at least 60 points (33% vs. 65%). However, the proportion of respondents indicating that at least half of new users of the product could expect to earn at least \$2400 was similar for the single testimonial business opportunity ad and the company assertion ad (40% vs. 48%).
- C The multiple testimonial cholesterol ads and the multiple testimonial business opportunity ads also show that, in the absence of a disclosure, consumers take away the message that the advertised products would enable at least half of new users to achieve results similar to those portrayed by the testimonialists in the advertisements. For example:
 - C 33% of the respondents exposed to the 54-66 point multiple testimonial cholesterol ad indicated the ad communicated that at least half of the new users of the product could expect to lower their cholesterol by at least 54 points. Similarly, 58% of the respondents exposed to the 30-90 point multiple testimonial cholesterol ad indicated the ad communicated that at least half of the new users of the product could expect to lower their cholesterol by at least 30 points.
 - C 33% of the respondents exposed to the \$2200-\$2600 multiple testimonial business opportunity ad indicated the ad communicated that at least half of the new users of the product could expect to earn at least \$2200. Similarly, 40% of the respondents exposed to the \$1200-\$3600 multiple testimonial business opportunity ad indicated the ad communicated that at least half of the new users of the product could expect to earn at least \$1200.

- C The “results not typical” disclosure did not significantly reduce these proportions for either the single or the multiple testimonial ads for either product.

Opinions

Table 6 presents the findings for the opinion question. These results show that:

- C In the absence of a disclosure, about 22% of the respondents exposed to the 60-point single testimonial cholesterol ad expressed the opinion that new users of the product could expect to lower their cholesterol by at least 60 points. Similarly, in the absence of a disclosure, about 29% of the respondents exposed to the \$2400 single testimonial business opportunity ad expressed the opinion that new users of the product could expect to earn at least \$2400.
- C In comparison to the single testimonial cholesterol ad without a disclosure, the company assertion ad resulted in a greater proportion of respondents opining that new users could expect to lower their cholesterol by at least 60 points (38% vs. 22%). However, in comparison to the single testimonial business opportunity ad without a disclosure, the company assertion ad resulted in a smaller proportion of respondents opining that new users could expect to earn at least \$2400 (12% vs. 29%).
- C At least a third of the respondents exposed to the multiple testimonial cholesterol ads without a disclosure expressed the opinion that the advertised products would enable new users to lower their cholesterol by at least 30 points (38% of the respondents exposed to the 30-90 point ad, and 77% of those exposed to the 54-66 point ad). Similarly, at least half of the respondents exposed to the multiple testimonial business opportunity ads without a disclosure opined that the advertised products would enable new users to earn at least \$1200 (52% of respondents exposed to the \$1200-\$3600 ad, and 63% of those exposed to the \$2200-\$2600 ad).
- C With rare exception, the “results not typical” disclosure did not significantly reduce these proportions for either the single or the multiple testimonial ads for either product.

Summary

The results of this study indicate that:

- C Consumer testimonials communicated to a substantial percentage of consumers that the advertised products would enable new users to achieve results similar to those portrayed by the testimonialists in the advertisements for those products (ad communication).

- C Consumer testimonials communicated to a substantial percentage of consumers that the advertised products would enable a substantial proportion (half or more) of new users to achieve results similar to those portrayed by the testimonialists in the advertisements for those products (“typicality”).

- C Two of the disclosures (“results not typical” and “experiences of a few”) failed, in most cases, to significantly reduce these effects on ad communication and “typicality.” A third disclosure (“average 10 pounds”) significantly reduced, in most cases, ad communication and typicality effects.

Table 3 - Opinion Results
for Weight Loss Ads

	No numbers	24-36 lbs No disclosure	24-36 lbs "Results not typical"	24-36 lbs "Average 10 lbs"	24-36 lbs "Experiences of a few"	48-72 lbs No disclosure	48-72 lbs "Results not typical"	48-72 lbs "Average 10 lbs"	48-72 lbs "Experiences of a few"
Sample size	n= 64	n= 63	n= 68	n= 65	n= 67	n= 67	n= 65	n= 62	n= 62
at least 10 lbs	81.25%	87.30%	85.29%	86.15%	91.04%	94.03%	92.38%	93.55%	91.94%
at least 20 lbs	50.00%	66.67%	66.18%	46.15%	64.18%	86.57%	83.15%	41.94%	80.65%
at least 30 lbs	17.19%	33.33%	41.18%	12.31%	29.85%	62.69%	52.38%	20.97%	50.00%
at least 40 lbs	7.81%	1.59%	10.29%	3.08%	1.49%	38.81%	29.30%	9.68%	24.19%
at least 50 lbs	3.13%	1.59%	5.88%	1.54%	0.00%	19.40%	20.07%	8.06%	14.52%
at least 60 lbs	1.56%	1.59%	2.94%	0.00%	0.00%	5.97%	3.15%	3.23%	4.84%

