

Covert Marketing: A Virtual Media Communication Vehicle

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Consumers' suspicion towards traditional marketing techniques, led marketers to try the virtual media communication form called disguise advertising as other forms of messages. The examples include making advertisements resemble news items (Aditya 2001; Levine 1993; Richards 1992), the infomercials in the '90s that disguise advertising as TV programs (Levine 1993; Lacher and Rotfeld 1994), making celebrities use the products in their real lives or in films (Aditya 2001), feeding media information using public relations (PR) activities like bribing journalists with gifts and making TV stations use the footages from press releases (Gillin 2006). Because of the prevalence of virtual media, the marketing practices that conceal the real sources (marketers) with disguised sources have posed both ethical and policy concerns. This article proposed a new typology that covered the comprehensive scope of disguised marketing practices, discussed the deceptive nature of this marketing technique from the consumer behavioral viewpoints, and conducted a 2×3 experiment to test the hypothesized relationships. The results suggest that an implicit message, disguised source's preference, is likely to be conveyed in covert marketing and thus results in high a deceptive tendency. Key words: Covert Marketing, Advertising, Marketing-in-Disguise, India. JEL Classification: M370

Introduction

Many marketing researchers have discussed the practices of marketing-in-disguise. "Masking," for instance, is a deceptive tactic proposed by Grazioli and Jarvenpaa (2003). According to the authors, the deliberate omission of important information in social exchange is considered "masking," such as recommending a product in an Internet newsletter without disclosing the fact that the publisher has received advertising money for the conduct. The same term is also used by McAllister and Turow (2002) to explain a type of misleading technique that conceals the marketer's commercial intent in the message. Nebenzahl and Jaffe (1998) use the term "disguised advertising," and define it as the advertising that conceals the source of the message in order to deliver a misleading impression that the marketer has not sponsored the message. The purpose of these practices is to "intentionally give a target an incorrect mental representation of the circumstances of a social exchange" (Grazioli and Jarvenpaa 2003, p. 95), with the underlying scheme of making profits (Lewczak 2005). Accordingly, a definition is derived for the broad concept of marketing-in-disguise: Marketing-in-disguise is an invested marketing technique that communicates favorable messages for marketers, but attempts to conceal its real source of the marketer. These marketing practices possess one characteristic in common: they are various forms of marketing practices that attempt to hide the real sources of marketers. The seemingly unintentional use of products by celebrities could be a scheme carefully designed to disguise marketers as celebrities, with an underlying intent to enhance the credibility of marketing claims (Aditya 2001). These practices are different from traditional advertising because they are not "seller's talk." The seller's talk blatantly shows the intention of persuading consumers, and thus most consumers are savvy enough to identify these commercial messages. The marketing practices in question, the marketing-in-disguise, could avoid this undesirable situation by using their disguised sources other than marketers. The study of this new marketing technique is important not only because of its prevalent use in traditional media, but also because of the emergence of the virtual communication environment. The Internet is more af-

fordable than any other medium (Richards 1997), and makes it difficult for audiences to verify the real identities behind the messages (Grazioli and Jarvenpaa 2003). The fact that the Internet is highly used by the public for information exchange further explains why the information distributed by disguised sources could work effectively in the virtual society (Grazioli and Jarvenpaa 2003; Petty 2003; Hawkins, Hoch, and Meyers-Levy 2001). It should be noted that marketing-indisguise can be paid by marketers through valuable substitutes rather than money (Gillin 2006), such as the free samples offered in press conferences and the travel compensation paid by marketers to attract journalists. Another example is the product placement in movies, which sometimes replaces cash fees with reciprocal promotional exposure of specific films (Nebenzahl and Jaffe 1998). The last part of this definition depicts the unique characteristic of marketing-in-disguise, namely the disguise of the real source. The disguised source is exposed instead of marketers in order to hide commercial intent (McAllister and Turow 2002), make promotional messages resemble objective information (Petty 1998; Nebenzahl and Jaffe 1998), and thus enhance the credibility of the product claims (Aditya 2001). A new categorization of marketing-in-disguise is proposed here in the attempt to draw the conceptual line between deceptive and non-deceptive practices before a novel marketing execution is developed or a new medium is used for such intent (Levine 1993; Lacher and Rotfeld 1994; Richards 1997; Petty 1998; Aditya 2001; Petty 2003; Lewczak 2005). This new categorization focuses on the main characteristic of marketing-indisguise, the disguise of the real source (i.e., real-source concealment). As shown in Table 1, three types of marketing-in-disguise could be identified based on a spectrum that demonstrates different extents of real-source concealment: perceptible disguise, ambiguous disguise, and covert marketing. The "perceptible disguise" occurs when the real source is detectable to consumers, such as infomercials and advertorials that are clearly labeled (Lacher and Rotfeld 1994). For instance, a "Car" (2007), took advantage of its appearance as official car placed on the company's official website as well in the movie "Tara Rum

Pum", with Celebrities Saif Ali Khan & Rani Mukherjee showing evident relationship between the film and the real source. The second type of marketing-in-disguise contains a blurry relationship between the real source and the marketing practice; this relationship is not clearly mentioned or is shown inconspicuously in the final credits and in small prints. The third type of disguised marketing practices, also referred to as "covert marketing," completely conceals the real source. Under this circumstance, almost all consumers cannot detect the real source, because it is neither mentioned in the content nor derivable from the context of the message. The unidentified endorsements, unidentified product placements, as well as unidentified paid editorials fall in this extreme of the concealment spectrum and are considered covert marketing. The "optimized press release" posted on online news portals with the investment from marketers is another example. Some news exposures on television contain materials and viewpoints directly planted by PR companies without disclosing those influences, which also constitute the complete disguise of real sources (Gillin 2006; Nebenzahl and Jaffe 1998). Furthermore, the paid opinions in the virtual society, along with buzz and word-of-mouth generated from these opinions, are also covert marketing because it is impossible for consumers to associate these seemingly consumer-generated messages to the real sources of marketers. After defining marketing-in-disguise and proposing a new way of categorization, it could be derived that not all of the marketing-in-disguise practices are difficult for consumers to detect, and these practices may have very different characteristics and deceptive impacts. Therefore, the literature in consumer behavior disciplines is reviewed to further examine the deceptive tendency and to develop hypotheses for the present study.

Review of Literature

There are three key elements in a case of deception (Gardner 1975, 1976; Richards 1990; Aditya 2001). First of all, there should be a representation, omission, or practice. Besides, it should be likely to mislead consumers acting reasonably under the circumstances. Moreover, the representation, omission, or practice should be material. This definition suggests two important constructs deceptiveness and materiality, which should be applied when judging the deceptive potential of a case. The construct of deceptiveness exists when a claim is likely to result in deception that is, containing the likelihood of deceiving (Richards 1990). More specifically, deceptiveness lies in the difference between "conveyed meaning" in the consumers' minds and the "actual product attribute." What is theoretically interesting about deceptiveness is that it is different from miscomprehension, which focuses on the "literal meaning" of the message rather than the "actual product attribute". In other words, the truth or falsity of the message's literal meaning would influence the extent of miscomprehension; however, it has no impact on the judgment of deceptiveness. Since the deceptiveness of a marketing practice depends on the difference between the "conveyed meaning" in the consumers' minds and the "actual product attribute," it is then crucial to define the scope of conveyed meaning from the messages.

The general principle is that the conveyed meaning includes what is said and what is reasonably implied, in other words, the summed total of the message (Richards 1990). While the explicit message represents the product information (content) provided by the marketer, the implicit message could be operational as the "disguised source's preference toward the product" implied through the concealment of the real source. In short, when the real source is successfully concealed, the "disguised source's preference" different from the product's true attribute is the factor that adds to the overall conveyed meaning, results in the difference between the conveyed meaning and the true attribute of the product/brand, constituting the deceptiveness of such practice (Richards 1990). Therefore, the more difficult it is for consumers to

detect the real source, the more likely the implicit message of "disguised source's preference" toward the product will be believed, eventually resulting in a higher level of deceptiveness.

H1: The level of real-source concealment in the message is positively related to the believability of "disguised source's preference" toward the advertised product.

Besides deceptiveness, materiality is another construct that contributes to the impact of deceptive practices (Richards and Preston 1992). A message is considered material if it involves the information that is important to consumers, and is more likely than a true claim to affect their belief or behavior regarding the advertised company, brand, or product (Richards 1990). That is, materiality contributes to the overall influence of deception, and therefore the deceptiveness can regulated only when it is accompanied by materiality. If consumers consider the disguised source as objective and credible, the messages shared by the disguised source will be viewed as authentic and trustworthy.

H2: The "disguised source's preference" toward the advertised product is positively related to the believability of product information.

Based on the discussions above, it can be derived that covert marketing, with the highest level of real-source concealment, is assumed to contain the highest level of deceptiveness and materiality. The "disguised source's preference" derived from the real-source concealment creates the difference between overall conveyed meaning and true product attributes, constituting deceptiveness. In addition, the materiality lies in covert marketing's feigned appearance as objective information, which tends to enjoy higher believability and be weighed more heavily in the consumer's decision-making process. Many researchers have demonstrated that the persuasion context can influence the consumer's psychological process toward communication materials as well

as acceptance toward the messages (O'Keefe, 1990). The construct of source, which represents the unique character of marketing-indisguise, is an important element in persuasion context. Source is the "perceived communicator to whom the message is attributed" rather than the actual producer of the message (McGuire 1989, p. 46). Clearly defined as the "judgments made by a perceiver concerning the believability of a communicator" (O'Keefe 1990, p. 130), source credibility represents consumers' estimations about the believability of the perceived communicator - the disguised source. While the factors like source expertise, attractiveness, and consensus greatly rely on the specific attributes of the type of source (e.g., the perceived expertise of source) and the situational factor in the communication environment (e.g., the website's attributes facilitating interaction), the source trustworthiness (Petty and Cacioppo 1986; White-head, Jr. 1968) with qualities like good, honest, or friendly, is more likely to be related to the disguised source rather than the real source of marketers in consumers' minds. In addition, several factors found to enhance the source trustworthiness could offer even higher credibility to the disguised source when the real source is completely concealed, such as the similarity between the source and the audience, and the objectivity factor suggesting that the source is impartial (Whitehead, Jr. 1968; O'Keefe 1990; Pornpitakpan 2004). Therefore, it is assumed that the type of source and the level of real-source concealment will influence the perceived source credibility.

H3: The type of source in the message is related to the respondents' perceived credibility of the source.

H4: The level of real-source concealment in the message is positively related to respondents' perceived credibility of the source.

According to the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) introduced by Petty and Cacioppo (1986), the receivers' extents of elaboration on is-

sue-relevant information could result in different processing outcomes, and the receivers' likelihood to elaborate on messages is determined mainly by their motivations and abilities. When the extent too elaborate is high, the disguised sources can serve as persuasive arguments, which not only affect receivers' confidence in their thoughts but also make the messages more trustworthy, and are likely to result in positive attitudes (Petty, Briñol, and Tormala 2002). If the peripheral route is adopted because of the low motivation and/or ability too elaborate, the peripheral cues in the persuasion context become important factors that could be directly associated with messages and permit simple inferences regarding its validity (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). Under this circumstance, the disguised sources would be regarded as strong peripheral cues, and thus directly transfer the high source credibility into a powerful impact on the receivers' attitudes. Hence, the high source credibility will contribute to the believability of the overall information and the degree of acceptance toward marketing messages under both central and peripheral routes of processing. As a result, receivers are more likely to accept messages (both explicit product information and implicit "disguised source's preference") when a more credible disguised source is used, and change their opinions in the direction advocated by the source, that is, to become more favorable to the products/brands in covert marketing (McGuire 1976; Hovland and Weiss 1951).

H5: The respondents' perceived credibility of the source is positively related to the believability of "disguised source's preference" toward the advertised product.

H6: The respondents' perceived credibility of the source is positively related to the believability of product information.

H7: The believability of product information is positively related to the respondents' attitudes toward the advertised product.

Based on these hypotheses, covert marketing, by completely disguising the real source, is assumed to possess higher source credibility, generate the implied message of "disguised source's preference," result in higher believability of overall product information, and have positive influences on consumers' attitudes toward the advertised product; in other words, it contains the highest level of deceptiveness and materiality, and is deemed deceptive.

Research Methodology

The present study attempts to gauge the relationships among real-source concealment, source credibility, believability of explicit and implicit messages, and the attitude toward the advertised product. Based on the Spectrum of Marketing-in-Disguise, a 2 x 3 experimental design manipulating different types of source (company & product) and different levels of real-source concealment (no concealment, moderate, and high) was employed; that is, three companies and three advertisements that feature the same attributes regarding an identical product were used to form the manipulation. Six groups were created in the experiment, and participants in each group viewed one type of advertisement stimuli to form their ratings toward the measuring items in the questionnaire.

Sampling Design

Three hundred participants were recruited from three management institutes of repute in Jaipur, Rajasthan for the research purpose. Two hundred and forty-four respondents were included in the final sample and analyses, excluding incomplete ones. The sample consisted of 98 males (40.2 %) and 146 females (59.8 %) between the ages of 17 to 33 with the average age of 20.4 years. When asked about the media they usually use to get information about high-tech products, the Internet was checked by 221 respondents (90.6 %), followed by word-of-

mouth with 167 respondents (68.4 %); the traditional media like television were all checked by less than 30 percent of the respondents. Regarding the respondents' Internet usage behavior, 52.5 percent of the respondents claimed that they spent 7 to 21 hours per week on the Internet, and 29.1 percent claimed to spend 22 to 35 hours per week. On the subject of specific product-related web activities, 83.6 percent of the respondents spent less than 7 hours per week accessing information on the web about products and services. The sampling of this study's participants is considered appropriate because these young students are typical audiences who spend a lot of time online, have been exposed to online product information, but remain distant to commercial-related information.

Advertisement Stimuli

The product chosen for this study was a Blackberry phone because it was relevant for participants and at the same time not too prevalent, so that they had some knowledge about the product category but did not have lots of actual experiences in real. The advertisements about the Blackberry phone were adapted from several different websites, and a new brand to make sure that no participant had ever heard of or purchased this product. The information about new brand of Blackberry phone was kept the same in collected advertisements. The noconcealment advertisement had the brand's trademark and a subtitle from new brand to inform the readers that this information was provided by the company. The moderate concealment advertisement had a symbol of "Celebrity Choice" instead of a brand trademark, and a subtitle read "celebrity review." At the end of the product information, there was a bolded disclaimer, "Reviewed phone supplied by company of new brand," and a small brand trademark to vaguely inform the readers that this information could be provided by new brand. The high-concealment advertisement (covert marketing) had the same layout as the moderate-concealment version, except that covert market-

ing did not have the disclaimer, and the connection between new brand and celebrity was not revealed. The layout for advertisement followed the same rules as other, with the tone and manner slightly altered to read like an advertisement. Small pre-tests were conducted in short interviews to check the success of the stimuli design. The pre-tests suggested that these stimuli contain similar arguments and similar amount of information, but at the same time represent different levels of real-source concealment.

Statistical Measures

The first part of the manipulation check asked participants to identify the name of the product they just viewed, whether they have seen this type of advertisement before, and if they reviewed the stimuli without skipping any statement. Another manipulation check was placed at the end of the questionnaire and designed to gauge the success of source manipulation by asking the respondents whether they are confident as to who the source of the information. Four dependent variables were measured in the experiment. The perceived source credibility included nine items and was measured by questions like whether the source in the message "is trustworthy" with seven-point Likert-type scales, yielding scores ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) for each question (Grazioli and Jarvenpaa 2003; Wang 2006). The scale was found reliable (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.92$). The perceived believability of product information included several items and was measured by seven-point Likert-type scales gauging respondents' agreements to statements like "it has the attributes described in the messages" (Richards 1990). The believability of product information was also measured by asking participants to evaluate whether the overall quality of information in the material is "accurate," "truthful," "factual," "convincing," and "believable" (Wang 2006) with the same seven-point Likert-type scales. The two scales were later combined as one construct (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.92$). Furthermore, the believability of the im-

plicit message (disguised source's preference) included four items and was measured by seven-point Likert-type scales with statements like "I feel that the source in the message prefers this product among other brands" (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.84$). Lastly, the attitude toward the advertised product included a four-item, seven-point semantic differential scale such as "good/bad" and "positive/negative" (MacKenzie, Lutz, and Belch 1986), as well as five extra statements like "if my friend is looking for a Blackberry phone, I will tell him/her about this product" with seven-point Likert-type scales (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.95$). Demographic information and Internet usage behavior were collected at the end.

Statistical Results

Manipulation checks for the recall of information showed that participants under all conditions identified the product information correctly, and have read the advertisement stimuli without skipping them. The manipulation check for the sources in the stimuli indicated that participants exposed to different sources held the same level of confidence as to who the source of the information was, F(1,238) = 3.349, p > 0.05, and participants in different real-source concealment conditions also held the same level of confidence about the actual identity of the source, F(2,238) = 0.261, p > 0.05.

Test of Hypotheses

Among all constructs, the "disguised source's preference" is the implicit message not supported by the product's true attributes because the disguised source is paid by the marketer to convey the messages rather than having true personal preferences toward the product. Hence, the existence of "disguised source's preference" will constitute the deceptiveness in covert marketing (Hypothesis 1). The ANOVA was performed to test this hypothesis. The results suggested that the

level of real-source concealment was the main effect on the believability of "disguised source's preference" toward the advertised product, F (2, 238) = 3.359, p<0.05. Specifically, the participants exposed to the no-concealment advertisement did not think that the source preferred to use the product (M=4.49, SD=1.12), the ones exposed to the moderate-concealment advertisement believed in this implicit message more (M=4.73, SD=1.04), and the participants exposed to the covert advertisement highly believed that the celebrity had personal preference for this product (M=4.92, SD=1.21). The same pattern was also found in the next situation, with the no-concealment condition being the least persuasive (M=4.56, SD=1.08), moderate-concealment condition enjoying higher believability (M=4.98, SD=0.86), and highconcealment condition being the most persuasive in delivering this message (M=4.99, SD=1.19). Hypotheses 3 and 4 focus on the construct of perceived source credibility, and suggest that both the type of source and the level of real-source concealment will be related to this construct. Particularly, it is assumed that different sources will contain different levels of source credibility, and the higher level of real-source concealment will also make the disguised source more credible. The results confirmed hypothesis 3 that there was a main effect from the type of source, F (1,238) = 18.435, p<0.001. Not surprisingly, the perceived source credibility of the celebrity (M=4.32, SD=1.0) was higher than that of the company (M=3.77, SD=0.99), possibly because of the perceived higher source expertise toward product reviews (Petty and Cacioppo 1986; Whitehead, Jr. 1968). Hypothesis 4, however, was not supported. The perceived source credibility toward the advertiser in the no-concealment condition (M=4.09, SD=1.07), the mixed source in moderate-concealment condition (M=4.0, SD=1.03), and the celebrity/company in covert marketing condition (M=4.04, SD=0.98) were not significantly different. One explanation is that, while company and celebrity enjoyed high credibility because of the apparent independence and objectivity, and moderate-concealment condition also enjoyed a certain level of trustworthiness because of the disclaimer revealing the sponsorship behind these messages. The traditional online

advertisements (no-concealment) were broadly assumed to be regulated by legal forces, and thus should contain truthful information and could be credible. Other hypotheses predict the positive relationships between the four main constructs: perceived source credibility, disguised source's preference, believability of product information, and attitude toward the advertised product. It is assumed that the source credibility will interact with all messages, including the implicit one, and thus the perceived high source credibility would make the personal preference conveyed by the disguised source more believable (hypothesis 5). Pearson correlation analysis supported this hypothesis, r=0.439, p<0.01. It is also hypothesized that both the source credibility (hypothesis 6) and disguised source's preference (hypothesis 2) will have positive relationships with the believability of overall product information. The correlation analysis showed that both hypotheses (2) and 6) were sustained; the perceived source credibility (r=0.79, p<0.01) and the believability of disguised source's preference (r=0.49, p<0.01) had significant, positive relationships with the believability of product information. The last hypothesis connects the believability of product information to the respondents 'attitudes toward the advertised product, which is also a crucial step when judging the materiality of a potentially deceptive marketing practice (McGuire 1976; Hovland and Weiss 1951; Richards 1990). The correlation analysis supported previous literature, and showed a positive and significant relationship (r=0.702, p<0.01).

Discussion & Conclusion

The marketing technique of disguising the real source has been a commonly used plot over a long period of time; however, the appearance of this scheme could be different with various devices and media vehicles applied. An effective way to examine all these practices from both the viewpoints of public policy and consumer behavior would be to study these executions as a whole. As demonstrated earlier, covert

marketing is the most deceptive practice among three types of marketing-in-disguise in that it completely conceals the real sources of marketers with more credible disguised sources. While online advertisements were perceived to possess different levels of source credibility, the real-source concealment was the main effect behind the implicit message, the disguised source's preference. The results also suggest that both the source credibility and the believability of the implicit message will contribute to the believability of overall product information, leading to consumers' more positive attitudes toward the product. For that reason, it can be concluded that covert marketing practices contain both the highest levels of deceptiveness and materiality, and is deceptive in nature. The non-significance of the relationship between real-source concealment and source credibility also possesses great value. This result suggests that, while different types of sources possess different levels of credibility, the disguise of real source does not automatically enhance the perceived source credibility. This is because traditional advertising has already established a certain level of credibility among consumers due to regulations and legal enforcement, and the moderately revealed relationship through disclaimers also enjoys credibility through the marketer's seemingly candid gesture. With that in mind, it is plausible to suggest that covert marketing will not provide marketers unique advantages in the aspect of source credibility, yet could run a huge risk of deception because of the implicit message. There is also reason to argue that covert marketing practices could affect individual consumers as well as the entire virtual world; that is, the new ways of communication and new opportunities of deceiving provided by advanced electronic media could adversely weaken the mechanisms of social control and erode social values in virtual society (Aditya 2001; Casteifranchi and Tan 2002). For instance, the two mechanisms of on-line shopping discussed by Grazioli and Jarvenpaa (2003) could be jeopardized by the prevalence of covert marketing practices because the assurance mechanisms (e.g., thirdparty seals) are susceptible to the schemes of covert marketing, and the trust-building mechanisms (e.g., customer testimonials) are also

vulnerable to the disguised marketing practices. Since these mechanisms are of great value to online shoppers, covert marketing could easily influence a considerable number of individuals and thus crush the trust in the virtual shopping environment.

Limitations of the Study and Future Research Imperatives

This study proposes a new construct of implicit message in covert marketing practices, and connects it with the previous literature in deception, credibility, and information processing. The examination of the relationships, however, is limited. To begin with, various propaganda devices are included under covert marketing, but their individual impact is not tested in the present study. As a result, future research can further examine different devices of covert marketing and study their characteristics. In addition, the importance of a product's true attributes is discussed but not tested in the study. This study makes assumptions that the "disguised source's preference" is a result from the marketer's investment, and thus is likely to be different from the product's true attribute, and also presumes that the perceived product's popularity among the disguised sources is different from the real situation. Only when these assumptions are tested can the deceptiveness of the practices be affirmed. Therefore, it is crucial for future research to compare the perceived disguised source's preference and the perceived level of product popularity with the product's true attributes, to enhance our understanding about the circumstances under which covert marketing practices are considered deceptive. Several limitations can be derived from the design of the experiment. The product of Blackberry phone was selected because of the collegestudent sample in this study; however, technology products like this may invoke different processing and perceptions than conspicuousconsumption products like fashion. Hence, future research can compare different products (e.g., functional versus hedonic-oriented) and gauge their different impacts on the deceptive potential of covert mar-

keting. This study used advertisements because of its relevance to the respondents; nevertheless, online advertisements has its own credibility issues because of the availability to the public (Johnson and Kaye 2004; Wasserman 2006; Banning and Sweetser 2007), and these issues may influence the results in the present study. Therefore, future research is encouraged to test covert marketing practices with different types of sources and media, to exclude the factor of the type of source and develop a true general picture as to how covert marketing works in consumers' minds.

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Table 1 Marketing in Disguise Continuum

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Type of Ad	Perceptible Disguised Advertising	Ambiguous Disguised Advertising (Covert Advertising)	Indistinguishable Disguised Advertising
Examples	Infomercial	Product Placement	Unidentified Placement
	Advertorial	Identified Editorial	Unidentified Paid Editorial
	Traditional endorse- ment		Unidentified Endorsement
	Sponsorship in Sports	Low-Profile Sponsor- ship	Optimized Press Release
	Direct Mail		Planted PR Exposure
	WAM		Paid Opinion Sharing Online
	Spam		Paid Buzz/Word-of- Mouth

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