GILDING THE LIE: DEVELOPMENT OF THE ATTITUDE LEARNING THEORY USING INFORMATION PROCESSING THEORY AND FISHBEIN'S ATTITUDE TOWARD THE OBJECT TO CAPITALIZE ON FALSE, NEGATIVE RUMORS

CAROLYN HOLTON, Southeastern University
DIANE R. EDMONDSON, Middle Tennessee State University

Two theories, information processing and the attitude towards the object model, make conflicting predictions about a rumor's marginal impact on attitude towards the object of a rumor in some circumstances. Recent implicit attitude conditioning work is applied to fill the theoretical gap and to guide specification of a more broadly applicable attitude learning theory. The theoretical concerns are explored within the realm of combating false, negative rumors, an area of interest for its tremendous negative financial impacts on companies. As rumors are spread from person to person, the authors advocate the use of brand ambassadors to disseminate corporate response strategies through personal networks.

INTRODUCTION

*The President of Procter & Gamble appeared on the Phil Donahue Show on March 1, 1994. He announced that due to the openness of our society, he was coming out of the closet about his association with the church of Satan. He stated that a large portion of his profits from Procter & Gamble Products goes to support this satanic church. When asked by Donahue if stating this on T.V. would hurt his business, he replied, "**There are not enough Christians in the United States to make a difference**." ("Trademark of the Devil", 2011)*

Versions of this Procter & Gamble (P&G) church of Satan rumor have been circulating since 1980 ("Trademark of the Devil," 2011). Three decades after the rumor's inception, and a quarter century after the company removed the associated logo from consumer products in an attempt to squelch it ("The Proctor & Gamble Company," 2011), P&G is still dogged by this rumor. The company has continued to be concerned enough to have statements from talk show hosts and the National Catholic Register debunking several versions of the rumor on its website (McGuire, 1999; "Supporting Statements from Talkshow Hosts," 1999, retrieved from P&G.com July 2007).

P&G reports that it fielded about 200,000 calls and letters about the rumor in its first fifteen years of circulation ("P&G files suit over false rumors," 1995). Some customers boycotted (Cekola, 2000). An economist hired by P&G calculated that the company lost an estimated $49.5 million in sales of Tide, Crest and Pampers from March 1995 to August 1997 due to the Satan connection rumor ("P&G may now sue," 2001). P&G's unreported rumor-related legal expenses are believed to have tacked on several more tens of millions of dollars ("High court refuses," 2001). One of the several court cases was resolved in P&G's favor as recently as 2007 ("P&G wins US case," 2007). Despite the fervor with which P&G defends itself, the rumor persists and the associated costs mount.

The company's primary rumor response strategy has been typical: It has supplied facts to refute the false allegations. In a general sense, a refutation strategy seeks to weaken or eliminate the belief that the organization that is the rumor's target possesses the attribute or engages in the behavior in question. Press releases and web pages on PG.com have been primary outlets for combating the church of

The Marketing Management Journal
Volume 22, Issue 1, Pages 35-49

Satan connection rumor in recent years (which seems appropriate given that e-mail appears to be a primary way this rumor is currently spread). Decades after the initial rumor, the website still included at least eight pages seeking to quash the rumor, and as recently as March 2011, the company continued to update rumor information on its website (Trademark Rumor, 2011). One page provided statements from three talk show hosts on whose shows the apocryphal interview has been said to take place, each stating that it never happened. Another page reprinted letters from religious leaders indicating that the rumor is false. A third talked about how the rumor may have developed from a historic P&G logo ("Internet Resources for Facts," 2003).

In sum, press releases, solicited statements from relevant parties, web pages and lawsuits demonstrate that the company is diligent in its efforts to clear its name and persuade the public that it is not engaged with the church of Satan. However, given the enormous costs incurred and continuing efforts over three decades later, it is clear that P&G's strategy for managing misinformation has not had the hoped for outcome.

Rumors have been a topic of academic study since 1902 (Stern, 1902). World War II era concern about the damage of menacing rumors to safety and morale motivated the seminal work on the psychology of rumor control in 1947 (Allport and Postman, 1947; Rosnow and Foster, 2005). During this century of study, various theories have been put forth, but our ability to mitigate the impact of false rumors is still very limited, as P&G's experience demonstrates. This work reviews the literature on how individuals process rumors and why they respond in the ways they do. We examine how rumors support attitude formation in order to specify more effective rumor mitigation strategies.

Information Processing Theory

While rumor definitions abound, this inquiry is limited to negative misinformation about an organization distributed to or among its external stakeholder groups. Such rumors have been called "bogies," and they are considered to be the most likely type of rumor to harm a company from a marketing perspective (Iyer and Debevec, 1991). Information processing theory offers predictions for how false, negative rumors affect companies and how these effects may be mitigated. According to the theory, perceived information input is stored in working memory for only about half a minute before it is either lost or begins to be encoded into long-term memory through rehearsal or by drawing associations (Simon, 1969). During the brief working memory window, related ideas may be retrieved from long-term memory to help construct meaning for the new information (Schacter and Scarry, 2001). These ideas can determine how the new information is encoded into long-term memory.

Many of the people who hear the rumor about a P&G Satan worship connection remember it (storing the rumor in long-term memory) whether or not they believe it. Although a new model of rumor propagation suggests credulity and uncertainty are important drivers (Kimmel and Audrain-Pontevia, 2010), when subsequently evaluating the company or processing new information about P&G, even people who do not believe the rumor may retrieve thoughts relevant to the company, including the thought that P&G does not support Satan worship. Tybout, Caulder and Sternthal (1981) posit that since thoughts related to negative rumors are less positive than those likely to have existed before the rumor was encoded, attitude towards the object of a negative rumor falls even when rumors are disbelieved. According to this line of reasoning, P&G's efforts to refute the Satan worship connection rumor paradoxically help consumers to encode it more thoroughly and increase the likelihood that the rumor is one of the thoughts retrieved when people think of P&G. Many strategies for refuting rumors have been proposed and tested, with attitude towards the target organization typically harmed in each case (Iyer and Debevec, 1991). *Not* refuting the rumor, ironically, should typically have a more

positive outcome on a rumor of unknown origin, and such has been measured (Iyer and Debevec, 1991; Tybout, Caulder and Sternthal, 1981)

In a laboratory experiment, Tybout, Caulder and Sternthal (1981), examined strategies to combat this effect. In most treatment conditions, a confederate posing as a research subject recalled a then circulating rumor that claimed that McDonald's used worm meat in its hamburgers. Predictably, in absence of another treatment manipulation, subjects hearing the rumor subsequently reported more negative attitudes toward McDonald's than those not hearing the rumor.

In one condition, the experimenter provided a direct refutation of the rumor. Treatment means for this group and the no response group were not significantly different. Direct refutation had no effect on combating the rumor. In another condition, the researchers provided research subjects with a second object which they associated with the content of the false, negative rumor: "That may sound funny to you," said the experimenter, "but last week my mother-in-law was in town and we took her to Chez Paul and had a really good sauce that was made out of worms." This redirection strategy avoided reinforcing the McDonald's-worms association and was intended to foster storage of the worms-as-food rumor with the second object, the French restaurant, instead of with the restaurant chain actually suffering from the negative, false rumor. While the subjects, regardless of treatment condition, indicated a strong disbelief of the rumor, subjects receiving the redirection treatment evaluated eating at McDonald's significantly more positively than those in the no rumor response condition. In fact, this group's attitude towards McDonald's was not significantly different from that of the group not exposed to the rumor. These same effects were observed when comparing subjects' intentions to eat at McDonald's.

Brand Ambassadors

Companies typically use figureheads and communications function employees to address false, negative rumors through media outlets (e.g. DiFonzo and Bordia, 2000). As rumors spread quite effectively person-to-person, it is intuitively appealing to use employees outside of the communications function and the executive ranks to tap into person-to-person networks.

Information theory's salience principle provides an explanation for why people afford greater importance to negative information about organizations: it is seen as more informative because it is less common (Kamins, Folkes and Pesser, 1997). Word of mouth information from another person about an organization is also more salient than ever-ubiquitous advertising. Word of mouth therefore has a greater potential effect on purchasing behavior.

When a rumor is in circulation, company employees at all levels may hear it from or be asked about it by friends and family whether or not these contacts are customers of the organization. To the extent that company employees are considered trustworthy and credible by the friends and family who inquire of them, they may be effective mitigators of the harm caused by false, negative rumors (Iyer and Debevec, 1991). Even when these relationships do not provide direct links to customers, the ties can be far reaching. Milgram's 1967 six degrees of separation study found that, on average, just six steps connected midwestern study participants to a Boston stockbroker (Gladwell, 2000). In replications with other subjects and targets in various occupations from various countries, similar results were found (Saxbe, 2003). Employee supporters have the potential to reach a broad customer base when serving as brand ambassadors for their organizations. When e-mail networks are considered, a great many chains of links can be easily initiated, with the ease of e-mail forwarding promoting promulgation of the information, even information that is partially directed by corporate marketing

communications professionals. Intrusive web-based marketing communications may be effective at influencing implicit brand attitudes, but as paid communications, they may not instill trust (Madhavaram and Appan, 2010). Employees appear to be a key component in building company trustworthiness (Morsing, Schultz and Nielsen, 2008). When applied to combating rumors, relying on employees to disseminate word-of-mouth communications is using good fire to fight bad.

Attitude Theory

Two prominent attitude theories explain the role of various beliefs in forming attitudes prior to making purchase decisions: Rosenberg's (1960) Affective-Cognitive Consistency Theory and Fishbein's (1963) attitude toward the object model states that one's attitude towards an object is a function of the sum of the product of the valenced strength of the belief about whether the object possesses a particular attribute (b_i), and the valenced evaluation of the

FIGURE 1:
Fishbein's Attitude Toward the Object Model

$$\text{Attitude} = f\left(\sum_{i=1}^{n} b_i e_i\right)$$

Where n is the number of attributes an object possesses
b_i is the belief strength that the object possesses the ith attribute, and
e_i is the evaluation of the ith attribute

Source: *The Role of Attitude Theory in Marketing* (Lutz, 1991).

TABLE 1:
Belief Strength and Evaluative Aspect Scales for Fishbein's Attitude Toward the Object Model

Belief strength (b_i)

McDonald's hamburgers contain worm meat

Very likely +3 +2 +1 0 -1 -2 -3 Very unlikely

Evaluative aspect (e_i)

Worm meat in hamburgers is

Very good +3 +2 +1 0 -1 -2 -3 Very bad

Source: Adapted from scales presented in *The Role of Attitude Theory in Marketing* (Lutz, 1991).

attribute (e_i), for all n attributes (see formula in Figure 1). Per this formula, Fishbein would measure the marginal effect of the rumor that McDonald's hamburgers contain worm meat as the product of bipolar ratings on 7-point scales (see Table 1).

Fishbein's formula leads to the conclusion that if the valence of evaluation of an object's attribute is negative but that the object possesses the attribute is thought to be more unlikely than likely, the multiplicative marginal effect on attitude is positive. The Tybout, Caulder and Sternthal (1981) study offers a case in point. Two days after the initial experiment, 47 subjects in the study were asked to rate how likely was it that the worm rumor was true on a 7-point scale. Their average rating corresponds to $b_1 = -2.53$ on the Fishbein-type scale. Although the study did not measure the evaluative aspect associated with this belief, it might be assumed that most subjects would prefer not to have worms in their hamburgers, particularly the 83% of subjects who were not in the displacement treatment group. In this case, the average evaluative aspect rating would have been in the $-3 \leq e_1 \leq -1$ range. The Fishbein formula provides that b_1e_1, the average marginal average effect of the rumor on the subjects' evaluation of McDonalds, is expected to fall into the 2.53-7.59 range. The specific value is not of importance, but worth noting is that subjects' attitude should be *more positive* than before hearing the disbelieved negative rumor. However, Tybout, Caulder and Sternthal (1981) measured *lower* attitudes and purchase intentions for people exposed to the rumor, which is consistent with P&G's findings of depressed sales following a false, negative rumor.

Refining the Theory

Intuitively, it might be expected that a negative evaluation on an attribute not believed to be possessed by the attitude object would cause the belief to be disassociated with the attitude object, causing the b_ie_i term to drop from the evaluation equation for that object, rather than to enhance the evaluation. While the Fishbein model does distinguish between salient and nonsalient beliefs (Lutz, 1991), it does not provide for dropping salient negative "disbeliefs." The rumor attitude pattern observed suggests the need for a relevance dummy variable equal to zero when both belief and evaluation are negative, or when a salient belief is not considered for other reasons, one of which is discussed herein, and to 1 at other times. This refinement helps the model considerably by not predicting a positive marginal effect on attitude when a salient negative rumor is disbelieved, but it does not account for the *negative* marginal effect of a disbelieved negative rumor as measured by Tybout, Caulder and Sternthal (1981).

Recent work by Olson and Fazio (2001, 2002, 2004) and Han, Olson and Fazio (2006) offers a path for closing the gap between Tybout, Caulder and Sternthal's (1981) measurement of prototypical practitioner observations and attitude learning theory. The new work explores implicit and subliminal attitude priming. Implicit learning, in which people demonstrate learning of an association or behavior although they are unable to articulate any explicit, conscious basis for it, has been demonstrated across several visual and verbal learning tasks (Chun & Jiang, 1999; Lewicki, 1986; Reber, 1967). Olson and Fazio (2001) employed an implicit learning paradigm to prime attitudes toward neutral stimuli. Like Tybout, Caulder and Sternthal (1981), Olson and Fazio (2001, 2002, 2004) find attitude changes inconsistent with the predictions of Fishbein's attitude toward the object model. These researchers specifically sought to replicate the marketing environment's tendency to present attitude objects and valenced information together to influence behavior even when consumers' attention is focused or directed elsewhere. In three studies, Olson and Fazio (2001, 2002, 2004) showed that attitudes can be both implicitly and subliminally conditioned. The studies carefully control for potential confounds of previous implicit and subliminal conditioning studies, providing a strong demonstration of the effects.

Implicit attitude conditioning explains how natural covariations of valenced objects with the attitude object result in attitude changes without explicit evaluation of related attributes. This effect suggests an additional model term c_j, where each *c* represents a valenced covariate that is implicitly evaluated as a component of attitude towards the object. Unfortunately, since people cannot report implicit processing, this effect is impossible to measure in a field setting. However, it is implied by predictable, systematic variances in attitudes from the levels predicted by beliefs and evaluations of all salient attributes alone. In a lab setting, the Implicit Association Test may confirm the operation of this term. Figure 2 represents this new model algebraically.

The Theory in Action

The worm rumor study suggests that the negative impact of a rumor can be mitigated through a redirection strategy. The strategy requires associating one or more aspects of the rumor with another object with the intent of removing it from the retrieval set for the negatively impacted organization. In this case, the relevance term, r_i, is zero, operating like Fishbein's salience criterion. The term will prove more useful in other cases, as will be shown.

The worm rumor study (Tybout, Caulder and Sternthal, 1981) also found that when the rumor was disregarded (in which case no model terms are actively manipulated), or rebutted by the experimenter (in which case an attempt is made to attach a strong, negative valence to b_i), the marginal attitude effect of a disbelieved negative rumor was negative. Per the new model, when b_i and e_i are both negative, r_i is zero, causing the rumor-related $b_i e_i r_i$ term arising from explicit evaluation of the rumor to fall to zero. The negative impact on attitude suggests an implicit negative evaluative element related to the rumor, which is now captured in the covariate term.

The evaluative term, e_i, provides an additional lever for effecting attitude change. For instance, redefining the implication of a belief could change the valence of its evaluation. A strategy to replace a negative evaluation with a positive connotation could have a positive impact on attitudes. The strategy may also give rise to additional positive $b_i e_i r_i$ terms associated with the way in which the implication is redefined. When applied to rumors, this strategy entails attaching the target to a positive story that redefines the implication of the rumor, changing the connotation. Instead of avoiding the rumor, the organization can rally around it, using the opportunity to disseminate positive information about itself.

FIGURE 2
Proposed Attitude Learning Theory

$$\text{Attitude} = f\left(\sum_{i=1}^{n} b_i e_i r_i + \sum_{j=1}^{m} c_j \right)$$

Where n is the number of attributes an object possesses
b_i is the belief strength that the object possesses the ith attribute
e_i is the evaluation of the ith attribute
r_i is the relevance of the ith attribute, a dummy variable which takes on values of 0 and 1
m is the number of valenced covariates implicitly considered
c_j is the valenced strength of the jth covariate

Based on the new attitude learning theory and consistent with the work by Olson and Fazio (2001, 2002) and Tybout, Caulder and Sternthal (1981), both redirection and rallying strategies are expected to work whether or not subjects believe the negative rumors to which the strategies are applied. Rallying has the potential to be more effective than redirection. While rumor redirection seeks to block the effect of a negative rumor, a rallying strategy goes a step further by taking advantage of the rumor to disseminate positive messages about the target organization.

A sample of each strategy may clarify the discussion. Consider the case of a college undergoing accreditation review. Perhaps parties found ill-qualified to teach in the adjunct assignments they enjoy have put a spin on their impending departures, suggesting that the accreditation authority may close the school. Four rumor response strategies allow examination of the operation of the proposed attitude learning theory.

Refuse to Engage

With this strategy, the college chooses not to respond to the allegations, perhaps considering that doing so will only lend credence to the rumors. To the extent that the rumors are prevalent and believed by students, students' attitudes towards the college may be depressed both by beliefs, b_i, about the likelihood of closure, and negative evaluations, e_i, of closure which could prohibit or delay degree completion. In addition, the covariate of critical accreditation discussions may have an implicit impact through the addition of a negative c_j term even for people who do not believe the rumor. A variation of this strategy is one in which companies refuse to engage currently, but promise to respond later (DiFonzo and Bordia, 2000).

Proposition 1:

In absence of an immediate organizational response, external stakeholders exposed to a false negative rumor will evaluate the target organization more negatively than before the rumor circulated.

Rebut

Following a rebuttal strategy, the hypothetical college responds that the accrediting body doesn't have the authority to close it or any other college or university, and explains that the accrediting body's evaluation was more positive than reported by the adjunct professors in the rumor. If the rumor was previously believed and the rebuttal strategy is successful, the college may succeed in changing a positive belief that the college is likely to be facing closure, b_i, to a negative term, indicating belief that closure is unlikely. With closure already evaluated negatively through e_i by the stakeholders of the college, the conditions for r_i to change from 1 to 0 are met, causing the $b_i e_i r_i$ term to drop from the model. However during rebuttal, covariation of the presentation of the object of the negative rumor and the negative information itself increases the probability that a negative c_j term will operate, depressing the external stakeholders' attitude towards the college.

Proposition 2:

External stakeholders exposed to rebuttal of a false, negative rumor by the target organization will evaluate that organization more negatively than before the rumor circulated.

Given the competing effects of falling belief strength and increasing negatively evaluated covariation with the rebuttal strategy as compared to the refuse to engage strategy, no general proposition on their relative efficacy is offered.

Redirect

The college could alternatively respond by redirecting the rumor's association with a story such as this one: "Remember when the Florida Female College closed? It had limited facilities and limited educational opportunities, but today it's been reborn as Florida State University.

Sometimes change is very, very positive for a college." If successful, this strategy would cause the topic of the rumor, college closure, to be associated with another attitude object, Florida State University, causing r_i to change from 1 to 0 and the $b_i e_i r_i$ term to drop from the model. By avoiding reinforcing a negatively evaluated c_j term, the strength of this term is expected to be lower than with a rebuttal strategy. If the story causes the information in the rumor to be evaluated positively, even if it is not considered directly relevant and therefore not explicitly considered as a component of attitude, it could potentially change valence of the implicit impact of the rumor through c_j, although any positive impact is expected to be minimal. In this way, a redirection strategy has the potential to mitigate the impact of a false, negative rumor. Less likely, the story might be perceived to have literal application, in which case it might change the valence and strength of the evaluation of potential closure, e_i.

Proposition 3:

> External stakeholders exposed to a false, negative rumor redirection strategy will evaluate the target organization more positively than those exposed to a refuse to engage or rebuttal strategy.

Rally

A fourth option is to associate the rumor with a positive story around which people can rally. For instance, the college might respond, "Our college has survived stronger hurricanes than this accrediting body. Remember Hurricane Andrew in 1992? We offered a safe haven for students without sufficient shelter, and we were praised in the community for closing well in advance of the storm to give students and employees sufficient time to stock up on essentials and prepare their homes. We even had a contact chain in place to identify students, faculty and staff who needed assistance when the storm had passed, and we quickly mobilized to help out those hardest hit in the local community. Challenges bring out the best in us." In the college context, this strategy can be likened to building team spirit in the face of a rival team. The rallying strategy has the potential to change the valence of the evaluative aspect of the accreditation challenge, e_i, without removing the $b_i e_i r_i$ term. In this way, the term's net impact is changed from negative to positive. In addition, the discussion may give rise to new, positive $b_i e_i r_i$ terms related to the college's protection of its students, its service to the community, its campus, and/or its history. In addition to, or even in absence of explicit belief changes, the story could serve to implicitly improve attitude through one or more covariate terms, c_j. For its potential to capitalize on otherwise damaging misinformation, the rallying strategy can be considered gilding the lie. Of the strategies presented, this one has the best chance of improving attitudes toward the maligned organization, even taking it to higher than pre-rumor levels. Since rumors are thought to have as a primary function entertaining or keeping the listener's attention, rallying may be an especially effective strategy (Guerin and Miyazaki, 2006). To the extent that a rallying strategy can be crafted to motivate and engage cognitive effort, it may further block a rumor's effect (Fazio and Olson, 2003).

Proposition 4:

> External stakeholders exposed to a false, negative rumor rallying strategy will evaluate the target organization more positively than before the false, negative rumor circulated.

Boundary Conditions

The four rumor response strategies are not equally appropriate in all conditions. While the proposed redirection and rallying approaches to rumor response may be effective with non-trivial, damaging rumors, they should not be used indiscriminately. For instance, in matters of life and death, these strategies are entirely inappropriate and could backfire in ways which are damaging to both outside stakeholders and the organization.

Many false rumors circulated via Twitter, Facebook, email and other means following the

catastrophic earthquake that devastated Japan on March 11, 2011. One of the more prominent was that,

> *"The weather forecast says it will rain from Monday. People living around Chiba, please be careful. The explosion at the Cosmo oil refinery will cause harmful substances to rise to clouds and become toxic rain. So when you go out, take your umbrella or raincoat, and make sure the rain doesn't touch your body!" (Anonymous, as reported in Sasaki, 2011)*

While the new strategies presented herein may be appropriate for many of the false, negative rumors that target organizations, it would be inappropriate and irresponsible for Cosmo Oil Co. to employ a rallying strategy and risk being perceived as making light of the true suffering, real threats, and justified fear that many in Japan continue to experience. It would be ludicrous to try to redirect national attention to any other topic in the week after the catastrophe. A rebuttal strategy might seem appropriate, and in fact Cosmo Oil chose to make very light use of this strategy, issuing a statement even shorter than the rumor text itself ("In Regards to Emails About the Chiba Oil Factory," 2011) which it chose not to place on its press releases webpage (Cosmo Oil Co. Press Releases, 2011). The brief statement seeks to allay fears while also apologizing for causing anxiety. In light of the life or death fears of the Japanese public, any substantial public relations push could be perceived as inappropriately focusing attention away from issues that matter.

We examine additional real world strategies and outcomes for several well-known rumors in Table 2.

Managerial Implications

Rumors about corporations are widely spread and have drastic consequences. Brand associations drive consumer behavior (Fitzsimons, Chartrand and Fitzsimons, 2008), and negative corporate rumors swing stock prices, result in lost sales, undermine trust among customers, harm brand image, lower employee morale, and increase workplace stress (DiFonzo and Bordia, 2000; Kimmel and Audrain-Pontevia, 2010, Pound and Zeckhauser, 1990).

Most typically, companies provide correct information when rumors swell (DiFonzo and Bordia, 2000), which entails refuting false rumors. Academics recommend this strategy, suggesting, for instance, "When an investigation determines that the rumor is not true, then a plan for correcting the error should be initiated. The success of this plan depends upon the credibility of the intermediaries and their ability to communicate widely, effectively, and quickly. The media often plays an important role in rumor control. They can correct misinformation and publicize information coming from the rumor-control effort (Burgess and Maiese, 2004)."

This is exactly the strategy that P&G followed. The company rebutted with information about the origins of the logo, with statements from talk show hosts, by publicizing the support of the publishers of the National Catholic Register, and by issuing press releases. Even so, the company estimated just a few years into the enduring rumor saga that it was losing tens of millions of dollars per year in sales, a figure that excludes the costs of rumor management (which ultimately included a logo change) and ongoing legal expenses.

Sometimes organizations take a "nobler" approach, avoiding addressing the rumor, as if doing so requires one to come down to the level of the one issuing the false accusation. This is P&G's current approach. In 1985, just five years into the rumor's long history, P&G removed the troublesome logo from consumer packaging, adding to the high costs associated with the rumor. While in December 2011, documents referencing the rumor can still be found on the P&G website through layers of links by a determined visitor ("Trademark Rumor," 2011) they are not returned by site searches. However, this refuse to engage strategy obviously does not extend to other

TABLE 2:
Sample Responses to Well-known Rumors

Rumor	Strategies observed	Outcomes observed	Sample alternative strategies
"Vans shoes are adorned with the Star of David so that wearers will "stomp all Jews." ("Star Quality", 2011)	**REBUT:** Since the product's creation, the company has sought to reassure inquirers that the trademarked pattern is just a pattern that dated from the founding of the company. There was no intent that it be an anti-Jewish message. ("Star Quality," 2011)	Despite this rebuttal, the rumor persists. It can now be found on Facebook ("Makers of Vans hate Jews?", 2011), and video "evidence" has been posted to YouTube of Van's alleged discrimination not only from the sole imprint but also from a "hidden swastika" symbol in the shoe's construction in June 2011 ("Proof Vans Shoe", 2011).	**REFUSE TO ENGAGE:** The company could have ignored the rumor instead of responding to inquiries. While this strategy avoids reinforcing the rumor, it also fails to combat it so those with the false impression may perpetuate it. **REDIRECT:** Vans might give new symbolism for the shoe pattern consistent with the current slogan, "Off the Wall." An ad campaign can focus on customers leaving their mark by showing the tread on a multitude of surfaces (e.g. on a skatepark wall, on a full/half pipe, on a rail or ramp). This strategy might give the shoe tread a positive connotation to displace the negative one promoted by the rumor. **RALLY:** Given the charged nature of the rumor, it is risky to acknowledge it, even to disseminate positive information about the company, thus no rally strategy is proposed.
"Diet Coke contains more calories than claimed, but the company gets away with the deception by paying a yearly fine." ("Diet Riot," 2011)	**REFUSE TO ENGAGE**: The company did not respond to the rumor.	Without a response, the rumor has morphed to include newer beverages such as the Zero line of diet soft drinks and has moved from traditional channels to blogs and the like ("How Many Calories," 2006).	**REBUT:** Diet Coke could have informed consumers that the Federal Trade Commission Act prohibits corporations from making false or misleading nutritional claims about their products, and does not allow payment of a fine to exempt a company from the FDA's regulations, and that the Lanham Act provides legal remedy to consumers for these deceptive practices. Although this strategy might cause the false rumor to be disbelieved, the content of the rumor would still be associated with Diet Coke, which could be expected to damage attitudes towards the beverage and discourage some sales of the product. **REDIRECT:** The company could promote Glacéau vitaminwater as 50 delicious calories of health. This strategy seeks to replace the association of the inflated calorie count with Diet Coke, tying it to another product line for which the connotation would not be negative or indicate deception on the company's part. **RALLY:** Coca-Cola could create a marketing campaign where scientists and consumers are at odds, with consumers saying "Tastes too good to be calorie free" and the scientists responding "Maybe we made it too good?" This strategy offers a helpful explanation for the false calorie perception, encouraging a positive taste association with Diet Coke in place of a damaging perceived deception by the company.

(*continued*)

TABLE 2 (*continued*)

Rumor	Strategies observed	Outcomes observed	Sample alternative strategies
"A Tootsie Pop wrapper with a picture of an Indian shooting an arrow at a star on it can be redeemed with Tootsie Roll Industries for a free bag of candy." ("Shooting Star," 2011)	**REBUT:** Since 1931, the company has responded to about 150 letters per week by sending special letters expressing their regrets to prize-seekers. In 1982, the company created a story titled "Legend of the Indian Wrapper" to accompany the regrets letter. ("Shooting Star," 2011)	At least 15 years after the legend explanation, some children were still collecting wrappers in hopes of an apocryphal for reward.	**REFUSE TO ENGAGE:** The company could have ignored all letters sent by prize-seekers, potentially causing them to feel cheated. **REDIRECT:** The company might add a QR code labeled "Use this wrapper" to Tootsie Pop wrappers to load a page on candy wrapper crafts, featuring wrappers from this brand. In this way, saving wrappers might become associated with making something, rather than receiving something from the manufacturer. (Candy wrappers have been made into or adorned jewelry, hair bands and barrettes, bags, light switch covers, tables, shoes, clothing, and more.) **RALLY:** The company could create an "Aim for the Stars" program to be distributed through schools (as children are the primary target of the rumor) that gives alternate meaning to the wrapper image. This could be in conjunction with Junior Achievement or another trusted external provider. In this way, problematic Indian emblem might come to represent the company's support for children's education.
"You can get a new pair of shoes from Nike by just mailing them any old, worn-out pair of sneakers." ("Free Shoes from Nike," 2011)	**REBUT:** A statement on Nike's website for about two years apparently explained that the company doesn't send unsolicited offers by email. The company also contacted customers who provided shoes in response to the rumor to inquire whether they'd like them returned or recycled. This communications strategy is a brief adjunct to a more forceful rally strategy. ("Internet Hoax," 2003) **RALLY:** The company promotes its shoe recycling program, which turns old shoes received into track, tennis court and other sports surfaces, and has fans participate in this promotion through Facebook and by holding shoe recycling events. In this way, Nike's reputation for supporting sports is reinforced when returning shoes to Nike is referenced, and a connection between the company and environmental responsibility is reaffirmed. **REDIRECT:** Nike has since launched the Free line of running shoes. Those searching for information on receiving free running shoes are likely, in effect, to be redirected to this successful line.	Initially, shoes arrived at the company's headquarters at a rate of 100-150 pairs per day. No references to the rumor following the year of its inception were located. In contrast, the recycling program described in the rally strategy has received over 25 million pairs of shoes. ("ReUSE A Shoe," 2011)	**REFUSE TO ENGAGE:** The company could have chosen not to respond to make a website announcement or respond to those from whom used shoes were received. Some consumers might have felt cheated for having "upheld their end of the bargain" with no response from Nike. **REDIRECT:** While some companies do have used shoe trade-in or rebate programs to which Nike could redirect consumers, potentially associating the rumor with other companies, redirecting customers to these competitors' programs could hurt Nike sales. (No such programs were found for shoe types not also carried by Nike.)

sources of information. A Google search on "P&G satan" instantly produces about 374,000 hits, a number that has nearly quadrupled during this research inquiry.

To our knowledge, companies are not typically undertaking redirection or rallying strategies. Existing preferences for the refute and refuse to engage strategies are ironic: it is the refutation strategy which is expected to do the company additional damage, while the refusing to engage strategy fails to counter the harm done by the rumor. The two unused strategies are expected to be as effective as if the rumor had not circulated, in the case of redirection (shown empirically with the McDonalds' worm meat rumor by Tybout, Caulder and Sternthal (1981)), or more positive, in the case of the rallying strategy.

P&G Had Other Options

P&G could have both redirected and rallied with a Reaching for the Stars sweepstakes full of wholesome images along with the historic moon and stars logo. This strategy would serve to redirect by presenting stars as images of hope, dreams, promise, and success. It could rally if the company were to use the sweepstakes to show P&G makes products and services, "of superior quality and value that improve the lives of the world's consumers," as the company states on its public statement of purpose ("Purpose, Values and Principles," 2011). Employees could also be encouraged to respond to receipt of the now e-mailed rumor or questions about it by forwarding sweepstakes information with a personal note. Further, employees might be asked to forward sweepstakes information to people they think would be interested (avoiding those likely to see such a message as spam) even without contact about the rumor.

Future Research

This discussion suggests a number of research directions. First and foremost, the rumor response strategies should be tested with various audiences (ages, occupations, cultural groups) and in many contexts. Little is known about the differences in rumor propagation behaviors by industry, function and specialty. Identifying significant differences holds promise for further refining the proposed strategies. Additional studies could assess the appearance and disappearance of particular terms of the proposed learning theory and behavioral impacts of the rumor response strategies. A number of instruments are available to test the theory both within the domain of brand attitudes, e.g. the Go/No-Go Association Task, and beyond it, e.g. the Implicit Association Test, the Breadth-based Adjective Rating Task, and others (Dimofte, 2010).

The brand ambassador concept holds promise as a standard element of integrated marketing communications plans. Research is needed to determine how companies might cultivate brand ambassadors, under what circumstances employees are willing to take this role, what elements of the request most positively influence response to a particular external communication request, whether hearing the same message more than once from different sources may lessen the credibility of a marketing communications strategy by correctly suggesting employees are repeating messages disseminated by a company authority, and other related issues. The effectiveness of using brand ambassadors to fight rumors should be tested against traditional mass media responses within rumor response strategy categories.

Finally, the revised attitude learning theory should be tested in a wide variety of situations in which attitudes are learned, and in particular, its covariate term should be tested with laboratory experimentation.

CONCLUSION

The proposed attitude learning theory bridges the gap between Fishbein's attitude toward the object model, predictions from information

processing theory and associated observations in the field (such as with the P&G rumor) and laboratory (as in the 1981 Tybout, Caulder and Sternthal worms study). The potential domain for the new theory is extremely broad, encompassing all situations in which attitudes are learned.

Since people form beliefs and attitudes based on rumors, rumor response strategies would provide an excellent first test for the theory. The propositions provided for the study of rumor response strategies based on the new theory show promise for guiding the creation of false, negative rumor response strategies to minimize the potentially enormous negative impact and to promote attitude gains that are predictive of purchase behavior. Using brand ambassadors in this regard offers hope for more pervasively and credibly disseminating rumor response messages through the same person to person networks that promulgate rumors.

REFERENCES

Burgess, H. and M. Maiese (2004). Rumor Control. In Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess (Eds.), *Beyond Intractability*, Conflict Research Consortium, University of Colorado, Boulder, Colorado, USA.

Cekola, A. (2000). Utah Amway dealer again faces P&G suit. *The Salt Lake Tribune*, Salt Lake City, UT.

Chun, M. M. and Y. Jiang (1999). Top-down attentional guidance based on implicit learning of visual covariation. *Psychological Science*, 10, 360-365.

Cosmo Oil Co. Press Releases. (2011). Retrieved April 20, 2011, from http:// www.cosmo-oil.co.jp/eng/press/index.html.

Diet Riot. (2011). Retrieved December 15, 2011, from http://www.snopes.com/ cokelore/1calorie.asp.

DiFonzo, N. and P. Bordia (2000). How Top PR Professionals Handle Hearsay: Corporate Rumors, Their Effects, and Strategies to Manage Them. *Public Relations Review*, 26 (2), 173-190.

Dimofte, C. V. (2010). Implicit Measures of Consumer Cognition: A Review. *Psychology & Marketing*, 27(10), 921-937.

Fazio, R. H. and M. A. Olson (2003). Implicit Measures in Social Cognition Research: Their Meaning and Use. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 54, 297-327.

Fishbein, M. (1963). An Investigation of the Relationship between Beliefs about an Object and the Attitude toward that Object. *Human Relations*, 16, 233-239.

Fitzsimons, G., T. Chartrand and G. Fitzsimons (2008). Automatic Effects of Brand Explosure on Motivated Behavior: How Apple Makes You 'Think Different. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 35(June), 21-35.

Free Shoes from Nike. (2011). Retrieved December 15, 2011, from http:// www.snopes.com/business/redeem/ newshoes.asp.

Guerin, B. and Y. Miyazaki (2006). Analyzing Rumors, Gossip and Urban Legends Through Their Conversational Properties. *The Psychological Record*, 56, 23-34.

Gladwell, M. (2000). *The Tipping Point.* London: Little Brown and Company.

Han, H. A., M. A. Olson and R. H. Fazio (2006). The Influence of Experimentally Created Extrapersonal Associations on the Implicit Association Test. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology,* 42, 259-272.

High court refuses to hear First Amendment appeals. (2001). *The Associated Press*, Retrieved July 12, 2011, from http:// www.freedomforum.org/templates/ document.asp?documentID=15041.

How many calories are in Coke Zero? (2006). Retrieved December 16, 2011, from http:// nineshift.typepad.com/weblog/ 2006/10/ how_many_calori.html.

In Regards to Emails About the Chiba Oil Factory. (2011). Retrieved April 30, 2011, from http://www.cosmo-oil.co.jp/inform ation/110312/index.html.

Internet Hoax Be Assured, We Don't Send Unsolicited Emails. (2003). Wayback Machine, Retrieved December 15, 2011, from http://web.archive.org/web/20031210194858/http://www.nike.com/nikebiz/news/pressrelease.jhtml?year=1998&month=03&letter=i.

Internet Resources for Facts about P&G Rumor. (2003). Retrieved December 15, 2003, from http://www.pg.com/company/who_we_are/trademark_pgrumor.jhtml.

Iyer, E. S. and K. Debevec (1991). Origin of Rumor and Tone of Message in Rumor Quelling Strategies. *Psychology & Marketing*, 9(3), 161-175.

Kamins, M. A., V. S. Folkes and L. Pesser (1997). Consumer Responses to Rumors: Good News, Bad News. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 6(2), 165-187.

Kimmel, A. J. and A. F. Audrain-Pontevia (2010). Analysis of commercial rumors from the perspective of marketing managers. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 16 (4), 239-253.

Lewicki, P. (1986). Processing information about covariations that cannot be articulated. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition*, 12, 135-146.

Lutz, R. J. (1991). The Role of Attitude Theory in Marketing. In H. Kassarjian and T. Robertson (Eds.), *Perspectives in Consumer Behavior*, 4th edition. Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice Hall, 317-339.

Madhavaram, S. and R. Appan (2010). The Potential Implications of Web-Based Marketing Communications for Consumers' Implicit and Explicit Brand Attitudes: A Call for Research. *Psychology & Marketing*, 27 (2), 186-202.

Makers of Van Shoes hate Jews? (2007). Retrieved December 16, 2011, from https://www.facebook.com/topic.php?uid=2393236725&topic=2568#!/topic.php?uid=2393236725&topic=2568.

Morsing, M., M. Schultz and K. U. Nielsen (2008). The 'Catch 22' of Communicating CSR: Findings from a Danish Study. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 14(2), 97-111.

McGuire, B. (1999). Even If It's by E-mail, It Can Still Be Slander. *National Catholic Register*, 75(34), 14-15.

Olson, M. A. and R. H. Fazio (2001). Implicit Attitude Formation through Classical Conditioning. *Psychological Science*, 12(5), 413-417.

Olson, M. A. and R. H. Fazio (2002). Implicit Acquisition and Manifestation of Classically Conditioned Attitudes. *Social Cognition*, 20 (2), 89-104.

Olson, M. A. and R. H. Fazio (2004). Reducing the Influence of Extrapersonal Associations on the Implicit Association Test: Personalizing the IAT. *Attitudes and Social Cognition*, 86(5), 653-667.

P&G files suit over false rumors. (1995). Retrieved July 12, 2011 from http://www.vandruff.com/mlm_PG.html.

P&G may now sue Amway over 'Satanic cult' rumors (2001). The Deseret News, Business Section, Salt Lake City, UT, page B08.

P&G wins US case on Satanic slurs. (2007). Retrieved July 12, 2011, from http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/business/6471373.stm.

Pound, J. and R. Zeckhauser (1990). Clearly Heard on the Street: The Effect of Takeover Rumors on Stock Prices. *The Journal of Business*, 63(3), 291-308.

Proof Vans Shoe Company. They are Racist!! And They Hate Jews. (2011). Retrieved December 16, 2011, from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tDWcl0F3ZRY&feature=youtu.be, accessed.

Purpose, Values and Principles. (2011). Retrieved July 12, 2011, from http://www.pg.com/en_US/company/purpose_people/pvp.shtml.

Reber, A. S. (1967). Implicit learning of artificial grammars. *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior*, 6, 855– 863.

ReUSE A Shoe. (2011). Retrieved December 15, 2011, from http://www.nikereuseashoe.com/.

Rosnow, R. L. and E. K. Foster (2005). Rumor and Gossip Research. *Psychological Science Agenda*, 19(5).

Sasaki, T. (2011). "Toxic Rain to Fall?" Retrieved April 30, 2011, from http://globalvoicesonline.org/ 2011/03/13/japan-toxic-rain-earthquake-weapons-and-other-false-rumors/.

Saxbe, D. (2003). Small World, After All. *Psychology Today*, 36(Nov/Dec), p 16.

Schacter, D. L. and E. Scarry (2001). *Memory, Brain and Belief*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Shooting Star. (2011). Retrieved December 15, 2011, from http://www.snopes.com/business/redeem/tootsie.asp.

Simon, H. (1969). *The Sciences of the Artificial*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Star Quality. (2011). Retrieved December 15, 2011, from http://www.snopes.com/business/hidden/vans.asp.

Stern, L. W. (1902). Zeitschrift für die gesamte Strafechtswissenschaft. *Zur Psychologie der Aussage. Experimentelle Untersuchungen über Erinnerungstreue*, 22 (2/3).

Supporting Statements from Talkshow Hosts. (2007). Retrieved July 20, 2007, from http:www.pg.com/company/who_we_are/trademark_talkshow.jhtml.

The Proctor & Gamble Company. (2011). Retrieved July 12, 2011, from http://www.answers.com/topic/proctor-gamble?cat=biz-fin.

Trademark Rumor. (2011). Retrieved December 15, 2011, from http://pg.custhelp.com/app/answers/detail / a_id/2729/session/L3NpZC9hNVEyMzV0aw%3D%3D.

Trademark of the Devil. (2011). Retrieved July 12, 2011, from http://www.snopes.com/business/alliance/proctor.asp.

Tybout, A. M., B. J. Calder and B. Sternthal (1981). Using Information Processing Theory to Design Marketing Strategies. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 18(1), 73-79.

[1]Rumors known by those hearing them to have been started by positive stakeholders thought not to have malicious intent are a special case in which refutation in a conciliatory tone may sometimes be effective (Iyer and Debevec, 1991). However, rumors are typically passed person to person without reference to an original source. In fact, the details passed along are chosen to make for good storytelling (Guerin and Miyazaki, 2006), and many modern examples show that reliable source information is not usually one of these details (c.f. snopes.com).

[2]With apologies to Florida State. Slight liberties have been taken for the purpose of illustration.