Dynamics of Sensegiving for Ongoing Media Coverage: A Quantitative Case Study of Green Building Rating Systems

Distinctiveness has long been lauded as a means for unlocking market opportunities (e.g., Anderson & Tushman, 1990; Porter, 1980), but it can also serve as a double-edged sword when it positions a product outside the sets of products to which audiences typically pay attention (Kennedy, 2005; Zuckerman, 1999). This is problematic because attention is a critical step preceding consumption decisions (Petkova, Rindova, & Gupta, 2013). Organizations may try to overcome the chasm between audience awareness and their products by seeking coverage by market intermediaries – for example, newspapers (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994; Kennedy, 2005, 2008; Navis & Glynn, 2010; Petkova et al., 2013). Recent work has begun to demonstrate how entrepreneurs and producers in emerging markets engage in sensegiving – or activities that attempt to influence others’ meaning – to attract media coverage (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Kennedy, 2008; Petkova et al., 2013; Santos & Eisenhardt, 2009). This work has tended to examine the relationship between sensegiving and media coverage as an average, such that it should be interpreted as constant over time. However, if sensegiving effectively changes the cognitive state of the receiving audiences – including attracting newspaper coverage – it is not clear that the effectiveness of subsequent sensegiving will be constant. I thus seek to examine the dynamics of sensegiving and media coverage for distinctive products.

While all products require attention as a step preceding broad awareness, understanding and consumption by market audiences, this is particularly problematic for products that are distinctive (Petkova et al., 2013). This is because distinctive products are sufficiently different from convention that audiences fail to interact with them. In essence, audiences often engage in the market through relatively entrenched patterns, so products that are nonconventional are likely to remain outside the awareness of most audiences (Zuckerman, 1999).

One avenue organizations have for bridging the gap between how they understand their distinctive product and the lack of awareness by audiences is through coverage by a market intermediary, such as the newspaper (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994; Kennedy, 2005, 2008; Petkova et al., 2013; Zuckerman, 1999). However, media coverage itself is an outcome of a process in which some actors are making sense of the distinctive product (Rosa, Porac, Runser-Spanjol, & Saxon, 1999). Organizations can try to influence this process and attract media coverage to their distinctive products through sensegiving, which is the engagement in activities to influence someone else’s cognitive process towards particular ends (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000; Kennedy, 2005, 2008; Petkova et al., 2013; Santos & Eisenhardt, 2009).

Recent work demonstrates that media coverage is responsive to sensegiving activities that match media organizations’ information needs (Kennedy, 2008; Petkova et al., 2013). This work has demonstrated the importance of salience and audience-appropriate novelty for media coverage, however, it has not taken into account that the information needs of the media outlets may change over time. As sensegiving activities succeed in increasing media coverage the information needs of the media outlet may change, such that the effectiveness of those same sensegiving activities change. I thus seek to contribute to our understanding of how distinctive products attract media coverage through sensegiving activities and particularly how sensegiving activities vary in their effectiveness over time.

I focus on how salience and novelty, which are common information needs of media outlets, may function differently over time. Salience is a sense of realness of a distinctive product (Kennedy, 2005, 2008), and once established may persist over time. Novelty, or a sense of newness and distinctiveness, is expected to require ongoing updating and may be satisfied differently for people with different levels of expertise (Petkova et al., 2013). While a distinctive product may be perceived as novel when the media becomes aware of its existence, as the media’s awareness and understanding of a product grows, the sense of novelty associated with the product is likely to diminish. Together, this suggests that sensegiving activities that primarily convey salience may be very important early on as the media begins to cover the distinctive product, but may decrease in importance as coverage increases. Thus my primary hypothesis is that the interaction of sensegiving and prior newspaper coverage will be negatively associated with subsequent newspaper coverage.

I examine this in a quantitative case study in the context of national, commercial green building rating systems in the United States. Green building rating systems are distinctive products that encourage the use of different practices, processes and performance metrics compared to the conventional building design and construction industry. This context has three entrants during its first fifteen years, which facilitates an in-depth examination of the relationships between each organization’s press releases about their rating system and media coverage of these distinctive products from 2000-2015. Further, this is an important context because of the broad impacts of the built environment on the external environment and human health.

I leverage variation in newspaper coverage to test the hypothesis about the relationships between press releases by each organization responsible for the green building rating system (in month t), prior newspaper articles (summed through month t-1) and subsequent newspaper articles about the product (in month t+1). I find support for my hypothesis: as prior newspaper coverage increases, press releases have a decreasing association with the number of future newspaper articles. However, the rating systems were introduced into fundamentally different environments, because LEED entered several years before the subsequent entrants. For this reason, I repeat the analysis by rating system. This analysis indicates that the effect is entirely driven by LEED. This result suggests the need for further study on the entry dynamics to better understand if this is a form of firstmover advantage, or simply an outcome of different sensegiving strategies.

The primary contribution of this study is to demonstrate that the effectiveness of sensegiving strategies targeted at the media may change over time as the information needs of the media changes. This is important to understand because distinctive products face challenges gaining awareness and adoption in the market, and coverage by intermediaries like the media is an important avenue for products to overcome these challenges.

This study also highlights opportunities for leveraging contexts with important social and environmental implications for the purposes of generating strategy and management insights. Products that combine technological developments and environmental outcomes are highly likely to challenge conventional market practices, processes and evaluative criteria and thus are likely to be perceived by many actors in the market as distinctive or nonconventional. This provides opportunities to identify contexts that are likely to be sites of dynamic socio-cognitive processes (including emergence, legitimation and the lack thereof) as they are ongoing and thus can be studied with limited survivor bias and increased potential for social impact.