EXAMINING AUDIENCE REACTIONS
TO BRAND JOURNALISM

by

JAMES THOMAS COLE II

JENNIFER D. GREER, COMMITTEE CHAIR
WILSON LOWREY
LANCE KINNEY

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ABSTRACT

An experimental study was conducted to assess the audience’s reaction to framing and attributed source cues in brand journalism, also referred to as custom content, custom publishing, or named for method of delivery (i.e. “customer magazines”). Given that establishing trust with customers, brand-building, and influencing purchase decisions are goals of brand journalism, this study examined the effect of commercial/branded or editorial/non-branded frames and use of corporate or peer customer sources on message credibility, attitude toward the brand, and purchase intent, with media savvy and involvement with the product as moderating factors. It was found that the editorial/non-branded frame had a positive effect on message credibility, while source cues alone had no direct effect on message credibility, attitude toward the brand, or purchase intent. However, involvement with the product emerged as a primary factor, having a greater effect on message credibility, attitude toward the brand, and purchase intent than frame or source cues as they were manipulated in this study. Further, involvement with the product exhibited significant interacting effects with source cues. Participants showing high involvement with the product were more likely to rate attitude toward the brand and purchase intent higher when information in brand journalism is attributed to a peer customer source, while participants showing low involvement with the product were more likely to rate attitude toward the brand and purchase intent higher when information in brand journalism is attributed to a corporate source.
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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Brand journalism, which might also be called “custom content,” “custom publishing,” or named for the medium of delivery (i.e. “customer magazines”), allows a business entity to target customers and prospects with tailored editorial that offers useful information to the audience while—perhaps covertly—promoting the business entity’s brand, brand values or products. The custom content industry is an emerging market for journalists. Marketers are spending more money on branded content than ever before (Custom Content Council, 2009a). When viewed as part of the overall spend on media, marketers pour 32% of their budgets into branded content (2009a).

Entrepreneurial opportunities abound for journalists in this growing industry. The majority of companies that use branded content as part of their marketing plans outsource at least some aspect of their branded content initiatives, and the average spend per company on that outsourcing is $886,000 (Custom Content Council, 2009a). Besides the entrepreneurial opportunities, journalists might also be drawn to the custom content business by the opportunity to work across any or all content delivery platforms, as marketers who espouse custom publishing seek to get the most value from their investment by repurposing content across media (Custom Content Council, 2009b).

With such a hefty investment in brand journalism, marketers will obviously seek accountability and a solid return on investment (ROI). ROI for custom content can be viewed in a number of ways. In a 2009 telephone survey of 1,000 Americans by GfK Custom Research,
78% of respondents said custom publications strengthen consumers’ relationships with sponsoring companies (Custom Content Council, 2009c). The “relationship” is a key component of branding. Companies seek not just to send a message to the consumer, but also to become a part of the consumer’s life and “create trust” (Arvidsson, 2005). In an even more direct way, ROI might be measured in purchase intentions. In fact, 68% of respondents in the GfK survey said custom publications help them make better purchase decisions (2009c).

Why do marketers choose custom editorial content as a way to extend their brand messaging? Editorial content has traditionally been considered to be relatively “pure” by both the journalists producing it and the public consuming it (Dyson, 2007). The problem with this view in the context of brand journalism is that the editorial itself can contain marketing messages—whether subtle or overt—that can affect the appearance of neutrality. Still, the relative power and credibility of editorial content as a means of branding is irresistible to marketing professionals (Dyson, 2007). As John Carroll, a mass communication professor at Boston University, put it, “Editorial is the new advertising” (Young, 2010). This narrative, storytelling approach is effectively turning brands themselves into publishers (Cheyfitz, 2011), whether the brand hires its own journalism department (Joel, 2011) or hires media professionals for the job (Custom Content Council, 2009a).

Very little research exists on the practices of single-sponsor or custom editorial magazines that attempt to convey relevant information while—overtly or covertly—incorporating the sponsor’s products into the editorial. Van Reijmersdal, Neijens, and Smit (2010) conducted the first research to focus on the “commerciality” of custom publications (called “customer magazines” in the study) and readers’ attitudes toward the magazines. Brand journalism varies with respect to the inclusion of product or brand information, and it may
originate either from the company or brand itself or a neutral vendor/publisher. The experimental study explored commerciality across two dimensions, content and source, and employed the term “source” not as the individuals given attribution in the content but as the originating source of the publication as a whole. The findings show that the more commercial the publication, the more frequently it is perceived as being less credible (2010).

Source credibility and persuasion knowledge theory provided the framework for Van Reijmersdal, et al. (2010), reasoning that audiences process commercial content poorly compared to editorial content. If the audience perceives the source of the content as commercial (i.e., an advertiser serving its own benefit), then the audience believes there is an attempt to persuade, and thus finds the content less credible. This study employed the amount of “brand integration” as an independent variable rather than the overall presentation of the content. On the operational front, the amount of brand integration had limited variance (0%, 50%, or 100% in the study) (2010). The research also did not consider potential moderating variables, such as the reader’s affinity for or prior knowledge of the brand, or the reader’s media literacy (e.g., understanding whether they were reading custom content). The study suggested that future research might look at smaller differences in the amount of brand integration to study where the “tipping point” is for the effects of commerciality to occur (2010).

Readers’ reactions to this mix of information and product promotion may indeed depend on whether the magazine itself is presented as the creation of the sponsor or as the creation of a third-party, independent publisher or journalist. Framing theory might be a more effective theoretical approach to this distinction, however. In other words, information presented in a “commercial frame” or an “editorial frame” in a custom publication may affect how the reader interprets it, thereby influencing its intended effectiveness.
The source of the information within the content might affect the audience’s reaction to the information. Here, source credibility could be employed at the attribution level as a secondary framework. Customers frequently comment on products or services in custom content, and that testimonial approach can be effective. Company sources are also often used in this type of content, but attributing information about a product to a representative of the company that releases it could affect the credibility of the information.

Further, these key factors in execution of custom content—frame and source—may influence the recipient’s attitude toward the brand. Brand management is a leading motivation for producing custom content (Dyson, 2007; Silber, 2010). As marketers place higher ROI demands on custom content, more pressure will also be placed on the content to influence purchase intention (Custom Content Council, 2009c), though the potential of custom content to do so is under-researched.

This study will explore how two key factors in the production of brand journalism—message framing and attributed sources in combination and individually—affect credibility of the information in the content, attitude toward the brand featured in the content, and purchase intention of the product placed in the content.
CHAPTER II

Literature Review

Framing Theory

Framing theory has both sociological and psychological roots, both of which are at play in how an audience interprets new information. Even in prominent, seminal works on framing in the fields of sociology and psychology, media are implicated in framing roles.

Sociology. In his work Frame Analysis, Goffman (1974) addresses the sociological roots of framing theory. People organize events into “primary frameworks,” some of which have no other organizing principle aside from “a lore of understanding, an approach, a perspective” (Goffman, 1974, p. 21). Though we are not likely even aware of these frameworks, and would be hard-pressed to describe them in detail, we have no problem applying them. Some of these frameworks are variable by individual. Some are shared by all, especially those that are most fundamental; Goffman uses as an example “that of a single, irreversible time” (Goffman, 1974, p. 21).

Early in his book, Goffman employs a media illustration to explain his idea of frameworks as “background understanding for events that incorporate the will, aim, and controlling effort of an intelligence, a live agency” (Goffman, 1974, p. 21). Such a framework is exemplified, says Goffman, by a weather report on a newscast. Rather than weather being presented as a mere occurrence, the newscast exerts an intelligence, a “live agency” into the event, providing us with understanding (Goffman, 1974).
Therefore, people perceive events in terms of these frameworks, and the type of frame employed “provides a way of describing the event to which it is applied” (Goffman, 1974, p. 24). Further, in Goffman’s explanation, the “live agency” is chiefly the human being and its community, giving his version of framing theory a distinctly social slant (Goffman, 1974).

Though simple and sensible on its face, Goffman concedes that the idea of primary frameworks isn’t altogether satisfactory. For example, “there is the embarrassing fact that during any one moment of activity, an individual is likely to apply several frameworks” (Goffman, 1974, p. 25). Even at the most abstract level, primary frameworks such as “everyday life” and “reality” are quite tenuous. On this point, Goffman asks that an “operating fiction” be accepted (Goffman, 1974, p. 26). While his use of examples from the media world signal the importance of framing theory on communication research, his concessions foreshadow the debate, ongoing today, of the theory’s validity in communication. He also hints at the theory’s psychological implications at the individual level, and admits that, of course, an individual’s framing of a situation or event can be misguided (Goffman, 1974).

**Psychology.** The psychological foundation of the theory suggests that *all* individual perceptions occur within certain frames of reference, i.e., schema that are accessible and pre-existing. In much the same vein as Goffman’s sociological “primary frameworks,” Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky’s Nobel Prize-winning collaboration on heuristics involves the study of “master frames” such as gains vs. losses (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009). Though primarily concerned with decision-making, Kahneman and Tversky’s work has obvious implications in communication, as many of their problems—or risk models—depend upon manipulation of the message frame to influence choice.
One of the most widely cited and easily understood of these framing manipulations is the Tversky and Kahneman’s Asian Flu Problem:

Imagine that the U.S. is preparing for the outbreak of an unusual Asian disease, which is expected to kill 600 people. Two alternative programs to combat the disease have been proposed. Assume that the exact scientific estimates of the consequences of the programs are as follows: If Program A is adopted, 200 people will be saved. [72 percent] If Program B is adopted, there is 1/3 probability that 600 people will be saved, and 2/3 probability that no people will be saved. [28 percent] Which of the two programs would you favor? (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981, p. 453)

A substantial majority of respondents given this version of the message choose Program A, citing risk aversion as the reasoning for the choice (Kahneman, 2002). The same model frames the same message—indeed, the same outcome—in terms of a different description of the options:

If Program C is adopted 400 people will die. [22 percent] If Program D is adopted there is 1/3 probability that nobody will die, and 2/3 probability that 600 people will die. [78 percent] Which of the two programs would you favor? (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981, p. 453)

Here, a clear majority favors Program D, and the percentages are reversed through manipulating the frame: survival vs. mortality, i.e., gains vs. losses.

In sum, we depend on these “frames of reference” to interpret information. In fact, psychological roots of framing theory suggest we can’t interpret information without frames (Kahneman, 2002). On the sociological level, however, Goffman acknowledges multiple frameworks may be applied or none at all (Goffman, 1974). If we accept, though, that framing
occurs, information will be interpreted differently given the “interpretive schema an individual applies” (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009, p. 18). Conversely, the same message can be framed in different ways, invoking an individual to use different schemas to interpret the message (Scheufele, 2008).

**Framing and Media Effects**

Frames are critical to communication research, since they are important tools for the audience in processing information, and also important to the message creators as a means of tailoring the message to influence the audience’s interpretation of information (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009). In some ways, framing as a media effect combines the sociological and psychological approaches. Framing theory argues that news frames influence how an audience interprets issues or events, and that the audience acquires beliefs and impressions from the context or presentation of the issue (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009). The audience participates in the framing process as well; the text and/or presentation “comports with the existing schemata” (Entman, 1993, p. 53), and a phrase, image or statement can trigger these beliefs or impressions.

**Toward a conceptual definition.** Though acknowledging that framing theory offers a way to explain the power of communication, Entman (1993) argues that conceptualization of the theory is scattered. This is likely due to its dual roots in sociology and psychology, as well as its superficial similarity to other media effects concepts (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009).

Some scholars who study framing as a media effect warn against the employment of one philosophical path in framing research:

The danger in neglecting the psychology of framing effects is that we cannot be sure that there is anything truly "unique" about this phenomenon; that framing cannot be subsumed
under some other generally understood concept, such as persuasion (Nelson, Oxley, & Clawson, 1997a, p. 223).

Complicating the presence of framing theory in communication research are other similar concepts that some scholars argue are closely related, namely, priming and agenda setting. Numerous studies explore those relationships in attempts to separate framing from its resemblance—however superficial—to other media effects (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009).

The distinctions between priming, agenda setting, and framing are subtle, and we must skirt the parsimony requirement of theory somewhat to explain how these models relate, overlap and, indeed, differ. Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) place issue salience in the agenda-setting camp, while priming is regarded as shaping judgments:

By making some issues more salient in people’s mind (agenda setting), mass media can also shape the considerations that people take into account when making judgments about political candidates or issues (priming) (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 11).

Both agenda setting and priming, then, are accessibility-based, i.e. memory-based means of processing information. This suggests a temporal sequence (agenda setting, then priming) by which certain issues or aspects are more accessible in recall, and thereby influential in forming attitudes; priming, then can be seen as an extension of agenda setting (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Both agenda setting and priming can occur in audiences through mere exposure to messages (2007).

By contrast, framing works through applicability, the actual connection the audience makes between concepts, and also suggests a more longitudinal effect than agenda setting and priming (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). “Mere exposure” is not enough. Audiences must build associations between concepts for framing to occur (2007). Further, some scholars argue that
frames activate existing cognitive schema, rather than adding something new to them (Nelson, Oxley & Clawson, 1997a). Various essays on this subject suggest preserving this distinction to bolster precision in media effects research (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007; Nelson & Oxley, 1999; Entman, 1993).

As an approach to a conceptual definition, Entman (1993) says framing essentially involves selection and salience. Framing highlights certain items of information, and thereby makes them more noticeable, or salient. It holds then, that frames also obscure certain bits of information, thereby reducing their salience (Entman, 1993). At the practical, operational level, text can be elevated in salience by placement or repetition, and also by association with familiar symbols, calling into play design’s role in framing effects (1993). Employing the psychological approach, these bits of information may also be more or less salient because of the audience’s existing schema (1993).

In sum, framing theory in communication research focuses not on what issues are selected by coverage or the amount of coverage the issues receive, but rather how the issues are presented (Price & Tewksbury, 1997).

**Application in research.** A useful approach to framing theory and its use in media effects is classifying framing research into two broad categories, dependent on the focus of the research: 1) *how* the frame is created and/or applied and 2) *who* is creating and/or applying it (Scheufele, 1999). In studying the first category, the frame can be both a dependent variable and an independent variable (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009). In researching the second, it is useful to view frames as either media frames, constructed and/or applied by those creating the content, or individual frames, constructed and/or applied by the audience (Scheufele, 1999). Studies can then be plotted within a four-quadrant typology, depending on focus (see figure 1). Scheufele
(1999) suggests relevant research questions for each quadrant, both as a means of classifying research and evaluating its progress. This typology also permits comparisons within quadrants and between quadrants.

![Diagram of Examining Frames as...](image)

**Figure 1.** A typology of framing research and relevant research questions (Scheufele, 1999).

Media sociology research by Shoemaker and Reese (1991) explored various pressures on the creation of content, which would thereby influence media framing of issues. Mass media content “takes elements of culture, magnifies them, frames them, and feeds them back to the audience” (Shoemaker & Reese, 1991, p. 49). Certainly this declaration of purpose pertains to patterns in coverage, i.e., what elements are presented most frequently. Our conceptual definition of framing is at play as well, however. Shoemaker and Reese explore media frames as a dependent variable, subject to a host of cultural, societal and organizational influences (1991).
Research regarding individual frames as dependent variables often involve media frames as independent variables (Scheufele, 1999). Gamson and Modigliani (1989) explored news coverage of nuclear power, and how presentation in news coverage influenced individuals’ and, in turn, society’s “shared frames” of the issue. The research differed from sole study of media effects in that it considered pre-existing schema based on experience of the individual, ranging from intrapersonal thoughts to interpersonal interactions, long-term predispositions and discourse other than that in the media, demonstrating that the audience has its own “toolkit” for making sense of—i.e., framing—world affairs (1989).

Research on social movements and issues provide a view of how individual frames are used as independent variables. Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley (1997b) examined the effects of frames on tolerance for the Ku Klux Klan by presenting audiences with news stories that varied by frame, presenting a Klan rally as an exercise of free speech on one hand, or as a disruption of public order on the other. Though the articles employed these frames, they are not media-created; rather, they cue existing schema (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009; Scheufele, 2008; Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974). In this case, framing of the Klan rally within the context of a widely regarded civil liberty—free speech—resulted in greater tolerance for the Ku Klux Klan than when the rally was framed as a threat to public order (Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997b).

**Frame as an independent variable.** Studies that explore media frames as independent variables are perhaps the most relevant to the concept of framing as a media effect; this is also, by volume of study, the largest “quadrant” of framing research in the field of communication (Scheufele, 1999). Frames created by media offer the audience a way to organize and understand

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1 The “individual” nomenclature in the top-right and bottom-right research quadrants is not meant to imply the media do not—or cannot—play a role in contributing to individual frames, only that media do not solely create them. Nor does “individual” necessarily imply a single individual; it also connotes “audience.”
information, and also influence the audience’s interpretation of an issue. By example, Tewksbury, Jones, Peske, Raymond, and Vig (2000) presented five versions of a newspaper story about industrial hog farming, randomly assigned to five audience groups. The versions manipulated the presentation of the issue in the weight they gave to frames promoted by organizations with interest in the issue. The audience members were tested on their impression of the issues immediately after reading the articles, and many of them participated in identical testing of the dependent measures again three weeks later. Not only were the subjects’ cognitions regarding the issue strongly affected by the dominance of the frames within the articles, but the retest three weeks later revealed an impact as well, suggesting credence to the idea of framing as a longitudinal media effect (Tewksbury, et.al, 2000).

**Master frames and manipulation.** Review of literature in framing research reveals little in the way of “master frames” that could potentially be applied across issues. Instead, research typically identifies new sets of frames unique to the issue under study (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009). Still, it is valid to study some of the more generalizable frames and infer those characteristics to similar situations.

Goffman (1974), once again invoking media in his more general sociological work on framing, employs two of these familiar frames to explain how an audience interprets dramatic information, particularly decades ago: the theatrical frame and the radio drama frame.

Goffman lists conventions that render stage interaction—the theatrical frame—different from reality: the spatial boundaries of the stage and the theater, the exaggerated interactions of the performers with each other and the audience (1974). Within the radio drama frame, further conventions allow listeners to distinguish the program from real life: sound effects that fade up, in, and then out to set the scene unrealistically; music used as both background and bridges
between scenes; and other attenuations of sound. These are well known and accepted
conventions that in turn form well-known and accepted frames of reference (1974).

The Mercury Theater episode that aired on October 30, 1938, however, violated these
theatrical/dramatic frames. In adapting “War of the Worlds” for the radio drama program,
director Orson Welles presented the story of alien invasion as a series of news bulletins (Lovgen, 2005). Though the introduction to the piece stated it was indeed a radio drama, those missing the brief introduction could have easily been confused into believing the “coverage” was real,
especially since the conventions of the broadcast closely mimicked the breathless radio news coverage less than one month prior of the Munich crisis, a meeting of European leaders in the ramp-up to World War II (2005).

Goffman sees framing at work both in the audience and the performers:

Some members of the audience for Welles’ show are almost as famous as the performers themselves because of the vigoroussness of their response. … (A)pparently most of those who misframed the event did so from the very beginning of their listening (which apparently had often begun well along into the show) (Goffman, 1974, p. 365).

Thus, Welles caught his first listeners not yet ready to bring the theatrical frame to what they were listening to (Goffman, 1974, p. 390).

The audience may have “misframed the event,” but Welles’ direction was no accident. Whether the morphing of the drama frame into a news frame was intended to deceive or not, the results speak for themselves (Lovgen, 2005). As The New York Times reported the next day, hundreds of thousands of people listening to the program panicked. In some New Jersey neighborhoods where attacks were “reported” in the show, families took to the streets, wet towels over their heads for protection from “Martian gas” (2005).
In much the same way (though admittedly in less melodramatic fashion), communicators with a marketing slant can manipulate frames, intentionally or not, to achieve an end. This explains to some degree why marketers devote dollars to brand journalism, in which marketing messages are framed as editorial content to draw on the “purity” of the form and its perceived lack of bias by the audience (Dyson, 2007). Given the demonstrated power of framing in communication, it is not difficult to understand why marketers see editorial as perhaps the most valuable form of media, precisely because it is not advertising (2007).

With regards to brand journalism, framing theory suggests that presenting an article as “commercial” (i.e. sponsored) content versus “editorial” (i.e. a news story or service story) may influence how the audience interprets the information in the article.

The presentation (“frame”) of messages in custom content may be commercial or editorial. A custom magazine, for instance, may be designated as originating from the company itself, i.e., with a logo on the cover and messaging that indicates it came from the company or agents thereof. The placement and prominence of these cues often result in feature packages constituting a mix of editorial and advertising, called “advertorials.” These commercial trappings may in turn trigger an “advertising schema” and thereby create skepticism regarding the content (Friestad & Wright, 1995).

The content may also be presented as an editorial magazine published by a third party with few, if any, trappings of commerciality. Editorial may be the most powerful tool at a marketer’s disposal because it is perceived to be more believable and trustworthy—a key element of credibility—than advertising (Dyson, 2007). Information-processing research studying the value of “pure” editorial content in contrast to advertorials shows editorial has at
least a modest advantage over advertising in conveying credible information, and that the
advantage held when tested two weeks later (Cameron, 1994).

Framing has been used as a theoretical framework for the effects of source credibility.
Druckman (2001) suggested that audiences rely on credible sources to “sort through” frames (p. 1045). Though Druckman’s work was concerned with the moderating effects of source credibility on framing success, it is useful to examine if framing in turn affects source credibility. This is particularly so in the context of custom content, where the audience’s defenses may already be heightened to the commerciality of the content (Van Reijmersdal et al., 2010).

Though framing and persuasion seem similar on the surface, the examination of credibility in terms of framing concerns the importance the audience attaches to beliefs, rather than the change in the content of the audience’s beliefs most often examined in persuasion studies (Nelson & Oxley, 1999). This distinction is relevant to the study of framing in custom content because persuasion is not always the desired end result of brand journalism. Rather, a commercial entity may position a custom magazine to “use the authority of editorial to shore up brand values” (Dyson, 2007, p. 635). The intent, then, is not always to sell the product, but to position the overall brand in the terms of the target audience (Arvidsson, 2005).

**Source Credibility**

Although perhaps secondary to framing theory in explaining audience regard of brand journalism, sources still have a role to play. While the overall presentation, or frame, of a message in custom content is relevant to the reader’s interpretation, messages are also filtered through the receiver’s perception of the message source (McCroskey & Teven, 1999). Attribution of information to a credible source is given historical weight by ancient philosophers. Both Aristotle and his contemporary, Isocrates, wrote of believing “good men more fully” and of
words carrying greater importance when the sources are “men of good repute” (Gass & Seiter, 2004).

The academic study of source credibility has its roots in psychology research. Yale psychology professor Carl I. Hovland pioneered the concept, publishing several articles on the differences in acquisition and retention of identical messages presented from trustworthy and untrustworthy sources (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). Hovland and others explored source credibility in the course of social scientific study of persuasion during World War II (Gass & Seiter, 2004).

Hovland and his colleagues, often referred to as “The Yale Group” in source credibility literature, continued their study of the concept after the war, publishing the seminal work Communication and Persuasion in 1953. Source credibility was set forth in the work as a component of persuasion, defined as communication that “successfully induces an individual to accept a new opinion” (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953, p. 10).

Research findings outlined in Communication and Persuasion provide the basis for the concept of source credibility: Messages from a high-credibility source increase the amount of opinion change immediately after exposure to the message, and messages from a low-credibility source lead to a decrease in opinion change (Hovland, et al., 1953). Further, the work identified three main components of credibility in a communicator: intentions, trustworthiness and expertise (1953). The audience must believe the communicator’s opinions are unbiased, and the audience must perceive the source is knowledgeable in the content area in question (Hovland, et al., 1953; Gotlieb & Sarel, 1991; Lupia, 2002).

Worth noting is the specificity with which The Yale Group classified the research by defining the term “source.” While acknowledging that “source” could include the channel
through which a message is communicated, much of the work in *Communication and Persuasion* dealt with matters of individual attribution:

(We) shall deal primarily with situations in which the effects are attributable to a single clear cut source, which is usually an individual speaker who communicates directly to the audience and gives his own views on an issue (Hovland, et al., 1953, p. 19).

Though the concept of source credibility is at first blush a straightforward one, the intervening years since the work of The Yale Group have seen the evaluation and addition of other potential components. While much of the research in source credibility continues to cite trustworthiness and expertise, other factors analyzed include similarity or attractiveness of the communicator to the audience, perceived hostility between the communicator and the audience, level of audience satisfaction, and various demographic variables (Singletary, 1976).

**Source as an independent variable.** Companies that want to spread their ideas not only face numerous choices in format of presenting their ideas, but also in the sources that represent those ideas (Straughan, Bleske, & Zhao, 1996). Research suggests news stories are more effective than ads (1996), and custom publications give companies the chance to own the medium of delivery while also controlling every aspect of the message (Dyson, 2007).

Practitioners who execute the content must carefully choose sources. While research is yet to directly examine source credibility at the attribution level in custom content, “advocacy messages” have been shown to be effective when relying on company officials for their perceived level of expertise (Straughan et al., 1996).

Of particular interest to a discussion of brand journalism is the intention of the source, referred to by McCroskey and Teven (1999) as the “lost dimension of ethos/credibility” (p. 91). When the audience realizes that a message has persuasive intent, attitudes toward the content
become less favorable (Van Reijmersdal et al., 2010). With regard to commercial content, Gotlieb and Sarel (1991) suggest attribution theory as a framework for credibility. The audience’s attributions concerning why the communicator takes a certain position affects whether the audience rejects or accepts the message (1991).

Audience suspicion of persuasion intent could in turn trigger an “advertising schema” and thereby create skepticism regarding the content (Friestad & Wright, 1995). With regard to source intent in editorial content, research indicates that a competent (i.e. expert) neutral source is more credible than a competent source that has a vested interest, and that it is difficult for a source with a vested interest to overcome the audience’s perception of persuasion intent (Salwen, 1992).

Many custom publications use the actual customers of a company as sources in stories. The proliferation of user-generated content on websites, especially those that encourage peer review of product, may be contributing to the increased credibility of information provided by peers. User-generated content online provides a relevant model for the effectiveness of customer sources, i.e., those who have personal experience with the product or brand. Research suggests that information provided by peers—other users like themselves—is perceived as credible as information from experts (Poorisat, Dentenber, Viswanathan, & Nofrina, 2009).

**Message Credibility**

Credibility of information is a much-studied variable with regards to editorial as well as advertising content. A number of factors have been found to influence the audience’s perception of information credibility as well as the credibility of the attributed source.

The source’s intention, expertise, and trustworthiness, as explicated by Hovland and The Yale Group, affect the audience’s perception of the credibility of the message (1953). These factors have held up time and again in editorial content as influencing the credibility of the
information, as well as mediating factors such as the quality of the message and the personal characteristics of the source (Slater & Rouner, 1996), the specificity and verifiability of the message (Rosenthal, 1971), and the mode of delivery (Kiousis, 2006).

In advertising content, the factors influencing credibility of the message are in part the same as in editorial: trustworthiness, expertise, and intent all play a role (McDougall & Fry, 1975). When comparing the two, however, audiences simply find editorial content more credible than advertising (Pornpitakpan, 2004). In brand journalism, then, the credibility of the information conveyed might be affected by whether the publication is viewed by the audience as commercial or editorial. Information in advertisements, for instance, is perceived as less credible than information in advertorials, in which inherently commercial messages take on the appearance of editorial content (Wu & Wasike, 2006).

The limited research on custom content shows that commerciality has a negative effect on credibility of the format (Van Reijmersdal et al., 2010). Van Reijmersdal et al., explored the “format credibility” (2010, p. 63) of customer magazines as a dependent variable as an indicator of the customer’s attitude toward the magazine itself. Findings showed that the commerciality of the content rather than the commerciality of the source had a negative effect on the credibility of the magazine. Commerciality was operationalized by using product integration in the stimulus material—specifically, labeled or unlabeled product images—while the source was defined as the producer of the content itself, rather than an attribution within the stimulus material.

A key strategy in the deployment of custom content is to legitimize points of view that fit the brand image and exclude those that run counter to the brand image (Dyson, 2007), and the presentation and choice of sources are key elements in the execution of brand journalism. It is
valuable, then, to explore how presentation and source attribution affect the audience’s perception of the credibility of the information presented in custom content.

**Attitude toward the Brand**

Mitchell and Olson define attitude toward brand as the audience’s internal, individual evaluation of the brand (1981). Using the relative purity of editorial content to build positive brand attitude has an obvious value to marketers (Dyson, 2007). Advertising, however, is typically the most public, common, and repetitive contact those who manage brands have with their target audience, so it stands to reason that much of the research regarding attitude toward brand would involve attitude toward advertisements. Mitchell and Olson (1981) demonstrated that attitude toward the ad is a significant predictor of brand attitude. Besides straightforward conditioning, Mitchell and Olson posited that the audience sees the ad itself as a brand attribute, so if the ad is likeable, then that contributes to the likeability of the brand (1981).

Still, further research indicated that there are mediating factors involved in the relationship between attitude toward the ad and attitude toward the brand, and that some of these factors may stand alone as predictors of attitude toward brand. Ries and Ries (2002) write that public relations, specifically publicity surrounding a product and word of mouth, are significant factors in building new brands, a position backed by studies showing that editorial publicity outperforms advertising that occupies the same space and with even the same content (Cameron, 1994).

Product placement in media programming other than advertising also affects attitude toward the brand. Van Reijmersdal found that prominent product placement in non-advertising content might have a positive effect on brand memory, but that it has a negative effect on attitude toward the brand itself (2009).
Brand management is a major motivator for producing custom publications; these magazines often intend to shore up brand values and improve the relationship of the customer with the sponsor of the content (Dyson, 2007). It is useful, then, to explore how frame and source in custom content influence the attitude of the consumer toward the brand that sponsors the content.

**Purchase Intent**

Consumers seek information prior to making a purchase in order to reduce perceived risk (Bettman, 1973). While custom content is most often employed in the less tactile practice of “brand-building” (Dyson, 2007; Arvidsson, 2005), clients are turning to publishers more often for content that impacts—even drives—the generation of sales leads (Voltolina, 2009). With the higher percentage of marketing dollars spent on brand journalism, marketers are beginning to demand a stronger return on investment, especially when outsourcing content creation (Silber, 2010). Consumers, too, report a reliance on custom content in making purchase decisions (Custom Content Council, 2009c). The specifics that impact the role brand journalism plays in purchase intent, however, are under-explored in research.

The frame of presentation might have an effect on purchase intent. Wu and Wasike (2006) found that viewers of both advertisements and advertorials were more likely to buy a product placed in an advertorial than one placed in an advertisement. Advertorials may have the appearance of editorial, but often incorporate strong commercial cues, including prominent labels reading “Advertisement” or “Promotion,” the advertiser’s logo, and/or a different typeface and layout from the publication’s editorial content (Van Reijmersdal et al., 2005). When product information is presented in an editorial format, or “news-like” presentation (Wang, 2005a, p.
perceived risk is decreased, and consumers show a tendency to trust the information to “draw a conclusion for their purchase intention” (Wang, 2005a, p. 125).

More often explored, though outside the context of custom content, is the effect of the attributed source of product information on purchase intent. Though celebrity endorsers are often employed in advertising, expert and peer endorsements are more relevant in custom content, as they are generally perceived as more credible and more relatable to the target audience (Wilson & Sherrell, 1993). Consumers have more access than ever before to peer review of products in the form of user-generated content on websites, and while both expert and peer endorsements have a positive effect on consumer attitudes, consumer endorsements have higher perceived credibility and more influence on purchase intent, especially when the audience is already interested in the endorsed product (Wang, 2005b).

Still, even in an online environment where the authoritative voice often belongs to the consumer, the appearance of commercial or corporate influence may have a negative effect on purchase intention, even in the presence of peer-generated endorsement (Prendergast, Ko, & Yuen, 2010).

The implications for brand journalism producers pressured to prove a return on investment are clear. Both the presentation of the content (“frame”) and the attributed source of the information may impact the behavior of the recipient.

**Moderating Variables**

**Involvement with the product.** In advertising research, the audience’s knowledge/experience with a product or brand has been shown to affect the credibility of commercial messages (Deighton, 1984). The same may hold true, then, for brand journalism. Audience members’ predispositions regarding the product that is the subject of the content may
have a moderating effect on the credibility of the content, as well as the attitude toward the brand that sponsors the content, and the intent to purchase the products featured in the content.

**Media savvy/sensitivity.** The air of credibility projected by editorial content is one of the reasons marketers invest in custom content (Dyson, 2007). If, however, the audience has previous experience with custom publications and understands or realizes the intent of such content, credibility may be affected (Van Reijmersdal et al., 2010; Friestad & Wright, 1995). Therefore, the audience’s understanding of and experience with custom content may have a moderating effect on the credibility of the content, as well as the attitude toward the brand that sponsors the content, and the intent to purchase the products featured in the content.

**Hypotheses**

Communicators spend an increasing amount of marketing dollars on brand journalism based on the idea that the editorial frame is more effective simply because it is not advertising. The relative purity of editorial and the audience’s perceived lack of bias in editorial are what communicators believe makes custom content work as a marketing tool.

H1a: Subjects will rate information as more credible when the information is framed as an editorial/non-branded message rather than a commercial/branded message.

H1b: Subjects will have a more positive attitude toward the company when the information is framed as an editorial/non-branded message rather than a commercial/branded message.

H1c: Purchase intent toward the product will increase when subjects are presented with information framed as an editorial/non-branded message rather than a commercial/branded message.
Further, it is important to choose sources carefully in brand journalism. Many custom publications use the actual customers of a company as sources in stories, but literature suggests that information provided by peers—other users like themselves—is perceived as credible as information from experts.

H2a: Participants will rate information as more credible when the information is attributed to a peer customer rather than a corporate source.

H2b: Participants will have a more positive attitude toward the company when the information is attributed to a peer customer rather than a corporate source.

H2c: Purchase intent toward the product will increase when participants are presented with information attributed to a peer customer rather than a corporate source.

Finally, these two independent variables may have an effect on each other. Literature suggests that the editorial frame and the peer attribution will be most effective in brand journalism.

H3a: Participants presented with the condition of a commercial/branded frame with a corporate source attribution will rate credibility the lowest.

H3b: Participants presented with the condition of a commercial/branded frame with a corporate source attribution will rate attitude toward the brand the lowest.

H3c: Participants presented with the condition of a commercial/branded frame with a corporate source attribution will rate purchase intention the lowest.

H4a: Participants presented with the condition of an editorial/non-branded frame with a peer customer attribution will rate credibility the highest.

H4b: Participants presented with the condition of an editorial/non-branded frame with a peer customer attribution will rate attitude toward the brand the highest.
H4c: Participants presented with the condition of an editorial/non-branded frame with a peer customer attribution will rate purchase intention the highest.

*Figure 2.* Researching the audience’s reaction to brand journalism using both framing and source attribution as independent variables, moderated by media savvy/sensitivity and involvement with the product.
CHAPTER III

Method

Overview

This experimental study examines the relationship between the independent variables (framing of product information within either a commercial/branded or editorial/non-branded format, attributing quotes in the information to a corporate source or a peer customer source) and the dependent variables (message credibility, purchase intent, and attitude toward the brand). The study uses a 2 x 2 factorial experimental design with the manipulation of the key variables of interest presented within stimulus materials. A brief questionnaire will be administered following exposure to the stimuli.

The experimental method is appropriate for this study given the need to gather data after exposure to media content. This method also offers other advantages. The experimenter’s control over the manipulation of independent variables is particularly applicable to this study (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). Experimental design is the best method for establishing evidence of causality (2006). Comparable field tests would be expensive, and experiments are easily replicated. The experimental method was employed in other studies involving credibility (McDougall & Fry, 1975; Wu & Wasike, 2006), purchase intent (Cowley & Barron, 2008), and attitude toward the brand (Wu & Wasike, 2006; Wang, 2005) as dependent variables. Additionally, the lone previously published study of custom content also employed the experimental method to test the effects of commerciality of customer magazines on attitudes toward credibility of the material by varying both the source (neutral or commercial) and the
amount of brand integration (0%, 50% or 100%) (Van Reijmersdal et al., 2010). The experimental method is appropriate for measuring attitudes toward stimuli, and the quality of the stimuli impacts the success of the study (Zhou & Sloan, 2009). The manipulation of the stimuli—specifically, magazine pages—in this study will replicate actual magazine pages in appearance and quality.

**Participants**

Stimulus materials were presented to an available sample of 325 undergraduate students enrolled in classes in the College of Communication and Information Sciences at the University of Alabama. All students participated in the study voluntarily and were offered extra grade credit in exchange for their participation. In the experimental method, using a relatively homogeneous group of participants and randomly assigning them to groups ensures that differences that emerge in the dependent variables in the study are most likely due to variations in the independent variables in the four treatment groups. In other words, this strengthens internal validity (Babbie, 2009). Four separate treatments were distributed randomly via packets, each with the different manipulations outlined below, to the four groups.

**Procedure**

This study explores how two key factors in the production of custom content—message framing and attributed sources—affect respondents’ perceived credibility of the information, attitude toward the brand featured, and purchase intention of the product. Two independent variables—frame and attributed source—were manipulated and combined into four versions of stimulus materials replicating custom content in a print magazine.

In advertising research, both the audience’s experience with a product or brand (Deighton, 1984) and the audience’s perception of the corporate creators of the product or brand
(Goldsmith, Lafferty, & Newell, 2000) have been shown to affect perceptions of credibility of commercial messages. The same may hold true for messages carried in brand journalism. Therefore, the researcher created a fictional brand called NextAV, along with logos, visuals and other supporting material, to control for past experiences with a known brand or perceptions of a company. Similarly, the researcher created an editorial source called Sight & Sound magazine to represent a neutral magazine.

For specific subject matter to cover in the content, the researcher chose audio/video equipment, again from the fictional brand name NextAV. The researcher chose this product for a number of reasons. First, it is the type of product that might typically be the subject of a customer magazine. Second, given the general demographics of students in the department, the equipment mentioned could be both of interest and affordable to the group of participants. Participants received a packet of stimulus material consisting of an information sheet, a cover letter, a sample magazine cover, a sample magazine article, and a questionnaire for evaluation of the sample magazine material. The cover and article were printed in full color on slick, magazine-weight paper to make the content replicate that found in a custom content magazine. Each participant was randomly assigned to one of four groups. Four stimulus packages were then distributed via packets, each with the different manipulations for frame and source. Condition 1 consisted of a commercial/branded magazine cover, along with an article with similar corporate logos that quotes a person from NextAV. Condition 2 consisted of a commercial/branded magazine cover, along with an article with similar corporate logos that quotes a peer customer. Condition 3 consisted of a magazine cover that appears to come from the editorial/non-branded source Sight & Sound, along with an article from the magazine that quotes a person from NextAV. Condition 4 consisted of a magazine cover that appears to come from the editorial/non-
branded source *Sight & Sound*, along with an article from the magazine that quotes a peer customer.

The text of the article itself did not mention a specific product or brand. Instead it focused on a service aspect related to the product, namely, considerations first-time buyers of home theater equipment should know. Serviceable advice on the use of a product is common practice in custom content (Dyson, 2007). All versions of the one-page article featured a sidebar with a branded product presence, namely, an all-in-one home theater system from the sponsor of the content, NextAV. Overt product placement is a common practice in custom content, often as a solution to a problem presented in accompanying editorial content or to generate customer response or as a call to action (Dyson, 2007).

The University of Alabama’s Institutional Review Board approved use of human subjects before the researcher collected the data. Those who agreed to participate in the research were compensated with extra credit in their courses. Participants received the materials in a classroom setting after their assigned class was over. They were invited to stay if they wished to participate. Participants were not aware that four versions of the packets were distributed. Participants' answers and their individual results were aggregated for analysis, and participants were assured of the anonymity of their responses. Debriefing materials were made available to participants following the experiment.

The stimulus material was reviewed by experts in the fields of research method and custom publishing for face validity.

**Data analysis.** The expected model for data analysis involved two independent variables (manipulated frame, manipulated source), two potential moderating variables (involvement in the product/brand, media savvy/sensitivity), and three dependent variables (credibility, attitude...
toward the brand, and purchase intention). Therefore, a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was proposed for analysis of data gathered from the experiment.

**Independent Variables**

**Frame.** Commercial trappings may trigger an “advertising schema,” creating skepticism regarding the content (Friestad & Wright, 1995). The air of purity projected by editorial content is one of the reasons marketers invest in custom content (Dyson, 2007). In this experiment, the content was framed either as commercial/branded or editorial/non-branded.

The commercial/branded frame in Conditions 1 and 2 was manipulated by first presenting a cover letter that told participants they were about to read an article from a magazine produced by NextAV, Inc., a home theater retailer (see Appendix A, Figure 8a). This information was in boldface type on the letter. Participants were instructed to read the letter first without moving ahead, and were allotted time to do so. Second, the participants were exposed to the next page in the packet, a magazine cover with several commercial visual cues (see Appendix A, Figure 4). The banner and title of the magazine were the same as the name of the home theater retailer, NextAV, the title is followed by “Inc.,” and a “clapper” logo was featured prominently in the banner as well. A NextAV branded product was featured in the upper-right corner of the cover, and a photo of a retail store with the same name and logo as the banner is featured in the cover photo. The tagline above the banner also indicated commercial origin, reading “Your audio and video equipment superstore.” The cover headline, “Custom Screens,” is accompanied by a subhead that mentions a NextAV branded product. In total, 7 visual cues on the cover imply the commercial/branded frame.

The next page in the stimulus packets for Conditions 1 and 2 featured a magazine article (see Appendix A, Figures 6a and 6b) with commercial visual cues similar to those on the cover.
The “clapper” logo is featured in the upper-left corner, alongside the NextAV banner. The tagline, “Your audio and video equipment superstore,” is also carried over from the cover. The product mention in the lower left sidebar is heavily branded, with the “clapper” logo shaded behind the sidebar and the brand name mentioned in the sidebar headline. In total, 5 visual cues on the article page imply the commercial/branded frame.

Other studies focused on advertorials have used the same approach (Friestad & Wright, 1995; Van Reijmersdal et al., 2005), though advertorials were operationalized by presenting the content within an editorial magazine, and including prominent labels reading “Advertisement” or “Promotion,” the advertiser’s logo, and/or a different typeface and layout from the publication’s editorial content (2005). In the stimulus material used for the current study, the implication is that branding in the visual presentation is carried throughout the publication, rather than in one labeled section as in advertorial applications.

The editorial/non-branded frame in Conditions 3 and 4 was manipulated first presenting a cover letter that told participants they were about to read an article from *Sight & Sound* magazine, which covers home entertainment news for consumers (see Appendix A, Figure 8b). This information was in boldface type on the letter. Participants were instructed to read the letter first without moving ahead, and were allotted time to do so. Second, the participants were exposed to the next page in the packet, a magazine cover with no specific commercial visual cues having the appearance of a typical non-branded audio/video equipment magazine (see Appendix A, Figure 5). The banner reads “Sight & Sound,” and the cover photo is of a popular recent film as opposed to the retail store on the commercial/branded versions in Conditions 1 and 2. The tagline above the banner also indicates editorial neutrality, reading “Your audio and video source.” The cover headline, “Custom Screens,” is accompanied by a subhead that mentions a
service-related topic rather than the brand mention in the commercial/branded condition. The “clapper” logo and branded products from the commercial/branded cover are dropped.

The next page in the stimulus packets for Conditions 3 and 4 featured a magazine article (see Appendix A, Figures 7a and 7b) with editorial visual cues similar to those on the cover. The name of the magazine is featured in the upper-left corner. The product mention in the lower left sidebar is branded only in the text, not in the headline, and no logos are shown. Instead, the product sidebar is presented as an equipment recommendation, with the headline “Here’s A Great Start.”

Though the only differences in presentation between the commercial/branded frame and the editorial/non-branded frame are essentially visual, the commercial visual trappings are overt and persistent in the commercial/branded frame version. The design cues on the cover and article were intended to call into play the role of visual design in framing (Entman, 1993), triggering an advertising schema (Friestad & Wright, 1995). While these cues are likely more explicit than would be used in a real-world custom publication, Wimmer and Dominick (2006) recommend that manipulations in experimental studies be as strong as possible to assure that the participant attunes to the cues that the researcher is using to establish the independent variables.

Manipulation checks for the manipulation of frames were included in the questionnaire (see Appendix B, items 10 and 11). Participants were asked to identify the name of the company that produced the article from 5 choices (Sight & Sound, NextAV, Home Theater, Audio & Video, or I don’t know who produced this magazine). Participants were also asked to identify what type of company produced the article from 5 choices (a publishing company, an electronics store, an electronics manufacturing company, a consumer group, or I don’t know who produced this magazine). Results of the manipulation checks are presented and discussed in Chapter IV.
Attributed Source. Companies that want to spread their ideas not only face numerous choices in format of presenting their ideas, but also in the sources that represent those ideas (Straughan et al., 1996). “Advocacy messages” have been shown to be effective when relying on company officials for their perceived level of expertise (1996). Research suggests that information provided by peers is perceived as equally credible as information from experts (Poorisat et al., 2009).

In this experiment, information within the commercial/branded or editorial/non-branded frames is attributed either to a company source or a peer customer source. For both attributions, gender-neutral names are used and no gender-specific pronouns are used. The photographs used with each article—one that depicts the company source and one that depicts the peer customer, show both male and female subjects. In the version with the corporate source (Conditions 1 and 3; see Appendix A, Figures 6a and 7a), a young man is wearing a NextAV shirt and woman is carrying a clipboard. In the version with the peer customer source (Conditions 2 and 4; see Appendix A, Figures 6b and 7b), a young man and woman are shown in their home seated in front of a home entertainment center. In the company source attribution, quotes within the content are attributed to Pat Cramer, a product engineer for NextAV. In the peer customer source attribution, quotes within the content are attributed to a young audiophile who recently graduated from college with a degree in journalism and is about to purchase home theater equipment. The specific attribution is explicated in the text once, in the second paragraph of the article, and the source is mentioned by name once more and quoted with accompaniment of name only twice more.

Manipulation checks for the manipulation of frames were included in the questionnaire (see Appendix B, item 12). Participants were asked to identify which item best describes the
person primarily quoted in the article from 7 choices (a typical audio/video equipment buyer, a customer who owns the product, a customer thinking about buying the product, a NextAV product engineer, one of NextAV’s corporate experts, none of these, or I don’t know). Results of the manipulation checks are presented and discussed in Chapter IV.

See Appendices A and B for the complete collection of stimulus material and the questionnaire.

**Measured covariates.** Though a fictional brand was created for this study, the participant’s previous experience with a featured product type may affect his or her perception of the product or credibility of information regarding a product (Deighton, 1984; Goldsmith et. al, 2000). Therefore, participants were questioned regarding their involvement with home theater equipment using the personal involvement inventory developed by Zaichkowsky (1994). Participants rate their involvement along a 7-point continuum with the anchors unimportant/important, boring/interesting, irrelevant/relevant, unexciting/exciting, means nothing/means a lot, unappealing/appealing, mundane/fascinating, worthless/valuable, uninvolving/involving, and not needed/needed. Zaichkowsky (1994) found reliability of the scale to be quite strong ($\alpha > 0.90$).

Also, the participant may have previous experience with custom publications and realize the intent of such content, influencing its intended effects (Van Reijmersdal et al., 2010; Friestad & Wright, 1995). Participants, then, were asked about their receipt of custom publications, namely, free magazines, coupons, and sales catalogs, and whether they received them very frequently, often, sometimes, rarely, or never (See Appendix B, item 5).

In addition, standard demographic questions regarding age, gender, ethnicity, and economic class were included. Participants were asked to fill in what year they were born (See
Appendix B, item 6); to select between male and female for gender (See Appendix B, item 7); to select African-American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Caucasian, Hispanic, Native American, Other, or check all that apply for race (See Appendix B, item 8); and to select what they considered their family to be from lower class, lower middle class, middle class, upper middle class, and upper class (See Appendix B, item 9). Results of the demographic items are presented in Chapter IV.

**Dependent Variables**

Brand journalism holds multiple potential benefits for companies wishing to communicate about their products or services. One of the main objectives of custom content is employing editorial credibility to shore up brand values (Dyson, 2007). Credibility of the information in custom content and attitude toward the brand featured in the content, then, are of interest to brand journalism producers and those sponsoring custom content products. As such, both content credibility and attitude toward the brand are used as dependent variables in this study. Given the formidable percentage of marketing budgets occupied by custom content expenditures (Custom Content Council, 2009a), marketing professionals who use custom content may seek more direct return on investment in the form of sales lead generation (Voltolina, 2009) and purchase intent (Custom Content Council, 2009c). Therefore, readers’ purchase intention of the product placed in the content was a third dependent variable in this study.

**Credibility.** Though credibility is a much-studied variable, it is also something of an amorphous one (Roberts, 2010). Credibility may refer to the messenger, the message, the modality, or some combination of influence between these factors (Kiousis, 2006; Roberts, 2010). Therefore, much of the confusion lies in the question of what exactly is being measured,
especially given similarities in the bipolar adjectives often used in the scales and high
correlations between individual variables in messenger and message scales (Roberts, 2010).

Because communicators tend to rely on the relative purity of editorial as one of the
primary benefits of producing custom content (Dyson, 2007), credibility of the information
conveyed in the content is an important factor in building the audience’s relationship with the
brand and its values. Therefore, the credibility of the message is the focus of the current study,
while the attributed source (“messenger”) is one manipulated independent variable.

Message credibility in the current study was measured using five bipolar ratings scales
designed by Flanagin and Metzger (2000), who employed the scales to measure credibility in
messages across five different media channels (television, newspapers, magazines, radio, and the
Internet). Participants in the current study rated the information along a 7-point continuum with
the anchors unbelievable/believable, inaccurate/accurate, not trustworthy/trustworthy, biased/not
biased, and incomplete/complete (See Appendix B, item 2). Roberts (2010) applied this measure
to evaluate newspaper stories and found the items to work together as one reliable scale ($\alpha =
0.83$).

**Attitude toward the brand (A_b) and purchase intent (PI).** Though custom content is
used often for brand building (Dyson, 2007; Silber, 2010), as marketers place higher ROI
demands on custom content, more pressure will also be placed on the content to influence
purchase intention (Custom Content Council, 2009c). Much like messenger/message credibility,
A_b and PI often show high correlation between individual variables (Spears & Singh, 2004). In
some studies, they are measured together as a single construct (2004). However, because
communicators employ custom content for building relationship with the brand and,
increasingly, for generation of sales leads (Voltolina, 2009), it is relevant to measure these two variables as separate constructs.

Spears and Singh (2004) explored a large pool of measures commonly used in marketing research regarding $A_b$ and PI and refined scales for each construct down to five bipolar ratings scales. Both scales showed strong reliability ($\alpha = 0.95$). A selection of these bipolar ratings is used in the current study and participants rate each item along a 7-point continuum. The anchors for $A_b$ are unappealing/appealing, bad/good, unpleasant/pleasant, unfavorable/favorable, and unlikeable/likeable (2004) (See Appendix B, item 3). The anchors for PI are never buy/definitely buy, very low purchase interest/very high purchase interest, and probably not buy it/probably buy it (2004) (See Appendix B, item 4).

See Appendix B for the complete questionnaire.
CHAPTER IV

Results

Participant Demographics

Participants in the study ranged in age from 18 to 40, with 97.5% in the traditional college student age range of 18 to 22. The mean age was 20.04 ($Mdn = 20$, $SD = 2.04$). Female participants made up 77.8% of the available sample ($n = 253$), while 21.5% of the participants were male ($n = 70$). Two participants (0.6%) didn't provide gender. Gender distribution was fairly similar to the make-up of students enrolled in the mass communication departments at the university.

For socioeconomic class, participants classified themselves as lower class ($n = 6$, 1.6%), lower middle class ($n = 15$, 4.6%), middle class ($n = 100$, 30.8%), upper middle class ($n = 183$, 56.3%), or upper class ($n = 20$, 6.2%), indicating a fairly well-off participant pool with the capability to purchase the product featured in the custom content. The price of the product was listed as $199.

For ethnicity, most participants ($n = 274$, 84.3%), identified themselves as Caucasian, with much smaller percentages identifying as African-American ($n = 32$, 9.8%), Asian or Asian-American ($n = 12$, 3.7%), Hispanic ($n = 9$, 2.8%), Native American ($n = 4$, 1.2%), or other ($n = 3$, 0.9%). Two participants did not identify any ethnicity. The percentages for ethnicity total more than 100% because participants were allowed to check more than one box. Eight participants (2.4%) identified as multi-ethnic.
Assignment to Conditions and Manipulation Check

In total, 323 usable questionnaires were returned. These were distributed fairly equally across four conditions, as Table 1 shows.

Table 1

Participants in the Four Conditions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Condition 1: Commercial/branded frame with company source</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>24.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condition 2: Commercial/branded frame with peer source</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>23.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condition 3: Editorial/non-branded frame with company source</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>26.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condition 4: Editorial/non-branded frame with peer source</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>25.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To check whether the participants attuned to the frame cue, an item on the study questionnaire asked participants to identify the company that produced the magazine. Of the 167 participants that received the editorial/non-branded frame condition, 122 (72.6%) correctly identified the magazine as editorial/non-branded (called Sight & Sound on the stimulus material; see Appendix A, Figure 5). However, of the 156 participants that received the commercial/branded frame condition, 146 participants (93.6%) correctly identified the magazine name as NextAV. So the manipulation appeared to work better in one condition for frame than it did for the other. Further analysis of the frame manipulation indicated problems with the perception of the type of publication, beyond just the name identification (see Table 2). Of the 167 participants that received the editorial/non-branded frame condition, only 34.1% \( (n = 57) \) perceived the magazine as an independent editorial product. Almost an equal number of participants \( (n = 54, 32.3\%) \) perceived it as a commercial/branded publication. Recognition was
better in the commercial/branded frame manipulation, with 64.1% \((n = 100)\) of the 156 participants who received the commercial/branded frame condition perceiving the magazine as coming from an electronics store or manufacturer. This is a limitation of the study that will be discussed in the next chapter.

Table 2

*Participant Perception of Type of Company That Published the Magazine*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Independent magazine</th>
<th>Electronics store or manufacturer</th>
<th>Consumer group</th>
<th>I don’t know</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Editorial/non-branded frame</td>
<td>34.1% ((n = 57))</td>
<td>32.3% ((n = 54))</td>
<td>15.6% ((n = 26))</td>
<td>18.0% ((n = 30))</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial/branded frame</td>
<td>17.9% ((n = 28))</td>
<td>64.1% ((n = 100))</td>
<td>6.4% ((n = 10))</td>
<td>11.5% ((n = 18))</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The source manipulation was clearer for the participants. Of the 158 participants who received the article with the peer source attribution, 81.6% \((n = 129)\) correctly recognized the attributed source as a customer. Of the 165 participants who received the article with the company source attribution, 66.7% \((n = 110)\) correctly recognized the attribution as corporate.

**Scale Analyses**

Four scales were used to measure key constructs in this study. Reliability analyses were run on each to determine if all items on the scales worked together as intended.

Of the five items used to the dependent measure of message credibility, three were retained (believable, accurate, trustworthy) to create one reliable scale \((\alpha = 0.88)\). The three items were averaged to create an article credibility score where higher scores indicated stronger ratings of message credibility. The scores could range from 1 to 7; actual scores ranged from 2 to 7 \((m = 5.06, \text{mdn} = 5.00, sd = 1.28)\). A histogram revealed that the scores followed along a normal, bell-shaped curve.
All five items were retained for attitude toward the brand (A_b), a dependent variable, to create one reliable scale (α = 0.94). The five items were averaged to create an A_b score where higher values indicated more positive attitudes toward the brand. The scores could range from 1 to 7; the actual scores ranged from 2 to 7 (m = 5.19, mdn = 5.25, sd = 1.14). A histogram revealed that the scores followed along a normal, bell-shaped curve.

All three items were retained for purchase intent (PI), a dependent variable, to create one reliable scale (α = 0.93). The three items were averaged to create a PI score with higher scores indicating greater intention to purchase the product. The scores could range from 1 to 7; the actual scores ranged from 1 to 7 (m = 3.91, mdn = 4.00, sd = 1.49). A histogram revealed that the scores followed along a normal, bell-shaped curve.

Of the 10 items used to measure involvement with the product, which were intended to be used as a measured covariate, nine were retained to create one reliable scale (α = 0.86). The nine items were averaged to create one product involvement score with higher scores indicating greater involvement with the product. The scores could range from 1 to 7; the actual scores ranged from 1.22 to 7.0 (m = 4.93, mdn = 5.00, sd = 0.93). A histogram revealed that the scores followed along a normal, bell-shaped curve.

Preliminary analysis on the media savvy measured covariate revealed low reliability as a scale, and indicated participants did not link items regarding coupons and sales catalogs with the type of publication being tested. Therefore, only the “free magazines” item was used for analysis, as it was most closely related to the research topic.

Tests of the Hypotheses

In Chapter 2, a model was proposed that would include manipulated independent variables of frame and attributed source run on three dependent variables: message credibility,
A_b, and PI. Two covariates were proposed in the model, involvement with/affinity for the product and media savvy/sensitivity, as measured with the single item in which participants rated their frequency of using free magazines. Hypotheses were proposed in Chapter 2 based on this model. Table 3 presents the results of the MANCOVA testing this model.

Table 3

*Proposed MANCOVA Model Testing Main and Interactive Effects of Frame and Source on the Three Dependent Variables*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Credibility</th>
<th>A_b</th>
<th>PI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>F</em></td>
<td><em>Part.(\eta^2</em>)</td>
<td><em>F</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrected Model</td>
<td>5.13***</td>
<td>0.075</td>
<td>9.55***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Covariates</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product involvement</td>
<td>12.44***</td>
<td>0.038</td>
<td>45.60***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience with magazines</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>0.006</td>
<td>1.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Main effects</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frame</td>
<td>11.60***</td>
<td>0.035</td>
<td>1.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Interactions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frame x Source</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>0.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>317</td>
<td>317</td>
<td>317</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .10
*\(p < .05\)
**\(p < .01\)
***\(p < .001\)

The first set of hypotheses focused on the effects of frame of the publication that the participants read. H1a, which suggested that participants who read the information in a non-commercial (or independent editorial) publication would rate the information as more credible, was supported. A statistically significant main effect for frame was found for message credibility, as Table 3 shows. Overall, the 168 participants in the editorial frame condition rated message credibility at 5.24, compared with a 4.78 rating for the 155 participants in the
commercial frame condition. H1b and H1c, proposing that attitude toward the brand and purchase intention would be higher for those reading the article from a non-commercial/editorial would be higher, were not supported. No significant main effects emerged for frame on $A_b$ and PI, as Table 3 shows.

The second set of hypotheses focused on the effects of attributed source in the article the participants read. This set of hypotheses (H2a, H2b, and H2c) suggested participants would rate information as more credible, would have a more positive attitude toward the company, and that purchase intent would increase when the information is attributed to a peer customer rather than a company official. However, all of these hypotheses were rejected. No main effects emerged for source as an independent variable on message credibility, $A_b$, or PI (see Table 3).

The third and fourth sets of hypotheses regarded the interactive effects of frame and source on the dependent variables. These hypotheses suggested that the commercial/branded frame combined with a corporate source attribution in the article would have a negative effect on message credibility, $A_b$, and PI, while the editorial/non-branded frame combined with a peer customer attribution in the article would have a positive effect on message credibility, $A_b$, and PI. However, no interactive effects emerged between frame and source on any of the dependent variables (see Table 3). Therefore, H3a, H3b, H3c, H4a, H4b, and H4c were rejected.

**Post-hoc analyses**

As Table 3 shows, product involvement as a covariate had significant effects on all three dependent variables. This suggests that involvement with/affinity for the product actually served as major factor related to views toward the information, the brand, and purchase intention. To test whether this variable interacted with the manipulated independent variables, the researcher proposed a new model. Instead of using product involvement as a continuous variable and a
measured covariate in the model, it was re-coded so that participants were divided as low, medium, and high involvement based on a roughly three-way split of the normally distributed scores on this measure. Involvement then was used as a fixed independent variable in the new model. To ensure two disparate groups on the involvement construct, the 80 participants with “medium” involvement were removed from the analyses. First, average product involvement scores were computed. Using roughly a three-way split, those with scores between 1 (the lowest possible score) and 4.56 were classified as “low” involvement with the product. Those with scores between 4.57 and 5.32 were classified as “medium” involvement and removed from all further analyses. Those with scores above 5.32 were classified as “high” involvement. Therefore, the final model was based on 117 participants with low involvement and 126 with high involvement.

The revised model also dropped the media savvy measured covariate (as measured by frequency of exposure to free magazines) because it did not emerge as a factor in the model above. However, two new covariates were added. Because the models used in the stimulus photographs were Caucasian and because the ability to purchase the featured product may be dependent upon perceived economic class, demographic variables of ethnicity (white or minority) and class (lower class to upper class, measured on a five-point response set) were added as measured covariates.

The final updated model (See Figure 3) was then used to test the hypotheses, therefore, included three independent variables: frame, source, and product involvement (with high and low involvement subjects only). The original three dependent variables were used: message credibility, $A_b$, and PI. Two measured covariates, economic class and ethnicity, were added.
Figure 3. Researching the audience’s reaction to brand journalism using framing, source attribution, and product involvement as independent variables, moderated by ethnicity and class/income.

This updated model (Figure 3) was used to again test the proposed hypotheses from Chapter 2, but more importantly to conduct post-hoc analysis of the main effect of involvement as well as interactive effects with the manipulated two independent variables (frame and source). Significant models emerged for all three dependent variables in this analysis. Results of the MANCOVA analysis are presented in Table 4.
The first set of hypotheses focused on the effects of frame of the publication that the participants read. H1a, which suggested that participants who read the information in a non-commercial (or independent editorial) publication would rate the information as more credible, was supported. A statistically significant main effect for frame was found for message credibility, as Table 4 shows. Overall, the 121 participants in the editorial frame condition rated message credibility at 5.29, compared with a 4.90 rating for the 122 participants in the
commercial frame condition. H1b and H1c, proposing that attitude toward the brand and purchase intention would be higher for those reading the article from a non-commercial/editorial would be higher, were not supported. No significant main effects emerged for frame on Ab and PI, as Table 4 shows.

The second set of hypotheses focused on the effects of attributed source in the article the participants read. This set of hypotheses suggested participants would rate information as more credible, would have a more positive attitude toward the company, and that purchase intent would increase when the information is attributed to a peer customer rather than a company official. However, all of these hypotheses were rejected. No main effects emerged for source as an independent variable on message credibility, Ab, or PI (see Table 4).

The third and fourth sets of hypotheses regarded the interactive effects of frame and source on the dependent variables. These hypotheses suggested that the commercial/branded frame combined with a corporate source attribution in the article would have a negative effect on message credibility, Ab, and PI, while the editorial/non-branded frame combined with a peer customer attribution in the article would have a positive effect on message credibility, Ab, and PI. However, no interactive effects emerged between frame and source on any of the dependent variables (see Table 4). Therefore, H3a, H3b, H3c, H4a, H4b, and H4c were rejected.

Because product involvement was added as a fixed independent variable, additional research questions were posed to investigate product involvement. Analyses examined how involvement was independently related to changes in the dependent variables as well as involvement’s interaction with frame and source cues. The level of significance set for these analyses was p < 0.10 because of the exploratory nature of the questions.

RQ1: How is product involvement directly related to message credibility, Ab, and PI?
Significant main effects emerged for level of product involvement on all three dependent variables, as Table 4 indicates. The 126 participants highly involved with the product rated the article as significantly more credible, rated their purchase intent significantly higher, and rated their attitude toward brand significantly more favorable than the 117 with low involvement (see means in Table 5). These effects were consistent across all four conditions, indicating that those involved with the product category had more favorable feelings about the article, the company, and the specific product, regardless of the manipulations for source and frame.

Table 5

*Means for High and Low Involvement Respondents in All Four Conditions Combined on the Dependent Variables*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Low Involvement Participants</th>
<th>High Involvement Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>m (sd)</td>
<td>m (sd)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message Credibility</td>
<td>4.87 (1.33)</td>
<td>5.31 (1.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A_b</td>
<td>3.33 (1.53)</td>
<td>4.28 (1.25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PI</td>
<td>4.84 (1.08)</td>
<td>5.56 (1.00)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RQ2: Does involvement with the product interact with frame cues on message credibility, $A_b$, and PI?

As Table 4 shows, no interactive effects between product involvement and frame were found. Frame effects found in the first set of hypotheses were consistent regardless of respondents’ levels of product involvement.

RQ3: Does involvement with the product interact with source cues on message credibility, $A_b$, and PI?
Significant interactive effects were found between product involvement and source cues for both $A_b$ and PI. For both of these dependent variables, those highly involved with the product rated $A_b$ and PI significantly lower when information was attributed to a corporate source rather than a peer customer source, regardless of frame. For those with low involvement with the product, the inverse was true. $A_b$ and PI scores increased with a corporate source and were lower with a customer source. The trends were similar for credibility, but the mean differences were not statistically significant (see means in Table 6).

Table 6

*Mean Scores for the Three Dependent Variables Based on Product Involvement Interaction with Source Cues*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Message Credibility</th>
<th>Low Involvement Participants</th>
<th>High Involvement Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Company Source $m$ (sd)</td>
<td>Peer Source $m$ (sd)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$A_b$</td>
<td>4.89 (1.28)</td>
<td>4.86 (1.40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PI</td>
<td>5.04 (0.95)</td>
<td>4.61 (1.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.46 (1.58)</td>
<td>3.16 (1.48)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

No three-way interaction was found investigating frame, source and product involvement collectively on any of the dependent variables.
Overall Analysis by Dependent Variable

To look at the results in a different way, it is helpful to look at the overall models that emerged by dependent variable, listing all variables (independent fixed factors and covariates) that were found to be significantly related to variability in respondents’ scores.

**Updated model.** For message credibility, as analyses with the original model and the updated model that included product involvement as a fixed factor, the factors significantly contributing to variance in scores were frame (H1a), product involvement (RQ1) (see both Table 3 and Table 4). The covariates of ethnicity (Caucasians rated the article higher in credibility than non-Caucasians) and class (higher income rated the article more credible) also were significantly related to variation in scores. Interestingly, source quoted in the article did not have a direct effect on credibility, nor did it interact with any other fixed factors. All four factors were significantly related to differences in perception of message credibility contributed approximately equally to the model significance.

For Aₜ, as Table 4 shows, the factors that emerged as significant in the model were product involvement and the interaction of source cue and product involvement. Product involvement explained by far the largest portion of the variance. Frame and the covariates of ethnicity and class had no relationship to variation in this variable.

For PI, as Table 2 shows, the factors that emerged as significant in the model were ethnicity (Caucasians reported significantly higher purchase intention), product involvement, and the interaction of source cue and product involvement. Product involvement explained by far the largest portion of the variance.
CHAPTER V

Discussion

Those who create brand journalism seek to strengthen customers’ relationships with the sponsoring companies (Custom Content Council, 2009c) and create trust (Arvidsson, 2005). This study was designed to explain how frame (commercial/branded or editorial/non-branded) and attributed source (corporate or peer customer) affect audience reactions to brand journalism, specifically with regard to message credibility, attitude toward the brand, and purchase intent. Brand journalists can choose to present information in custom content with commercial trappings (such as product integration, logos, etc.), or use a more neutral, editorial approach. Custom content creators also must choose the right sources to be quoted in their articles. Two possibilities are sources within the sponsoring company, or customers that are familiar with the brand or product and can speak on the company’s behalf. Both source types may be considered to have a high level of expertise. The findings from this study might aid content creators in making these decisions. Further, the study found that involvement with the product is an important factor determining audience reaction to brand journalism.

This chapter outlines the findings and implications of the results. It also suggests paths for future research that might improve on the limitations of this study, and presents some ideas for further exploration of brand journalism.

Summary of Findings

Based on the findings of this study, framing a commercial message as editorial content does have a positive effect on readers’ perception of message credibility. This finding held firm
both in the proposed model and the revised, final model, indicating this is a strong and significant result. However, the frame had no main effect on $A_b$ or $PI$. Also, no interactive effects between frame and source emerged on message credibility, $A_b$ or $PI$.

Meanwhile, attributed source alone—the person who was quoted in the article—had no significant effect on readers’ perception of message credibility, $A_b$ or $PI$. However, participant involvement with the product produced significant interactive effects on attributed source with regard to attitude toward the brand and purchase intent. When product involvement was low, the message with the corporate source improved both attitude toward the brand and purchase intent. When product involvement was high, the message with the peer customer source improved both attitude toward the brand and purchase intent. The same trend was noted for message credibility as well, though the differences between the groups fell short of statistical significance.

In fact, product involvement—which was originally proposed as a moderating factor—ultimately emerged as a major factor related to views toward message credibility, attitude toward the brand, and purchase intention. When product involvement was high, participants rated message credibility, attitude toward the brand, and purchase intent significantly higher than when product involvement was low. The effect was so strong that a new model was proposed to examine interactions between product involvement and the manipulated independent variables. The revised model allowed the researcher to unearth interesting interactions.

Covariates of ethnicity and income/class were added after preliminary analysis as well. Ethnicity had an effect on message credibility and purchase intent, likely because the models pictured in the stimulus material were all Caucasian. Income/class had an effect on message credibility.
Effect of frame. Framing theory suggests that presentation of a message is critical to the audience’s interpretation of that message. Brand journalism as a discipline is built on presenting inherently commercial messages as editorial content. Marketers rely on the perception of editorial purity to enhance the appearance of neutrality, even if the underlying intent of the message is anything but neutral (Dyson, 2007; Young, 2010). It is not surprising, then, that readers in this study found information more credible when it is presented in an editorial/non-commercial frame. In this study, participants who recognized the editorial/non-commercial frame, i.e., identified the magazine as coming from a neutral source, rated the information in the article more credible than those who recognized the commercial/branded frame. This finding supports one of the hypotheses (H1a) from the original model proposed in this study. It is similar to a finding in the previous study of custom content (Van Reijmersdal et al., 2010) in which credibility was rated higher when “commerciality” (operationalized as product integration) was lower. In studies that examined material similar to custom content, such as advertorials, messages are perceived as more credible when taking the appearance of editorial content (Wu & Wasike, 2006). In the end, this study supports previous research stating that audiences simply find editorial content more credible than advertising (Pornpitakpan, 2004). It stands to reason that the same would hold for brand journalism, which often presents inherently commercial messages as editorial content.

In the updated model, this finding was true for those who rated their involvement with the product as both high and low. However, the results exhibiting this effect should be viewed with caution, as relatively few participants recognized the editorial/non-branded frame as coming from a non-branded source.
The presentation of commercial messages in an editorial frame is a bedrock practice of brand journalism. Audiences are increasingly reluctant to subject themselves to commercial messages (Garfield, Singh, Clark, Monson, & Eastman, 2011). In order to build credibility, brands need report from an industry-wide perspective, which means giving competitors and unsavory stories salience in the branded channels, further adding to the appearance of editorial purity (2011). For advertisers, editorial-style storytelling is replacing classical advertising, as credibility within the advertising frame is a continuing challenge (Cheyfitz, 2011).

Attitude toward the brand and purchase intent had yet to be explored experimentally with regard to custom content. Surprisingly, no main effects emerged for frame regarding attitude toward the brand or purchase intent. The researcher expected the relative purity and perceived lack of bias of the editorial/non-branded frame to have a positive effect on both these dependent variables, just as the editorial/non-branded frame affected message credibility positively. However, problems emerged with the manipulation of this frame. Only 34.1% of participants recognized the frame as non-branded. Almost as many, 32.3%, perceived the frame as commercial/branded. This problem with the manipulation may have contributed to the limited effect on dependent variables. Because sponsors of custom content are increasingly concerned with return on investment for endeavors of this nature, further study would be valuable. This is particularly true of the purchase intent variable, which presents opportunities for direct tracking of return on investment.

With regard to $A_b$, no significant effect emerged for frame in this study. However, in the opinion of some advertising experts, “the audience won’t give you 3 seconds for a brand or even 30 seconds for a commercial, but they are more likely to give you 30 minutes for a story” (Garfield, Singh, Clark, Monson, & Eastman, 2011). This editorial approach to brand-building
means that the brands themselves either become publishers or hire others experienced at storytelling (2011). It is possible that the issue with the manipulation limited the effect of frame on $A_b$ in this study.

Though those who invest in brand journalism may hope to drive purchase intent, experts emphasize that journalism, not marketing, should be the end result of custom content creation, as the goals of the two disciplines are different. Marketing seeks to “push wares” at the “moment of truth,” while the editorial approach seeks to present insights that add value to customers’ lives (Joel, 2011). It is possible that the issue with the manipulation limited the effect of frame on PI in this study. It is also possible that, without specific calls to action such as business reply prompts, the appearance of editorial neutrality alone will have no effect on purchase intent.

Though the original model in this study predicted an interaction on dependent variables between frame and source, no significant effects emerged in the results. The original set of hypotheses were based on the idea that the relative purity of editorial and the audience’s perceived lack of bias in editorial are what communicators believe makes custom content work as a marketing tool. The interactions in the conditions of stimulus materials might be viewed as “least pure” (Condition 1, which was framed as commercial/branded and quoted a corporate source) to “most pure” (Condition 4, which was framed as editorial/non-branded and quoted a peer customer source). While it is possible that issues with the manipulations limited the interactive effects of frame and source on message credibility, $A_b$, and PI in this study, it is also possible that the interactive effect of frame and source is more subtle than frame alone, and perhaps temporal or cumulative as well. Participants may not make a strong enough relation between the commercial frame and a perceived persuasive intent on the part of the corporate
source, or the relative independence of an editorial product with quotes from a peer, in a brief reading of one article meant to represent an entire magazine campaign.

While no direct effects were found in this study of frame on $A_b$, and PI, and no interactive effects were observed regarding frame on any of the dependent variables, the potential effect of frame on message credibility is notable. While sponsors of brand journalism might desire a more direct return on investment than message credibility, that variable has trustworthiness as one of its key components. Trust between customer and company is a key component of brand-building as well, and a desirable end result of an investment in brand journalism. Taken with previous studies that show negative effects of commerciality and product placement in custom content (Van Reijmersdal et al., 2010; Van Reijmersdal, 2009), content creators might consider the editorial approach as an important component of brand building and the best path to building trust with customers.

Effect of source. Straughan, Bleske, and Zhao (1996) emphasized the importance of selecting effective sources to represent a company’s ideas. Of particular interest is the concept of persuasive intent (McCroskey & Teven, 1999) and its potential negative effect on attitudes toward the content (Van Reijmersdal et al., 2010). Persuasive intent of corporate sources, for instance, has been viewed in previous research as causing a “lost dimension of ethos/credibility” (McCroskey & Teven, 1999, p. 91).

In this study, however, attributed source alone exhibited no main effect on any of the dependent variables in this study. The information presented in the article is essentially the same with exception of the attribution, and the information presented has an authoritative tone overall. Perhaps this authoritative tone caused the participants to perceive a high level of expertise regardless of attribution; appearance of expertise is one of the main tenets of credibility in the
seminal research (Hovland et al., 1953). Expert and peer endorsements are relevant in custom content with regard to purchase intent, as even in advertising copy, the testimonial is generally perceived as more relatable to the target audience (Wilson & Sherrell, 1993). Therefore, it was surprising that no direct effects emerged from the source cues on $A_b$ and PI. Again, the overall authoritative tone of the article, along with the soft uptake of the source cues as revealed by the manipulation checks, may have contributed to the lack of significant effect. While improving on the percentage of participants who recognized the frame cues, only 66.7% of participants correctly identified the corporate source cue, and 81.6% recognized the peer customer cue. Also, the source manipulations in the stimulus materials did not include a direct endorsement of the brand or the product. Both the corporate source and the peer customer source offered only general advice on the topic. This may have been too subtle a connection for participants to make in one reading of an article meant to represent an entire custom content campaign. Again, the effects of selection of source in branded content may be cumulative or temporal.

However, though no significant effects emerged regarding source alone or the interaction of frame and source, there were significant effects in the interaction between involvement with the product and source with regard to $A_b$ and PI. Content creators should take note of the interactive effects of involvement and attributed source, which are outlined in the next section.

**Effect of involvement with the product.** Though the originally proposed independent variables exhibited only one main effect on the dependent variables (the editorial/non-branded frame led to more participants rating message credibility higher in both the original model and the updated model), involvement with the product had a significant effect on all three dependent variables. Involvement with the product was proposed in the previous model as a covariate, but emerged as having a significant effect on participant perception of message credibility, $A_b$, and
PI. Those with highest involvement with the product rated all three dependent variables higher than those with the lowest involvement.

Product involvement can’t be overlooked as a variable in studies regarding brand journalism. Brand journalism is typically targeted at either prospects or existing customers (Arvidsson, 2005). The results of this study suggest that current customers are the most receptive audience for custom content, because they make up the audience that is most likely highly involved with the product.

The results of this study also showed significant interactive effects between product involvement and attributed source. Participants who were highly involved with the product rated attitude toward the brand and purchase intent higher when the information in the article was attributed to one of their peers. On the other hand, participants with lower involvement rated attitude toward the brand and purchase intent higher when the corporate source was quoted. The same trend was observed for message credibility, though it was not statistically significant in the results.

Given the emergence of peer reviews in digital media on sites such as Amazon.com, it stands to reason that peers, even in the print medium, would help drive attitudes and purchase decisions for those customers who know the product well. In light of the findings of this study and the findings of Poorisat et al. (2009), marketers might consider themselves facilitators of communication between customers that can aid the company in building brand values; the customer may become the authoritative voice. Alternatively, when introducing a product or brand values to prospects that have little or no knowledge or involvement with the brand, content creators might consider using their own expert sources in brand journalism.
Limitations

As is the case in all research, this study was limited by several factors. First, the experimental method itself is criticized for artificiality and narrowness of scope (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). While efforts were made to craft stimulus material that reflected “real-world” brand journalism, participants were presented what were in effect representations of magazine pages rather than actual custom content. Moreover, the stimulus material was read and the questionnaire completed in a classroom setting rather than a more natural environment. Moreover, attention was forced on the article in this setting, while in a natural setting there may be more distractions.

The available population also limited the study. Though the researcher attempted to craft the stimulus material around products, services, and sources that were relatable to the available population of college students in the journalism program at the University of Alabama, the participant pool did include those with lower product involvement, while brand journalism efforts are typically targeted mostly or even only to customers (Arvidsson, 2005). Still, the mean product involvement score was relatively high and low involvement, by basis of this split, was defined as those scoring 4.56 and lower, meaning that many of these “low” involvement participants were still well above the theoretical neutral midpoint of 4 on the 7-point response format.

Further, the use of only one product limits the appeal of the content; typical customer magazines, for example, frequently feature many products within a brand family, or a variety of products sold by a sponsoring retailer.

The study also was limited by weak manipulations of frame in the stimulus material. The manipulation for the editorial/non-branded frame was unclear to the participants, indicated by the
only 34.1% \((n = 57)\) of those who received the conditions with the editorial/non-branded frame perceived the magazine as an independent editorial product. Almost an equal number of participants \((n = 54, \ 32.3\%)\) who received the conditions with the editorial/non-branded frame perceived it as a commercial/branded publication. Recognition was better in the commercial/branded frame manipulation, with 64.1% \((n = 100)\) of the 156 participants who received the commercial/branded frame condition perceiving the magazine as coming from a commercial source. It was, however, still lower than hoped. It is worth noting that this lack of recognition between commercial and editorial frames is a common refrain in brand journalism, as content creators struggle with how strong a connection should be made between the content and the sponsor of the content. It is certainly an issue that bears further exploration.

The attributed source manipulation was somewhat clearer. Of the 158 participants who received the article with the peer source attribution, 81.6% recognized the attribution as a customer. The corporate source cue was somewhat problematic. Of the 165 participants who received the article with the company source attribution, 66.7% recognized the attribution as corporate. Meanwhile, 25.5% who received the article with the corporate source attribution still believed the source to be a peer customer. Wimmer and Dominick (2006) recommend that manipulations be as strong as possible in stimulus materials of experimental studies to ensure that the participants attune to the cues that the researcher is using to establish the independent variables. The manipulations in this study could still be improved with stronger cues, especially in the cover letter, where the researcher could more clearly explicate both the type of publication (the frame) and the person featured in the copy (the source).

Obviously, the weak manipulations cast doubt on the results of the study, including the significant finding regarding interaction between product involvement and attributed source.
Though the emergent major factor in the study, involvement with the product, yielded the most significant findings, it must be noted that the split between high, medium, and low involvement was somewhat artificial. Participants with scores between 1 (the lowest possible score) and 4.56 were classified as “low” involvement with the product. Those with scores between 4.57 and 5.32 were classified as “medium” involvement and removed from analysis, even though the top end of the “medium” involvement was past median (5.00). Those with scores above 5.32 were classified as “high” involvement.

Overall, there was a great deal of unexplained variance in the results. This would suggest there were other, unexplored variables at work. The original model also proposed assessment of the participants’ knowledge and understanding of brand journalism, as savvy regarding custom content might affect a reader’s reaction to it. However, no reliable scale was found in literature, and the item used on the questionnaire (see Appendix B, Item 5) did not prove reliable and was removed from the study. It is possible that awareness and savvy of the audience regarding the intent of brand journalism is a major factor in the efficacy of brand journalism, but that factor could not be observed in this study as measured. It is possible as well that age is a factor in awareness of brand journalism, and that the available population of undergraduate college students is not socialized as consumers to the point that they would recognize custom content conceptually. Moreover, available scales, such as general perceptions of the trustworthiness of advertising (Soh, 2009) or media in general (Kohring and Matthes, 2007), might be interesting to explore as a covariate.

Suggestions for Future Research

Many of the above limitations can be improved upon in future research. A suggested next step in brand journalism research is introducing stronger frame and source cues into stimulus
material and repeating the experiment in this study. Stronger manipulations of the independent variable might help make influences on the dependent variables clearer.

Research using this framework also might be valuable in examining the reactions of current customer groups exclusively. Applied research, for instance, might explore audience reaction to actual publications using customers that already own products and services from the brand covered in the custom content. Though the sample used in this study did report high involvement with the product (making the split of low, medium, and high involvement somewhat artificial as mentioned in the limitations), they were certainly not customers of the brand, as the brand name was created for the purposes of this study. Current customers with a brand affinity might react differently.

Brand journalism is not relegated to the print medium. Broadcasts with single sponsors and product integration are common and might be considered custom content. Brands might choose to communicate with customers through corporate blogs, content-driven websites, email newsletters that link to custom content, or social media channels that link to custom content. Therefore, future research might focus on brand journalism execution across different media channels, and whether the method of delivery affects the audience’s reaction to custom content.

As mentioned previously, longitudinal study of custom content might also be useful. Brand journalism specialists may already be conducting readership studies on publications or campaigns across multiple issues, and web analytics would reveal certain readership aspects such as time spent on a page or click-through rates. However, researchers might consider adding the dependent variables explored in this study as part of readership research, as established scales for message credibility, $A_b$, and PI could add gravitas to readership research and support arguments for return on investment in custom content.
While the stimulus materials in this study featured a mid-priced audio/video product and a previous study of custom content featured olive oil, a low-cost food product (Van Reijmersdal et al., 2010), it is possible that the cost of the product itself would have an impact on reader’s reaction to the content that covers it. Many custom content campaigns are aimed at high-cost items, such as vehicles or luxury products and services. Therefore, future research might vary the cost of the products featured in the content.

Future research also might explore brand journalism within different theoretical frameworks. The elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981) might provide a suitable framework for brand journalism research, as either frame or source cues or both together might trigger central or peripheral routes to decision-making. The elaboration likelihood model might be particularly useful when exploring custom content and purchase intent, as marketers might be more encouraged to invest in brand journalism if it is shown to help lead to purchase decisions and thereby provide some return on investment.

An exploration of brand journalism within a competitive framework also might make for useful research. For instance, some customers might be highly involved both with a specific brand and a specific product, and custom content might be useful in convincing a customer to use a similar product produced by another brand.

The researcher also suggests development of a reliable scale for brand journalism literacy to determine the awareness an audience may possess regarding the persuasive intent of custom content. This would be especially valuable in determining if there is a saturation effect associated with brand journalism, particularly in business niches where spending on brand journalism is high and customers receive a wealth of custom content through any number of media channels.
Further, the researcher suggests exploring other dimensions of the rise of brand journalism, including ethical considerations. Though journalism, advertising, and public relations as professions carry generally accepted and industry-wide codes of ethics, brand journalism is arguably where these disciplines intersect, and there are no established ethical guidelines for its execution. In an environment where the wall between advertising and editorial is essentially thin, and framing commercial messages as editorial could be considered somewhat deceptive, an exploration of the ethical implications would be relevant.

Conclusion

The findings in this study suggest that custom content creators might choose different attributed sources to speak to different groups of potential customers. Those unfamiliar with the product or brand might have a more positive attitude toward the brand and be more likely to purchase the product discussed if the information in the content is attributed to a corporate source. Alternatively, highly involved customers might prefer to receive information from customers like themselves.

The very fact that companies own the media might create a credibility gap involving the perception of commerciality or persuasive intent. As the term “brand journalism” implies, the relative purity and unbiased appearance of the editorial frame lends the most credibility to the message, an important finding given that one of the goals of custom content is to build trust with the brand.

Because this study suggests that involvement with the product had the strongest effect on all dependent variables explored, companies might choose to focus on those highly involved with the product or brand—namely, its best customers—when investing in custom content.
Brand journalism will likely continue its rise to prominence as consumers become more and more desensitized to traditional advertising. Certainly the interest level in the concept is rising. For example, the 2010 South by Southwest panel schedule featured one session on brand journalism; the 2012 schedule featured eight sessions (South by Southwest, 2012). Perhaps most significantly, companies are beginning to recognize the advantage of “owning their own media” to communicate with customers directly without need for pushing stories to other media outlets. In the years to come, this recognition of the importance of custom content could lead both to employment opportunities and entrepreneurial potential for working journalists.
References


Appendix A: Stimulus Materials

Figure 4. Commercial/branded cover.
Figure 5. Editorial/non-branded cover.
Figure 6a. Commercial/branded article with company source

First Things First

Home theater equipment is more affordable that ever. But there are still some fundamental truths that haven’t changed.

When you’re just getting started, there are bound to be growing pains. That goes for life as well as becoming an audiophile. It’s wonderful to flip through these pages and dream about the $100,000 custom home theater or listening room, but first things first. You can do it for less than $400! (See sidebar, left.)

It won’t take long to get overwhelmed when shopping to outfit your first room, so a little advice never hurts. Take it from someone who has been there. “We really did our research on entry-level equipment,” says Pat Cramer, a product engineer for NextAV’s all-in-one home theater systems. “We wanted to put as much as we could in the package, while still keeping the price reasonable.” Well, at least those priorities are straight!

We sat down with Cramer for a solid list of lessons learned. Here’s what we found out.

DON’T OUT-SPEND YOUR BASE EQUIPMENT. There’s no need to spend $4,000 on speakers if you only spent $400 on the audio receiver sending the signal. It won’t power those speakers effectively, or deliver the range capability to those high-end speakers.

DO ANALYZE YOUR ROOM. Many audio receivers come with a microphone and on-screen analysis to gauge your room’s acoustics. Use it. And abide by it. “You could spend hours upon hours getting the surround levels and equalizer settings right,” says Pat. “I did it in a few minutes with the automatic analysis.”

DON’T SHAKE THE WALLS. If the walls are audibly vibrating, that’s not cool. Though the clichéd approach is bass that rocks the floor, that actually means you’re doing something wrong. Plus, you’re missing out on the careful sound design you’re paying for in a Blu-ray disc by introducing unintended sounds into the mix. The acoustic analysis should at least help eliminate audible vibrations, and might get rid of them altogether.

DO SET ASIDE 5% OR MORE FOR THE CABLE. It’s a great rule of thumb: Whatever you spend on the set-up, expect to add at least 5% on the cabling. It does matter. And that percentage will go up if you’re running cable long distances. “We found out you actually need heavier gauge cable the longer you have to run it, and most people do that in reverse because it’s more expensive,” says Pat.
Figure 6b. Commercial/branded article with peer customer source

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We sat down with Cramer for a solid list of lessons learned. Here’s what we found out.

**Don’t Out-Spend Your Base Equipment.** There’s no need to spend $4,000 on speakers if you only spent $400 on the audio receiver sending the signal. It won’t power those speakers effectively, or deliver the range capability to those high-end speakers.

**Do Analyze Your Room.** Many audio receivers come with a microphone and on-screen analysis to gauge your room’s acoustics. Use it. And abide by it. “You could spend hours upon hours getting the surround levels and equalizer settings right,” says Pat. “I did it in a few minutes with the automatic analysis.”

**Don’t Shake the Walls.** If the walls are audibly vibrating, that’s not cool. Though the clichéd approach is bass that rocks the floor, that actually means you’re doing something wrong. Plus, you’re missing out on the careful sound design you’re paying for in a Blu-ray disc by introducing unintended sounds into the mix. The acoustic analysis should at least help eliminate audible vibrations, and might get rid of them altogether.

**Do Set Aside 5% or More for the Cable.** It’s a great rule of thumb. Whatever you spend on the set-up, expect to add at least 5% on the cabling. It does matter. And that percentage will go up if you’re running cable long distances. “We found out you actually need heavier gauge cable the longer you have to run it, and most people do that in reverse because it’s more expensive,” says Pat.
Sight & Sound

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First Things First
Home theater equipment is more affordable that ever. But there are still some fundamental truths that haven’t changed.

HERE’S A GREAT START
Think of it as a starter kit for home theater. But the NextAV HT-5100 isn’t your average “home theater in a box.” Four HDMI inputs handle the latest high-def formats, such as 3D video. The receiver’s network allows you to bring your PC’s audio into your listening room, and adds compatibility with iPods and iPhones. The NextAV receiver is plenty powerful enough to handle upgrades if you decide to replace the speakers later. And for a limited time, get a 25% discount on NextAV critically-acclaimed custom-cut speaker cable; it’s a top-of-the-line accessory for a top-of-the-line system. All for $399.

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Figure 8a. Cover letter for commercial/branded conditions

Dear Student:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study.

Your participation will involve reading a magazine article taken from a magazine produced by NextAV, Inc., a home theater retailer, then completing a questionnaire.

Though you may not have an interest in this type of product, for purposes of this study, please envision yourself in this group of potential customers. Following are two pages from the magazine, the cover and an article. Please look closely at the cover and read the article titled “First Things First” and the associated sidebars, then complete the questionnaire. PLEASE READ THE MATERIAL CAREFULLY. You will not be able to refer to the material when completing the questionnaire; you will complete the questionnaire from memory.

Once you have completed the survey instrument, please bring it to the front of the classroom and place it in the covered box marked “Surveys.” Then, to be sure you receive the extra credit, PRINT your name, CWID, and your class number in the designated space below.

This should take about 15-20 minutes of your time. Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time. The results of the research study may be published, but information about participants will not be used at all. There are no known risks to you as a result of participating in this study. If you feel uncomfortable answering any questions, you can withdraw from the survey at any point. Please do not write your name or any other identifying information on the packet.

Thank you again for your participation.

[Signature]

Jamie Cole
Graduate Student, University of Alabama
jcole@crimson.ua.edu

To receive extra credit, please complete the following. This will be separated from your survey responses.

PRINT Your Name: __________________________ CWID: __________________________

Class: JN ________
Dear Student:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study.

Your participation will involve reading a magazine article taken from a magazine produced by Sight & Sound magazine, which covers home entertainment news for consumers, then completing a questionnaire.

Though you may not have an interest in this type of product, for purposes of this study, please envision yourself in this group of potential customers. Following are two pages from the magazine, the cover and an article. Please look closely at the cover and read the article titled “First Things First” and the associated sidebars, then complete the questionnaire. PLEASE READ THE MATERIAL CAREFULLY. You will not be able to refer to the material when completing the questionnaire; you will complete the questionnaire from memory.

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Thank you again for your participation.

Jamie Cole
Graduate Student, University of Alabama
jtc0le@cramson.ua.edu

To receive extra credit, please complete the following. This will be separated from your survey responses.

PRINT Your Name: ________________________________ CWID: _______________________

Class: IN ________
Appendix B: Questionnaire

Please complete the following questionnaire based on the material you just read. Please DO NOT look back at the magazine material; complete the questionnaire from your memory of the material.

1. To me, home theater systems are:

   unimportant _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : important
   irrelevant _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : relevant
   unexciting _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : exciting
   mundane _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : fascinating
   worthless _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : valuable

2. Please rate the magazine article you just read on the following characteristics:

   inaccurate _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : accurate
   not trustworthy _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : trustworthy
   incomplete _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : complete

3. After receiving and reading this information in this magazine excerpt, how would you rate your feelings about NextAV, the company that makes the product you read about?


4. After receiving and reading this information in this magazine excerpt, how would you rate your intention to purchase the “home theater in a box” featured in the magazine article?

   very low purchase interest _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : very high purchase interest
   probably not buy it _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : probably buy it
5. How often do you receive and look at the following from companies or retailers?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Free magazines</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Very Frequently</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coupons</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales catalogs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. What year were you born? _____

7. What is your gender? _____Male _____Female

8. What is your race? (check all that apply)

_____ African-American
_____ Asian/Pacific Islander
_____ Caucasian
_____ Hispanic
_____ Native American
_____ Other

9. What did you consider your family growing up?

_____ lower class
_____ lower middle class
_____ middle class
_____ upper middle class
_____ upper class

10. What is the name of the company that produced the magazine that contains the article you just read?

_____ Sight & Sound
_____ NextAV
_____ Home Theater
_____ Audio & Video
_____ I don’t know who produced this magazine
11. What type of company produced the magazine that contains the article you just read?

_____ A publishing company; it’s an independent magazine
_____ An electronics store
_____ An electronics manufacturing company
_____ A consumer group
_____ I don’t know who produced this magazine

12. Which of the following best describes the person who was primarily quoted in the magazine article you just read?

_____ A typical audio/video equipment buyer
_____ A customer who owns the product
_____ A customer thinking about buying the product
_____ A NextAV product engineer
_____ One of NextAV’s corporate experts
_____ None of these
_____ I don’t know who was primarily quoted in the magazine article