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The impact of flattery: The role of negative remarks

Kenny Basso [a,*], Cristiane Pizzutti dos Santos [b,1], Manuela Albornoz Gonçalves [b,c,2]

[a] Business School, Faculdade Meridional – IMED, Senador Pinheiro, 304, Cep: 99070-220, Passo Fundo, Brazil
[b] School of Management, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Washington Luis, 855, Cep: 90460-010, Porto Alegre, Brazil
[c] School of Management, Universidade FEEVALE, ERS 239, 2755, Cep: 93352-000, Novo Hamburgo, Brazil

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ABSTRACT

This study extends our understanding of flattery and consumers' use of persuasion knowledge in the retail context by addressing the role that negative evaluations from a salesperson play on consumer's perceptions of store agent trustworthiness. Across two experiments, our findings show that a negative salesperson remark along with a positive remark reduces the client's use of persuasion knowledge therefore enhancing the client's perception of the salesclerk's trustworthiness. Additionally, we found a boundary condition of this effect: the price of the target product. Finally, perceptions of salesperson trustworthiness mediated the effect of the remarks on behavioral intentions.

1. Introduction

Paula sees in the shop window a beautiful pair of jeans. She does not resist and decides to try them on. Upon exiting the dressing room to take a look in the full length mirror, the salesperson says, "Those jeans fit you perfectly! You look wonderful!" In this situation, what does Paula think? Does she think the salesperson is intent on persuading her? And what would have happened if the salesperson had given Paula negative feedback? If she had instead said, "Those jeans do not fit you well. Let me show you another pair."

Put simply, flattery is the art of offering pleasing compliments (Chan and Sengupta, 2010). Apart from the effects of retail atmosphere (Rayburn and Voss, 2013), research has addressed this old and well-known tactic of persuasion in the retail setting with a particular focus on the relationship between the frontline employee and the client (Campbell and Kirmani, 2000; Chan and Sengupta, 2010; Main et al., 2007).

Interestingly, previous literature (Campbell and Kirmani, 2000; Friestad and Wright, 1994) indicated that flattery can backfire and result in the opposite of the intended outcome, particularly when offered before the consumer makes their purchase decision. Consumers tend to view the salesperson as less sincere when s/he uses flattery because they believe the ulterior motive of the salesperson's flattering remarks is to persuade them to buy the product (Campbell and Kirmani, 2000; Main et al., 2007).

Although research demonstrates that consumers may possess knowledge of persuasion techniques and draw inferences about marketers' motives and goals (Campbell and Kirmani, 2000; DeCarlo and Barone, 2009; Kirmani and Campbell, 2004; Main et al., 2007), little is known about when consumers use this knowledge. Campbell and Kirmani (2000) identified two factors that influence consumers' use of persuasion knowledge: the accessibility of ulterior motives and the cognitive capacity of the consumer. Thus, when the situation makes ulterior motives accessible or a consumer has unconstrained resources, individuals access their persuasion knowledge to infer an underlying persuasion motive, thus influencing the customer's evaluation.

Contrasting with the profuse literature on persuasion tactics used by sales people, including positive remarks (i.e. flattery), negative feedback in retail settings has been largely neglected, despite the great deal of research (e.g. Cusella, 1982; Drachman et al., 1978) focused on the effects of the feedback valence – positive and negative – in other interpersonal interactions, such as between teacher and student and supervisor and subordinate.

This present study extends our understanding of flattery and consumers' use of persuasion knowledge in the retail context by addressing the role negative evaluations from the salesperson play on the consumer's perceptions of the store agent's trustworthiness. Based on the extra credit effect (Drachman et al., 1978) and attribution theory (Jones and Davis, 1965; Kelley and Michela, 1980), when a salesperson makes a negative evaluation to a client (contrary to the flattery the client expects), s/he may gain "extra

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +55 54 3045 6100.
E-mail addresses: bassokenny@gmail.com (K. Basso), crispizzutti@gmail.com.br (C.P. dos Santos), manu.mag@gmail.com (M. Albornoz Gonçalves).
[1] Tel.: +55 51 33083690.
[2] Tel.: +55 51 93430016.

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credit” because s/he is perceived to resist the temptation of praising the client to make the sale. Consequently, the client will perceive the frontline employee more trustworthy. Hence, we propose that consumers are less likely to use persuasion knowledge when a salesperson makes negative comments about a product because the salesperson's behavior signals that s/he is not attempting to persuade the consumer to make the purchase, but is instead performing based on his/her internal disposition. Moreover, we address how clients' perceptions of sellers' trustworthiness impact behavioral intentions. Most studies addressing the use of flattery in retail interactions only investigate how flattery affects a customer's evaluation of a salesperson's attributes – such as sincerity and trustworthiness (Campbell and Kirmani, 2000; Main et al., 2007). To fill this gap, we test the impact of salesperson flattery and negative evaluations on consumer behavior – namely, word of mouth (WOM) and purchase intentions – through client perceptions of seller trustworthiness.

Finally, to qualify the role of negative evaluations, we investigate a boundary condition – price of the target product – that likely modifies the relationship between positive/negative comments and trustworthiness. The price of the target product may act as an external cue – along with the valence of the remark – that helps the client to make their attribution about the salesperson behavior.

We first present the theoretical basis of our research and the hypotheses we developed. Then, we detail two experiments that test our hypotheses and present the main findings and a general discussion of this article. Note that in this article, feedback, evaluation, comment and remark are used interchangeably.

2. Theory and hypotheses

2.1. Flattery and negative remarks

Flattery is aptly defined as “communicating positive things about another person without regard to that person's true qualities or abilities” (Fogg and Nass, 1997, 551). Within a broad spectrum of forms of interpersonal influence, Cialdini and Goldstein (2004) present flattery as a tactic used by individuals to persuade others to perform activities or actions they would not otherwise conduct. Thus, we consider flattery as a form of interpersonal influence retail sellers use to persuade customers to change their attitudes and behavioral intentions to purchase products and spread positive WOM.

Using the Persuasion Knowledge Model to explain the effect of flattery in interpersonal sales settings, Campbell and Kirmani (2000), based on Friestad and Wright (1994), stated that consumers develop knowledge about persuasion motives and tactics and use that knowledge to cope with persuasion episodes. For example, in a personal selling context, a consumer may use their persuasion knowledge to assess the extent to which a salesperson's remark reveals the ulterior motive of persuading the customer to buy the product.

Although Gordon (1996), through a meta-analytic effort, found a positive effect for flattery on judgments of interpersonal attraction in the retail setting, research has shown that when salespeople flatter customers before the purchase (i.e., an ulterior sales motive is plausible), customers rate the level of seller's sincerity (Campbell and Kirmani, 2000) lower than when flattered after the purchase (i.e., an ulterior sales motive is not plausible). According to Campbell and Kirmani (2000), the reason for this evaluation is that clients identified a plausible ulterior motive and used it when formulating their judgments.

In the present study, we propose one mechanism – negative salesperson remarks – that affects consumers' inferences about persuasion motives underlying salesperson behavior before the purchase and, consequently, influences perceptions of salesperson trustworthiness.

Based on the extra credit effect, when a person makes negative evaluations (contrary to what is expected) to another, the evaluator may gain extra credit from the target. Hence, the target may form better judgments of the evaluator because s/he has rejected the use of persuasion tactics (e.g., has resisted the temptation to flatter) (Drachman et al., 1978).

The basis of the extra credit effect relies on the tenets of correspondence theory developed by Jones and Davis (1965). According to this theory, observers make a correspondent attribution for the cause of an event when they (i.e., the target of communication) attribute an event's cause to the true feelings or disposition of the corresponding individual. Alternatively, observers make a non-correspondent attribution when they attribute the cause of an event to reflect situational constraints or pressures upon the individual (e.g. to meet a sales goal or obtain commission). Consequently, correspondent (non-correspondent) attributions will lead to weaker (stronger) inferences of ulterior motives and higher (lower) levels of trustworthiness towards the corresponding individual (e.g. the salesperson).

Jones and Davis (1965) suggest that there is a greater probability of correspondent attributions when observed behavior departs from the norm because these conditions reveal an individual's true disposition. Flattery, being the norm in salesperson–consumer interactions (Chan and Sengupta, 2010), prompts a non-correspondent attribution from the target consumer and leads to the consumer to assign a low level of trustworthiness to the sales agent. On the other hand, consumers consider negative remarks to be an unusual and unexpected behavior. Due to this, negative feedback from a salesperson should trigger a correspondent attribution that leads the consumer to assign a higher degree of credibility to the salesperson. In essence, negative comments are not normative and induce target clients to conclude that the salesperson is “telling the truth.”

In sum, by making negative evaluations about a product to a client (i.e., expressing a view contrary to what is expected), the salesperson makes his/her true disposition more evident and the ulterior motives less evident, thus enhancing the client's positive judgments. On the other hand, by making positive remarks, the salesperson makes his/her ulterior motives more accessible to the client, thus increasing the client's negative judgments. Fig. 1 depicts this reasoning.

The logic proposed here is that negative in addition to positive feedback will enhance consumers' perceptions of salesperson trustworthiness to a greater degree than positive feedback (i.e., flattery) alone. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H1. Clients exposed to a negative remark along with a positive remark will perceive a salesperson as more trustworthy than clients exposed to positive remarks only.

Several variables may interact with the salesclerk comments. For instance, Campbell and Kirmani (2000) used a differentiation in price to explicit the seller's flattery, that is, their scenarios described the positive remark associated with a more expensive product to highlight the persuasive action. Then one could ask how the price of

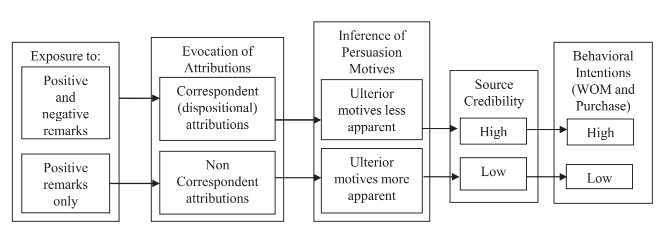

Fig. 1. Remarks attribution model.