



Cognitive predictors of consumers' intention to comply with social marketing email appeals



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Social marketing
Computer-mediated communication
Persuasion
Influence
Compliance
Survey research

ABSTRACT

Email is used increasingly by social marketers to appeal to consumers, however, relatively little is known regarding the cognitive processes which lead consumers to comply with actions that marketers request in email messages. This exploratory study tests the direct effects of five cognitive factors that characterize the message receiver on intention to comply with an email appeal. These cognitive factors are benefit goals and cost goals related to the message, trusting beliefs in the message sender, involvement with the message, and perceived effort of complying with the appeal. We find four of the five factors are significant predictors of intention to comply, jointly explaining 70% of variance in this measure.

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1. Introduction

Email is a fast, inexpensive, and easy-to-use Internet communication medium, and these characteristics have led many commercial organizations to use email to contact consumers. However, consumers frequently resist being contacted via unsolicited email, and they may react unenthusiastically even to contacts via permission-based (opt-in) email (Cases, Fournier, Dubois, & Tanner, 2010; DuFrene, Engelland, Lehman, & Pearson, 2005; Moustakas, Ranganathan, & Duquenoy, 2006). Researchers have responded to these observations with a growing literature stream that investigates consumers' reactions to commercial uses of email, for example, measuring the conversion rate at which consumers click on hyperlinks in email advertisements (Martin, Van Durme, Raulas, & Merisavo, 2003), identifying optimal email contact frequency (Micheaux, 2011), and studying the process by which consumers decide to engage with the email message (Ellis-Chadwick & Doherty, 2012).

Significantly less attention has been paid to consumers' reactions to social marketing conducted via email. Kotler and Zaltman (1971) launched the study of social marketing by proposing to apply marketing principles to promote social change. Since that time, the social marketing field has developed by integrating a focus on consumers' needs and wants with the objective of

changing consumers' behaviors to achieve some social benefit (2011).¹ Lee and Kotler (2011, p. 7) offer four themes that broadly define social marketing: "(a) influencing behaviors, (b) utilizing a systematic planning process that applies marketing principles and techniques, (c) focusing on priority target audience segments, and (d) delivering a positive benefit to society."

Because social marketing utilizes "tools, techniques and concepts derived from commercial marketing in pursuit of social goals" (Peattie & Peattie, 2009, p. 262), we might anticipate that many aspects of consumers' reactions to social marketing conducted via email will be explained from findings in the commercial marketing literature. However, the context in which email messages are used can significantly impact individuals' reactions to them (Wilson, 2002; Wilson & Sheetz, 2008). For example, Kim, Haley, and Koo (2009) find that even simple contextual differences between product advertising (focusing on a product or service) and corporate advertising (focusing on the overall corporate image) can determine whether consumers' existing level of product knowledge will influence their development of attitudes and intentions toward purchasing a product after viewing the ad.

A number of contextual differences distinguish social marketing from commercial marketing. Social marketing often diverges from commercial marketing in the approaches it uses, for example, by focusing on anti-consumption appeals (Lee, Fernandez, & Hyman, 2009). In addition, social marketing campaigns frequently face environmental challenges that are not present in commercial marketing and are in some cases actually caused by commercial marketers, for example, by promoting fattening foods without regard for societal costs of obesity and chronic disease (Wymer, 2010). A further difference is illustrated by Brennan and Binney (2010),

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¹ Recent reviews of the social marketing field are provided by Dann (2010) and Dibb (2014).

who study negative emotional appeals of fear, guilt, and shame that frequently are employed in social marketing but are rare in commercial marketing research. These differences caution against assuming that commercial marketing research can necessarily be generalized to social marketing contexts or that it is capable of guiding all aspects of social marketing, and suggest that researchers should direct greater attention toward study of consumers' reactions in contexts that are specific to social marketing.

This paper studies a social marketing use of email in which an unsolicited appeal is made to consumers to take a socially-beneficial action, a use which we refer to hereafter as an *email appeal*. We were interested in identifying the major cognitive factors that predict development of consumers' intention to comply with email appeals. Despite conducting an extensive review of the persuasion, advertising, and marketing literatures, we found no research that comprehensively studies this issue in the context of social marketing. The lack of existing research in this area motivated us to conduct an exploratory study to assess the role of five key cognitions in predicting intention to comply with a representative email appeal.

2. Background

We drew from research in related areas of persuasion, advertising, and marketing to identify cognitive factors that may be expected to contribute to consumers' willingness to comply with email appeals. Our review identified five factors that prior research suggests will exert direct effects on compliance intention. These factors represent a diverse set of cognitions, including the message receiver's *benefit goals* and *cost goals* related to the message, *trusting beliefs* in the message sender, *involvement* with the message, and *perceived effort* of complying with the appeal. We discuss the background literature and present our research hypotheses relating to these factors in the following sections.

2.1. Perception of benefits and costs

The marketing and advertising literatures tend to discuss benefits and costs from the perspective of the message sender, highlighting email as a quick, cost effective, and simple-to-use medium for targeting specific groups of consumers (e.g., Cases et al., 2010; DuFrene et al., 2005; Moustakas et al., 2006). Yet benefits are also important to consumers, who are known, for example, to be much more likely to open and read email appeals if they believe a monetary benefit can be gained (Chang, Rizal, & Amin, 2013). Costs are important as well, as unsolicited email can be taxing and irritating to receivers (Moustakas et al., 2006; Renaud, Ramsay, & Hair, 2006). Where receivers foresee a high ratio of costs to benefits they often avoid opening email (Baek & Morimoto, 2012) or set up message filters to block it (Park, Sharman, Rao, & Upadhyaya, 2007; Renaud et al., 2006).

One approach to understanding how perceived benefits and costs influence consumers' reactions to email appeals is presented by Wilson and Lu (2008). They investigated effects of message receivers' benefit and cost goals in an email persuasion study based upon the goals-planning-action (GPA) model (Dillard, 1990). The GPA model was developed to explain the behaviors of message senders within a two-tiered goal structure in which *primary goals* are considered to be instrumental to the sender's task and *secondary goals* encompass motivations to manage the sender's identity, level of arousal, and relationship and interactions with the receiver. Wilson and Lu theorized that message receivers utilize a similar two-tiered goal structure in which obtaining benefits and avoiding costs constitute the primary goals in forming a response to email messages. They report that benefit goals and cost goals appeared frequently in their students subjects' stated rationales

for responding to a request made in an email message related to university sports activities, and both factors were significant independent contributors to the receivers' intention to comply with the request. Subsequent research confirmed the original findings, demonstrating that benefit and cost goals arise immediately when subjects receive an email message and continue to be formed as the message is subsequently opened and read (Wilson, 2015).

These findings suggest that benefit goals and cost goals may also be important predictors of consumers' responses to email appeals in the context of social marketing, relationships that are tested in our first two hypotheses.

H1. Greater goals of obtaining benefits related to the message (benefit goals) increase message receivers' intention toward compliance with an email appeal.

H2. Greater goals of avoiding costs related to the message (cost goals) decrease message receivers' intention toward compliance with an email appeal.

2.2. Trusting beliefs

Trust is "a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another" (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998, p. 395). In online settings, research attention focuses on consumers' beliefs that the other party will be honest, i.e., trusting beliefs (Cases et al., 2010), and researchers report that trust improves responses toward advertising, advice, and requests by reducing perceptions of risk in online transactions (Nicolaou & McKnight, 2006; Van der Heijden, Verhagen, & Creemers, 2003). Trust of online sellers, e-commerce marketplaces (such as eBay), and members of a marketplace are reported to increase intentions to revisit a website or make a purchase (Cases et al., 2010; Everard & Galletta, 2006; Hsu, Chang, Chu, & Lee, 2014; Kim, Kim, & Park, 2010; Lu, Zhao, & Wang, 2010; McKnight, Choudhury, & Kacmar, 2002; Pavlou & Gefen, 2004; Weisberg, Te'eni, & Arman, 2011). None of these studies specifically addresses the role of trust in relation to email appeals, however, development of trust has been linked previously to related aspects of online advertising, including design and structural elements (Wang & Emurian, 2005).

Researchers have examined consumer trust in both permission-based and unsolicited email marketing contexts. Chang et al. (2013) find that consumers evaluate the trustworthiness of the sender when deciding to opt-in to receive permission-based email, and Park et al. (2007) report that individuals are generally averse to receiving unsolicited email messages because of privacy concerns. Yet DuFrene et al. (2005) demonstrate that trust is malleable. They report that consumers who are repeatedly exposed to opt-in messages from the same retailer tend to synchronize their trusting beliefs toward the sender with their overall trust evaluation of the retailer and their purchase intentions.

Based on these studies, we anticipate that viewing an email appeal can cause consumers to develop trusting beliefs in the integrity and benevolence of the message sender (McKnight et al., 2002). Where trust is developed, we propose it will tend to overcome perceived risks of responding to the email appeal similar to reports from studies of other types of online transactions. These observations lead to our third hypothesis.

H3. Greater trusting beliefs toward the message sender increase message receivers' intention toward compliance with an email appeal.

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