

Research Article

Does it pay to beat around the bush? The case of the obfuscating salesperson ☆

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Abstract

How often do salespeople obfuscate in response to a customer's question? And when and why does obfuscating help or hurt the prospects of a sale? We investigate these questions in three studies, developing and testing a framework based on theory from persuasion, social cognition, and communication theory. The results show that most consumers report having experienced obfuscation in the marketplace and believe that it is more prevalent in professions where people have strong monetary motives to obfuscate. Further, we find that when consumers' prior expectations of a dishonest response to a question are heightened, either because the construct of honesty is chronically salient to the individual or because of the presence of a monetary motive for the salesperson, obfuscation undermines purchase intentions relative to a straightforward "don't know" response. In contrast, when expectations of a dishonest response are low, an obfuscatory response is as persuasive as an admission of lack of knowledge. These effects are mediated by perceived trust in the salesperson. Implications are discussed for persuasion theory, salesperson influence tactics, and consumer welfare.

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Introduction

Salespersons face a peculiar occupational hazard—they regularly encounter factual questions from prospective customers for which they should know the answers on the spot, but often don't. (Alternatively, they may know the answers, but may not want to disclose them.) In dealing with such situations,

a salesperson has some clear response options: (1) do the right thing and admit to not knowing the answer, (2) lie with a false answer, or (3) obfuscate, that is, dodge the actual question and provide a pseudo-answer with irrelevant, tangential, or vague information. The first option is normatively appropriate, but may reduce the perceived competence of the salesperson in the eyes of the customer. The second option, lying, could be detected, thereby leading to a significant loss of credibility. The third option, obfuscating, may have some appeal—the question will seem to have been answered (even if vaguely), and the salesperson can hope that the conversation will move on to other matters. Therein lies the appeal of obfuscation.

The word "obfuscate" has its origins in the 16th century Latin word *obfuscatu*s, meaning "to darken." A contemporary definition of the word is "to make so confused or opaque as to be difficult to perceive or understand" (www.thefreedictionary.com). Synonyms of the word include conceal, cover up, eclipse, and

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shade. Obfuscatory responses are plausible in a wide range of social interactions and communication situations. Writers (e.g., Berkoff, 1981) have noted its widespread prevalence in marketing tactics. Further, important questions have been raised about the clarity of information and potentially obfuscatory tactics in selling situations (Ellison & Ellison, 2009). Yet, perplexingly, very little scholarly research appears to have been published on this topic.

Our interest in obfuscation focuses on interactions between salespersons, service providers, or commercial agents (all of whom, for ease of exposition, we will refer to as salespersons) and prospective customers (i.e., prospects). In this context, we define obfuscation as a salesperson's response to a prospect's question that (a) does not directly answer the question; (b) is intentionally vague and unclear; and (c) impedes the prospect's ability to obtain desired information. We focus primarily on the effects of a salesperson's obfuscatory answer, when compared to an admission (or a claim) of lack of knowledge by the salesperson to a prospect's question. This comparison is interesting for several reasons. As noted earlier, a major motivation for obfuscation is that it potentially allows a salesperson to answer a consumer's question in a seemingly reasonable way, as opposed to a candid yet potentially damaging admission of lack of knowledge, or a truthful answer that might jeopardize the likelihood of a sale. If the salesperson provides instead a seemingly candid "don't know" answer in such situations, it could enhance perceptions of the salesperson's honesty, and thus trustworthiness, relative to an obfuscatory response. However, a forthright admission of lack of knowledge could also seriously hurt perceptions of the salesperson's competence (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). This tension in managing perceptions of trustworthiness versus competence likely impacts a salesperson's decision to obfuscate, as well as outcomes of the salesperson's persuasion efforts.

Assuming obfuscation is widely prevalent in the marketplace (and we provide evidence that it is), it has important implications from an ethical and consumer welfare standpoint. If obfuscating salespeople are more likely to make a sale than their "come clean" counterparts, there would be an economic incentive to behave unethically (Ellison & Ellison, 2009; Kalra, Shi, & Srinivasan, 2003). Also, since obfuscation amounts to less transparency in communications with customers, their welfare could be in jeopardy. However, if obfuscation is likely to get punished in the marketplace by reducing prospects' willingness to purchase, honesty might turn out to be always the best policy for salespeople. Given the present state of scholarly knowledge on the topic of obfuscation, it is unclear which of the two outcomes will prevail, and when. This is the central issue addressed by the present research. Below, we first present a preliminary study with data about consumers' impressions of the prevalence of obfuscation in the marketplace and some of its characteristics. Next, we develop a conceptual framework with specific hypotheses and then present two experiments designed to test the hypotheses.

Study 1: survey of marketplace beliefs

The purpose of study 1 was to assess whether consumers have experienced obfuscation in the marketplace, to learn more

about the nature of these experiences, and to understand consumers' expectations regarding the likelihood of obfuscation attempts in specific professions (e.g., among used car salesmen versus doctors). We expect to find that consumers' expectations about the likelihood of obfuscation would be contingent on a salesperson's monetary motives (e.g., sales commissions).

Method

All participants ($n = 300$) lived in the U.S. and were recruited via a Qualtrics panel. Their ages ranged from 18 to 75 years (median = 33), 67% were female, 47% were married, and 72% had completed at least some college. We informed them that we were interested in their experiences with salespeople and their perceptions of how salespeople respond to consumer questions, since we wished to understand the notion of "obfuscation." The concept was explained with the statement that when people obfuscate, "they typically deliberately answer a question in a vague, long-winded way without really answering the question at all. When people obfuscate, there is often a reason why they do so."

We then asked participants whether or not they had ever had an experience with an obfuscating salesperson. Had they ever experienced "...having a salesperson 'beat around the bush' or be very vague or longwinded in answering a question you asked, rather than answering your question clearly and directly?" We then asked whether they had heard of someone else experiencing salesperson obfuscation. Respondents who said that they themselves had experienced obfuscation were also asked to briefly describe what had happened as well as why they thought the salesperson obfuscated. Participants were then asked to judge (not at all/perhaps/absolutely the reason why) seven specific reasons why salespeople might "beat around the bush." They then rated the likelihood of obfuscation in 15 different professions (order of presentation randomized), and the likelihood that people working in these professions worked on sales commissions (i.e., had a monetary motive). We subsequently developed classification schemes for responses to the two open-ended questions (what happened and why did it happen). Two coders, blind to the research hypotheses, independently classified the responses; a third coder reconciled disagreements. Coder agreement rates were 88% for type of obfuscator, 76% for type of obfuscation incident, and 94% for the reasons why obfuscation occurred.

Results

Over two-thirds of participants (70%) reported that they had had an experience with an obfuscating salesperson, and a similar number (66%) said that they knew of someone else who had experienced salesperson obfuscation. Thus, as expected, obfuscation by salespeople seems common. In the open-ended question, participants described a variety of obfuscatory responses, especially with electronics salespeople (20%), car salespeople (19%), and other sellers of services such as roofing and security (12%). Regarding the types of salesperson responses construed as obfuscatory, many (41%) described situations where the

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