

Research Report

# Promotional phrases as questions versus statements: An influence of phrase style on product evaluation

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## Abstract

This research investigates consumer responses to simple promotional phrases styled (i.e., framed) as questions versus statements and the moderating role of arousal. Study results indicate that under low arousal, questions have a more favorable influence on product evaluation than statements do; this influence is mediated by the perceived interestingness of the phrase. Under high arousal, the influence is reversed, and it is mediated by perceived clarity. The differential influence of phrase style (framing as question vs. statement) also extends to purchase behavior among consumers in a supermarket.

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Imagine a consumer seeing one of two versions of an ad for a new beverage. One version states, “The beverage for you.” The other version asks, “The beverage for you?” How would these two phrases differentially influence consumers? The current research demonstrates differences in consumer responses to such simplistic promotional phrases about product preference, which include little or no factual information, depending on whether they end with a period versus a question mark. Specifically, the relative influence of these two types of phrases depends on the level of arousal provided by accompanying stimuli. Under low arousal, questions (vs. statements) have a relatively more favorable influence on product evaluation; this influence is mediated by the perceived interestingness of the phrase. Under high arousal, the influence is reversed, and it is mediated by perceived clarity. These findings build on and extend prior research on linguistic effects (Cheema & Patrick, 2008; Patrick & Hagtvedt, 2012; Shiv, Britton, & Payne, 2004),

questions (Ahluwalia & Burnkrant, 2004; Khan & Tormala, 2012; Petty, Cacioppo, & Heesacker, 1981), and arousal (Gorn, Pham, & Sin, 2001; Martin, Laing, Martin, & Mitchell, 2005; Sanbonmatsu & Kardes, 1988; Steenkamp & Baumgartner, 1992).

## Theoretical framework

### *Linguistic effects*

Consumers’ perception of the world depends in no small part on language (Pennebaker, Mehl, & Niederhoffer, 2003; Pinker, 1995; Whorf, 1956), and linguistic structures and phrases have been found to influence consumers in numerous areas, such as product attribute perceptions (Levin & Gaeth, 1988), categorization (Schmitt & Zhang, 1998), physical health (Campbell & Pennebaker, 2003), gustatory discrimination (Hoegg & Alba, 2007), and coupon redemption (Cheema & Patrick, 2008). For instance, wording a notion as “I think” (vs. “I feel”) is more persuasive when the target attitude or message recipient is cognitively (vs. affectively) oriented (Mayer & Tormala, 2010). Wording a refusal as “I don’t” (vs. “I can’t”) facilitates

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resistance to temptation and motivates goal-directed behavior (Patrick & Hagtvedt, 2012).

Closer to the current undertaking is the work by Senay, Albarracín, and Noguchi (2010), who investigate the role of the interrogative (vs. declarative) form of simple future tense in the influence of introspective self-talk on motivating goal-directed behavior. Participants who engage in self-talk using the phrase “Will I...” perform better on tasks than those who use the phrase “I will...” The current research, however, differs from this prior work in numerous ways: (1) The current work focuses on promotional phrases rather than self-talk; (2) it relies on a phrase style of questions versus statements rather than on two specific formulations; (3) it investigates the influence of this phrase style on product evaluation, as well as on actual purchase behavior; (4) it demonstrates the moderating role of arousal; and (5) it demonstrates the mediating roles of perceived clarity and perceived interestingness, which are central to marketing communications (Hagtvedt, 2011).

#### *Interesting questions and clear statements*

It may not be obvious whether it is more effective to style a promotional phrase as a statement or a question. Consumers respond favorably to clear communication that leaves little room for uncertainty (Homburg, Klarmann, & Staritz, 2012). While a question mark indicates uncertainty, a simple statement can convey more clarity. In other words, it entails straightforward, unambiguous communication to a higher degree. However, questions often engage the mind more than straightforward statements do, and even rhetorical questions can enhance consumer elaborations on a given message (Ahluwalia & Burnkrant, 2004; Howard & Burnkrant, 1990; Petty et al., 1981; Swasy & Munch, 1985). Such questions may cause strong (vs. weak) arguments to become more (vs. less) persuasive if the personal relevance of the message is low, while this influence is reversed if personal relevance is high (Ahluwalia & Burnkrant, 2004; Petty et al., 1981). As argued by Petty et al. (1981), the former effect may stem from increased elaboration, while the latter effect may stem from disruption of thinking. These authors’ focus on editorials with counterattitudinal messages containing weak or strong arguments differs from the current focus on the ubiquitous, simple promotional phrases that imply product preference but offer little or no factual information. Nonetheless, questions of this kind invite consumers to make an assessment. Even if they are not deemed very interesting per se, I expect that they may be considered more interesting than comparable statements, at least in a promotional context. After all, consumers are familiar with promotional phrases providing claims and suggestions of various kinds. Unless such statements provide information that is new, surprising, or particularly relevant, they may fail to interest the consumer. Questions, however, invite consumers to reach their own conclusions, and styling a phrase as a question may therefore be enough to stimulate interest, at least to a higher degree than a comparable statement (Ahluwalia & Burnkrant, 2004; Hagtvedt, 2011; Howard & Burnkrant, 1990).

#### *The moderating role of arousal*

Following the above perspectives, it is here proposed that the influence of questions versus statements on product evaluation depends on the level of arousal experienced by the consumer. This is because consumers under low (vs. high) arousal have a stronger tendency to value interestingness, while those under high (vs. low) arousal have a stronger tendency to value clarity.

Arousal pertains to the subjective experience of energy mobilization, varying from sleepiness to frantic excitement (Di Muro & Murray, 2012; Russell, Weiss, & Mendelsohn, 1989), and prior research shows that it influences information processing. For instance, high arousal increases attention and the systematic processing of persuasive messages, and thus it can enhance the persuasiveness of strong arguments (Martin et al., 2005). The current research focuses on simple promotional phrases rather than on complex arguments, but it aligns with this prior research in that arousal is expected to influence processing and evaluation.

Although most prior research has focused on the arousal provided by target stimuli, indicating optimal levels of variables such as novelty or complexity in those stimuli (Berlyne, 1971, 1974), it is here proposed that extraneously provided arousal affects consumer responses to the target stimuli. I am not thus making a misattribution-of-arousal argument (Schachter & Singer, 1962), but I am arguing that high arousal decreases the value placed on interesting communication and increases the value placed on clarity (Loewenstein, 1994). Conversely, under low arousal, a consumer is likely to appreciate a question to the extent that it arouses curiosity (Berlyne, 1966, 1974; Steenkamp & Baumgartner, 1992).

This argument also fits with an evolutionary perspective (Darwin, 1859; Pinker, 2002). In many high-arousal situations, whether tied to opportunity or threat, it would have benefitted our ancestors to make clear, immediate assessments. For instance, a person hunting or being attacked by a large animal might benefit from swift assessments that inform immediate action. Conversely, under normal, low-arousal conditions, curiosity and the appreciation of interestingness would have led people to learn and prosper. In other words, those who valued interestingness under low arousal and clarity under high arousal tended to survive, thrive, and pass on their genes, perpetuating these tendencies in later generations. I suggest that today’s consumers exhibit these tendencies based on a generalized response to arousal, regardless of its source.

In sum, I make the following predictions in the context of product advertising: Under low arousal, questions have a more favorable influence on product evaluation than statements do; this influence is mediated by the perceived interestingness of the phrase. Under high arousal, the influence is reversed, and it is mediated by perceived clarity.

#### **Study 1**

Study 1 was designed to provide preliminary evidence in regard to the proposed process. I expect that the tendency to value clarity is stronger under high (vs. low) arousal, while the

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