

Research Dialogue

Cultivating admiration in brands: Warmth, competence, and landing in the “golden quadrant” ☆

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Abstract

Although a substantial amount of research has examined the constructs of warmth and competence, far less has examined how these constructs develop and what benefits may accrue when warmth and competence are cultivated. Yet there are positive consequences, both emotional and behavioral, that are likely to occur when brands hold perceptions of both. In this paper, we shed light on when and how warmth and competence are jointly promoted in brands, and why these reputations matter.

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Judgments of warmth and competence play important roles in consumers' perceptions of organizations and brands (e.g., Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004; Aaker, Vohs, & Mogilner, 2010). For example, non-profits tend to be perceived as relatively warm, whereas for-profits are perceived as more competent (Aaker et al., 2010). Not only do these perceptions form stable impressions of firms, they color consumers' willingness to engage with brands made by these organizations. When firms are perceived as both warm and competent, consumers become more willing to buy brands from these organizations.

Recent research suggests that the cultivation of both competence and warmth is needed now more than ever, with

perceptions of brand quality decreased by 24% and trust in brands experiencing a decline of nearly 50% since 1993 (e.g., Gerzema, 2009). Admiration in brands may be the emotional antidote to both kinds of tarnished perceptions. Indeed, prior work has shown that cultivating both warmth and competence leads to admiration, whereas the absence of one of these dimensions has been found to elicit negative emotions: If competence is lacking, pity is experienced, and if warmth is lacking, envy is felt (Caprariello, Cuddy, & Fiske, 2009; Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2007; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002).

The emotional benefits resulting from the combination of warmth and competence have behavioral consequences as well. Warmth is typically associated with cooperative intentions and prosocial behavior, inducing others to come to one's aid when needed, whereas competency is typically associated with the ability to execute one's intentions (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008). From a customer perspective, being perceived as both warm and competent corresponds to increased willingness to buy from an organization (Aaker et al., 2010) that can ultimately translate into increased consumer engagement, connection, and loyalty, which are cornerstones of social brand building (Fournier, 1998; Fournier & Avery, 2010).

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So when can reputations of warmth and competence be developed in brands? And what are the positive consequences that result from these reputations? To address these questions, we report the results of a study in which we tested how warmth and competence interact to affect admiration and purchase intent. Subsequently, we discuss how brands can foster reputations that are both warm and competent. In doing so, we hope to illuminate how brands might land in this “golden quadrant.”

Understanding warmth and competence

In Kervyn, Fiske, & Malone (2012—this volume), the authors build on the Stereotype Content Model to suggest that consumers assess brands’ perceived intentions and abilities, which elicit certain emotions and drive consumer behavior. Warmth perceptions answer the question, “What intentions does this entity have?” People or social objects with cooperative intentions are seen as warm, approachable, and trustworthy. Competence perceptions answer the question, “Is this entity capable of carrying out its intentions?” Being perceived to have the ability to implement their intentions indicates competence. In this light, brands—as social objects—with cooperative intentions should be seen as sincere, trustworthy, and friendly, whereas brands perceived to possess a skill set to execute competently should be associated with intelligence, success, and leadership (Aaker, 1997).

How do these reputations play out in the marketplace? Although it has been established that the combination of warmth and competence results in positive emotional consequences, such as admiration (Cuddy et al., 2007), in addition to behaviorally-oriented consequences, such as increased purchase intent (Aaker et al., 2010), it remains unclear how warmth and competence combine to impact purchase intent and whether consumer admiration fuels the impact of warmth and competence on purchase intent. We designed an experiment to examine these questions.

The “golden quadrant” study

The goal of our study was two-fold: first, we sought to investigate whether warmth and competence interact to affect purchase intent. That is, do warmth and competence contribute individually to affect purchase intent or do brands receive an extra boost when they possess both dimensions? Second, to investigate what drives purchase intent, we examined the impact of warmth and competence on admiration, and in turn on purchase intent. We drew on the methodology and stimuli developed by Kervyn et al. (2012—this volume), and further refined by Bennett & Hill (2012—this volume), to examine the downstream consequences associated with warmth and competence.

Procedure

Four hundred and eight adults (57.1% female; mean age=34.51, SD=12.54) participated in an online study on brands. Based on random assignment, participants were exposed to one of the following brands: McDonalds, Burger King, BP, Shell, Tropicana, Minute Maid, Tylenol, or Advil, selected by

Bennett & Hill (2012—this volume) because they represent four diverse product categories that vary in degrees of warmth and competence (fast food, gasoline, orange juice, and pain relievers). Specifically, participants were asked to think about the brand, and then indicate the extent to which it was seen as warm and friendly ($r=0.76$) and competent and capable ($r=0.85$) on a 5-point scale (1 = “not at all descriptive,” 5 = “extremely descriptive”). In addition, feelings of admiration toward the brand were captured on a 7-point scale (1 = “not at all,” 7 = “extremely”). Next, purchase intent (“how likely you would be to buy the brand if you had need for such a product during the next 30 days?”) was assessed on a 7-point scale (1 = “not at all,” 7 = “extremely”). Demographics and brand familiarity were also measured. Last, participants were paid (\$0.50) and debriefed.

Results

We argue that the combination of warmth and competence is ideal for brands to achieve, but are the positive behavioral effects associated with their achievement additive or interactive? The results of a regression analysis involving warmth, competence, and an interaction between the two constructs on purchase intent revealed a significant main effect of competence ($\beta=0.69$, $t=3.12$, $p=0.002$), but no main effect of warmth ($\beta=0.21$, $t=0.67$, $p=0.51$), a finding echoing that of Aaker et al. (2010), who also found that competency perceptions are more important than warmth for spurring consumers to purchase. In addition, the results suggest that warmth and competence interact with one another to marginally affect purchase intent ($\beta=0.14$, $t=1.70$, $p=0.09$). Thus, it appears that achieving a status of both warmth and competence provides firms with an additional boost that surpasses the individual effect that each provides.

To examine the process underlying the above effect, a mediation analysis was conducted. First, purchase intent was regressed on competence ($\beta=0.69$, $t=3.12$, $p=0.002$), warmth ($p=0.51$), and their interaction ($p=0.09$). Next, admiration was regressed on competence ($\beta=0.30$, $t=2.36$, $p=0.02$), warmth ($p=0.83$), and their interaction ($p=0.51$). Finally, purchase intent was regressed on admiration and competence, along with warmth and the interaction of competence and warmth (the latter two continued to be nonsignificant). Supportive of partial mediation, the effect of admiration was significant ($\beta=0.49$, $t=5.77$, $p<0.001$), whereas the effect of competence declined in predictive ability ($\beta=0.54$, $t=2.55$, $p=0.01$), as evidenced by a bootstrap analysis which yielded a 95% confidence-interval of [0.04, 0.27] for the difference between the coefficients of competence in the two regressions (with and without the mediator). These results suggest that competence is indeed a direct driver of purchase intent, supportive of past work (Aaker et al., 2010), and that admiration partially mediates the impact of competence on purchase intent.

General discussion

The idea that, at their core, warmth and competence describe the vast majority of perceptions that people have about others is well-established (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007). However, the fact that this lens is also used when people perceive other

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