

Source effects in purchase decisions: The impact of physical attractiveness and accent of salesperson

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Abstract

A study was conducted to examine the impact of salesperson physical attractiveness and accent on receiver purchase intentions. Twenty-four broadcast commercials were produced by manipulating attractiveness and accent factors. Participating in the study were 963 subjects who evaluated the product/service being advertised. Consistent with the argument that if receivers behave according to the physical attractiveness stereotype, they should perceive attractive salespersons more favorably and respond to their sales pitches more readily than they do to unattractive salespersons, purchase intentions were more favorably influenced by attractive salespersons' message. Also, study findings indicate that salespersons with a standard accent or dialect were perceived more favorably and created higher purchase intentions than foreign-accented salespersons. Implications for advertising and personal selling are discussed.

Keywords: Salesperson accent; Physical attractiveness; Categorization theory; Personal selling; Communication effectiveness

1. Introduction

Marketing and social psychology literature repeatedly note that receiver perception of the sender influences message effectiveness (Alpert and Anderson, 1973; Reingen and Kernan, 1994). Kelman (1961) argued that sender attractiveness is an important dimension influencing receiver approval of a message. Empirical studies demonstrate a 'what is beautiful is good' halo effect in

receiver perception of the sender's physical appearance. Also, several studies have reported that sender accent is an additional factor or moderating variable influencing receiver message approval (Bradac and Wisegarver, 1984; Foon, 1986; Tsalikis et al., 1991).

However, findings and conclusions of the different researchers mentioned above are inconsistent. Reingen and Kernan (1994) reported that more favorable selling skills are attributed to highly attractive salespersons; buyers treat ostensibly attractive sellers more cordially, and attrac-

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tive persons get more donations when soliciting for charitable organizations. In addition, attractive people are better liked and are assumed to be more sociable, independent, and exciting (Bringham, 1980; Patzer, 1983; Patzer, 1985), while less attractive people are assumed to be deviant and are often stigmatized (Jones et al., 1978; Unger et al., 1982). Wilson and Sherrell (1993), on the other hand, reported that respondent attitude change is not related to the attractiveness of the speaker.

Tsalikis et al. (1991) reported that an American salesperson with a standard American-English accent has an advantage over a Greek-American salesperson with a Greek-English accent when addressing an English-speaking audience. They also showed that there was no significant interaction between respondent exposure to an accent and the respondent evaluation of the accent. Tsalikis et al. (1992) found that a sales pitch presented in standard accent evokes more favorable judgements on all measured dimensions than the same sales pitch presented in foreign accent.

Tajfel's (Tajfel, 1981) categorization theory can be utilized to shed light on this topic. Tajfel's (1981) social categorization, social identity, and social comparison theory is a category-based model explaining how the receiver decodes or evaluates the spokesperson. According to the theory, the receiver first evaluates the spokesperson along the dimensions of *attractiveness* and *accent*. Next, the receiver identifies himself or herself with the spokesperson along those categorized dimensions. Finally, these categories form the basis for a comparison with the spokesperson. However, criteria for comparison are based upon the standards of the dominant group, such as white Anglo-Saxon males in the United States. Also, a positive identification with the spokesperson, based on the standards of the dominant group, results in the receiver being positively influenced by the spokesperson. Hence, advertisers who use presenters with a positive receiver identity, coupled with attractiveness and accent dimensions, can expect a positive influence on members of the target market.

It is posited in this study that decoding theory

provides some explanations to receiver evaluation of the sender. Hence, the objective of this study is to investigate the relationship between spokesperson attractiveness and accent and consumer purchase intentions, and therefore to understand the usefulness of decoding theory in explaining and predicting consumer purchase intentions.

2. Spokesperson dimensions and consumer decision making

Persuasion research has focused on identifying those attributes of a spokesperson affecting the impact of persuasive communication. Two of the factors cited in current literature are: (1) *spokesperson attractiveness* (Alpert and Anderson, 1973; Baker and Churchill, 1977; Joseph, 1982; Swartz, 1984; Eagly et al., 1991), and (2) *spokesperson accent* (Bradac and Wisegarver, 1984; Foon, 1986; Tsalikis et al., 1991).

2.1. Spokesperson attractiveness

Abundant research evidence attests to the positive expected marketing consequences of employing attractive versus unattractive spokespersons and models (Baker and Churchill, 1977; Joseph, 1982; Courtney and Whipple, 1983; Reid and Soley, 1983; Caballero and Pride, 1984; Kahle and Homer, 1985; McGuire, 1985; Belch et al., 1987; Kamins, 1990). Spokesperson attractiveness, a general concept, encompasses three features: similarity, familiarity, and liking (Swartz, 1984). Persuasion through an identification process is based on the receiver finding the source attractive in terms of intellectual skills, personality properties, lifestyle characteristics, etc. Attractive people are better liked and are assumed to be more sociable, independent, and exciting, while less attractive people are assumed to be deviant.

Joseph's (Joseph, 1982) review of the experimental findings from advertising and related disciplines on the impact of physically attractive spokespersons and models on opinion change, product evaluation, source perception, and recall shows that attractive – as compared to unattrac-

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