Reducing Reactance Induced Backlash Responses to Recommendations

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Prior research has shown that marketers’ recommendations to consumers not only fail to decrease recommended against behaviors, but rather cause increases in the behaviors creating backlash effects. We examine the effects of four moderators on reactance induced backlash: freedom of choice, availability of substitutes, repetition, and elaboration. We find that substitute availability has little effect on reducing reactance; perception of freedom is the main driver of backlash responses. We also find that repetition can reduce backlash under some circumstances, and that although backlash is not driven by elaboration, elaboration can reduce reactance induced backlash. Implications for marketers are discussed.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This research examines factors that might reduce reactance induced backlash effects to persuasion. Marketers often seek to persuade consumers, however, such influence attempts may fail due to a variety of reasons including poor message delivery (Kardes et al. 2005; Zhang & Buda 1999), lack of attention (Petty et al. 2005), dislike for the ad (Edell & Burke 1986) or suspicion of marketers’ intent (Friestad & Wright 1994). This research focuses on another, less oft researched, reason for the failure of marketers’ persuasion attempts, consumer reactance.

Reactance is a motivational state that individuals experience when they perceive their freedom to choose or act is being threatened (Brehm 1966). Prior research has shown that due to this freedom-motivation, consumers often react against marketing communications. In doing so, consumers do not merely ignore reactance-inducing messages, but rather act against them, generating backlash effects (Mann & Ward 2001; Plant & Devine 2001). For example, individuals provided with a recommendation against an option not only failed to decrease choice of that option, but instead increased choice of it (Fitzsimons and Lehmann 2004).

Such reactance-induced backlash effects (e.g., when consumers increase a recommended against behavior) are of particular concern to marketers. In this research we examine four factors that might affect reactance induced backlash and some strategies marketers might undertake to reduce such effects. The four factors examined are: freedom of choice, substitute availability, repetition, and elaboration.

In study one, we examine both freedom of choice and substitute availability. Substitute availability may be an important factor in reactance because when consumers adhere to a marketing-communication, they may be forced to change their preferences and may end up with an option they were initially less interested in. Such switching carry significant opportunity costs. We vary these opportunity costs by varying the availability of close versus distant substitutes and examine whether reactance induced backlash levels are affected. If reactance is driven by high opportunity costs, it should be significantly reduced when a close substitute is available.

At the same time, we also vary the psychological costs of reactance by manipulating perceived freedom of choice. If reactance is caused by a perceived threat to freedom, it should be significantly reduced if no freedom exists to begin with. We conduct a 2 (Freedom of choice: Yes/No) by 2 (Opportunity cost: Close/Distant substitute) between subjects design with a recommendation against a given product. We find that individuals who perceive they have freedom of choice enact high levels of reactance, choosing the recommended against option almost 80% of the time; the presence of a close/distant substitute has no effect on the level of reactance. However, when no freedom of choice is given, reactance is significantly reduced (25% and less).

These findings suggest that reactance is driven by psychological rather than opportunity costs and that attempts to minimize reactance via changes to the product mix may not be effective. Instead, marketers should reduce the psychological cost of adhering to recommendations, for example, by embedding messages in less threatening environments (e.g., product placement), or constructing messages that do not as obviously dictate a certain path for behavior (e.g., comparative ads or elaboration; see study 3).

In study two we examine the effects of multiple recommendations on consumer reactance. Although advertising research has shown that repetition can serve to enhance message effectiveness (Appel 1971; Hasher, Goldstein, and Toppino 1977; Hautvedt et al. 1994), this may not be the case when reactance is involved. Specifically, individuals who find one recommendation as an attempt to limit their freedom may find ten such recommendations even stronger, more reprehensible freedom-limiting attempt.

We find that whereas low levels of repetitions (i.e., 1) increase reactance, higher levels (i.e., 3 and 10) serve to reduce it. These findings suggest marketers might be wise to repeat their messages to gain compliance. However, this tactic may only work under certain circumstance. First, the recommendations used in this study differed from one another. Additionally, the message source was reportedly other consumers, a source likely to elicit less suspicion than marketers might (Friestad and Wright 1994). Thus, to maximize the effectiveness of repetition, marketers should attempt to convey the same message via different means repeatedly, using slightly different messages, and attempting to enhance credibility of message sources.

In study three we examine the effects of externally provided versus internally elaborated upon behaviors on consumer reactance. It is possible that reactance is caused by consumers’ elaboration on the behavior recommended; such elaboration can be balanced (considering both pros and cons) or can be negative only, considering why the behavior is being recommended against. If elaboration underlies reactance, patterns of behavior in elaboration and direct recommendation should be similar. Such similarity is important to identify, since some marketing communication (e.g., comparative advertising or “teasers”) may involve elaboration (Chebat et al. 2001).

Additionally, in this study we examine a real-life, long-term, consequential behavior, pursued outside of the lab. Such reactance responses have not been examined to date, and this study allows us to see whether reactance effects have lingering real-world effects. We also examine whether any of these effects are affected by chronic individual reactance (Hong 1992).

In study four we find that reactance is not driven by an elaboration process, as responses to balanced/cons only elaboration differ from responses to direct recommendations. We find responses to a direct recommendation are affected by chronic individual reactance, whereas responses to elaboration are not. Specifically, individuals high in chronic reactance who received a direct recommendation against a behavior, showed the highest levels of engagement in that behavior. This finding suggests that reactance induced backlash effects persist outside of the lab and thus should be a cause for concern for marketers.

At the same time, study three shows that elaboration (especially on the cons only of the behavior) seems to provide a strong remedy against reactance induced backlash effects.

Thus, the utilization of open-ended (albeit guided) communication with consumers in which they are allowed to reach their own conclusions may be a strong remedy for reactance induced backlash behaviors.
REFERENCES


