Positively Useless: Irrelevant Negative Information Enhances Positive Impressions

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In a series of studies we show that irrelevant information, such as unhelpful user reviews, can enhance product appeal – if framed negatively. When unhelpful reviews appear alongside positive ones, consumers conclude that there is nothing negative to say about the product, which boosts the impact of the positive reviews.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The current research examines the desirability and impact of irrelevant information, in the form of unhelpful online reviews. Positive and helpful user reviews have been shown to increase evaluations and sales (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Zhu and Zhang 2010). While negative reviews can increase product awareness (Berger, Sorensen and Rasmussen 2010) and negative information can be beneficial in two-sided communications and reviews (Eisend 2006; Schlosser 2011), less is known about the effect of irrelevant information in the context of word of mouth and reviews. We suggest that unhelpful reviews can have a positive effect – if they are presented as being negative.

Our premise derives from the observation that online reviews are usually written by strangers, making it difficult to assess their accuracy and relevance (Schlosser 2011). When there are several well-reviewed options or consumers are uncertain of their choice, we propose that they will turn to the small number of available negative reviews, because negative information is often perceived as more diagnostic and valuable (e.g., Rozin and Royzman 2001). If negative reviews do not provide information that consumers believe to be relevant, they are perceived as unhelpful, yet they provide reassurance that “the worst is not so bad”. This enhances the perceived usefulness of the positive information and boosts product evaluations.

Irrelevant information can have positive effects if it is valued by consumers (Carpenter, Glazer and Nakamoto 1994), but can also reduce product evaluations if it is not valued (Brown and Carpenter 2000) and may dilute the impact of more relevant information (e.g., Meyvis and Janiszewski 2002). We build on this research and suggest that the way irrelevant information is presented may determine its impact: when irrelevant information, such as an unhelpful review, is framed negatively, it should lead to higher product evaluations and purchase intentions.

We thus hypothesize that evaluations will be more positive when a review set includes an unhelpful review that is framed negatively rather than positively, and compared to sets without an unhelpful review. This hypothesis is confirmed in a series of four studies in which we also examine the process underlying the effect and rule out alternative explanations.

In study 1, participants evaluated an espresso machine and were assigned to one of three conditions: a set of four positive reviews only (control) or the same four reviews with an additional unhelpful review, framed either with a positive or a negative rating (1 or 5 stars). This review provided general information about coffee that was irrelevant to evaluating the specific espresso machine. As predicted, evaluations differed across conditions (F(2, 74) = 3.56, p < .05). They were significantly higher when the review set included a negatively framed unhelpful review (M = 5.81) compared to the positive frame (M = 5.04, F(2, 74) = 4.86, p < .05) and control conditions (M = 5.0, F(2, 74) = 5.73, p < .01). The latter two conditions did not differ significantly (F < 1).

Study 2 showed that the effect is moderated by familiarity with the reviewers. The student participants read reviews of an elective course, supposedly provided by either friends or strangers. Once again, there were four identical positive reviews and one unhelpful review, framed either positively (“recommended”) or negatively (“not recommended”). The review provided information that was irrelevant for evaluating the course (that it fit the reviewer’s schedule). The expected 2-way interaction (F(1,91) = 5.80, p < .05) emerged: when the reviewers were strangers, evaluations were significantly higher if the review set included a negatively framed unhelpful review (M = 5.68) rather than a positive one (M = 5.0, F(1, 91) = 6.42, p < .05). When the reviewers were friends, unhelpful review framing did not impact evaluations (F < 1). We also identified the underlying process of the effect: bootstrapping analysis showed that it was mediated by a greater overall perceived usefulness of reviews.

Study 3 ruled out two-sided persuasion as an alternative explanation for the effect, by showing that it stems from a lack of negative diagnostic value rather than the mere inclusion of negative information. We therefore included a condition in which the unhelpful review was replaced by a weak but helpful negative review. As expected, we found a significant difference in evaluations of a camera (F(2,100) = 4.71, p < .05). Evaluations were significantly higher in the negative-unhelpful condition (M = 5.76) than the positive-unhelpful condition (M = 5.15, F(2, 100) = 4.94, p < .05) and the weak-negative condition (M = 4.97, F(2, 100) = 8.74, p < .01), confirming that our effect is different from two-sided persuasion.

Study 4 showed that the effect occurs when a negative review is personally irrelevant but not if it is relevant (and thus, truly negative). Participants read reviews of running shoes comprising either four positive reviews only or the same reviews with an additional one-star review, which contained information relevant for women but not for men. The expected gender × review set interaction was found (F(1, 80) = 10.39, p < .01). Men were willing to pay more for the shoes when their review set included the additional (irrelevant) review (M = 86.97, SD = 27.50) compared to when they saw only the four positive reviews (M = 71.90, SD = 17.86; F(1, 80) = 5.23, p < .05). Women, however, were willing to pay less when the additional (relevant) review was included (M = 74.70, SD = 19.76) than when it was not (M = 89.68, SD = 19.59; F(1, 80) = 5.16, p < .05).

The findings demonstrate that unhelpful reviews can have a positive effect on evaluations, and that they can boost the impact of positive reviews – if they are presented with a negative frame. Lack of negative diagnosticity, rather than the mere addition of negative information, is of key importance, with seemingly irrelevant information proving quite relevant when it comes to evaluation and purchase decisions. While consumers and sellers may find some types of reviews and information unhelpful and irrelevant, these can nonetheless have an unexpected positive effect on evaluations.

REFERENCES


