



ASSOCIATION FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

Labovitz School of Business & Economics, University of Minnesota Duluth, 11 E. Superior Street, Suite 210, Duluth, MN 55802

How Vulnerable Are Consumers to Persuasion Attempts?

Anick Bosmans, Tilburg University

Luk Warlop, Katholieke Universiteit B Leuven

EXTENDED ABSTRACT - Consumers are often confronted with mixed marketing signals. To some extent, marketing communications may reflect sincere and diagnostic information to help the consumer make optimal choices. On the other hand, these communications may also reflect ulterior motives that are based on making profit, manipulation of choices, or sometimes even mere deception. For the consumer then, making the right purchase decision is not an easy job. Consumer welfare would require that consumers are able to discount to the extent that persuasion attempts are driven by mere ulterior motives.

[to cite]:

Anick Bosmans and Luk Warlop (2005) ,"How Vulnerable Are Consumers to Persuasion Attempts?", in NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 32, eds. Geeta Menon and Akshay R. Rao, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 506-506.

[url]:

<http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/9131/volumes/v32/NA-32>

[copyright notice]:

This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at <http://www.copyright.com/>.

How Vulnerable are Consumers to Persuasion Attempts?

Anick Bosmans, Tilburg University
Luk Warlop, Katholieke Universiteit – Leuven

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumers are often confronted with mixed marketing signals. To some extent, marketing communications may reflect sincere and diagnostic information to help the consumer make optimal choices. On the other hand, these communications may also reflect ulterior motives that are based on making profit, manipulation of choices, or sometimes even mere deception. For the consumer then, making the right purchase decision is not an easy job. Consumer welfare would require that consumers are able to discount to the extent that persuasion attempts are driven by mere ulterior motives.

Surprisingly little consumer research has investigated when and how consumers will discount for manipulative marketing influences. The present study shows that—although people are able to discount manipulative persuasion attempts—even small reductions in processing resources result in decreased criticism and skepticism, and a higher inclination to follow the advice of the salesperson. Contrary to what can be expected from the persuasion literature, we also observed this decreased scepticism in situations where the ulterior motive was extremely salient.

In 4 experiments we asked participants to choose from and to evaluate two new products while we subjected them to either a blatant persuasion attempt or to a sincere advice. At the same time, background music was played that either elicited high or low levels of arousal (assumed to influence participants' cognitive resources). In our sincere advice conditions (i.e. ulterior motive not salient) we expected people to be more inclined to follow the advice of the salesperson, whereas in the blatant persuasion attempt conditions (i.e. ulterior motive salient) we expected people to discount this advice. The results of our studies are consistent with this expectation, but only when the background music elicited low levels of arousal. When the background music elicited high levels of arousal, both people in the sincere advice as well as those in the blatant persuasion attempt condition were more likely to follow the advice of the salesperson. These effects were replicated even when the ulterior motive was made extremely salient (experiments 3 and 4). The results of experiment 4 moreover show that highly arousing music is capable of significantly decreasing consumers' scepticism. Our results show that even a subtle manipulation such as arousing background music can lead to a higher inclination to follow the advice of the salesperson, decreased consumer scepticism and a decreased application of persuasion knowledge, even when the ulterior motive is highly salient and deceptive. This suggests that consumers are highly vulnerable to misleading persuasion attempts, and that the ability of consumers to cope with these deceptive attempts is often overstated in the persuasion knowledge literature.