Putting Your Best Face Forward: the Effects of Negative Affect on Agent Evaluation

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

When consumers encounter a firm, they are typically confronted by a “face” whether it be a celebrity spokesperson or a customer contact employee. Typically these faces are happy, smiling faces. That is, the prevailing assumption seems to be that a positive face (i.e., a face that conveys positive affect) is the best face for a firm to put forward.

Yet imagine the following scenario. You are standing in line waiting to check-in for a flight. You have just had an awful day at work and the flight you were booked on has been cancelled. When you finally reach the ticket counter (seething), you are greeted by an enthusiastic agent who says to you with a huge smile, “Hi, how can I help you today?” The present research suggests that such an encounter would not only discourage a positive reaction, but in fact exacerbate your negative affect.

In contrast to research suggesting that negative affect motivates people to improve their affect, (Cialdini, Darby, and Vincent 1973) several studies have suggested that there are circumstances under which negative affect leads people to avoid tasks that are rated as happy (Wegener and Petty 1994), and instead choose alternatives closer in valence to their own affect (Erber, Wegner, and Therriault 1996), even though such choices would seem to perpetuate their negative affect.

It has been found that people will often use their affect as information to form judgments and make decisions (Clore et al. 2001; Johnson and Tversky 1983; Schwarz and Clore 1983; Wright and Bower 1992). Perhaps affect serves as a standard of comparison that could lead to assimilation or contrast (Herr 1986). If a target differed greatly from the standard (the affective state) perhaps it would lead to a contrast effect and a magnification of that agent’s attributes (affect-incongruent behavior) (Herr 1986). Thus, it is proposed that negative affect leads one to (a) form a more negative standard of comparison, (b) expect more negative behavior, and (c) perceive a magnified contrast between one’s affect and the behavior of a positive agent.

The current research seeks to examine how people in a negative affect state respond negatively to a positive agent. In the investigation that follows experiment 1 induces negative or positive affect in participants and exposes them to a positive, neutral, or negative agent via a TV advertisement. Experiment 2 induces a neutral or negative affect in participants and exposes them to a face-to-face interaction with a positive, neutral, or negative agent. Experiment 3 induces negative, neutral or positive affect in participants and exposes them to face-to-face interaction with a positive, neutral or negative agent to study the process underlying the response of negative-affect individuals to a positive agent.

Experiment 1

Following an affect manipulation, participants viewed a set of advertisements that featured a positive, neutral, or negative agent and tracked changes in their affect. Participants’ tracked changes in affect were coded for transitions. In support of hypothesis 1, an interaction among participant affect, agent affect and transition was significant and in the predicted direction ($F(2, 42)=3.83, p<.05$).

Further, in support of hypothesis 2, the negative reaction to the agent carried over to product evaluation ($F(2, 42)=4.07, p<.05$).

Experiment 2

How might these effects carry-over to a service encounter where the interaction with an agent is face-to-face? Experiment 2 included two key differences: 1) a comparison of negative to neutral affect, and 2) face-to-face interaction with the agent.

Following an affect induction, participants interacted with an agent displaying positive, neutral or negative affect. Participants then evaluated the agent. In support of hypothesis 3, a participant affect by agent affect interaction found that the negative-affect participants negatively evaluated a positive agent ($F(2, 66)=3.03, p=.055$).

Experiment 3

Experiment 3 tested the proposed process whereby negative affect leads to a shift in people’s standard of comparison and greater expectation for affect-congruent behavior. As a result, people perceive a positive agent as displaying such extreme positive behavior that it is aversive.

Following a false feedback manipulation of affect, participants encountered a positive, neutral or negative agent. Participants then indicated how sad and negative they thought people are in general. Finally, participants rated the positivity of the agent’s behavior and assessed the agent’s behavior relative to people in general. Consistent with hypothesis 4, participants in the negative affect condition judged people in the general population higher on Negative Demeanor compared to neutral and positive affect participants ($Ms=5.76, 4.89, and 5.04, respectively; F(2, 73)=3.51, p<.05$). Consistent with hypothesis 5, an examination of participant ratings of the agent found a participant affect by agent affect interaction such that the positive behavior of the positive agent appears magnified for negative-affect participants ($F(4, 65)=2.62, p<.05$).

The findings have a number of implications for both theory and practice. Theoretically, the results provide evidence that the assumption that consumers are always looking for a positive agent is an oversimplification. In fact, there appear to be situations in which people in a negative affect state respond negatively to a positive agent. Is it possible that forcibly making someone engage in the processing of affect-incongruent behavior could have a detrimental effect on affect? While very challenging cognitive tasks can prove absorbing and improve affect, (Erber and Tesser 1992) perhaps less absorbing tasks can under some circumstances exacerbate a negative affect state? Also, given the important distinctions between negative and positive affect, the current investigation focuses on the more counterintuitive effects of negative affect. Further, this research provides suggestive evidence that the observed effect of negative affect could also occur for positive affect. However, future research is needed to test this possibility.

REFERENCES


