How Do Consumer Targets Perceive and Respond to Brand Agents in Persuasion Attempts?

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How do consumer targets perceive and respond to brand agents in persuasion attempts? Many advances of the persuasion knowledge model have focused upon people in selling functions as agents in a persuasion episode. A major facet that remains under researched is our understanding of brands as agents. This paper addresses this gap by examining consumer beliefs about brands as agents of persuasion. Depth interview data show how target perceptions of agents can be more complex and their responses less resistant than previous conceptualizations. Consumer targets can perceive brand agents as representing, offering, reaching out, getting the word, and making do; and they can respond by defending, congratulating, choosing, and getting suckered.

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**How do consumer targets perceive and respond to brand agents in persuasion attempts?**

In their seminal article, Friestad and Wright (1994) began to explore the nature of consumers’ taken for granted understandings of how persuasion agents attempt to influence them in the marketplace. Although they recognized that agents were not necessarily people in selling functions, many advances since have been situated in such settings [e.g., a salesclerk making a sale (Campbell and Kirmani 2000), a retailer convincing customers “to spend more money very soon” (Brown and Krishna 2004, 532)]. Recently, Kirmani and Campbell (2004) consolidated and extended our understanding of consumers’ understandings of salespeople as persuasion agents. A major facet of persuasion knowledge that remains under researched, however, is our understanding of brands as persuasion agents.

This paper begins to address this gap by examining consumers’ perceptions of how brands attempt to persuade and how they themselves respond to these attempts. This is important because unless we do so, we risk overlooking differences in consumers’ beliefs about how brands as compared with salespeople attempt to persuade. As well, this paper contributes larger conversations about how persuasion knowledge is an invariable resource (Friestad and Wright 1994; Kirmani and Campbell 2004) and how consumer responses to brand actions vary as a function of their relationship with the brand (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004; Aggarwal 2004).

**Method**

Depth interviews on the general topic of brands were conducted with five participants (Jack, Jill, Joe, Jon, and Jay), and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were first coded individually, and after grouping observations and identifying themes, the process of comparison and refinements was repeated until a coherent account of the data was achieved (Charmaz 2000; Strauss and Corbin 1998).

**Findings**

**Brands as agents**

Five dimensions emerge in participants’ perceptions of brands as agents: 1) agents represent, 2) agents offer, 3) agents reach out, 4) agents get the word, and 5) agents make do. It is worth noting that not all brands are discussed along these dimensions. For example, brands described as “imitators” and “least luxurious” are rarely talked about along these dimensions.

In seeing agents as representing, participants drop names and reference stereotypes. For example, on Diesel, Joe explains “GINO, you know, Italian, STM [local catholic school], ‘98 civic lowered with rims and beads, spiky hair perfect to the twist!’” As well, participants see agents as offering them symbolic connotations that might otherwise be inaccessible. For example, Jill notes how Club Monaco helps portray her as having class and cosmopolitanism, and how without it, she would risk looking like a “little hoochie” or “country”. Participants talk about agents as “reaching out” for them, and they express belief that agents get the word and teach them about styles and about “what gets hot”. For example, Joe talks excitedly about how Tommy Hilfiger “180 degrees reversed their marketing” to reach him as a youth, and Jill explains how Club Monaco “looks at all the runway shows, everything and whatever’s hip at the time” and then gets this out to “the younger generation”. Lastly, participants see agents as making do with what already exists in “the system, the way society works”, and speak easily of branded placements in movies and video games. Jay remarks how “they do that all the time…if you watch your favorite sitcom, again the guy wears certain clothes, sits on certain furniture, whatever, like all that’s been placed there.”

**Consumers as targets**

Four dimensions are identified in participants’ perceptions of themselves as targets: 1) targets defend, 2) targets congratulate, 3) targets choose, and 4) targets get suckerized. Again, it is worth noting that not all brands are discussed along these dimensions, instead these are often brands that participants like.

Although participants often talk about brand agents as “sneaky”, they are quick to defend when asked to elaborate. For example, on criticisms and Hugo Boss, Jack concludes “problem is that’s the nature of the game…they’re in the market where everybody else is doing it, so if they don’t do it, they’ll get left in the dust”, and adds “you shouldn’t need to have certain clothing to have more confidence, but the reality of the situation is…it gives you that nice, warm feeling inside.” Sometimes, agents are congratulated for being “sly” in persuasion attempts. In talking about Rocawear in music videos, Jay comments “a music video’s more subversive right…it’s clever right, an effective way to reach your target.” As well, participants often stress their choice by emphasizing product specifics and contrasting with others. For example, Joe repeatedly contrasts himself from others who are “into” his music: “I would say that 98% of people who like hip hop don’t like Guess”, and even when he retraces Guess back to a hip hop song, he is very adamant: “Honestly to tell you the truth why I bought Guess, because I heard it on a [Nas] song…[So might others?] No, not really, Guess is not very popular in that sense, where