You and Us: Causal Effects of Language Use on Consumers’ Perceptions of Brands

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Three studies examine how subtle variations in language use can significantly affect consumers’ attitudes toward real-world brands. The studies indicate that customers and non-customers react in opposite directions to seemingly inconsequential pronoun variations in persuasive messages. Moreover, the effect of pronoun use on consumers’ attitudes can reverse as a function of the specific brand domain (e.g., banking vs. healthcare). These moderated effects are found to be mediated by perceptions of brand honesty. These findings demonstrate the unexplored role of language in persuasion and highlight the fact that customers and non-customers may extract divergent meanings from minor language variations.

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“Imagine a global financial firm with the heart and soul of a two-person organization. A world-leading wealth management company that sits down with you to understand your needs and goals… You & Us. UBS.” (www.ubs.com).

“Together, We’re Making a Difference. For over 25 years, Whole Foods Market team members, customers and suppliers have worked to make the world a better place.” (www.wholefoodsmarket.com)

The excerpts above illustrate the commonsense belief that portraying the affiliation between the brand and the consumer in terms of an intimate interpersonal bond should lead to more favorable attitudes among consumers. Referring to consumers and the brand in terms of ‘you and us’ in the UBS slogan as opposed to ‘we’ in the Whole Foods Market statement may seem equally effective. Likewise, whether these messages are perceived by existing customers or by potential ones may seem totally inconsequential.

The present research challenges both these assumptions. We demonstrate that language variations as subtle as pronoun use can have significant effects on consumers’ attitudes toward brands. These effects can be either positive or negative, depending on people’s relationship status with the brand (i.e., customers vs. non-customers) as well as on the specific brand domain. In domains in which brands are perceived as equal partners (e.g., banking), using the pronoun ‘we’ instead of the phrase ‘you and the brand’ can lead to more favorable attitudes among customers but to less favorable attitudes among non-customers. Conversely, in domains in which brands are perceived as partners in a hierarchical relationship (e.g., healthcare), using the phrase ‘you and the brand’ instead of the pronoun ‘we’ can lead to more favorable attitudes among customers but not among non-customers.

Mediation Hypothesis

Consumers have implicit beliefs about what is appropriate in their relationships with different brands (Aaker et al 2004). They may rely on their knowledge of their affiliation with the brand when evaluating language use, to make dispositional attributions about the brand: when language is in harmony with their beliefs, the brand is perceived as more trustworthy, leading to more positive attitudes overall. When language is incongruent with consumers’ beliefs, they may attribute this discrepancy to negative dispositions such as dishonesty, leading to less positive attitudes. We therefore hypothesized that the moderated effect of pronoun exposure on attitudes is mediated by perceptions of brand-honesty.

An alternative possible mediator is processing fluency: when consumers interact with brands for which they have stored linguistic representations, these are likely to become more accessible and, in turn, facilitate processing of congruent information but not of incongruent information. Fluency, in turn, leads to more favorable attitudes (Schwarz 2004).

In a pretest, we asked participants to rate as either equal or hierarchical their relationships with their real brands in several domains. The results indicated that consumers perceive their relationships with their banks as significantly more equal than their relationships with their health-insurance providers (p<.001). Consistent with the conceptualization above, we predicted that exposing people in a banking context to the pronoun ‘we’, as opposed to the phrase ‘you and the brand’, will lead to more favorable attitudes among brand customers but to less favorable attitudes among non-customers. Conversely, we predicted that exposure to the pronoun ‘we’ in a health-insurance context will lead to less favorable attitudes among customers and to more favorable attitudes among non-customers.

IN STUDY 1, 164 participants read a message advertising Wells Fargo, a prominent west-coast banking brand. Some participants read a message with the phrase ‘you and Wells Fargo’, whereas others read a message in which ‘you and Wells Fargo’ was replaced with ‘we’. In the control condition, the consumer and the brand were not referred to jointly. Next, participants were asked to rate their agreement with four attitude items. Finally, they were asked whether they were banking with Wells Fargo, thus yielding a 2(customer-status: customer vs. non-customer) x 3(pronoun: ‘we’ vs. ‘you and the brand’ vs. control) design.

The results revealed a significant 3(pronoun) x 2(customer-status) interaction, p<.013. Customers rated their brand-attitudes more positively in the ‘we’ condition than in the ‘you and Wells Fargo’ condition and the control. Conversely, non-customers rated their attitudes less positively in the ‘we’ condition than in the ‘you and Wells Fargo’ condition and the control.

IN STUDY 2 we tested whether the effect found was mediated by either honesty perceptions or processing-fluency. The same design was used as in study 1 but with two banking brands (Wells Fargo and Stanford Federal Credit Union). In addition to attitude measures, we included mediating variables pertaining to brand-honesty and processing-fluency.

After reading ad excerpts as in study 1, 80 participants were asked to rate their agreement with seven attitude statements, two brand-honesty statements, and two fluency statements. Finally, they were asked whether they were banking with the brand, yielding a 2(customer-status) x 2(pronoun) x 2(bank) design.

The analysis revealed a significant 2(pronoun) x 2(customer-status) interaction, p<.021, with no effect of brand name, indicating that the effect found was not brand-specific. Again, customers rated their brand-attitudes more positively and non-customers rated their brand-attitudes less positively in the ‘we’ condition than in the ‘you and the brand’ condition. A mediated-moderation analysis (Muller et al 2005) indicated that this effect was mediated by perceptions of brand-honesty but not by processing-fluency.

IN STUDY 3 we tested the hypothesis that the effect of pronoun use will reverse when the brand domain is associated with a hierarchical consumer-brand relationship. 312 participants were assigned to a 2(domain: banking vs. healthcare) x 2(pronoun) x 2(customer-status) design.