The Impact of Source and Item Characteristics on Consumer Responses to Flattery in Retail Sales Transactions

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Flattery is a common method of interpersonal influence applied by agents in the marketplace. However, the literature on persuasion knowledge and related topics has primarily revealed a negative influence of flattery in a retail setting. The present research identifies two critical boundary conditions in the context of marketplace interactions which may result in a positive outcome of flattery. Results of a field study demonstrated that when a highly attractive (vs. less attractive) salesperson flatters a consumer on an item she/he already owns (vs. an item from the store), flattery can lead to higher satisfaction, trustworthiness and intentions to revisit the store.

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References

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Consumer behavior research over the last 25 years has significantly informed us about persuasive communications in the context of interpersonal interactions in the marketplace (Friestad & Wright 1994; Campbell & Kirmani 2000; Main, Dahl & Darke 2007). Flattery is a common method of interpersonal influence applied by agents in the marketplace. Although research on flattery in marketing has primarily focused on its negative influence (Main et al. 2007), studies conducted in other disciplines such as psychology and organizational behavior provide evidence of a positive influence of flattery (e.g., Cialdini, 2000; Watt, 1993; Wayne & Ferris 1990). The purpose of the present research was to search for similar positive evidence of flattery in the marketplace context and identify the boundary conditions of such an outcome.

We focus on two potential conditions under which flattery may have a positive influence on consumers. The first factor is the target item of flattery. To date, the literature has primarily looked at flattery on a store item that consumers try on (e.g. Campbell & Kirmani 2000). We are interested in learning if there is any difference in trustworthiness when the salesperson flatters the consumer on an item he/she wears to the store. Literature on mere ownership suggests that an object is evaluated more positively by individuals when it is owned by them vs. not (Beggan 1992) since possessions are considered as one’s extended self (Belk 1988). Evaluation of one’s own possessions is therefore linked to one’s self perception and feeling of self enhancement (Beggan 1992). However, the literature has yet to explore the impact of a salesperson’s flattery on a possession. It may be possible that when a consumer is flattered on an item she/he owns, it enhances his/her self-perceptions and creates a positive feeling towards the interaction experience as well as the flatterer.

The second factor proposed in the current study is the attractiveness of the source. Prior work demonstrated that messages from an attractive source are considered significantly more persuasive as compared to messages from an unattractive source (e.g. Baker & Churchill 1977) and can increase product evaluations of a contaminated product (Argo, Dahl & Morales 2008). In addition, attractiveness creates a halo effect, in which attractive people are considered to have many other socially desirable personality characteristics. Therefore, the source becomes more persuasive in the perceiver’s eyes. We predict that flattery will lead to higher satisfaction with the interaction experience when the salesperson is attractive vs. unattractive. Moreover, this will be strengthened when a highly attractive salesperson compliments on an item owned by the consumer, as opposed to an item from the store.

A total of 50 participants (19 male and 31 female) from a large eastern university took part in a field study and received payment for their participation. A 2 (product: own vs. store) X 2 (attractiveness: high vs. average) between subjects experimental design was conducted. The product was a manipulated variable and attractiveness was a measured variable. The primary dependent measures included...