The Fundamental Attribution Error in Salespeople and Its Correction By Stealing Thunder: Evidence From Agents and Consumers

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The fundamental attribution error in retailing settings is investigated by comparing consumers versus sales agents’ responses to social influence. Two studies investigate how ingratiation tactics and processing motivations influence the error. Results demonstrate that under defense motivations, consumers are less likely to fall prey to the error than agents.

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Extended Abstract

When you go shopping and encounter a salesperson, what is your first impression? Do you spontaneously think “untrustworthy” or “helpful”? When you automatically think untrustworthy, a stereotype toward salespeople is activated. Research has demonstrated that people are suspicious of salespeople’s behavior (Main, Dahl, & Darke, 2007) and have a negative stereotype toward salespeople (Babin, Boles, & Darden, 1995). This negative stereotype may influence consumers’ perceptions. Specifically, when dealing with salespeople, consumers may fall prey to the fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1977), which holds that when forming impressions, people tend to misattribute others’ behavior to dispositional factors (e.g., untrustworthy) while underestimating the impact of situational factors.

We argue that consumers who have no work experience as salespeople may easily apply FAE when processing feedback from salespeople, as their early negative impressions may bias the interpretation of later information. In turn, the application of FAE may lead to high persuasion knowledge (Friestad & Wright 1994). In contrast, consumers who have worked as salespeople may hold relatively accurate perceptions of salespeople, so they are less likely to apply the FAE.

H1: Consumers with experience as salespeople will have higher perceptions of trust toward salespeople who provide them with positive feedback than consumers without experience as salespeople.

A second question is how to counteract the negatively biased judgments of salespeople’s trustworthiness (i.e. the sinister attribution error) evidenced in retail settings (Main et al. 2007). One possibility is the use of stealing thunder which is a dissuasion tactic in which people self-disclose potential weaknesses to reduce its negative impact on others’ evaluations (Dolink et al, 2003). That is, salespeople may use the stealing thunder tactic by self-disclosing a plausible ulterior motive to increase their perceived trustworthiness. However, this effect may be moderated by work experience as salespeople. Consumers who have worked as salespeople may recognize stealing thunder as a tactic, so they are less likely to trust the message. Therefore:

H2: Flattery with stealing thunder will lead to higher perceptions of trust toward salespeople than flattery alone for consumers without salesclerk experience. However, this stealing thunder will have negative effects on consumers who have worked as salespeople.

Study 1

Method. This was a 2 (flattery: alone vs. combined with stealing thunder) × 2 (consumer types: salesperson experience vs. no experience) quasi experimental between-subjects design (N=74). Participants self identified whether they worked as salespeople previously. They imaged an interaction with a salesclerk where they were going to buy a pair of sunglasses. Participants were either told that: “That’s a great pair of sunglasses. … (flattery)” or “You may think that I am just trying to make a sale, but that’s a great pair of sunglasses. … (stealing thunder)” The dependent measure was trust (Main et al., 2007; α=0.81).

Results showed a significant interaction (F (1,70)=6.41, p<0.05). Planned contrasts showed that for flattery alone, participants with sales experience had higher trust in the salesclerk than those without experience (F(1,70)=8.48, p<0.01), as per H1. Planned contrasts also supported H2. Participants without experience perceived salespeople as more trustworthy when flattery was combined with stealing thunder than when provided alone (F(1,70)=3.43, p=0.068). In contrast, participants with sales experience rated lower trust for flattery used with stealing thunder than flattery alone (F(1,70)=3.0, p=0.088).

Study 2

It is well established that motivations have an influence on information processing (Chen & Chaiken, 1999). A motivation for accuracy may drive people to “use all attribution-relevant information” (Vonk, 1999, p.383) instead of dispositional bias like the FAE. Consequently, under accuracy motivation, flattery combined with or without other tactics (e.g., stealing thunder) will have little influence on consumer’s information processing. On the contrary, defense motivation is a desire to hold attitudes that are congruent with one’s prior beliefs (Chaiken, Giner-Sorolla, & Chen, 1996). In retailing contexts, when defense motivated, flattery may lead to lower perceptions of trust for consumers without sales experience than consumers who have, as the former may be more likely to attribute causation to salespeople’s dispositions than the latter. However, flattery combined with stealing thunder will result in the opposite effect under defense motivation.

H3: Stealing thunder will be only effective for consumers without sales experience under defense motivation, while it will make no difference under accuracy motivation.

Method. It was a 2 (flattery: alone vs. combined with stealing thunder) X 2 (consumer types: salesperson experience vs. none) X 2 (motivation: accuracy vs. defense) between-subjects design (N=141). The manipulation of flattery was the same as Study 1. Participants were asked to image an interaction with a salesclerk. Half of them were told to buy a pair of sunglasses. Given that buying sunglasses is the primary shopping goal, this should lead them to want to avoid being tricked by the salesclerk (defense motivation). The remaining participants were asked to go shopping for a jacket and try on sunglasses beforehand (accuracy motivation).
Trustworthiness. A 2 X 2 X 2 ANOVA on trust yielded significant two-way interaction between flattery type and consumer types in support of H2 (F(1, 133) = 5.14, p < 0.05) and three-way interaction (F (1, 133) = 4.87, p < 0.05). Planned contrasts supported H3. Under defense-motivation, participants without experience rated higher trust with the use of stealing thunder than the use of flattery alone (F = 8.48, p < 0.01), while under accuracy-motivation, there were no significant effects (F = 0.28, p = 0.60 (flattery) and F = 0.24, p = 0.63 (stealing thunder)). Further, under defense-motivation, higher trust was evidenced with the use of stealing thunder for participants without experience than those with experience (F = 7.74, p < 0.01), while for flattery alone, participants with experience had higher trust than participants without experience (F = 4.04, p < 0.05).

General Discussion
This research demonstrates that after flattery, consumers with sales experience rated trust higher than consumers with no experience. Salesclerks can provide positive feedback to consumers without experience when used in combination with stealing thunder. Defense-motivation influences the interpretation of these tactics, while accuracy-motivation does not. The present study contributes to the literature by: (1) identifying when salesclerks can provide positive feedback and be trusted, (2) demonstrating evidence of the application of FAE by salespeople, and (3) demonstrating the impact of motivations.

Reference

To Punish or to Forgive: Examining the Effects of Consumer Penalties on Perceptions and Behavioral Intentions towards the Service Provider
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Price penalties are imposed on consumers in various industries especially services. For example, retailers charge a restocking fee when consumers return unwanted products; airlines charge a cancellation or re-ticketing fee when travelers change their plans; and banks charge a late payment fee when consumers fail to pay their credit card bills on time. While service providers claim that penalties are imposed to enhance compliance and compensate for the loss when customers fail to comply, consumers may not agree. Research showed that the presence of a penalty only slightly enhances compliance (Fram and McCarthy 2000). In contrast, there is a prevalent feeling among consumers that service providers abuse their power and perceive the penalties as revenue enhancement rather than covering costs (Fram and Callahan 2001). As a result, many penalties are perceived as unfair and consumers develop negative emotions.