Green Requests: Issue Importance and Compliance With Assertive Environmental Messages

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Is Greenpeace’s "Stop the catastrophe!" campaign effective? When/why do consumers adhere to assertively phrased messages? We examine this question in one field and three lab studies, and show that Issue Importance is central in gaining compliance with assertive messages.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Background
While any request limits the freedom of the addressee (Brown and Levinson, 1987), assertive language is even more restricting, as it leaves the addressee an even smaller option for refusal (Searle, 1969; Vanderveken 1990). Consequently, as it is shown in previous research, assertive message phrasings typically decrease compliance with the message, compared with non-assertive messages (e.g., Dillard and Shen 2005; Edwards, Li, and Lee 2002; Quick and Considine 2008). However, some counterintuitive findings (e.g. Buller, Borland, and Burgoon 1998) imply that compliance with assertive language can be elevated in situations of higher issue importance.

We show this general phenomenon, employing the example of messages which relate to environmental behavior. Issue importance plays a great role in consumer’s reaction to environmental campaigns because environmental issues bear a non-personal character and therefore are generally less close to the consumer’s heart. While the common finding is that assertive environmental messages result in low compliance (e.g., Lord 1994; Shrum, Lowrey, and McCarty 1994), many environment-related issues are being promoted aggressively through assertive messages such as “Use only what you need!”—the Denver water economy campaign.

We suggest that issue importance not only diminishes non-compliance with assertive messages, but even leads to higher compliance with assertive messages than with non-assertive ones. The key reason for this suggestion is that when an issue is important, an assertive message supports one’s attitude, while a non-assertive request may have the opposite influence as it implies a non-serious attitude toward the issue. Thus, we hypothesize that when an issue is considered important and the message is assertive, the fit between message phrasing and consumer’s attitude leads to higher compliance. A non-assertive message in this situation would contradict consumer’s ends and yield lower compliance. However, if an issue is not deemed important, a non-assertive message would be a higher fit than and assertive one, resulting in higher compliance with a non-assertive message.

METHOD

Study 1–Field Study
The purpose of the study was to measure compliance with an assertive versus a non-assertive ad as an effect of issue importance. To meet our hypothesis we created a 2 (assertiveness) by 2 (issue importance) design in the following way:

Assertiveness manipulation: We placed two sponsored links in Google Adwords advertising system, calling viewers to sign a petition to save the Mediterranean Sea: one assertive (You must save the Mediterranean Sea!) and one non-assertive (You could save the Mediterranean Sea.)

Issue importance conditioning: Two types of search words were identified: Sea-related (e.g. Mediterranean Sea pollution) and General (e.g. knitting machines). We relied on the assumption that people who type a sea-related search word deem higher importance to sea pollution than people who type in a general word.

We then compared the number of clicks on each of the ads, following a general or a sea-related search word. In line with our prediction, we found significantly higher ratio of clicking the assertive ad after typing in a sea related search word, and significantly higher clicking on the non-assertive ad after typing in a general search word.

Studies 2 and 3
In order to support our socio-linguistic explanation which involves issue importance, we conducted two studies which were similar in their 2 by 2 design, but different in type of behavior and in operationalization.

Study 1 used an assertive and a non-assertive message regarding an important (water economy) and an unimportant (recycling plastic containers) issue for the specific society we examined (www.hh-law.co.il). Participants (N=102) were exposed to a short and simple message, which was either assertive or non-assertive and related either to water economy or to recycling plastic containers. The assertive message read: “You must economize water/recycle plastic containers.” The non-assertive message read: “It’s worth economizing water/recycling plastic containers.” After reading the message participants filled out a questionnaire which measured issue importance and compliance intention. Results revealed a significantly higher compliance intention with the assertive message vs. a non-assertive message calling for water economy. As predicted, for recycling messages there was no difference in compliance intentions between people who read an assertive and a non-assertive message.

Study 2 manipulated issue importance by addressing two different groups: low issue importance (students of Business school, N=53) vs. high issue importance (students of Agriculture and Environment, N=52). Assertiveness was manipulated using the recycling related materials from Study 1. Our results showed an interaction for assertiveness and issue importance: while for Business students there was no difference in compliance as an effect of assertiveness, Environment students showed significantly higher compliance intentions with an assertive recycling message than with a non-assertive one.

Study 4
We hypothesized that the effect of compliance with an assertive message can be created by temporarily elevating issue importance. This is an important point because of its practical implications. In this study we temporarily elevated issue importance using a clip about air pollution. Participants (N=146) were divided into two groups: one group first completed a general environmental issue importance questionnaire, then saw the clip, and then completed an air-pollution issue importance questionnaire and compliance intention questions. The second group filled out all three measures in a row.

Results: While the groups did not differ in general environmental issue importance, the group that saw the clip showed significantly higher air-pollution issue importance. This evidence implies that issue importance can indeed be temporally elevated. Further, the group that saw the clip revealed significantly higher compliance intention with the assertive pollution message than with the non-assertive message, while the group that did not see the clip revealed no difference in compliance intention. These results suggest that even a temporarily elevated issue importance can affect compliance with assertive environmental messages.
Summary
When compliance is the goal, issue importance appears to be a central variable in determining message phrasing. This is true not only for environmental issues, but also in health related promotion (e.g. sunscreen usage), and possibly even in encouraging the public to pay taxes regularly. We therefore hope to further explore this general and straightforward mechanism of the influence of issue importance on perception of assertive requests.

REFERENCES


