Top 10 Lists: Public Ads That Hurt the Cause

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Three studies examine the Presenter’s Paradox (Weaver, Garcia, and Schwarz 2012) in the context of healthy and social behavior. Our results show that Top 10 lists (e.g., “Top 10 Reasons to Quit Smoking”) can reduce rather than enhance people’s likelihood to adopt healthy lifestyles or make desired social decisions.

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“Top 10” Lists: Public Ads that Hurt the Cause

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Whether trying to get people to quit smoking, exercise more often, or simply get out to vote, public service announcements (PSAs) genuinely attempt to promote societal well-being. One pervasive strategy is the use of “Top 10” reasons to change a certain behavior. For instance, the National Institute of Health (NIH) website currently includes a “Top 10 Reasons to Quit Smoking” PSA that lists, among others, the following reasons: “(1) I will reduce my chances of a heart attack, (2) I will reduce my chances of getting lung cancer, emphysema, and other lung diseases, (3) I will have better smelling clothes, hair, breath, home, and car.” Because these “Top 10” lists are generally exhaustive, they inevitably include both strong and mildly-strong reasons to change behavior. In this report, we question whether such PSAs actually help or hurt the cause.

This question builds on past work on the Presenter’s Paradox (Weaver, Garcia, and Schwarz 2012), showing that when people present information, they tend to use a strategy that resembles “adding” (more is better) while people evaluating that same information tend to use a process that resembles averaging (less is more). For instance, while presenters thought that adding a $15 voucher for books to a $1,750 tuition credit would increase recipients’ perceptions of the generosity of a scholarship, recipients actually evaluated the $1,750 tuition credit + $15 books package as significantly less generous than the $1,750 tuition credit alone.

While there are some surface similarities between people’s evaluations of a “Top 10 Reasons” PSA containing strong and less strong arguments and their evaluations of a consumer product containing highly and mildly favorable product features (Weaver et al. 2012) or their impressions of other people based on highly and mildly favorable trait information (Anderson 1965), there are several reasons why these types of judgments may differ. First, past work on averaging in impression formation has largely been limited to targets that are naturally perceived of as unified entities, like other people and consumer products. Here we investigate whether similar averaging-like processes will arise in the context of persuasion with strong and less strong arguments. Whether adding or averaging will occur in this context is an open empirical question. Second, one of the most developed perspectives on the issue of strong versus weak arguments, the Elaboration Likelihood Model, also does not explicitly address this question. While the ELM has looked at how the quality versus quantity of persuasive arguments affects persuasion, it has focused exclusively on strong and “specious” (false or misleading) arguments rather than strong and mildly strong ones. While designers of PSAs may believe that relevant but less strong arguments (e.g., smoking will reduce my morning cough) may help or at least would not hurt in persuading people that smoking is unhealthy, it is unlikely that they would think that including a specious or false argument would have persuasive appeal. Furthermore, the psychological mechanism through which specious arguments may affect persuasion may not be easily transferable to the context of mildly strong arguments. Reading a specious argument may lead to an inference that a source is unreliable and unintelligent, leading a perceiver to question all other arguments from that source. This explanation would not apply to the types of mildly favorable arguments that presenters may include in PSAs.

Second, despite evidence of the Presenter’s Paradox, previous investigations used settings that were created for controlled experiments to examine differences between presenters and evaluators. In contrast, the present analysis examines whether policy makers fall prey to the presenter’s paradox by testing real PSAs. Third, our work is fundamentally different from the “dilution effect” (Nisbett et al. 1981), because we look at the effect of mildly versus strongly favorable information that is always relevant to evaluators’ judgments and presenters’ presentation decisions. Work on the dilution effect, however, studies the effect of additional information that is by definition nondiagnostic and irrelevant to the judgment at hand and of no value in predicting the outcome (Nisbett et al. 1981; Tetlock et al. 1996).

We examined three “Top 10” PSAs to assess what is more persuasive, the combination of strong and mildly strong reasons that policy makers included in the original campaigns or a PSA created by us containing only the strongest reasons.

Study 1 showed that people were less inclined to quit smoking after reading the NIH’s 10 Reasons campaign than after reading our truncated 2 Reasons campaign (NHLBI 2013a). Study 2 showed that prospective voters ascribed less importance to voting and were less likely to personally express an intention to vote after reading a “Top 10 Reasons to Vote” PSA put forth by the Douglas County, Nevada, Election Center than after reading our “Top 3 Reasons” list that used only the strongest arguments. Study 3 used a “Top 10 Reasons to Exercise” PSA from the Medical News Today website, a widely-read medical news site with a monthly readership of 3-4 million, to examine whether need for cognition (NFC) moderated the effect. Results showed that while High NFC (mean = 1SD) participants expressed stronger intentions to exercise after seeing our 3 verses the original 10 Reasons PSA, low NFC participants (mean - 1SD) showed a non-significant tendency in the opposite direction.

In sum, our results show that Top 10 lists can reduce rather than enhance people’s likelihood to adopt healthy lifestyles or make desired social decisions. For instance, each year, The National Health, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI) receives over $3 billion in tax money from the Federal Government in order to, among other, advance understanding of the development and progression of disease, diagnosis of disease, and disease prevention (NHLBI 2013b). While the designers of their Top 10 Reasons to Quit Smoking” PSA chose to include the less strong, but still relevant reasons, they inadvertently weakened the message rather than strengthened it. Marketers and public policy makers should be very careful designing such Top 10 lists, because weak reasons can dilute the message.

REFERENCES

