Consumer Compliance in Face-To-Face Interactions: the Role of Sensitivity and Expressiveness

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This paper examines role of sensitivity-to-face and facial expressiveness in consumer compliance. A change in consumers’ sensitivity to the face and the facial expressiveness of partners can affect consumer compliance by affecting anticipated facial feedback. We develop and test our mechanism and hypothesis through one field and three lab experiments.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Face-to-face interactions are one of the most pervasive and important types of interpersonal interaction (Kendon, Harris, and Key 1975). Such exchanges are also central to many marketing interactions, such as customer service, sales, promotions, and negotiations. During face-to-face interaction, customers have the opportunity to obtain a relatively high degree of personal attention, and also to receive quick and direct responses to their concerns.

Despite the importance of face-to-face interactions in consumer choice, there is a lack of research on which factors of face-to-face interactions affect consumer compliance, and how. This paper examines the effect of consumers’ sensitivity to face and facial expressiveness on consumer compliance in requests. We propose that consumers expect facial feedback from their interactive partners in response to their decisions and behavior in face-to-face interactions. In an effort to avoid negative feedback, people comply with requests.

We identify and test consumer sensitivity to face as well as the facial expressiveness of a partner’s face as drivers of the effect.

Shiv and Huber (2000) suggest that when consumers anticipate emotions, vivid attributes attract more attentional resources and increase the weight of such information in preference construction. Given the vividness of facial expressions, consumer sensitivity to the face could moderate the effect of face-to-face interactions on consumer choices. In this paper, we use sensitivity to face to refer to the detection and reactions to facial features and movements. Sensitivity to face can be increased by stimulation or raise consumer’s attention to subtle changes of the face (Aron 2006). For instance, Solomon, Prkachin, and Farewell (1997) show that exposure to a brief orientation of facial movement increases sensitivity to emotions communicated by facial expression. We hypothesize that

Hypothesis 1: The effect of face-to-face interactions on compliance is stronger when consumers are more sensitive to the interactive partner’s face and weaker when they are less sensitive.

Because anticipated facial feedback is proposed to underline the effect of face-to-face interactions on compliance, manipulating the facial expressiveness of a partner’s face will moderate this effect. The feedback from the partner’s face should be expressive (vivid), timely (immediate), and consistent (suitable) for a consumer to interpret the facial feedback as diagnostic (Hogarth et al. 1991; Salen and Zimmerman 2004). We hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 2: The effect of face-to-face interactions on compliance is stronger when the interactive partner’s face is more expressive and weaker when the face is less expressive.

Hypothesis 3: The effect of face-to-face interactions on compliance is stronger when the interactive partner’s facial feedback is timely and weaker when the feedback is delayed.

Hypothesis 4: The effect of face-to-face interactions on compliance is stronger when the interactive partner’s facial feedback is consistent with anticipated expressions and weaker when the feedback is inconsistent with anticipated expressions.

Four experiments were conducted to test our theory and hypotheses, including one field experiment and three lab experiments.

Experiment 1 had a 2 (sensitivity: sensitivity to face vs. sensitivity to hand) × 2 (facial expressiveness: expressive vs. inexpressive) between-subjects design. In support of hypotheses 1 and 2, the results showed a significant two-way interaction between sensitivity and facial expressiveness. Participants who practiced a facial massage on themselves were more willing to donate when the research assistant was expressive than inexpressive. Willingness to donate of the participants who practiced a hand massage on themselves was independent of facial expressiveness.

Experiment 2 was a field study conducted in a hair salon with real consumers. It had a 2 (promotion type: face-to-face vs. written request) by 2 (sensitivity: sensitivity to face vs. sensitivity to hair) between-subject design. Supporting hypothesis 1, the results showed a significant simple effect of promotion type and a significant simple effect of sensitivity, qualified by a significant interaction between promotion type and sensitivity. Customers who had just received a facial treatment were more likely to purchase a membership card under the face-to-face promotion than under the written request. This difference between face-to-face promotion and written request conditions decreased when customers received a haircut.

Experiment 3 had 2 (facial expressiveness: expressive expression vs. blank expression) by 2 (sensitivity: sensitivity to face vs. sensitivity to production) between-subject design. The result showed a significant simple effect of sensitivity and a significant simple effect of facial, qualified by a significant interaction between facial expressiveness and sensitivity. When sensitized to the narrator’s face, participants were more likely to choose the difficult task after watching an expressive expression video than after watching a blank expression video. When sensitized to the video production, participants’ choices did not differ significantly whether they watched an expressive or a blank expression video.

Experiment 4 had six between-subject conditions differing in facial expressiveness: Expressive, Blank, Same, Delayed, Opposite, Written Request. The results showed that the expressive expression group had a significantly higher rate of compliance with the donation-request than the remaining groups. Expressiveness, timeliness, and consistency of facial expressions moderated the effect of face-to-face interactions on compliance.

This paper provides a new understanding of the effects of sensitivity-to-face and facial expressiveness on consumer choices during face-to-face interactions. In contrast to previous research, we examine the feedback mechanism that such interactions create, and the role of sensitivity to face and facial expressiveness. By providing an account of the role of anticipated feedback, this research provides a way to extend “face effects” to faceless transactions. Moreover, we identify and test the effect of three dimensions of facial expressiveness on consumer choice, thereby adding to the marketing literature, compliance literature, and communication literature.
This paper provides great implications for marketing managers, particularly those in the service industries and departments. Voice training has a long history in customer service and telemarketing. Companies help to modulate the voices of their staff in pacing, emphasis, etc., to improve the effect they have on their customers. In learning the role of sensitivity-to-face and facial expressiveness in compliance, managers could provide effective training for their service and sales staff. Training for facial expressions to become more demonstrative, timely, and consistent could help increase the likelihood of customer compliance.

REFERENCES


Kendon, Adam, Richard M. Harris, and Mary Ritchie Key (Eds.) (1975), *Organization of Behavior in Face-To-Face Interaction*, The Hague, the Netherlands: Mouton.

