Brand Traumas: Why Writing About Negative Brand Experiences Boosts Evaluations More Than Writing About Positive Experiences?

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The paper investigates the power of the expressive writing paradigm in the context of brand relationships turning points. Two experiments show that consumers benefit by expressively sharing their emotions and thoughts on the relational changes prompted by relationship turning points, thus restoring their original level of appreciation toward the brand.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumers can develop relationships with brands that are strikingly similar to relationships with human beings (Schmitt 2012). As with humans, relationships with brand evolve over time – alternating periods of relative harmony, mutual support and satisfaction with periods of dissent, instability, and dissatisfaction. Here we focus on the concrete evolutionary moments of a brand relationship: the turning points, i.e. situations in which the relationships go through traumas caused in particular by frustration with the partner (a.k.a. the brand) and the consumer needs to readapt its behavior in the relationship, so as to re-establish equilibrium, harmony, and mutual satisfaction. Previous literature studied crisis (Aaker, Fournier and Brasel 2004), ruptures (Fajer and Schouten 1995) but turning points have been almost completely ignored (an exception being Russel and Schau 2013). Contrary to Russel and Schau (2013), the focus here is not on accommodation of brand loss but on the processes necessary to accommodate shocks and relational changes so that the relationship can endure (rather than be lost or terminated).

Our conceptual lever for addressing brand traumas is the expressive writing paradigm (Pennebaker and Beal 1986). Pennebaker’s (1997) expressive writing constitutes a powerful therapeutic tool used in clinical psychology to help individuals overcoming trauma or tragic events. Writing about emotional experiences appears to have physiologically evident benefits (Boozin 1997). The paradigm is based on the assumption that disclosure (i.e. contemplating, and writing about) of the traumatic event is associated with improvements in physical and psychological well-being (Lepore 1997; Pennebaker 1989). In particular, emotional expression, written or verbal, facilitates cognitive processing of stressful experience since it forces individuals to confront the source of stress and their responses (Klein and Boals 2001). Fundamentally, disclosure reduces inhibition, reduced inhibition reduces stress, reduced stress leads to improved health outcomes (Boozin 1997). Conversely, not disclosing the trauma occasions causes inhibition, and inhibition could increase stress, augmented stress leads to health problems.

Given the ubiquity of opportunities for disclosure in online forums, social networks, and other relationship-building communication platforms, we thought that Pennebaker’s paradigm does indeed provide a propitious and promising theoretical backdrop for investigating how consumers cope with the inevitable turning points they experience with their brands. The fundamental expectation is that writing expressively (i.e. emotionally and without inhibition) about the traumatic event should have a positive impact on the overall evaluation of the brand. The paper shows this effect presenting two experimental studies with a between subjects design. In the first study, the efficiency of the expressive writing paradigm is tested by instructing participants to emotionally relay their negative experiences with brands (compared to a condition where participants are not writing about these experiences). Indeed, in a scenario in which people are dissatisfied with their brands, so they are facing a negative experience with their relational partner, individuals rate the brand higher after having shared their thoughts expressively, compared to individuals that do not write about their experience. In study 2, findings from study 1 are replicated and extended in that also positive experiences with their brand are compared with traumatic experiences. In addition, the efficacy of expressive writing is compared also against the condition of a more factual writing (here, participants were instructed to relay their negative experiences in a more detached, less emotional way). When consumers experience a positive as well as a negative turning point in their relationship with brand, writing expressively (rather than factually) boosts their overall evaluation of the brand.

Altogether, the studies show that the expressive writing paradigm, widely accepted in clinical psychology, can offer a propitious and theoretically highly consequential contribution for consumers dealing with turning points in their relationships with brands. This is especially true for consumers experiencing negative turning points. Indeed, as for tragic events in psychotherapy, a negative experience with a product or a brand can harm individuals emotionally. Thus, offering a way to deal with such negative emotions and escape from the uncomfortable situation is important for consumers especially when they are willing to invest in their relationship with the brand. Future research would do well to focus on controlling the obtained results for the amount spent for the product by the consumer, gender, frequency of occurrence and temporal distance of the relationship turning points. In addition, in order to have a clear picture of the process underlying the phenomenon, it is worth investigating whether personality traits might have an impact in shaping how individuals react to brand relationship turning points and including in the study a before measure of individuals’ attitude toward the brand, so to assess exactly the improvement caused by the expressive writing paradigm.

REFERENCES


