Saying a Little, Saying a Lot: Response Length As a Deception Cue For Consumers

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A salesperson’s answer-response length influences consumers’ veracity judgements. In three studies we found that a match between expectations and the response length results in mistrust when the salesperson was associated with a negative stereotype. Conversely, mistrust results from a mismatch for salespeople that are not associated with a negative stereotype.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Effective methods for separating liars from truth-tellers have been considered in consumer-salesperson interactions, interpersonal relationships, criminology, and organisational settings. When should an individual be sceptical of a communicator? The stakes can be high. If a consumer is excessively cautious and does not believe a truth telling salesperson, a good deal will be forfeited. If a consumer is overly trusting and believes a deceptive salesperson, the consumer can be duped into purchasing a product that does not work as promised.

One interesting factor that may affect the propensity to believe the communicator is the amount of detail the salesperson provides in response to a consumer’s question. The goal of this research is to examine how response length influences veracity judgments in a sales setting. Canvassing lay beliefs and extant research on deception in general presents completely opposing predictions. Internet sites suggest that saying too much is a dead giveaway of deceit. For example, the truthaboutdeception.com provides advice to the liar by counselling him or her to say as little as possible because “people get suspicious if you say too much.” Conversely, academic literature has tended to expect and find the opposite: liars say less. The reported results however, are somewhat mixed. DePaulo and Morris (2004) offer some evidence that liars say less and provide fewer details. In a meta-analytic approach, DePaulo et al. (2003) found no support for variations in talking time, but did find that liars provided fewer details. However, Vrij and Heaven (1999) found no effect for the amount of details provided by a liar. Although consumer research has not explicitly considered response length as a cue to deception, there has been research investigating when consumers believe a salesperson’s claim using the Persuasion Knowledge model (Friestad and Wright 1994). Previous work has found consumers to assume that salespeople have ulterior motives (Main, Dahl, and Darke 2007) and therefore, are more likely to deceive. Others have reported that salespeople are less trusted when they offer unsolicited recommendations (Fitzsimons and Lehman 2004) and when they behave in a manner consistent with a negative ‘salesperson’ stereotype, such as providing flattery to a consumer (Guo and Main, 2012).

We suggest a salesperson associated with a negative stereotype may be mistrusted when they behave in a manner consistent with that stereotype. In other words, salespeople associated with a negative stereotype are not believed when they behave as expected. We also propose that a salesperson associated with a non-negative stereotype may not be believed when they behave in a manner inconsistent with their usual behavior (i.e. response length is inconsistent with the rest of the answers s/he provides). In other words, salespeople associated with a non-negative stereotype are not believed when they behave in an unexpected manner.

Empirical Work

In study 1, we tested whether consumers believe the claim of a salesperson associated with a negative stereotype when more or less information is provided in response to a specific question (versus approximately what is ‘normal’). We expected responses that are ‘normal’ in length to not be believed. We asked participants to imagine a scenario with a used car sales person who answered their question regarding the transmission with a response that was short (or long) when they expected a response to be short (or long). Responses matching their expectations were least believed, particularly when the salesperson provided a long answer.

In study 2, we tested whether consumers are likely to believe a salesperson associated with a non-negative or neutral stereotype when s/he provides a response which is consistent in length with the rest of the conversation (versus more or less than the hairdresser usually says). We expect responses that are ‘unusual’ in length to not be believed. We found that responses that mismatched their expectations were least credible, particularly if they provided a short answer.

Of course, there are many differences between examples of salespeople with a negative stereotype (used car salespeople in this case) and salespeople with a non-negative stereotype (a hairdresser in this case). In study 3, we tested whether the results for a situation where a consumer visits a hairdresser on a one-off basis would be believed when they offered an ‘unusual’ or a ‘normal’ length of response. We found that responses that mismatched their expectations were least credible, particularly if they provided a short answer. It appears that the existence of a relationship was not driving the results.

Discussion

We found that when the salesperson was associated with a negative stereotype, consumers evaluated the salesperson as least believable when they were expected to speak at length and they did speak at length. This finding is consistent with the lay beliefs communicated on internet sites. Interestingly, they refer to the long response as ‘normal’. We also expected that a mismatch between expectations and the length of the salesperson’s response would result in not believing salespeople that are not associated with a negative stereotype. We found that when a hairdresser (indicative of this category) was expected to speak at length about a product, but had relatively little to say, s/he was not believed.

We tested whether the difference in cues to deception between these two types of salespeople could be because there was an existing relationship or the potential for an existing relationship in study 3. We did not find support for that explanation. However there are still many differences between a car salesperson and a hairdresser. Since a hairdresser touches the head and hair of the client and tactile interaction has been found to affect consumer’s reaction (Hornik 1992), future research could consider the influence of appropriate (and inappropriate) touch on deception cues.

This research contributes to the deception cue literature more generally as little work exists considering the moderation of the relationship between behavioral cues and suspicion. The only findings in the deception literature currently point toward shorter answers as the most likely response format for liars. Here we find that longer responses were a cue for deception for salespeople associated with a negative stereotype.

REFERENCES
DePaulo, Bella M., James J. Lindsay, Brian E. Malone, Laura Muhlenbruck, Kelly Charlton, and Harris Cooper (2003), “Cues to Deception.” Psychological Bulletin 129, 74-118.


