Does Sparing the Rod Spoil the Child? How Praising, Scolding, and Assertive Tone Can Encourage Pro-Social Behavior

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To encourage pro-social behavior marketers sometimes praise (Good job!) and sometimes scold (We’re not there yet) consumers. Two field and two lab experiments demonstrate that assertive praising and non-assertive scolding are the most influential on pro-social behavior. This effect is mediated by guilt (for scolding) and optimism (for praising).

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Marketers and policymakers seek ways to encourage consumers to act in a more socially responsible manner. Two ubiquitously used communication approaches are praising (You are doing great) and scolding (You are not doing enough). Praising drives optimism and positive emotions (Geers, Handley, and McLarney 2003), which lead individuals to wish to continue what they were doing (Keltner, Greenfeld, and Anderson 2003). Scolding, on the other hand, mobilizes people to act through avoiding or reducing guilt (Kluger and DeNisi 1996). However, the effectiveness of each approach in triggering behavior is not clear: some works demonstrate that praise is an effective way to mobilize for action due to the optimistic feelings it evokes (Turner et al. 2010), other works show that praising does not necessarily affect behavior (Hattie and Timperley 2007). Similarly, there is research suggesting that scolding is an effective in motivating people for action because of guilt feeling (Duhachek, Nidhi, and Dhee 2012), while other research suggests that guilt is ineffective in activation (Gadema and Ogletorpe 2011; Hall 2007).

A possible reason is that it is not only what you say that matters, but also how you say it (Boster et al. 1999). Specifically, praising and scolding can be performed with a more (“Recycle!”) or a less (“It’s worth recycling”) assertive tone. Pro-social marketing literature suggests that the assertiveness of the tone may have vast effects on the persuasiveness of what is being said (Kronrod, Grinstein, and Wathieu 2012a; Quick and Considine 2008).

The current research introduces assertiveness as a moderator that can explain when praising or scolding are more effective. The authors demonstrate that when communicators praise consumers, an assertive tone may be more effective in encouraging behavior, whereas when scolding, a non-assertive tone is more useful. As noted before, praise is empowering for action due to elevated optimism. Positive mood, such as optimism, in turn, elevates openness for, expectation for, and compliance with assertive language (Forgas 1999; Kronrod, Grinstein, and Wathieu 2012b). This literature leads us to the conclusion that praising would be most effective in mobilizing consumers for action when it is expressed with assertive tone. By contrast, guilt and negative mood induce the use of, and expectations for gentler and less assertive language (Forgas and Cromer 2004). As scolding evokes guilt and negative mood (Jackson 2005; Passyn and Sujan 2006), we suggest that scolding may be more efficient in activating people when expressed in a non-assertive tone, because when people feel guilty a gentler request is more successful in restoring positive mood, which consequently leads to higher mobilization for action (Boster et al. 1999). We therefore hypothesize that:

**Hypothesis 1:** Tone assertiveness moderates the effect of type of communication (praising/scolding) on pro-social behavior. Specifically, praising will elicit greater likelihood to engage in pro-social behavior when it is assertive, rather than non-assertive. Conversely, scolding will elicit greater likelihood to engage in pro-social behavior when it is non-assertive, rather than assertive.

**Hypothesis 2:** This moderation is mediated by optimism (for praising) and guilt (for scolding).

We present four studies that test the moderating effect of assertiveness on the usefulness of praising and scolding in encouraging pro-social behaviors such as signing environmental petitions, hand hygiene and financial planning. **Study 1** in an online study testing participants’ intentions to sign a petition for the clarity of waters in the Great Lakes, following praising/scolding and assertive/non-assertive messages. Results indicate an advantage of assertive-praising (“We are doing a lot to keep our lakes clean. We must do more! Sign the petition for clean waters!”), and non-assertive-scolding (“We are doing too little to keep our lakes clean. We could do more. Please sign the petition for clean waters.”), to influence participants’ intentions to sign the petition (F(1,147)=10.1, p=.001), as well as actual click rates on the link to the petition (χ²=13.2, p=.004). **Study 2**, a field experiment, demonstrates that assertive-praising (“You are doing a lot for your health. You must do more! Wash your hands with soap—always!”) and non-assertive-scolding (“You are not doing enough for your health. You can do more. You can wash your hands with soap—always.”) are the most effective in encouraging people to wash their hands with soap in public restrooms (F(8,32)=7.6, p=.000). **Study 3** is also a field experiment in the area of personal financial planning. We emailed one of four versions of an announcement from the university HR unit to a random sample of 400 university employees, encouraging them to click an education video about retirement programs. This study measured success of the different phrasings via an objective behavior measure of click rate. As predicted, the percent of employees who clicked the link after receiving the assertive praising email (“You Care about Your Retirement. Watch this Educational Video!”) was the highest (21%), followed by the non-assertive-scolding (12%) (“You Don’t Care Enough about Your Retirement. We Invite You to Watch the Educational Educational Video Below.”). Only 7% of the employees who received a non-assertive praising email clicked the link, and no one (0%) of the employees who received the assertive scolding email opened the link (χ²=20.84, p<.0001). Finally, **Study 4** examines the mediating role of optimism and guilt in an online experiment which tests intentions to devote time to watching a video about hand hygiene. Results once again demonstrate the advantage of assertive-praising and non-assertive-scolding in mobilizing people for pro-social action. Participants who read the associate-praising message were willing to devote significantly more time to watching the videos (M=4.8min.) compared with participants who read a praising but non-assertive message (M=3.1min., F(1,164)=10.5, p=.002). Conversely, participants who read a scolding message were significantly less willing to donate time to watch the video when the tone was assertive (M=2.7min.), compared with when the tone of the message was non-assertive (M=4.6min., F(1,164)=7.9, p=.006). This work offers an answer to a question based on an ancient proverb (Proverbs 13:24): Does “sparing the rod” necessarily “spoil the child”? We show that “sparing the rod” does not necessarily “spoil the child”, and that effective communication involving praising or scolding depends on assertiveness.

**REFERENCES**


