How Power States Influence the Persuasiveness of Top-Dog Versus Underdog Appeal

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Drawing on power literature and research in top dog vs. underdog appeals, this research demonstrates that high- (low-) power individuals respond more positively to underdog (top dog) appeals because showing support for underdog (top-dog) brands facilitates power expression (restoration). Further, this effect was moderated by hard vs. soft sales strategy.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Both top-dog and underdog positioning have been widely used in marketplace. However, prior research provides no clear answer regarding which strategy is more persuasive, nor does it identify conditions under which one method of positioning may be superior to the other (Kim et al., 2008; McGinnis and Gentry 2009; Paharia, et al., 2011; Vandeloo, Goldschmied, and Richards 2007). Attempting to fill this gap, we examine the effectiveness of underdog and top-dog appeals from the perspective of consumers’ psychological state of power, because definitions of both constructs are based on hierarchical differences between different parties (French and Raven 1959; Magee and Galinsky 2008). Specifically, we propose that consumers in a low-power (high-power) state would respond to top-dog (underdog) appeals more positively because their desire to restore (express) power would be satisfied by showing support for a top-dog (underdog) brand.

Further, the proposed effect between positioning and power are moderated by the sales strategy (DeBono 2006; Rucker and Galinsky 2009). Particularly, when a hard-sell strategy that focuses on the utilitarian aspect of a branded product is adopted, lower-power consumers may no longer prefer top-dog appeals because endorsing top-dogs that are only functionally superior does not effectively restore their power. When a soft-sell strategy that focuses on the symbolic aspect of a branded product is adopted, high-power consumers will not respond more positively to underdog appeals because in this case, endorsing an underdog brand that is symbolic inferior will endanger their high-power status.

Study 1 tested our basic hypothesis that high (low) -power consumers are more likely to endorse underdogs (top dogs) in the context of business competition. Participant were first asked to write about a particular incident in which they had power over others or in which someone else had power over them. Afterward, participants were presented with two companies, one described as the top dog, and the other underdog, that were bidding for the same job. As the main dependent variable, participants indicated their preference for the advertised brand (1= not at all, 7= very much). A repeated-measure ANOVA yielded a significant interaction of power and appeal (F(1, 57) = 7.42, p < .01): high-power participants were more likely to support the underdog company (M = 8.38) than the top-dog company (M = 7.03; n(57) = 2.48, p < .05), whereas participants in low-power states were more likely to support the top-dog company (M = 7.77) than the underdog company (M = 6.59; n(57) = 2.02, p < .05).

Study 2 aimed to conceptually replicate the basic finding using a between-subject design as well as a different power manipulation. Moreover, we explored the power restoration/expression mechanism in this study. To manipulate power, we adopted the role play procedures from Galinsky, Gruenfeld, and Magee (2003), in which participants were randomly assigned to play the role of either a manager (high-power) or a subordinate (low-power). Afterward, participants were presented with an ad copy, which featured a car rental company either described as a top-dog or an underdog. Participants then indicated their liking for the target brand (1 = not at all, 7 = very much). To capture the underlying mechanisms, participants also indicated the perceived instrumentality of the advertised brand in terms of power expression and power restoration. Again, a significant interaction between power state and appeal type (F(1,117) = 8.82, p < .01) was obtained. As expected, high-power participants responded to underdog appeals more positively than to top-dog appeals (M_undersigned = 3.42, M_top-dog = 2.60; n(59) = 2.18, p < .05), whereas the pattern reversed for low-power participants (M_undersigned = 2.77, M_top-dog = 3.47; n(58) = 2.02, p < .05).

The same analysis on the perceived instrumentality in power expression yielded the predicted power state x appeal type interaction (F(1,117) = 9.11, p < .01) such that underdog (vs. top-dog) brands were perceived as more instrumental for power expression only for high-power participants (p < .01). The same analysis on the perceived instrumentality in power restoration yielded again a power state x appeal type interaction (F(1,117) = 5.73, p < .05) such that top-dog (vs. underdog) brands were perceived as more instrumental for power restoration only for low-power participants (p < .01). Two moderated mediation analyses further confirmed that power expression/restoration mediated the effect of positioning appeal on brand attitude for high/low-power participants (Preacher and Hayes 2011).

Our final study tested the moderating role of sales strategy. Thus, we adopted a 2 (power) x 2 (positioning appeal) x 2 (sales strategy) -between-subject design. Power and positioning appeals were manipulated using the same methods as in experiment 2. We adopted Rucker and Galinsky’s (2009) method to manipulate sales strategies, with the hard-sell message focusing on functionality, whereas the soft-sell message focusing on status. As the dependent variable, participants indicated their preference for the advertised brand (1= not at all, 7= very much). The analyses revealed that when a hard-sell strategy was employed, the interaction between power state and appeal type was significant (F(1, 177) = 4.15, p < .05): high-power participants evaluated the advertised brand more positively when an underdog (vs. top-dog) appeal (p < .05) was utilized. However, low-power participants reported similar evaluations regardless of the appeal used. In contrast, when a soft-sell strategy was employed, there was only a main effect of appeal type (F(1, 171) = 11.90, p = .001): low-power participants still evaluated the advertised brand more positively when an underdog (vs. top-dog) appeal was used (p < .05).

Three studies collectively demonstrated that consumer preferences toward underdogs and top-dogs depend on their psychological power states. In addition, we identified potential motives underlying individuals’ differential attitudes toward underdogs and top-dogs: expressing and restoring power. Importantly, consumers’ responses toward underdog and top-dog brands may shift depending on individuals’ power states and whether appeals are communicated using a hard- or soft-sell strategy. This research contributes to both power literature and research on underdog and top dog appeals.

REFERENCES


