Same Same, But Different: How Refutational Two-Sided Messages Steer Ambivalent Attitudes

Anuja Majmundar, University of Southern California, USA
Erlinde Cornelis, San Diego State University, USA
Nico Heuvinck, IÉSEG School of Management, France

This research introduces attitudinal ambivalence to message sidedness literature. The results show that two-sided messages only work when ambivalence is low (study 1). Including a refutation in a two-sided message overcomes this limitation (study 2) if this refutation is based on the same (vs. different) product attribute (study 3).

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The question whether marketers should use one- vs. two-sided messages has received considerable attention in the persuasion literature (e.g., Eiseud, 2006), but without straight answers. On the one hand, the inclusion of negative information in a promotional message seems to enhance attitudes and intentions (e.g., Crowley & Hoyer, 1994), whereas, on the other hand, attitudes and intentions can be derogated (Eisen, 2006). We argue that attitude ambivalence could account for these mixed results. Past research demonstrates that attitude ambivalence plays an important (negative) role in influencing attitudes and intentions (e.g., Priester & Petty, 1996). When people are confronted with a two-sided message, this may induce feelings of evaluative conflict (i.e., attitudinal ambivalence) which may lead to lower attitudes and purchase intentions. However, when a two-sided message does not evoke high levels of ambivalence, we expect positive effects on message effectiveness as previously documented in message sidedness literature.

The first objective of this research is to introduce attitude ambivalence as an explanatory factor for prior inconsistent results concerning the effectiveness of one- vs. two-sided messages (study 1). We know that ambivalent attitudes are generally more susceptible to persuasion (van Harreveld et al., 2009). Most research focuses predominantly on the underlying reasons why (e.g., because they are less strong, or because they are a source of psychological discomfort which people want to resolve). Instead, our research focuses on refutation as a tool to get people with highly ambivalent attitudes ‘off the fence’ (study 2). Next, study 3 introduces refutation on the same vs. different product attributes as a moderator of these effects. This work advances the literature on ambivalence and message sidedness, while also providing hands-on recommendations to practitioners dealing with cases of high ambivalence.

137 undergraduate students were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (one- vs. two-sided) by 2 (high vs. low ambivalence) between-subjects factorial design. They were shown a set of four conditions in a 2 (one- vs. two-sided) by 2 (high vs. low ambivalence) factorial design. Study 2 was identical to the previous one except for some modifications: (a) only two-sided messages were used, (b) a different product stimulus was used to generalize across products: a notebook, (c) the attributes were pretested on their importance level, and, finally (d) measures of negative and positive WOM were included. The results show significant interaction effects: in case of high ambivalence, refutational two-sided messages lead to higher attitudes, purchase intentions, and proportionally more (less) positive (negative) WOM (compared to non-refutational two-sided messages). Hence, a refutation may overcome the perverse effects of ambivalence in two-sided messages.

Study 3 examines whether the nature of the refutation matters. Refutational statements can be based on the same or different product attributes levels, for example: “This laptop has a short battery autonomy, but on the other hand the battery charges exceptionally fast” (same attribute) vs. “This laptop has a short battery autonomy, but on the other hand this model has many USB ports” (different attribute). We test whether refutation on the same vs. different attributes in a two-sided message amplifies attitudes, purchase intentions, and WOM. 305 participants of an online respondent panel were randomly assigned to one of six conditions in a 3 (two-sided non-refutational vs. two-sided refutational on the same attribute vs. two-sided refutational on a different attribute) by 2 (high vs. low ambivalence) between-subjects factorial design. Study 3 was similar to study 2 except (a) the same vs. different product attribute level refutational statements were manipulated by tailoring the type of product attribute(s). The results show that among high (vs. low) ambivalent individuals, same-attribute refutations lead to significantly proportionally more (less) positive (negative) WOM and higher purchase intentions (vs. different-attribute refutations or non-refutational two-sided messages). Among individuals with low (vs. high) ambivalence, refutational two-sided messages, irrespective of whether they are based on the same or different product attributes, lead to significantly lower purchase intentions and proportionally less (more) positive (negative) WOM (vs. non-refutational two-sided messages). Hence, a two-sided message with a focus on the same attribute is more persuasive while addressing highly ambivalent people.

This research shows that attitude ambivalence explains previous inconsistent results concerning two-sided messages’ effectiveness. That is, two-sided messages only yield more positive attitudes and intentions when ambivalence is low (vs. high) (study 1). However, in study 2, we show that this perverse effect of ambivalence in two-sided messages can be resolved by including a refutation. In other words, a refutation can persuade ambivalent individuals. Study 3 shows this only works if the refutation is on the same product attribute-level. While it is known that ambivalent individuals evaluate relevant stimuli more deeply to resolve their ambivalence, further research can explore whether refutation based on the same (vs. different) product attributes is perceived as more salient, more complete, or more successful in reducing anticipated conflict, allowing ambivalent individuals to form stable attitudes and intentions.
REFERENCES