Enjoy! Hedonic Consumption and Compliance with Assertive Messages

THE PROBLEM

People are typically taught to speak to others politely, especially when requesting something. If asked to perform a small favor, most of us would prefer a gentle, “please do [this]” rather than a more directly worded “do [this].” Indeed, prior research has repeatedly shown that people tend to react against assertive commands that use the imperative tone, whereas gentler requests are more effective to elicit compliance.

However, a fair amount of marketing communication is actually highly assertive (as in Nike’s slogan “Just do it” or U.S. Airways’ “Fly with US”). Considering our preference for politeness, is assertiveness an effective way to convince consumers to comply? Are there consumption situations where consumers may be more easily persuaded by assertively phrased slogans?

Recent research by Luc Wathieu and his colleagues (Ann Kronrod and Amir Grinstein) finds that compliance with assertive or non-assertive messages is product and context dependent. For example, consumers more often comply with assertive language in the context of hedonic products. In contrast, non-assertive language is more persuasive in the context of utilitarian products. In an examination of actual existing slogans, the authors find that while for utilitarian products like banking, diapers or real estate, about 8% of the slogans are assertive, a dramatic 24% of slogans for hedonic products, like ice-cream, designer jeans or beer, are assertively phrased.

FINDINGS

To explain this highly contrasted situation, Wathieu and colleagues looked at interpersonal situations where assertive language is prevalent. The researchers found that when people are in a good mood they tend to use more direct language (an observation supported by literature in linguistics). While in a good mood people say “Give me some ketchup” instead of a more polite form “Could I please have some ketchup?” Additionally, people in good mood actually expect direct communication and assertive language. And when we hear language that fits our communication expectations, it sounds more convincing.

Wathieu and colleagues examined their hypothesis over three studies. In one study, participants read messages encouraging them to try chocolate or to open a bank account. When viewing messages about chocolate, respondents displayed higher purchase intentions when the language was assertive (e.g., “you must try our chocolate!”) as opposed to non-assertive. In contrast, when viewing messages about a bank account, the respondents’ purchase intentions were higher following a non-assertive message (“you could open a bank account with us”). Wathieu suggests that this can partially be explained by differences in mood induced...
by each product; respondents reported better mood when they were thinking of chocolate, but when thinking of a bank account, no positive mood was detected. Further, Wathieu connected respondent’s positive or negative mood to expectations of assertive or non-assertive language.

Wathieu and colleagues then demonstrated context (hedonic or utilitarian) alone could induce consumers to comply (or not) with messages. They used two utilitarian products (business services); one of them was presented as hedonic (ad featuring a flight to the moon), and the other was presented as merely utilitarian (ad featuring an office scenario). Mirroring the results of the first study, assertive messages achieved better compliance in the hedonic context ad but non-assertive messages achieved better compliance in the utilitarian ad context.

A third study showed the indispensable role of communication expectations. Wathieu and colleagues advertised a group of imaginary brands like Quile and Dezlik through either assertive or nonassertive messages. Consumers were more likely to assume assertively advertised fictitious brands were hedonic whereas non-assertively advertised brands were assumed to be utilitarian.

**IMPLICATIONS & CONCLUSIONS**

Wathieu and colleagues conclude that in the marketplace assertive messages are more persuasive than non-assertive messages for consumption contexts that induce positive mood. One such example is hedonic consumption. When thinking of the pleasure of hedonic goods, such as chocolate, spa or a vacation, the consumer is in positive mood, and therefore, she may expect to be addressed with more assertive language. Consequently, assertive slogans like “love yourself a little” would be more convincing than less assertive language like “you could love yourself a little”. By contrast, in utilitarian consumption, such as banking or insurance, no positive mood is experienced, and therefore non-assertive phrasing is expected and would consequently yield higher compliance than assertive language.


This Brief, based on the work of Luc Wathieu, was composed by Chris Hydock in collaboration with Luc Wathieu.