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**Impact of apologetic vs. defensive selling strategies under negative corporate publicity:
Exploring the role of customer trust and gratitude**

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Abstract

Violation of consumer trust is one of the immediate dangers when companies face negative publicity in the market. Similarly, customer reciprocity towards such firms, in form of their gratitude also gets adversely affected under these circumstances. However, previous research have focused only on the firm-level strategies when assessing the adverse impact. In this research, for the first time, we study the impact of salespersons' selling strategies to customers (apologetic and defensive selling strategies) under negative corporate publicity. Using a series of propositions, we highlight the impact of these two selling strategies on customer trust and gratitude. The managerial implications of the study suggest that appropriate use of apologetic and defensive selling strategies would enable salespersons to alleviate the impact of negative publicity of companies on their customers.

Impact of apologetic vs. defensive selling strategies under negative corporate publicity:

Exploring the role of customer trust and gratitude

Negative corporate publicity in the current time may take variety of forms, making the corporate entities an object of close stakeholder scrutiny. Extant research in this area (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2001; Pullig, Netemeyer, and Biswas, 2006) suggests that multiple aspects of the affected organization may be exposed to the damage, once the publicity spreads in the marketplace. The harmful impact of negative publicity may be attributed to its nature of credibility, and people's general tendency to emphasize negative information, rather than company initiated communication. Recently, more extensive detrimental effects have been identified, such as spillover to other related brands (Dahlén and Lange, 2006), and increased vulnerability to competitors' marketing mix actions (Van Heerde, Helsen, and Dekimpe, 2007).

Scholars have revealed a growing concern about consumer reactions to negative publicity and the efficacy of various coping strategies (e.g., Ahluwalia et al., 2001; Pullig et al., 2006). For example, Dawar and Pillutla (2000) suggest that organizational responses to crises can fall into a continuum flanked by unambiguous support and unambiguous stonewalling. Beyond the direct harmful impact of the publicity, recent studies further explore factors that can moderate this process. For example, prior positive expectations held by consumers can weaken the negative effect of an inappropriate coping response on brand equity (Dawar and Pillutla, 2000). Also, firms can evade the publicity and regain a favorable brand reputation by investing on social

responsible activities (Klein and Dawar, 2004) or by taking a manifold brand position (Roehm and Tybout, 2006). In addition, consumers' responses to negative publicity also vary with their individual characteristics, such as information processing styles (holistic thinkers vs. analytic thinkers) (Monga and John, 2008).

Despite the frequent occurrence of negative publicity and its harmful effect on focal companies, Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, and Unnava (2000) maintain that, "knowledge about its effects is limited. There is little theoretical research dealing with how consumers process such information and how companies can develop strategies to combat its effects" (p. 203). One of the most immediate dangers is the violation of consumer trust. Trust is a valuable resource for both profit-oriented business and nonprofit organizations, and for both firms in consumer markets, and those in business markets (Moorman, Zaltman and Deshpande, 1992; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Sirdeshmukh, Singh and Sabol, 2002), but it is fragile. As such, beyond an exploration of trust initiation (Lewicki and Bunker, 1996), how to recover consumer trust immediately and effectively is the top priority for companies that have been negatively publicized (Schoorman, Mayer, and Davis, 2007). Researchers have shown interest in the destructive effects of negative publicity and the consumers' responses to it (e.g., Ahluwalia et al., 2001; Griffin, Babin, and Attaway, 1991). For example, Pullig et al. (2006) conclude that the exposure of negative publicity weakens consumers' satisfaction, purchase intention, and evaluation of the corporation as well as brand equity. Consumer attitudes toward brand advertising and the focal brand can be interactively determined by negative publicity, advertising, and existing brand attitude

(Stammerjohan et al., 2005). Dahlén and Lange (2006) add that the negative publicity of one brand may spill over to others.

Role of salespersons under negative corporate publicity

However, most of the existing literature focuses on investigating how company as an entity should take corporate actions and neglect impact of salespersons, who may play a significant role in the process of repairing trust under negative publicity. Salespersons are important in the negative publicity scenarios due to the consumers' perception of them as corporate representatives who are accessible, humanized, and help build corporate trust in everyday business situations. It is well-documented that a significant role of the salesperson lies in creating and maintaining customer trust (e.g., Moorman, Zaltman, Deshpande, 1992). Furthermore, it is inevitable that salespersons have to confront with customer inquiries and consultation, which makes it even more important that they are prepared to face tricky confrontation with customers. Salespersons are often also in advantageous position to reduce consumers' negative response after negative publicity in an effective way by providing direct, customized and flexible answers to the customers' inquiries. Literature provides useful insights and guidelines, although limited, on how managers could design efficient corporate strategies dealing with negative publicity, but keep silent on managing and utilizing sales force during such critical points. Researchers have also compared effectiveness of reticence, apology and denial-based responses in repairing interpersonal trust-violations (Ferrin et al., 2007; Kim et al., 2004) and organizationally dealing

with business crisis (Lyon and Cameron, 2004), but the results are largely divided. Then, given the special role of the salesperson both as corporate representative and individual consultant to customers, how should they react? Even though negative publicity about companies is quite common today, there has been no previous systematic investigation of how consumers process negative information about the companies when interacting with a salesperson of the company. Literature is silent on what selling strategies should salespersons adopt when their companies are under negative corporate publicity.

As Dawar and Pillutla (2000) suggest, organizational responses to crises can fall into a continuum flanked by unambiguous support and unambiguous stonewalling. In the former organizational response, the company and its representatives may provide support to customers, and doing so implies that they admit the mistake, and are apologetic about it, and are ready to make up for it. However, in the latter strategy, the organization may respond in a non-cooperative way with its customers, refusing to accept even part of its responsibility, which may evoke a different sense of response from the customers. In this paper, we further explore the consequences of organization's boundary spanning sales employees to take one of these two selling strategies with their customers, namely apologetic selling strategy, which is akin to organization's unambiguous support, and defensive selling strategy, which is akin to unambiguous stonewalling. However, we focus our study only on these two extremes of the continuum.

In this paper, we address these issues by highlighting the role of customer trust and gratitude and the impact of defensive vs. apologetic selling strategies under the circumstances where customer trust and gratitude towards salespersons may vary as a consequence of the negative publicity. Based on the propositions, we also provide meaningful managerial, and research implications in the paper.

Development of Research Propositions

Customer Trust and Selling Strategies under negative publicity

Trust, defined as “a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions of the behavior of another” (Rousseau et al. 1998, p. 395), is often the result of repeated interactions over time between two individuals (Rousseau et al 1998; Swan, Bowers, and Richardson 1999). In personal selling situation, buyer’s trust is also important since customers seek predictable and obligatory behavior from their salespersons in situations where a relatively high degree of uncertainty is linked to future rewards (Millar and Rogers, 1987).

In terms of salesperson’s strategies to sell to customers under negative corporate publicity, out of the two possible strategies, we posit that apologetic selling strategy is more effective to repair damage in trust resulting from negative publicity, when compared to defensive selling strategy

(under similar levels of customer trust).

P1: Apologetic selling strategy by salespersons is more effective than defensive selling strategy under negative corporate publicity.

However, customers may attribute different reasons to company's mistakes and responsibilities under negative publicity, and therefore depending on their attributions, their trust on the company and its representatives may vary. Therefore, we also posit that:

P2: Apologetic selling strategy by salespersons (under negative corporate publicity) is more effective when customers' trust on salesperson is low (than high).

and

P3: Defensive selling strategy by salespersons (under negative corporate publicity) is more effective when customers' trust on salesperson is high (than low).

Customer Trust and Purchase Intentions under negative publicity

The dynamic and complex role played by salespeople in long-term relational selling paradigm enhances the customer's perception and evaluation of the salesperson's efforts to manage the often multifaceted relationship over time (Frazier, 1983). A salesperson is considered the primary contact point for the customers (Homburg and Stock, 2004), and are primarily responsible to

make successful relationship with them (Wilson and Jantrania, 1995). The increased emphasis on the salesperson becomes even more important in competitive environments, when customers seek long-term relationships, higher level of contact and increased value-added services from salespeople (Liu and Leach, 2001). Huntley (2006) found that when the trust was high, customers purchased more from the seller, and were also more willing to recommend the seller's offerings to colleagues. Since trust is also a dimension of relationship quality, and also consists of evaluations of various aspects of relationship like attitudinal, process and future expectations (Jap et al., 1999), higher quality of relationships creates bond between the buyer-seller members for both to reap benefits beyond the mere exchange of goods (McNeil, 1980). This is consistent with the social penetration theory, which states that partners will continue to deepen a relationship as long as anticipated benefits exceed anticipated costs (Altman and Taylor, 1973).

We therefore posit that relationship between the salesperson's selling strategies and customer's future purchase intention is moderated by the customer's trust on the salesperson.

P4a: High customer trust on salesperson (under negative corporate publicity) will lead to higher customer purchase intentions under defensive (vs. apologetic) selling strategy.

P4b: High customer trust on salesperson (under negative corporate publicity) will lead to lower customer purchase intentions under apologetic (vs. defensive) selling strategy.

P4c: Low customer trust on salesperson (under negative corporate publicity) will lead to lower customer purchase intentions under defensive (vs. apologetic) selling strategy.

P4d: Low customer trust on salesperson (under negative corporate publicity) will lead to higher customer purchase intentions under apologetic (vs. defensive) selling strategy.

P 4a-d expected results are shown in Figure 1.

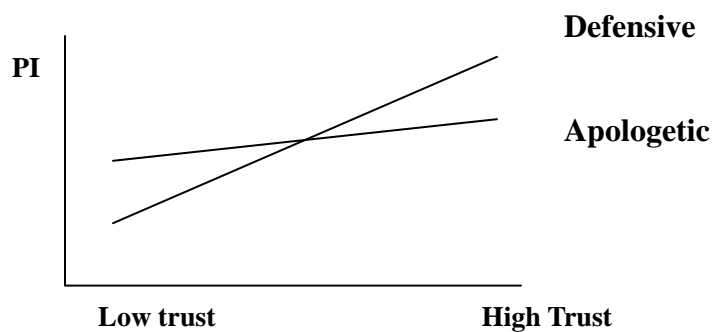


Figure 1: Comparison of defensive and apologetic selling strategies on customer purchase intentions under the moderating impact of customer trust

Customer Gratitude and Selling Strategy under negative publicity

Gratitude has been conceptualized as an emotion, an attitude, a moral virtue, a habit, a personality trait, or a coping response (Emmons and McCullough, 2003). Fitzgerald (1998)

identified three components of gratitude as 1) a warm sense of appreciation for somebody or something, 2) a sense of goodwill toward that person or thing, and 3) a disposition to act that flows from appreciation and goodwill. The affective component refers to feelings of gratitude generated when people “perceive themselves to be the recipient of an intentionally rendered benefit” (Emmons, 2004), a relatively “short term state” (Ben-Ze’ev, 2000). Feelings of gratitude generate an ingrained psychological pressure to return the favor. As Becker (1986) states, “People every where do feel such obligations.....the mere recognition of a benefit seems to generate a sense of obligation to repay.” From behavioral perspective, gratitude represents an act of creating a cycle of reciprocity between giving and counter-giving and contributes to the ongoing construction of a relationship (Bartlett ad DeSteno, 2006; Emmons and McCullough, 2004). Gratitude motivates people to act pro-socially themselves (McCullough et al., 2001), makes them more generous and helpful towards others in their social networks (McCullough et al., 2002) and people who are made to feel grateful are more likely to return favor to their benefactors (Tsang, 2006).

Gratitude is a relationship-sustaining emotion, with an important impact on maintaining trust in relationship (Young, 2006). Because customers and sellers participate in numerous cycles of reciprocation, customers receive important evidence of seller behaviour, which increases their confidence in the seller’s future actions (Donny and Cannon, 1997). Therefore, customers in relationship with higher levels of gratitude based reciprocal behaviours have higher level of trust (Palmatier, 2009). Gratitude has a significant positive effect on person’s evaluation of another

person's trustworthiness, which results in higher trust (Dunn and Schweitzer, 2005). It is also argued that people who trust on partners must rely on their perception's of the trustee's characteristics (e.g. ability, integrity, benevolence) to develop expectations about the trustee's further behaviour and positive emotions such as gratitude significantly influence these perceptions and increase trust (Dunn and Schweitzer, 2005).

When people do something of their own accord, they act on their own free will (e.g. giving a free gift to someone or performing a random act of kindness). It has been shown that any relational investment which is non contractual and random in nature, generate higher levels of gratitude (Wood et al. 2008). Recipient of discretionary investment tend to feel more grateful, in contrast, contractual, role based, or persuasion based investment because feelings of gratitude (Morales, 2005; Tsang, 2006; Wood, 2008). People feel more grateful to benefactor when they feel that the positive behaviour fall within the benefactor's volition control (Weiner, 1985). Therefore, when customers perceive that the investment done by seller is a random act or a free will, they feel more grateful compared to when they perceive the act is duty based obligation or a contractual requirement (Malhotra and Murlighan, 2002; Roberts, 2004). Based on this understanding of predictors of customer gratitude, we posit that:

P5a: Customers are more likely to show higher gratitude towards salesperson (under negative corporate publicity), under apologetic (vs. defensive) selling strategy.

P5b: Customers are more likely to show lower gratitude towards salesperson (under

negative corporate publicity), under defensive (vs. apologetic) selling strategy.

Since gratitude is a precursor to customer's commitment and future purchase intentions, we also posit that:

P6: High customer gratitude towards salesperson (under negative corporate publicity) will lead to higher customer purchase intentions under apologetic (vs. defensive) selling strategy.

P7: Low customer gratitude towards salesperson (under negative corporate publicity) will lead to higher customer purchase intentions under defensive (vs. apologetic) selling strategy.

P7 and P8 expected results are shown in Figure 2.

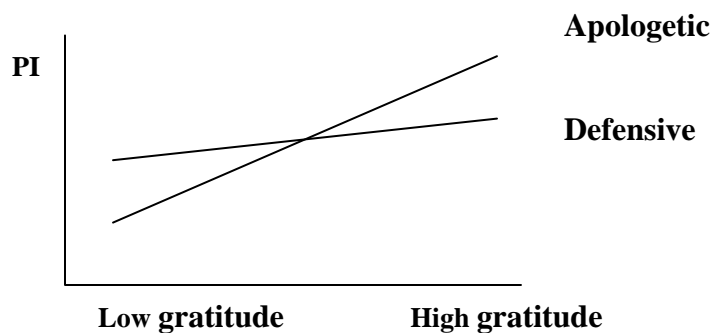


Figure 2: Comparison of defensive and apologetic selling strategies on customer purchase intentions under the moderating impact of customer gratitude

Discussion

It is important to realize that salespersons being a credible source of information for customers, can play a proactive role in alleviating the negative impact of adverse information or publicity faced by companies. Salespersons are the relationship builders with customers, and their importance in sustaining these relationships under trust damaging situations, cannot be undermined. Our study for the first time highlights the importance of a company's boundary spanners in crisis management, going beyond the role they play in bringing sales revenues into the companies. We show in this conceptual paper through a series of propositions, how salespersons can smartly choose their selling strategies with customers to leverage their trust built by them in their relationship to optimize sales, and repair trust-damage to an extent by the use of appropriate selling strategy.

In the relational selling paradigm, customer trust and gratitude has an important role to play and therefore, the salesperson should adapt their selling strategies accordingly. When companies face negative publicity, the customers are looking for reasons to attribute the cause, and reach a conclusion about 'whose fault it was?' Under these circumstances, salesperson can use defensive or apologetic selling strategy depending on the degree to which customer trust and gratitude has

been violated, and how much can be saved from being violated.

Our study highlights that use of defensive strategy by salespersons will work more effectively with customers when customer trust is not yet violated. However, in the adverse case of trust being already violated (and therefore the customer trust is low), only an apologetic selling strategy will work. Similarly, if customer trust remains, and salesperson attempts to sell to customers using defensive strategy, then s/he is more likely to succeed in getting an order. On the other hand, if the customer's trust is low, then only an apologetic selling style can work, if at all.

We also show that customer gratitude has an important intermediary role to play in such situations. It is likely that customers show a higher gratitude towards salesperson (acting as company representative) when the salesperson is using apologetic selling strategy. Companies can leverage this situation meaningfully, as defensive selling style can sometimes aggravate the situation and make it only worse. Some customers would show more gratitude than others, and for such customers the salespersons should use apologetic selling strategy and vice-versa with customers with low gratitude.

Managerial Implications

The study has several managerial implications. The study highlights the importance to leverage the salespersons under conditions of company's negative publicity. The study also highlights how to adapt the selling strategy under negative influence of information with customers. Since

violation of customer's trust, and show of gratitude is often immediate, salespersons that play an important role in building customer relationships can also be helpful in sustaining these relationships by reducing further erosion of customer trust, and rebuilding trust to some extent. Similarly, customer gratitude also plays an important role during such crises before the companies. In such situations, the salespersons can activate the customer's gratitude towards the company by adopting an appropriate selling style and strategy. Most often customers wait for companies' official information to base their attribution about where the fault lies. The salesperson while acting as company's representative can also reduce erosion of sales and customer equity by integrating defensiveness or apology to customers as per the situation, with their selling style to achieve the desired results.

Customer gratitude under times of such distress stems from repaying what they have gained from consuming the company's products in the past. It also stems from the goodwill that the company has generated in the market with its consumers in the past. In times of such crisis, it is critical for companies to not just salvage, but also strengthen the customer relationships by reducing erosion of customer trust and leveraging their gratitude.

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