

The Dimensions of Source Credibility and Salesperson
Persuasion

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INTRODUCTION

One cannot deny the presence of consumerism in Western Culture. Consumerism is grounded upon “the concept that an ever-expanding consumption of goods is advantageous to the economy” (Dictionary.com). With the prominence of consumerism as an American ideology, and the competitive nature of the work force, it is difficult to ignore the presence of salespersons. Sales departments are often the driving force for company growth. For example, MINDBODY Inc., a business management software company based out of San Luis Obispo, California experienced a 378% increase in growth over a period of three years, and was given the coveted ranking of the 21st fastest growing software company by the distinguished Inc. 500 in 2009 (inc.com). Is this increase in growth directly related to the success of the sales department? The growing popularity to utilize software to run a business has increased and can probably account for some MINDBODY’s growth, but people still need to be persuaded to buy, and that is where the salesperson comes into play.

Persuasion is perhaps the most important skill for a salesperson to master. Jones, Moore, Stanaland, and Wyatt (1998) contend that the success of salespeople depends on their ability to persuade. There are many elements of persuasion that a salesperson needs to consider when trying to influence a consumer. The effects of credibility in persuasion have received a great amount of empirical attention. According to communication scholar and author Daniel O’Keefe in his book *Persuasion: Theory and Research*, “credibility consists of the judgments made by a perceiver concerning the believability of a communicator” (O’Keefe, 2002, p. 181). The believability of a

communicator can vary depending on the given receiver. There are many dimensions of credibility that should be taken into account. The aim of this literature review is to evaluate the dimensions of credibility, physical attractiveness, gender, and race of salespersons, and how these variables contribute to sales success.

CREDIBILITY

The perceived credibility of a salesperson is perhaps the most influential aspect needed to achieve persuasion when it comes to selling to a consumer. In order to reach a high level of credibility, two dimensions need to be considered. Malshe (2010) argues that “credibility construct consists of cognitive and affective dimensions; with the former referring to the source’s perceived expertise, while the latter representing its perceived trustworthiness in the eyes of the recipient” (p. 14). Thus, the recipient will perceive a salesperson to have the highest level of credibility when the salesperson is both competent and trustworthy. Furthermore, the perceived credibility of a salesperson can shift either positively or negatively depending on the levels of expertise and trustworthiness interpreted by the consumer.

EXPERTISE

The expertise of a communicator is an influential persuasive factor that helps determine source credibility. Expertise can be measured by the relevant knowledge on the given subject matter. A recipient can compare a high-credibility salesperson versus a low-credibility salesperson by examining a persuader’s education, occupation experience, and position advocated (O’Keefe, 2002). The connection between expertise and

credibility can be explained by the research conducted by Cunningham, Fink, and Kenix (2008) which explored the influence of expertise on the appropriateness of endorsers in a women's tennis event. Research found that the athletes were better representatives of the energy bars than were the actors, signifying that the athlete related to the product more because of their profession (Cunningham, 2008). Thus, the success of the product endorsement can be attributed to the expertise of the athletes that related to that product. The relationship between the athlete and the product endorsement puts together a match that the consumer can perceive as credible. This connection is called the "match-up" hypothesis, and is further explained by Kamin's research on celebrities. The hypothesis from Kamin's article states "a celebrity endorser may only enhance both product-and ad-based evaluations if the characteristics of the product "match-up" with the image conveyed by the celebrity" (Kamins, 1990, p. 5). Thus, a well-known professional athlete might be seen as a more credible endorser of Gatorade than a television actor. This same logic can be applied to the credibility salespeople when evaluating their background experiences and occupations. For example, a software salesperson with a degree in computer engineering would probably have more source credibility than a software salesperson with a degree in liberal studies.

Furthermore, research done by Tsai, Chin, and Chen (2010) concerning the effects of trust and expertise from salespersons and the consumer's intention to purchase nutraceuticals reveals further correlation between source expertise and persuasive success. In the study, salespersons with high expertise attempted to sell nutraceuticals to customers. The study revealed that the consumers who felt the salespersons were competent were more likely to purchase the nutraceuticals, "since nutraceuticals are

complex products with medicine-like effects, if the salesperson appears to have sound medical knowledge, this might help consumers to have a better understanding of the properties of the nutraceuticals, and increase their purchase intention” (Tsai et al., 2010, p. 283). When a consumer believes that a salesperson is knowledgeable or an expert, he or she is more likely to purchase the given product. In addition, the study uncovered that the salesperson’s expert knowledge also strengthened perceptions of his or her trustworthiness, which is another important factor when evaluating credibility.

TRUSTWORTHINESS

Trustworthiness is considered the second most important aspect when considering source credibility in persuasion. When considering credibility in a sales environment however, trustworthiness may be more vital for a recipient in persuasion because of the common stigma concerning salespersons and their motivation for money. Furthermore, S. Jennings, the Director of Sales at MINDBODY, Inc. maintained “you are not going to be able to give and share your experience and knowledge in a product if the consumer doesn’t trust you or is willing to talk to you” (personal communication, May 16, 2011). It is no secret that salespersons are driven by money and commission, therefore a salesperson needs to instill a high level of trust towards the consumer. According to Malshe (2010), trust is determined by the recipients “confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity, and a combination of dependability, competence, integrity, and responsiveness” (p. 14). If a salesperson places money as a priority over the recipient the recipient will not perceive the salesperson as trustworthy or credible. This concept can be further explained by Wood, Boles, and Babin (2008) in their investigation of how buyers perceive the trust of salespersons in an initial sales encounter. The study claims “a

consumer relies greatly on an inherent capacity to judge another person based on his or her tangible characteristics...[which are] helpful in placing a salesperson in a category that either begets trust or does not” (Wood et al., 2008, p. 28). It is imperative then to make a respectable first impression in order to achieve trustworthiness, especially since the majority of sales are made after the initial encounter (S. Jennings, personal communication, May 16, 2011). Communicator expertise can also directly affect the dimension of trustworthiness. Malshe contends that a communicator who is perceived as an expert will experience enhanced levels of trust and will therefore have more credibility (Malshe, 2010). Thus, a salesperson can be perceived as more trustworthy if the recipient believes they are competent.

Another factor that can bolster or inhibit trustworthiness is likability. Communicators who are liked are more effective persuaders than communicators who are disliked. Likability is measured by how friendly a salesperson is viewed. Furthermore, Wood et al. (2008) maintains that likeability “has even been suggested as a dimension of salesperson trustworthiness” (p. 29). Trustworthiness is a crucial trait to consider when evaluating the credibility of a salesperson. In addition, there are multiple facets that factor into the dimension of trustworthiness when trying to achieve credibility, such as a communicator’s likability and competence. In the interview conducted with S. Jennings, she said that “people buy people, not products...people will buy a product from someone because they appreciate who you are and they like who you are (personal communication, May 16, 2011).” It is also noteworthy in face-to-face sales to consider the salesperson’s physical attractiveness and how it can contribute either positively or negatively to persuasion.

PHYSICAL ATTRACTIVENESS

There is an ample amount of research that examines the dimensions of physical attractiveness in a persuasive setting. Chaiken (1986) reveals that “research does indicate that heightened physical attractiveness generally enhances one’s effectiveness as a social influence agent” (as cited in O’Keefe, 2002, p. 205). However, physical attractiveness can also downplay the credibility of a persuader. The role that physical attractiveness plays on speaker credibility varies depending on situation specific variables. Cunningham et al.’s (2008) study examined the influence that attractiveness played upon the perceived credibility of the communicator. The study conveyed that attractive persons are considered to be an appropriate endorser for products that relate to one’s physical appearance, such as hair products or perfume (Cunningham et al., 2008). Therefore it seems that an attractive salesperson would have direct persuasive credibility with products that pertain to fashion, cosmetics, or other related topics. Cunningham et al.’s study showed that an athlete’s “attractiveness has become increasingly utilized in promoting and selling many women’s sports, especially “sex-appropriate” sports such as ice skating, swimming, and tennis” (Cunningham et al., 2008, p. 376). The findings from this study can relate to salespersons that sell products where physical attractiveness have an impact. The term “sex appropriate” contains similar logic to the “match-up” hypothesis introduced earlier by Kamins (1990). Thus, gender and physical attractiveness need to be evaluated in more detail.

Gender plays a role in the connection between physical attractiveness and credibility. Physically attractive females are perceived as more credible when associated

with more feminine sports. Furthermore, a physically attractive female might be seen as a more credible source if she was selling a more female oriented product such as cosmetics as opposed to car parts. Results of this study concluded that

Among the athletes with high levels of expertise, there were no differences in perceived appropriateness between the highly attractive and less attractive athlete. Among the athletes with low expertise, the attractive athlete was perceived as a more appropriate endorser than was the less attractive athlete. (p. 376)

These findings are applicable to sales. A highly competent and attractive salesperson, such as a college graduate from a prestigious university, should have no different persuasive outcomes than his or her highly competent but less attractive counterpart. Thus, competence and expertise hold more weight when both candidates are equally attractive. Conversely, a highly attractive salesperson that has low expertise will have more perceived credibility than his or her opponent who has the same level of low expertise, but is not attractive. Therefore, when both candidates are low in expertise, the more attractive candidate will receive more persuasive success.

Attractiveness may not always be beneficial for a communicator attempting to persuade or sell. O'Keefe (2002) "found source expertise to be a more powerful determinant of persuasion than was communicator physical attractiveness" (p. 206). This can be linked to the study that was done on the amount of hours needed to sleep. An attractive persuader attempted to tell his audience that they only needed 4 hours of sleep.

The persuasiveness of this idea failed even though the persuader was physically attractive (Maddux & Rogers, 1980). This example further reveals that appearing physically attractive will not always be beneficial with persuasion, and that “physically unattractive communicators will at least sometimes be more effective than physically attractive persuaders” (O’Keefe 2002, p. 206). Thus, in some situations physically attractive communicators do not experience greater persuasive success.

GENDER

Gender plays a key role in the perceived credibility of communicators. It is imperative for a salesperson to stand out amongst other salespersons in order to stay competitive. Thus, the salesperson must establish credibility or the consumer will lose interest. Our society today is male-dominated, and the media portrays a male perspective. A study done by Weibel, Wissmath, and Groner (2008) discuss the effects of gender and the credibility of newscasters. The study found a major difference between the perceived credibility of male and female counterparts in news casting. The research found that the careers of women depended on their physical appearance, while the career of males depended on professional networks (Weibel et al., 2008). This finding suggests that male credibility is more affected by expertise whereas female credibility is more affected by their attractiveness. A recent poll “found that 78% of people mentioned on TV programs were men” (Wood, 2009, pg. 262). Although salespeople do not necessarily make television appearances, it is arguable that we live in a patriarchal society. This exerts a great amount of pressure on female salespersons to appear physically attractive in a male-dominated world.

Moreover, since Cunningham et al. (2008) study on sports broadcasters found that females are perceived as more credible when reporting on a feminine sport, and the majority of sports broadcasted are male oriented; physical attractiveness for females could backfire. The reasoning behind this conveys “the effects of physical attractiveness on persuasion are reduced as the personal relevance of the topic to the receiver increases” (O’Keefe, 2002, p. 206). Most of the studies that correlate physical attractiveness and persuasive outcomes deal with low relevance topics, meaning the communicator is more knowledgeable than the audience. Since media focus is predominantly catered towards men, it is considered a highly relevant topic, which could put women at a disadvantage if they are attractive, but not an expert. The same premise applies to men who have low expertise but are attractive, engaging in high-relevant subject matter.

Consequently, the study done by Jones et al. (1998) found that the level of equality has balanced and female salespeople are more accepted in the workforce. The study also found that female salespersons have more credibility than White males in an actual sales environment. Appearing physically attractive can help both females and males in persuasion. However appearing physically attractive does not always help. The research done in this category is highly context specific, and can vary depending on the situation.

RACE

The role of race has different effects on credibility through the lens of attractiveness and expertise. In a study that measured communicator attractiveness and race, White and Black men were judged on their perceived persuasiveness. The study done by Chaiken

(1986) found that attractiveness was more conducive to the White communicator than the Black communicator. The study reveals that a Black male communicator does not have to be physically attractive to be considered a credible persuader, whereas a White communicator's attractiveness plays a more important role when it comes to credibility.

When it comes to the level of expertise, the research done on salespeople and race revealed some interesting results. The study done by Jones et al. (1998) was comprised of 136 Whites and 132 Blacks from four major Universities. The participants were shown a series of pictures of salespeople from different race and genders, and they were asked questions based on credibility and intent to buy. Jones et al. (1998) study uncovered that

...the Black salespersons were considered more likable, most trustworthy, most attractive, and highest on expertise...[and] a *discounting of* (or backlash against) the White male seller, who may have conjured up outdated and negative perceptions of the "typical" salesperson. (p. 85)

The stereotypical salesperson is seen as an aggressive White male and the participants in this study did not favor the White male. According to the findings in the study, the Black male salesperson experienced the greatest persuasive success in relation to credibility. Black female salespersons were ranked second in credibility with White females ranking third. Finally, and somewhat surprisingly the results put the White male salesperson on the lowest tier of perceived credibility.

While most of this paper is based upon research done on sales and credibility that is extracted from peer reviewed articles, I chose to additionally interview a salesperson from a very successful and local software company. This gives an inside perspective from a real sales environment. Stephanie Jennings is perhaps the most successful salesperson in the company. She worked her way up to the top without a degree, but not having a has not hindered her success as she holds the title of Director of Sales for the entire company. In 2005 the company generated a respectable \$772,865 in total revenue. Three years later in 2008, the company's growth boosted to a record high \$6 million in total revenue (inc.com). The company is growing rapidly, and much of the growth is due to the expansion of the sales department. I interviewed Stephanie Jennings to get an inside scoop on how to be successful in sales. Much of the research I have done on credibility directly relates to her success at MINDBODY.

INTERVIEW

Stephanie Jennings, Director of Sales, MINDBODY, Inc.

1. Give me a little background on yourself, education, and past work experience prior to MINDBODY, Inc.

I started school right out of high school and actually took a break because I got a really awesome job working for a telephone company. I thought I could do it while I went to school but I couldn't, it was during the Internet boom. I decided to stop going to school and really focus on understanding this whole Internet technology. I stopped going to school with the plan to go back but never did. I worked 7 years for that company, I started off as an operator taking assistance calls, within 6 months I moved to the customer

service department working full time then became a lead, which is a leadership position, this was all by the time I was 18 years old. When I was 19 I took my first sales job in the service delivery coordination department. I was assisting reps in building their portfolio for their clients. I realized then that my heart was in sales; at 19 I was doing sales and managing a client base that generated about \$3.1 million in revenue for the company. When I finished my time at the company I was a customer service manager, I decided to leave sales for a little in order to get management experience. I did all of this to build my resume based on experience because I didn't finish my degree. From there I worked a few telecom jobs in sales positions. I took a break from sales and I worked at a salon and was quickly promoted to manager. I was focusing on redesigning the retail, the boutique of the salon, and building the spa. I doubled their retail sales in my first year at the salon. I focused on technology sales after the salon and found MINDBODY while I was teaching 12 group fitness classes every week, health and wellness was important to me. I found MINDBODY, which incorporates health and wellness with technology. I am now the Director of Sales at MINDBODY and I can attribute that to my perseverance and passion for sales.

2. What particular skills or talents are most essential to be successful in sales?

Number one is the ability to listen. Listening techniques are the probably the most important component a good salesperson can have. Solution selling is the most beneficial way to sell to somebody, it is how you can close deals. If you listen to someone and really find what their pain points are and gather the information that you need, you can

easily turn that around and sell it. All of the sudden you have a closed deal and closed opportunity just from listening to someone. Second thing a salesperson needs is perseverance. You really need to continually push and not worry about rejection. The ability to persevere through any situation allows those types of people to excel in sales. You are going to get rejected 20 million times before you get that one yes. Finally, confidence and a really strong personality is the next essential skill. People that are confident will allow their clients to know who they are. People buy people, not products. Everybody sells something, when you are selling something there is always three other competitors that sell it just the same, if not better. People will buy a product from someone because they appreciate who you are and they like who you are. It is always good if you have a confident and outgoing personality and are willing to let people in. You will close more deals that way.

3. When do you think the majority of sales are made?

Follow-ups. You are going to get a very small percentage of initial contacts that are going to close on the spot, it happens and that is why people cold call, but 9 times out of 10 it comes from follow ups. Making the initial contact is really made to start developing and building a relationship. Your closes happen when you follow up with a client because you can't discover pain points and you can't provide a solution in the initial call, and that is the true key to selling.

4. What have you found is more important when attempting to sell to a consumer, establishing a level of trust to the client or your expertise in selling the product?

I think that is a really hard thing to answer, and I think it goes right down the middle.

First and foremost, if I truly answer that question I am going to pick trust over experience and knowledge in the product. You are not going to be able to give and share your experience and knowledge in a product if the consumer doesn't trust you or isn't willing to talk to you. If I have to pick I would say trust is number one. If you establish trust and don't necessarily have the knowledge somebody else does but the client is willing to talk to you, you have established a relationship that can go further to make the sale. You will also need some level of expertise to continue to sell the product after the relationship has been established.

5. Do you think your credibility as the North American Sales Manager and now the Director of Sales has ever enhanced your influence over a prospect?

Absolutely. I can say from experience of being that person and having to pull those people in, that your experience, knowledge, and understanding of what is happening with the entire organization makes a difference. At an executive level, at a director's level, at a high-level management point of view; bringing that person into a larger deal is always going to increase credibility. I have a personal example here at MINDBODY. World Health is a 35-location health club out of Calgary, Canada. MINDBODY only has 300 health club clients overall. We went out to Calgary, Canada and did a full analysis of the

product for two days and I believe that they considered us because I took the two owners of the company there. While I had credibility from a North American Sales Manager perspective and as someone they felt really knew and understood the product, and they liked me; bringing out the two owners showed that we were really serious about them. When you have two owners coming out to meet with you in an organization with over 300 employees, that credibility shows that not only do we know the product but also we care and want your business.

CONCLUSION

The dimensions of credibility, physical attractiveness, gender, and race of salespersons all pertain to persuasion. In order to increase persuasion in sales it is imperative to increase credibility. Credibility is one of the most important elements in persuasion and its dimensions can vary depending on the given situation. The research done in this paper concludes that the two most important dimensions of persuasive credibility are expertise and trustworthiness. In persuasion, expertise is considered the main dimension when trying to influence a social agent but trustworthiness in sales may be more important. Stephanie Jennings concurs, “if you establish trust and don’t necessarily have the knowledge somebody else does but the client is willing to talk to you, you have established a relationship that can go further to a sale” (personal communication, May 16, 1011). Thus, relationships based on the foundation of trust needs to be established with the consumer before expertise can even come into play. Furthermore, Malshe’s (2010) article stresses that a salesperson’s credibility is damaged when promises are not kept. Keeping promises bolsters a salesperson’s trust, and thereby

enhances credibility. Expertise is the second most important element because the salesperson needs to find a solution for the client. Listening and finding what the client needs is an easy way to find a solution (S. Jennings, personal communication, May 16, 2011), and expertise is needed to solve that solution. These two dimensions of source credibility are seemingly straight forward, but the other dimensions need to be examined more closely. Heightened physical attractiveness has a direct impact on persuasion. Consequently, it can be concluded from the research that physical attractiveness is highly context specific. In most situations however, it can enhance the influence over a consumer. Research found that appearing physically attractive is more beneficial when the product being sold is sex appropriate (Cunningham et al., 2008). Gender is another important dimension to consider when evaluating salesperson persuasion. It can be concluded from the research that gender is most reliant on physical attractiveness. But when it comes to sales, the research I have conducted has determined that the playing field has leveled for males and females. When it comes to credibility, Jones et al. (1998) revealed that female salespersons had better credibility than the males. The research conducted on race revealed the most interesting results. The research put the White male salesman as lowest in credibility and it rated the Black male salesperson as the highest. It also revealed that physical attractiveness is more reliant for the White male salesperson and less for the Black male salesperson. All of the dimensions that are evaluated depend on the situation, but each dimension is worth considering in detail. The research from this paper can be beneficial in order to increase sales success, and the practical advice offered from a successful Director of Sales supports the assertion that credibility should be cultivated. After all S. Jennings maintained “that credibility shows that not only do we

know the product but also we care and want your business” (personal communication, May 16, 2011).

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