

THE USE OF IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT IN CUSTOMER SURVEYS: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF INTRODUCTORY STATEMENTS ON COMMENT CARDS

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ABSTRACT

A basic tenet of survey research is that questionnaires should be designed to avoid bias. The presence of impression management tactics in introductory statements would appear to violate this tenet. As such, research in this area has recommended avoiding the use of such tactics as self-promotion, ingratiation, and exemplification. The current study examines this issue through a content analysis of customer comment cards. The results indicate that a majority of the cards contain evidence of impression management. Managerial implications are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Impression management has been defined as a set of behaviors that “individuals employ to protect their self-images, influence the way they are perceived by significant others, or both” [8, p. 232]. Perhaps the most well-known taxonomy of impression management was developed by Jones and Pittman [4]. It contains five types of impression management: ingratiation, self-promotion, exemplification, intimidation, and supplication. Of these, ingratiation, self-promotion, and exemplification would appear to have important implications for survey research because they have a presumed tendency to influence responses.

In particular, the presence of biased wording in introductory statements has the potential to influence the validity of the data and should, therefore, be avoided. As Bartkus et al. note: “they should be concise, be objective, and not lead the respondent to answer in a particular way” [1, p. 165]. Impression management, however, appears to have the potential to lead a respondent, no matter how concise or objective the statement. For example, Westfall and Stern note that ingratiatory behavior is thought to elicit positive affect and psychic indebtedness toward the ingratiator, which in turn can cause the influence target to favor the ingratiator when given the opportunity [9]. The use of ingratiation tactics in an introductory statement may temper any negative feedback that might be forthcoming or increase positive feedback.

With regard to self-promotion, Westfall and Stern note that it “typically involves attempts to influence performance judgments or evaluations of competence” [9, p. 270]. Bartkus et al. note that self-promotion is evidenced on customer comment cards with statements such as “Our award-winning staff is here to help with your stay” [1, p. 165]. When used this way, the presumed intent is to remind respondents that, despite any negative service they may have received, the company is still competent. As such, it has the potential to bias responses.

With regard to exemplification, Bartkus et al. note that a statement such as “We work hard so that you may enjoy your stay” has the potential to unfairly bias impressions by conveying that the company is competent in what it does. As such, it might unduly temper negative feedback and accentuate positive feedback [1].

Given this background, it seems reasonable to suggest that introductory statements in survey research should avoid impression management. Unfortunately, Bartkus et al. content analyzed comment cards from U.S. hotel chains and found numerous examples of impression management in the introductory statements. Forty-six percent of the cards contained evidence of exemplification, approximately 13 percent included evidence of ingratiation, and about 2 percent included evidence of self-promotion [1].

With this preface, it is important to clarify that there is only a presumption of impression management. In essence, identifying statements as evidence of exemplification, self promotion, and ingratiation presumes that their use was motivated by a desire to be seen more favorably. It is possible that the motives are relatively benign, and therefore not forms of impression management. For example, it is hard to imagine that a company would not value its customers’ opinions. Similarly, companies may genuinely work hard and simply want customers to know how much effort has been devoted to helping ensure a high level of service quality. Finally, companies may be proud of their accomplishments and simply want customers to know about them. Nonetheless, survey instruments are not the proper place for such information and their presence in introductory statements, therefore, raises the prospect of impression management, whether intended or not. In this regard, Bartkus et al. conclude that such tactics are: “expected in promotional brochures but violate the objectivity standard for survey research. As such, they should be avoided” [1, p. 173] [6] [7].

While the Bartkus et al. study examined hotel chains, one might question whether the results are generalizable to a wider sample of comment cards. For example, are restaurant comment cards equally prone to the use of impression management? What about grocery stores and other retailers? The purpose of this study is to extend the Bartkus et al. study by examining the wording in introductory statements for a cross-sectional sample of comment cards. The study is also intended to clarify and otherwise elaborate on the nature of impression management.

We begin with a brief review of the Jones and Pittman taxonomy as it relates to comment cards. This is followed by a description of the method of analysis and the subsequent presentation of results. We conclude with implications for the appropriate design of an introductory statement.

IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT TAXONOMY

The taxonomy of the three impression management behaviors that are used in this study is adapted from the Jones and Pittman taxonomy [4].

Ingratiation

Ingratiation is perhaps the most common component of the five factor model. Originally defined by Jones as “a class of strategic behaviors illicitly designed to influence a particular other person concerning the attractiveness of one’s personal qualities” [3, p. 11], ingratiation has since been de-stigmatized in the impression management literature. As Liden and Mitchell note, “the use of ingratiating behavior may not always involve devious methods to manipulate others” [5, p. 574]. Most researchers argue that while ingratiation may take many different forms, the underlying need is the

same: *to be liked*.

Self Promotion

Self promotion is associated with a need to be viewed by others as *competent*. Giacalone and Rosenfeld argue that the “self promoter tries to make others think he or she is competent on either general ability dimensions (e.g., intelligence) or specific skills (e.g., ability to play a musical instrument)” [2, p. 321].

Exemplification

Exemplification is designed to project an impression that one is *dedicated*. Jones and Pittman maintain that individuals who engage in exemplification involve themselves in managing impressions of integrity, self-sacrifice, and moral worthiness [4].

This review suggests that impression management tactics are not, with the exception of self promotion, all that uncommon on hotel comment cards. The question that this study addresses is whether or not impression management transcends hotels to other retail sectors.

METHOD

The method for this study is relatively straightforward and simply involves a convenience analysis of customer comment cards collected from non-chain hotels, grocers, and retailer establishments. The researchers collected the cards by visiting establishments over a 12-month period. In total, 49 cards were collected of which 11 were for non-chain hotels, 16 were for grocers, and the remaining 22 were for retail stores.

Each card’s introductory statement was then evaluated independently by two members of the research team for evidence of impression management. The results were then compared to identify any meaningful discrepancies in coding. Although a high level of congruence was found in the two analyses, a passage on one of the cards was found to be difficult to interpret and, therefore, was eliminated from the final analysis. The results were then tabulated according to the three forms of impression management; namely ingratiation, exemplification, and self promotion.

RESULTS

Of the 49 cards evaluated in this study, evidence of some form of impression management was found on 27 (approximately 55 percent). This corresponds very well to the results from the Bartkus et al. study where 56 percent of the cards contained evidence of impression management [1].

Within each sector, the result showed some variation. Non-chain hotels and grocers showed evidence of impression management at 73 and 69 percent, respectively. For retailers, that percentage was considerably lower at 41 percent.

Evidence of the type of impression management tactic used was also varied. Ingratiation was identified on 64 percent of the non-chain hotel cards. Of grocers, that percentage was 25 percent and for retailers, it was 27 percent.

Exemplification was identified on 36 percent of the non-chain hotels’ cards. For grocers and retailers,

this percentage was 31 and 18 percent respectively.

For self promotion, only one example was identified. Consistent with the Bartkus et al. study, it appears that self promotion is not a common tactic used on comment cards.

DISCUSSION

This study sought to extend the results of a previous study that focused exclusively on hotel chains. This study expanded the scope to include non-chain hotels, grocers, and other retailers. In doing so, it is intended to shed light on the practice of impression management in the area of this type of survey research.

Overall, the results do not differ substantially from those of Bartkus et al. [1], primarily with regard to self promotion which was not found to be a common practice.

There are, however, differences between the two studies with regard to the relative use of ingratiation versus exemplification. In the Bartkus et al. study, exemplification was much more common than ingratiation (46 percent for exemplification versus approximately 13 percent for ingratiation). In the current study, 26 percent of all cards showed evidence of exemplification while a higher percentage of cards (35 percent) showed evidence of ingratiation.

With regard to a comparison of the chain hotels from the Bartkus et al. study and non-chain hotels in the current study, the percentages indicate that ingratiation is the more common tactic in the non-chain hotels (64 percent for ingratiation versus 36 percent for exemplification). Why non-chain hotels appear more prone towards ingratiation is difficult to discern at this time.

Even though ingratiation appears to be a more common practice in these other sectors, it might make sense to ascertain whether or not the forms of ingratiation are harmful to the validity of the results. Although this would require an experimental design (which is beyond the scope of this study), a review of the statements reveals most to be relatively benign. While the intent may be to create an impression of being liked, we would argue that these statements are also useful in persuading customers to respond. In essence, by telling customers that they are valued, for example, they are probably more likely to respond. In the end, we believe that while ingratiation can conceivably extend beyond acceptable boundaries, we do not view the examples from this study to be out of line from common practice in survey research. That is, it is common practice to notify survey respondents that their opinion matters. Hence, it makes sense in the current context as well.

The same cannot be said for the use of exemplification. While we do not know the direction of influence that exemplification will have on respondents, its use appears to serve no purpose and has the potential to bias responses. As a result, exemplification is viewed as the more serious of the two.

Finally, although this study provides additional insights into the use of impression management in survey research, it is not without limitations. First, the study used a convenience sample that may or may not be representative of the population. Second, the identification of impression management statements on comment cards is based on the presumptive argument that the use of ingratiation, exemplification, and self-promotion are not proper in survey research and should be avoided. Unless we measure the motives of each company, we cannot know for sure whether or not the statements were intentionally designed to influence impressions. Finally, impression management is a complex subject.

In the current study, we utilized a well-known taxonomy, but it should be acknowledged that other taxonomies might be equally valid.

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