

WHEN SAYING “THANK YOU” CAN BACKFIRE – THE EFFECT OF GRATITUDE EXPRESSION ON W-O-M INTENTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Consumers who feel grateful towards a firm are motivated to reward the firm in a reciprocal fashion by repeating their purchases or by spreading positive WOM (word-of-mouth) about the firm. This research investigates how consumers' tendency to reciprocate firm's favor is modulated when they were given a chance to explicitly express gratitude. Participants who were guided to express their gratitude towards the firm that provided a favor reported significantly lower intention to generate word-of-mouth, both offline or online, compared to those who expressed happiness or their counterparts in the control condition.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Gratitude is the positive emotion one feels when another person has intentionally given, or attempted to give, one something of value [8] [9]. Research has documented positive effects gratitude brings, including better sleep and overall satisfaction with life [3] [6]. Also, gratitude plays an essential role in building and preserving social relationships [3] [4]. More recently, research has investigated the effect of gratitude expression – showing the other the extent of the felt gratitude – on relationship maintenance [5]. As Mauss (1925) once noted, such “expressions of gratitude can be viewed as simple exchanges for benefits to restore social balance in obedience to the norm of reciprocity [7].” To what extent, though, would merely expressing gratitude restore such a balance? Also, if gratitude expression restores the balance, how would it affect other potential reciprocating behaviors? The current research investigates these in a consumer context.

Prior research documented many instances in which reciprocity principle affects consumer behavior [1]. Cialdini (2004) argued, when discussing the effectiveness of providing free samples or try-outs, that customers are not only exposed to the product or service, but they also feel indebted. Relatedly, consumers who are grateful for a firm's product or service are motivated to reward the firm in a reciprocal fashion and do so by repeat purchasing and spreading positive WOM (word-of-mouth) about the firm (e.g., [9] [10]). Consequently, it is a quite common approach of brands to utilize gratitude as an emotion that enhances brand-customer relationship. However, would it be strengthening the relationship more if the customers are encouraged to reciprocate the firm or brand's favor by expressing the gratitude, or even if it does, would it demotivate consumers engaging in further firm-benefitting behavior as consumers feel as though they have fulfilled the need to reciprocate?

We conducted a quick pilot study (N = 128) to see if gratitude indeed elicits positive response behaviors from consumers who are provided with free samples. Participants in a product evaluation study were asked to imagine they would receive a sample for the product they evaluated. Then, they were asked to indicate the extent to which they would (1) purchase the product, (2) generate offline and online WOM. They were also asked to indicate degree to which they felt grateful towards the company that provided the sample. Replicating the findings from prior literature, the participants who felt higher level of gratitude indicated greater purchase intention (Pearson's $r=.473$), and WOM intentions offline and online (.531, .294, respectively, all correlation significant at the .01 level; median split also yields same results such that high vs. low gratitude show significant differences in terms of purchase and WOM intentions, all $ps < .01$).

Next, we examined the effect of gratitude expression. In a laboratory study (N = 112) which was described as a new product evaluation study, participants were asked to imagine receiving a sample size product for the product they had evaluated (as in the pilot study). Then, they received condition assignments. One-third of the participants were asked to take part in the company's initiatives to collect the evidence for customer engagement, by writing a brief message to express how thankful they were to receive the sample, whereas another one-third were asked to write about how happy they were for the sample. Rest of the consumers were not asked to write anything and the responses from these consumers served as baseline. Then, they were asked to indicate the purchase intention, then offline and online WOM intentions. We found no differences across conditions for product evaluation ($p = .73$) and purchase intention ($p = .16$). Yet, one-way ANOVA showed significant effect across the three conditions on WOM intentions, both offline and online ($p = .01$ and $p = .04$, respectively). The two measures were combined to create WOM index which yielded same result (Omnibus $p = .01$). Specifically, planned contrasts indicated that this main effect was driven by significant differences in the intentions reported by the recipients in the 'happy note' condition (M = 3.75) and the 'thank you note' condition (M = 2.75; $p < .01$). Whereas expressing happiness had marginal effect on enhancing WOM intentions compared to the baseline (M = 3.19; $p = .08$), the participants' reported WOM intentions between the gratitude expression condition and the control condition did not differ ($p = .17$). Further, the findings suggest that the extent to which gratitude expression operates as the reciprocation is rather domain specific. The fact that participants (i.e., recipients) were encouraged to say positive aspects about the firm, yet in a reciprocating manner by directing the message to the firm (i.e., benefactor), reduced their tendency to benefit the firm by sharing such a positive consumption experience with other consumers.

In summary, we investigated how expressing gratitude might mitigate the urge to reciprocate a favor received from a firm. Despite well-documented benefits of gratitude, compared to another positively-valenced emotion (i.e., happiness), expressing gratitude can demotivate consumers to share the positive experience with other consumers via WOM. These findings seem to support the notion that expression of gratitude can be a simple, effective maneuver to restore social balance in reciprocal relationships.

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