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Which Agent Do You Prefer: Sinful Success or Virtuous Failure?

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Extended Abstract

February 25, 2010

Imagine that you are looking for a real estate agent to help you sell your house. Agent A has sold many houses. You've heard that she sometimes withholds information from the buyer about problems with a house in order to close the deal. Agent B has sold fewer houses. You've heard that she is always up front about revealing information, even if it might hurt the sale. Which agent would you prefer?

Consumers often make trade-offs between two important dimensions of evaluation, competence and morality (Wojciszke 1994). Competence reflects an agent's skill or effectiveness in achieving goals, while morality reflects an agent's honesty. Prior research suggests that moral judgments are more important than competence judgments in evaluations of both individuals (Skowronski and Carlston 1987) and groups (Ellemers, Pagliaro, Barreto, and Leach 2008). In fact, morality tends to be given more weight than competence in general impression formation (De Bruin and Van Lange 2000). We refer to this phenomenon as the "morality effect."

In the situation described in the opening vignette, the morality effect would predict that Agent A, the more moral agent, would be preferred to Agent B, the more competent agent. However, self-interest suggests that a seller might prefer an agent who is likely to get the job done to an agent who may fail to do so. Thus, the agent's ability to successfully achieve the consumers' goal may override the morality effect.

In this paper, we examine some conditional boundaries of the morality effect in a marketing context. Our fundamental premise is that whereas the morality effect may dominate

non-marketing interpersonal relationships (such as friends, family and strangers), both competence and morality are likely to be important when evaluating marketing agents (such as salespeople and service agents). As goal-directed individuals who actively manage their interactions with marketing agents (Friestad and Wright 1994; Kirmani and Campbell 2004), consumers seek agents who can help them buy, repair, sell, and use products and services. In order to achieve purchase-related goals, consumers need marketing agents who are both competent and moral. Therefore, it is unclear whether the morality effect will dominate in a marketing context.

We examine a situation in which consumers must choose between a competent agent who engages in immoral behavior (i.e., sinful success) over a less competent but moral agent (i.e., virtuous failure). Such situations are found everyday as consumers make choices among political candidates, financial brokers, and salespeople. We define “sinful” behavior as the use of tactics that are perceived to be immoral, i.e., deceptive or unfair. The agent’s competence reflects both the extent to which the agent’s persuasion goal is achieved, e.g., the sales agent sells a product or makes a sale, and the agent’s expertise in the product category.

We predict that in situations where competence is more important than morality, consumers prefer sinful success over virtuous failure. We examine three factors that affect the relative importance of competence and morality: 1) the consumer’s time horizon; 2) the ability of the agent’s sinful behavior to directly harm the consumer; and 3) cognitive load. The importance of competence may be greater when the consumer has a short-term time horizon for goal achievement. For instance, someone who must sell a house within three months is likely to be more interested in an agent’s ability to do so than someone who has a longer time horizon. The importance of morality may be lower when the agent’s immoral behavior does not harm the

consumer. For instance, the consumer may not care if a salesperson backdates invoices or cheats on his taxes; however, she will care if the agent tries to cheat her by withholding discounts or free samples. Finally, high cognitive load may increase the consumer's natural instincts of self-interest. These predictions are tested in several experiments.

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