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Recommended Citation

Opengart, Rose and McCall, Michael, "Emotional Intelligence: The Antidote to Persuasion?" (2013).
Association of Marketing Theory and Practice Proceedings 2013. 9.
https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/amtp-proceedings_2013/9

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Emotional Intelligence: The Antidote to Persuasion?

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ABSTRACT

The study of emotion can be traced back to the early work of William James (1884). Consequently, it is hardly surprising that such a fundamental building block of human experience remains a fertile area for academic researchers and practitioners in fields as diverse as psychology, economics and marketing. Although there have been numerous calls for marketers to focus on touching customers' emotions, a number of important gaps remain. We consider here, the notion that emotional intelligence mediates the impact of social influence attempts in consumer decision making. Specifically, we argue that emotional intelligence may serve to mute and/or lessen individual responses to persuasive communications. We then present a decisional model that can serve as a template for emotion-related decision making.

Emotions are central to the actions of consumers (Bagozzi, Gopinath, & Nyer, 1999; Kotler, Kartajaya, & Setiawan, 2010), thus understanding the role of emotions in consumer decision-making and buying behavior is critical for effective retail decision-making (Levy & Weitz, 2007). Feelings-oriented factors influence consumer behavior, attitudes and purchasing decisions (Gardner, 1985). Emotion is an essential component of judgment and decision-making (Gohm & Clore, 2002; Schwarz & Clore, 1996), and emotions are thought to directly stimulate desire and initiate action (Bagozzi, 1992). Influence agents and moderator agents of consumer behavior may include emotions, feelings and relationships with others.

Salovey and Mayer (1990) proposed a model that identified four different factors of emotional intelligence: the perception of emotion, the ability reason using emotions, the ability to understand emotion and the ability to manage emotions. It has subsequently been shown that emotional intelligence (EI) influences problem solving and workplace innovation (Jordan & Troth, 2004), interpersonal skills, (Brown & Moshavi, 2005; Jordan & Troth, 2004; Prati, Douglas, Ferris, Ammeter & Buckley, 2003), and motivation and enthusiasm (Abraham, 2004; Carmeli & Josman, 2006; Gardner & Stough, 2003). More recently, research has focused on how emotion influences consumer's information processing (Lee & Sternthal, 1999), attitudes (Williams & Aaker, 2002), decision-making (Isen, 2001) and purchasing behavior (Kahn & Isen, 1993).

For example, research has demonstrated that affectively pleasing atmospheres cause shoppers to have a positive affect toward the product as well as in the person's decision-making (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). Emotion has also been shown to influence perception of the store's image,

the number of items purchased, the amount of money spent, and even the time spent shopping (Cohen & Areni, 1998). Mano and Oliver (1993) found that positive and negative affect mediated the relationships between product judgment and customer satisfaction. Similarly, Stayman and Batra (1991) found that people viewing an ad while in a positive emotional state induced stronger positive feelings toward a product.

Emotions may play a strong role in “impulse buying,” which in contrast to rational reflective purchasing, has been described as uncontrolled, spontaneous, and influenced by arousal and affect (Beatty & Ferrell, 1998; Faber & Vohs, 2004; Kacen & Lee, 2002), implying that the wish to acquire a product is elicited on the spot and creates a need for immediate gratification.

Given the influence of emotions on consumer behavior, emotional intelligence should enable a consumer to regulate the effect their emotions may have on purchasing behavior. Emotional intelligence is “the ability to perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to so as to promote emotional and intellectual growth” (Mayer & Salovey, 1997) .

Within the larger consumer research literature, Petty and Caccioppo (1986) have presented an important model of the persuasion process. The key ideas that underlie the Elaboration Likelihood Model are that attempts at persuasion can take one of two routes. The central route involves a more considered and deliberate approach where the soundness of the argument is assessed and analyzed. The peripheral approach to persuasion does not involve a careful elaboration of argument quality and tends to rely on such variables as source attractiveness, credibility, and other environmental and situational factors.

An interesting offshoot of these conceptualizations is that many attempts at persuasion fall within this peripheral information processing model. For instance, in what has become a classic presentation of social influence, Cialdini (1984) identified six influence principles that lead people to say yes, when they really wanted to say no. Each of these principles is built upon rules that generally serve us well but within a peripheral sphere can be exploited. An example is the notion that people have a desire to be consistent and will often agree to large requests, if they have first agreed to a small request. Other tools of influence include the impact of scarcity, real and imagined authority, liking and reciprocity.

Each of these elements could be used to influence consumer behavior, yet the degree of impact on the emotions and responses of the consumers may differ from one person to another. Consequently, we posit that a person’s level of emotional intelligence serves to moderate the effect of social influence on the consumer. Finally, we consider both the theoretical implications of this heuristic model as well as how this work can inform managerial decision making.

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