

The Smiling Face in Marketing Appeals and its Effects on the Customer

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SSE/EFI Working Paper Series in Business Administration
No. 2003:7
April 2003

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Abstract:

Joy appeals appear frequently in marketing, but they have received little attention from marketing researches compared to other emotional appeals (e.g., sexy appeals, humor appeals, and attraction appeals with decorative models). This study examines one particular aspect of the joy appeal in a marketing context, the smiling face stimulus. The main findings are that the smiling face is more effective than non-smiling faces in eliciting (1) a positive attitude toward the smiling stimulus person, (2) a positive overall attitude to the firm using the smile appeal, and (3) intentions to patronize and recommend this firm.

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Emotions have for some time attracted the attention of marketing researchers, particularly those who are active in the advertising effectiveness tradition, and it is clear that many marketing appeals elicit emotions. In fact, it is difficult for a marketing appeal *not* to produce at least some level of emotion (Zeitlin and Westwood 1986). It is also clear that the customer's emotions affect subsequent responses in terms of several variables in hierarchy-of-effects models (Brown and Stayman 1992; Holbrook and Batra 1987).

Marketing researchers' interest in this matter, however, has not been equally distributed over the full gamut of emotional appeals. This means that some emotional appeals have received more attention than others, particularly sexy appeals, fear appeals, humor appeals, and attraction appeals with decorative human models. Yet one common appeal has escaped attention – the joy appeal. In fact, reviews of the effects of message appeals do not include the joy appeal at all (cf. Percy and Rossiter 1992). This neglect is unsatisfactory, because joy appeals are frequently encountered in contemporary marketing. Typical applications are ads with pictures of smiling people having a good time, messages framed in terms of benefits such as fun or laughter, and employees who attempt to keep an emotional front loaded with smiles in customer interactions. Moreover, joy is a fundamental emotion in many emotion typologies (Izard 1977), and it affects several variables related to thought processes and social interaction (Isen 1984).

In this paper, we are particularly concerned with joy appeals involving a smiling face. Smiles are not the only way to elicit target person joy in a marketing context, and a joyful person may express his or her joy by other means than smiles, but smiles do appear to be related to joy (cf.

Menon & Dubé 2000). Moreover, the smile is a universal expression commonly assumed to play a crucial role in human interaction (Kraut and Johnston 1979; Lau 1982).

The main premise in this paper is that a smiling face in a marketing appeal has the potential of eliciting target person joy and evoking target person responses in terms of intermediate response variables commonly used by marketing researchers (and practitioners). Indirect support for some of these links exists in previous research, in the sense that smiling faces have been shown to elicit target person happiness (Lundqvist and Dimberg 1995). Moreover, in the case of services, the employee's degree of smiling behavior has been shown to affect customer behavior (Tidd and Lockard 1978). What we believe is missing, however, is empirical evidence specifically related to a marketing context and the links between a smiling face stimulus, target person joy, and the intermediate effects of joy. The purpose, then, is to examine target persons' responses to this stimulus in terms of joy and a set of attitudes and intentions frequently encountered in marketing research.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The emotional context of joy

Joy is typically allocated to a pleasant/high arousal cell in emotional typologies, together with emotions such as excitement, attraction and interest. Few emotion theorists would – from a conceptual point of view – equate joy with the other emotions that are populating this cell, and few empirical studies that distinguish between different theoretical constructs in the pleasant/high arousal cell have produced such high levels of correlations between them that it becomes reasonable to treat them as synonyms (cf. Russell 1980; Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson,

and O'Connor 1987). Consequently, when we discuss the joy appeal in the following sections, the discussion is based on the assumptions that joy is a distinct emotion type and that it should not be lumped together with other positive emotions.

The smiling face and the target person's joy

Can a marketing appeal containing a smiling face really elicit joy in the target person when he or she is exposed to this stimulus? After all, smiles are so common in this context that they may signal “marketing” or “influence attempt” rather than “genuine stimulus person joy” in the mind of target persons. And most of us know that joy is not the only reason behind a smile; it may serve the purposes of facilitating social interaction and hiding uncertainty (Kraut and Johnston 1979). However, several studies show that a smiling face stimulus, such as a photo of a smiling stranger, indeed creates a joy-like response in terms of either face muscle movements or self-reported joy (Dimberg and Thunberg 1998; Lau, 1992; Lundqvist and Dimberg 1995). One explanation is that joy and other emotions are contagious, in the sense that humans are more or less programmed to be sensitive to other persons' emotions – and programmed to adapt to these emotions in order to facilitate social interaction (ibid.). The extent to which a smiling face evokes joy in a *marketing* context, however, remains unexplored. In order to explore this issue, the first hypothesis is anchored in the general capacity of a smile to evoke joy in the target person:

H1: A smiling face in a marketing appeal evokes more joy in the target person than a non-smiling face

The smiling face and the target person's attitudes and intentions

Many authors have suggested that emotions may color judgments of several aspects of the emotion-evoking stimulus per se. For example, it seems to be well established that physically attractive persons, who elicit feelings of attraction among observers, are by heuristic shortcuts perceived to possess a wide variety of other favorable and valuable characteristics than good looks – such as kindness, warmth, and honesty. In other words, we tend to believe that “what is beautiful is good” (Dion, Berscheid, and Walster 1972). A handful of researchers outside a marketing context have identified a similar heuristic with respect to the smiling face stimulus. For example, Lau (1982) found that a smiling face elicited more positive evaluations, a higher level of attraction, and higher perceived intelligence than a non-smiling face. In a context in which the target person perceives that the stimulus person is smiling because he or she is likely to gain something from making a good impression, however, the smiling face may not produce significant effects on other variables. Wheeler, Baron, Michell, and Ginsburg (1979), for example, who studied the influence of a smiling face on subjects' judgments of stimulus persons' intelligence in a job interview context, failed to find a significant effect of smiles. On the other hand, and in terms of the only marketing-related study of the effects of the smiling faces that we have identified (in which joy was not measured), Nelson, Hammerle, and Beall (1988) found that an ad with a smiling dentist evoked higher friendliness and attraction scores compared to the case with the same non-smiling dentist. So maybe there is room for a heuristic of the “what is joyful is good” type? If so, under what conditions does it occur?

The influence of emotions on judgment, sometimes referred to as affect infusion, is assumed to be particularly salient under two conditions: (1) the judgment is of little immediate personal

relevance and there is little time or detailed information available for substantive processing, and (2) the object is complex and the judge is motivated to be accurate (Forgas 1995). These two conditions are akin to *both* low involvement and high involvement in many marketing models, so when are emotions *not* likely to have an impact on judgments? According to Forgas (1995), low affect infusion conditions encompass a situation in which a direct retrieval of pre-existing judgments is possible, and a situation in which the judge is highly motivated to arrive at one particular pre-determined judgmental outcome. Given that the conditions for high affect infusion are at hand, then, we expect that the target person's attitude toward the stimulus person who appear in a marketing appeal would be subject to a "what is joyful is good" heuristic as follows:

H2: A smiling face in a marketing appeal evokes a more positive attitude toward the stimulus person than a non-smiling face

Moreover, with regard to emotions in general, we expect that emotions generated by the stimulus person may transfer from the stimulus person to other objects to which the stimulus person is associated and color the judgments of these objects, too. Previous research has indicated that this transfer do take place when several specific emotions are involved. For example, ads including attractive models – who create attraction in the mind of the target person – tend to generate positive attitudes toward the ad and to the advertised brand (Baker and Churchill 1977). How far would this transfer stretch in the case of joy? Does it transfer to judgments concerning the overall assessment of the marketing actor who is using the emotional appeal? Some research indirectly suggests that this may be the case. For example, in service management-related literature, employee behavior characterized by happiness, smiles and positive affect has been shown to positively affect the customer's overall

evaluation of the supplier (Menon and Dubé 2000, Pugh 2001; Winsted 2000). The following, then, is hypothesized in the case of a smiling face (given the conditions of high affect infusion):

H3: A smiling face in a marketing appeal evokes a more positive overall attitude toward the firm using the marketing appeal than a non-smiling face

Furthermore, research on the effects of emotional appeals for one particular brand indicates that emotions evoked by an appeal are transferred beyond the overall evaluation of the brand to the target person's intentions vis-à-vis the brand or the supplier of the brand (Bello, Pitts, and Etzel 1983; Dudley 1999). An intention materializes when an individual makes a proposition that connects him/her with a future behavioral act (Söderlund 2002), and given that emotions in general are related to intentions (Bagozzi and Dholakia 1999), we expect that a smiling face elicits stronger intentions than a non-smiling face (cf. Nelson et al. 1988 who shows that a smiling face in an ad elicits higher patronize intentions than a non-smiling face). Two common behavioral objects of intentions in marketing are patronizing and recommending (i.e., word-of-mouth), and they were selected as response variables:

H4: A smiling face in a marketing appeal evokes a stronger intention to patronize the firm using the marketing appeal than a non-smiling face

H5: A smiling face in a marketing appeal evokes a stronger intention to recommend the firm using the marketing appeal than a non-smiling face

RESEARCH METHOD

Procedure

Three versions of a scenario referring to a customer's interaction with a sales representative were developed as stimulus material. All scenarios were identical except for the facial expression of the female sales representative who appeared in a photo in each scenario. In the first version she was smiling, and in the second and third versions she was not smiling. The scenario was enclosed in a questionnaire that we used as data collection means. Respondents were randomly allocated to one of these three versions, and all respondents answered an identical set of questions about the variables in the hypotheses after the exposure.

All respondents were participants in marketing classes, and they were asked to complete the questionnaire in the classroom at the beginning of the teaching session. The first author, who was the teacher in the seminar, distributed the three versions of the questionnaire randomly to the participants as they were seated, informed the participants that no talking was allowed while completing the questionnaire, stressed that responses to all questionnaire items were necessary, collected the completed questionnaires, and debriefed the participants. The procedure was repeated with four groups of participants who met the teacher at four different occasions. No main differences in the responses emerged between the four groups; therefore, they were aggregated to one single sample for the analysis ($N = 165$). The number of respondents who completed each of the three versions was 55.

The scenario was introduced by asking the participant to imagine that he or she had entered a fictive travel agency in which he or she interacted with a sales representative. The purpose of the visit was to gather information about a trip. This setting was assumed to minimize the

likelihood for a low affect infusion condition (cf. the theoretical section), in the sense that pre-existing judgments about a non-existing travel agency are unlikely, and there are no reasons to believe that the participants would have a strong motivation to arrive at one particular judgment about the events at the travel agency. The scenario text is available from the authors.

The hypotheses require that a smiling face is to be contrasted with a non-smiling face. Given that a face can take on many non-smiling expressions, we decided to use two different non-smiling faces in addition to a smiling face. The photos of faces included in the scenarios were obtained by a process that involved the following steps: First, several pictures were taken of the same female stimulus person who was asked to take on facial expressions ranging from very sad to very joyful. Second, seven of these photos were selected as potential candidates for the final analysis, and they were assessed by a separate group of respondents ($N = 14$) who we asked to evaluate each of the seven photos in terms of the extent to which they believed that the stimulus person was joyful (1 = Do not agree at all, 7 = Agree completely). Third, we used the scores from this test to select one face with low joy content (mean joyfulness = 1.21), one face with medium joy content (mean joyfulness = 3.84), and one smiling face (mean joyfulness = 6.64). These faces, then, can be conceived of as being located at different points on a facial joy continuum. They are depicted in figure 1 in the same way as they appeared in the scenarios.

Figure 1:
The three faces used in the experiment



Measures

After having read the scenario, the participant was asked to reflect on how he or she would feel given an interaction of the type described in the scenario. At this point in the questionnaire a 10-point joy scale appeared, and it consisted of the following adjectives: joyful, pleased, cheerful, merry and in good mood (1 = Do not agree at all, 10 = Agree completely). Alpha for the joy scale was .93. Similar items appear in a frequently used joy scale developed by Izard (1977). Havlena and Holbrook (1986) and Holbrook and Batra (1987) have used related items in their joy scales. In addition, and as a (discriminant) validity check, a sadness scale including three adjectives (sad, in bad mood, and grieved) was also to be completed by the respondent (alpha = .89). The specific sadness and joy items were mixed in the questionnaire. It was expected that joyfulness and sadness would be negatively correlated but not bipolar (i.e., the negative correlation is larger than -1). For example, in Lorr and Shea (1979), the sadness–cheerfulness correlation was $-.55$, and the sad–happy correlation in Sjöberg, Svensson, and Persson (1979) was $-.47$. In our case, the correlation between the joyfulness variable and the sadness variable was $-.56$ ($p < .01$), thus indicating that some level of validity is at hand in the measure of joy.

Then, in the following parts of the questionnaire, the other variables in the hypotheses were measured. With respect to the respondent's *attitude toward the stimulus person*, we used six adjective-pairs and a 10-point response format: bad–good, dislike her–like her, unpleasant–pleasant, unintelligent–intelligent, uninteresting–interesting, and negative impression–positive impression. These items appear frequently in scales measuring attitude toward the ad and attitude toward the brand (Holbrook and Batra 1987; Liu and Stout 1987; Mitchell 1986), and we used the unweighted mean of the participants' responses to the six

items as an indicator of attitude toward the stimulus person ($\alpha = .91$). In addition, in this part of the questionnaire, and for the purpose of a manipulation check, we included one adjective pair explicitly related to the respondent's perception of the stimulus person's emotional state, namely unhappy–happy.

The *overall attitude toward the firm* was measured as the unweighted average of the participant's responses to three customer satisfaction items developed by Fornell (1992). They appear in several national customer satisfaction barometers (cf. Johnson, Gustafsson, Andreassen, Lervik, and Cha 2001). More specifically, the participant was asked to think about his or her impression of the travel agency and to respond to the following items on a 10-point scale: "How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with this travel agency?" (1 = very dissatisfied, 10 = very satisfied), "To what extent does this travel agency meet your expectations?" (1 = not at all, 10 = totally), and "Imagine a travel agency that is perfect in every respect. How near or far from this ideal do you find this travel agency?" (1 = very far from, 10 = cannot get any closer). Alpha for this scale was .93.

Finally, *patronize intention* was measured with the item "How likely is it that you would purchase a ticket from this travel agency?" (1 = Very unlikely, 10 = Very likely), and *word-of-mouth intention* was measured by the item "How likely is it that you would recommend this travel agency to a friend who is looking for a vacation abroad?" (1 = Very unlikely, 10 = Very likely). Both types of intentions, then, were of the behavioral expectation type (cf. Söderlund 2002), and this type of one-item intention measure appears in several assessments of the effects of marketing appeals (cf. Liu and Stout 1987; Mitchell 1986).

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

It was expected that the respondents would not characterize the three faces as equally joyful. In order to examine the manipulation, we used an ANOVA to compare the means for the three groups of respondents with regard to the unhappy–happy item in the questionnaire that specifically referred to the respondents' view of the stimulus person's emotional state. The mean responses for this item in the three groups were 4.12 (the low joy face group), 6.27 (the medium joy face group), and 7.25 (the smiling face group). The overall test was significant, $F(2, 161) = 34.33, p < .01$, thus suggesting that all means were not equal. A Scheffe test indicated that all pairwise mean comparisons between the groups were significant ($p < .05$ for each pair). Hence, it can be contended that the manipulation had the expected effect.

The first hypothesis stated that the smiling face in a marketing appeal evokes more joy in the target person than a non-smiling face. We used an ANOVA to compare the mean level of joy between the three groups. The low joy face elicited a relatively low level of joy (mean = 5.06), the medium joy face produced a higher level of joy (mean = 5.29), and the smiling face generated the highest level of joy (mean = 6.06). The overall test indicated that all means were not equal: $F(2, 162) = 3.99, p = .02$. Moreover, a post hoc comparison with Scheffe's test revealed that the smiling face evoked a significantly higher level of joy than the low joy face ($p = .03$), and an almost significantly higher level of joy than the medium joy face ($p = .12$). The difference between the low joy face and the medium joy face was not significant ($p = .83$). This analysis, then, indicates that the smiling face had a greater joy-eliciting potential than the low joy face, but also that the medium joy face was equally effective in producing joy in the target person. In other words, a smile is one of several ways in which a face may

elicit joy. This means that hypothesis 1 is supported only for the smiling face versus the low joy face.

Turning to hypothesis 2, in which we hypothesized that a smiling face in a marketing appeal evokes a more positive attitude toward the stimulus person than a non-smiling face, an ANOVA comparison was made between the three groups of respondents with regard to the attitude toward the stimulus person. The comparison generated the following means in the three groups: 4.54 (the low joy face group), 5.59 (the medium joy face group), and 6.33 (the smiling face group). The overall test was significant, $F(2, 162) = 15.03, p < .01$, and a post hoc Scheffe test showed that all pairwise mean comparisons between the groups were significant ($p < .10$ for each pair). Hypothesis 2, then, is supported. It indicates that a “what is joyful is good” heuristic appears to have been in operation in the minds of our respondents.

Hypothesis 3 stated that a smiling face in a marketing appeal evokes a more positive overall attitude toward the firm using the marketing appeal than a non-smiling face. The satisfaction means in the three groups were as follows: 5.04 (the low joy face group), 5.45 (the medium joy face group), and 6.32 (the smiling face group). Again, an ANOVA generated a significant overall result, $F(2, 162) = 6.25, p < .01$. A pairwise post hoc comparison revealed that the smiling face produced significantly more satisfaction than the low joy face ($p < .01$) and significantly more satisfaction than the medium joy face ($p = .07$). The difference between the low joy face and the medium joy face was not significant ($p = .54$). Hypothesis 3, then, is supported.

According to hypotheses 4 and 5, a smiling face in a marketing appeal evokes a stronger intention to patronize and recommend the firm using the marketing appeal than a non-smiling

face. For patronize intentions the group means were as follows: 5.04 (the low joy face group), 5.20 (the medium joy face group), and 6.34 (the smiling face group). An ANOVA on these group means generated a significant overall result, $F(2, 162) = 5.22, p < .01$, and a pairwise post hoc comparison revealed that the smiling face produced significantly stronger patronizing intentions than the low joy face ($p < .01$) and significantly stronger patronizing intentions than the medium joy face ($p = .036$). Hypothesis 4 is thus supported. Turning to word-of-mouth intentions, the following group means were obtained: 4.37 (low joy face group), 4.65 (medium joy face group), and 6.04 (the smiling face group). An ANOVA on these means produced a significant overall result, $F(2, 161) = 6.58, p < .01$. The pairwise post hoc comparison revealed that the smiling face produced significantly stronger word-of-mouth intentions than the low joy face ($p < .01$), and significantly stronger word-of-mouth intentions than the medium joy face ($p = .02$). The difference between the low joy face and the medium joy face was not significant ($p = .84$). This means that hypothesis 5 is supported.

DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Two main findings emerge from this study: (1) a smiling face (i.e., a high joy face) evokes more joy than a low joy face, but not significantly more joy than a medium joy face, and (2) the smiling face appears to be more effective than non-smiling faces in eliciting a positive attitude to the smiling stimulus person, a positive overall attitude to the firm using the smile appeal, and intentions to patronize and recommend this firm.

With respect to the first part of the findings (i.e., the medium joy face and the smiling face do not evoke different levels of joy), one explanation is that humans have a bias to perceive objects in favorable rather than in unfavorable terms (Taylor and Brown 1998), which, in turn,

suggests that that many different facial expressions, and not only a smiling face, may create target person joy (as long as the expression is not below some joylessness threshold). But why would a smiling face – that does not produce a significantly higher level of joy than a face with moderate joy content – still evoke stronger responses in subsequent variables? One reason could be that a smiling face evokes *other* positive emotions than joy (e.g., attraction) to a larger extent than non-smiling faces – and these other emotions join one another in their effects on other variables. A related reason is that one particular emotion may elicit other emotions, and if this is the case several specific emotions would again present themselves as potential determinants of attitudes and intentions. Given this “bundle-of-emotions” explanation, and given the narrow focus on joy in this paper, future research on the effects of the joy appeal, and the effects of joy, needs to explicitly take account of several emotions that may arise together or as byproducts of each other.

An alternative explanation, however, may also be suggested. Perhaps it is something about the smiling face that leaves particular joy traces that are qualitatively different from the joy traces left by a non-smiling face. In other words, the *level* of joy evoked by one particular stimulus may not be the sole contributor to affect infusion. This explanation, then, suggests that the link between joy and cognitive judgments may not be direct; perhaps mediating variables are activated to a larger extent by the smiling face than the non-smiling face. For example, given that a joy response may evoke memories of joy experienced in the past, so that this historical joy comes alive and blends itself with the present joy (cf. Bower 1982), it is possible, when this process unfolds, that a smiling face is activating other memories than those activated by the non-smiling face (e.g., prior judgments of objects related to prior smiling faces). And it is perhaps *these other memories* that color cognitive judgments made in the present. A conceptual and empirical analysis of such potentially mediating variables would be an

important task for future research. Presumably, an analysis of this type would also serve to highlight the nature of the relationship between a face stimulus and a joy response.

More generally, this study shares an important limitation with several other attempts to examine the effectiveness of emotional appeals, in the sense that little has been said about the underlying process of emotional variables' influence on cognitive judgments. For example, is the emotional response coloring each of the cognitive variables? Or is its influence limited to an effect on variables located at an early stage in the effect hierarchy? These issues need to be examined if we wish to say something more than that an emotional appeal "evokes" this or that response in other variables.

Despite these limitations, and given the present state of knowledge about the joy appeal, the practical implication of this study seems straight-forward: The marketer who is interested in affecting target persons' attitudes and intentions, rather than joy per se, would benefit from selecting pictures of smiling faces rather than pictures of non-smiling faces. With regard to ads and other appeals in which the content can be controlled easily, the implementation appears to be unproblematic. However, in appeals made by live employees who interact with customers, the implementation is more problematic, because it involves many other (and organization-related) variables than those that traditionally are manipulated by marketers. Given the results in this study, however, managers may of course try to smile themselves in their interaction with employees!

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