Face it - Photos don't make a Web Site Trustworthy

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ABSTRACT

Use of staff photographs is frequently advocated as a means of increasing customer confidence in an e-shop. However, these claims are not conceptually or empirically grounded. In this paper we describe a qualitative study, which elicited customer reactions towards an e-commerce site that displayed staff photographs and links to richer media. The results suggest that employing social and affective cues, particularly in the form of photos, can be a risky strategy. To be effective they should be combined with functionality and targeted specifically at the user types we identified.

Keywords

E-commerce, e-CRM, trust, social cues, affective cues

INTRODUCTION

Lack of the 'human touch' is widely seen as a reason for low consumer confidence in e-commerce. Nielsen [3] has suggested that photographs and company background information may make "the web a less impersonal place and increase trust". Experience from the advertising industry lends further credibility to this idea. However, photographs are only one way, and a very restricted one, to substitute some of the social and affective cues normally present in face-to-face communication (e.g. facial expression, gesture and gaze) [4]. Our research examines the effect of these cues in e-commerce. In this initial report we focus on static representation – photographs.

CONCEPTUAL BASIS

The sociological concept of *re-embedding* states that face-to-face interaction helps to establish trust in distant interaction. A recent study found that exposure to photographs prior to interaction increases trusting behaviour in virtual teams [5]. Research on the credibility of web content revealed that authors' photographs have an effect on an article's perceived trustworthiness [1].

Research in social psychology has identified cues of trustworthiness in face-to-face situations (e.g. eye contact, lateral flexion of head). We drew on research in *social presence* and *telepresence* to establish how these cues could best be mediated (e.g. giving context, temporal co-presence). We call this approach *virtual re-embedding.*

TEST MATERIAL & METHOD

In the research reported here we used photographs, links to more expressive or synchronous media (email, telephone), and hints of personal accountability. We implemented four versions of virtual re-embedding in a mock-up of the German on-line shopping site Amazon.de: **[A] Customer:** Photograph of a customer receiving an ordered item. (Location: checkout pages). **[B] Editor:** Photograph, name and contact-email of a section editor. (Location: product description pages). **[C] Customer Service Agent:** Photograph, name, email and telephone number; text detailing availability for communication & personal responsibility of service agent. (Location: first checkout page). **[D] Company Background:** Photographs and short text on company's facilities, people & history. (Location: separate page linked to first page).

15 participants, incl. 6 online-shoppers, were asked to *think aloud* while performing a trial shopping exercise, followed by 45 minutes *focused interviews*. The combination of these techniques allowed for obtaining reactions from participants without directing them to the elements tested. To examine the verbal protocols, video and system interaction we employed Mayring's in-depth *qualitative content analysis* [2]. This allowed us to develop a grounded understanding of participants' perceptions and reasoning on trust.

RESULTS

The results suggest that it is not generally advisable to display photographs of people. The participants' reactions ranged from suspicion to enthusiasm. The control variables *Internet usage experience* and *gender* did not serve to explain this enormous variance. Thus, we employed the qualitative technique called *typifying structuring* [2] to generate a typology based on the participants' reactions and on-line shopping status.

While this typology is still preliminary, requiring further validation studies, it serves to clarify the risks associated with the use of photographs. It further emphasizes the need to take into account personality and situational variables when analysing the effect of social and affective cues. Our analysis revealed the four user types, illustrated in Table 1:

	Relationship Seeking	Function Seeking
SHOPPER	*Photographs*: Can intensify relationship	*Photographs:* Decrease usability
	Other Media: Enrich relationship	*Other Media*: Provide new functionality
	Lack of Benefits	**Lack of Trust**
NON-SHOPPER	*Photographs:* Positive reaction	*Photographs:* Trust manipulation
	Other Media: Offer new benefits	*Other Media*: Further manipulation

Table 1. User types and their reactions

Relationship Seeking: These participants exhibit a high level of trust prior to the study. *Photographs* do little to increase their trust, but they allow them to intensify their relationship with the brand. However, they disapprove of photographs they consider as inappropriate to the brand identity. More *expressive or interactive media* (e.g. chat) promise to increase loyalty in this group - not through a superficial treatment of "trust", but through enriching their overall brand experience.

Function Seeking: This group is willing to bear a high level of risk and prefers an anonymous, lean service. *Photographs* are mostly rejected, because they "clutter" the interface without providing added functionality. Based on the reactions to the personally responsible service agent [C], implementations that offer *functional significance of face-to-face communication* are more promising with this user type. The main role of such cues is not for communicating trustworthiness, but for supporting these customers in achieving their tasks. For this type of users the traditional criteria of HCI, task effectiveness and efficiency, are most important.

Lack of Benefits: These participants do not shop on-line. Their costs (e.g. time spent browsing) are not justified by the benefits they could reap. Overall, this type of user gave the most positive reaction towards the *photographs* tested. However, they are still left with a lack of benefits in on-line shopping, e.g. lack of personalised advice. Incorporating *synchronous media* (e.g. chat to give personalised advice) together with assurance measures external to the interface is likely to win them as customers for e-commerce.

Lack of Trust: These non-shoppers are the most risk-aware and exhibit very little propensity to trust on-line vendors. They do not believe that the *photographs* on the site depict the company's staff. On the contrary, they see them as attempts at trust manipulation. *Richer media* are also objected due to their fear of manipulative intent.

CONCLUSIONS

Our results suggest that photographs and also richer media should be used with care. Customer reactions vary widely, thus putting photographs of employees on e-shops' interfaces might benefit one group of shoppers while deterring another. Implementing different interfaces to cater for different customer types could serve to maximise the benefit of having a "human touch" while minimising the risk of appearing to be manipulative.

However, the problem runs deeper. Results from research on trust in virtual teams [5] are contradicted by the extremely negative reactions of some participants. We attribute this to the fact that in an e-commerce context the validity of the social and affective cues given is not assured. The e-shop could choose to display any attractive-looking photograph. In face-to-face situations or virtual team settings, there is little room for using cues strategically in this way.

Social and affective cues do prompt affective responses. These can be negative or positive, depending on the implementation and on the user type. Based on our results we assume that there are implementations that can improve the experience of a wider user group:

I. Employing interactive or more expressive channels (e.g. chat or video) leaves less room for strategically controlling cues and thus increases the validity of the cues given.

II. Analysing and modelling the functions of social cues in real world shopping and, thus reducing the risks that are present in on-line shopping. An example of a functional benefit of a face-to-face relationship is the avoidance of misunderstandings (through shared history and common ground). An on-line shop could aim to model this functionality, hence providing genuine, non-manipulative justification for *function seeking* users.

In a situation where bandwidth to consumers is increasing, while the uptake of e-commerce is stagnating, using photographs or social and affective cues via other media is very tempting. However, our results suggest that ill-considered use of these cues can decrease both trustworthiness and usability of an e-shop.

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