

Starting Off with an Apology: Paving the Way to Consumer Persuasion?

Abstract

Apologies usually follow a notable mistake. However, recently companies have started to apologize in their persuasive communications for committing a trivial mistake. This article examines whether and why trivial apologies can serve as an effective persuasion technique in direct e-mail campaigns. Results show that (1) trivial apologies have a persuasive impact on attitudes and behavioral intentions, (2) a lack of persuasion knowledge activation explains this impact, and (3) the persuasive impact can be attenuated when disclosing the use of trivial apologies as a persuasion tactic.

Extended abstract

'Sorry! Yesterday our cat ate our website speed. Please accept FREE SHIPPING on us as an apology!' By apologizing – even if for a trivial mistake – companies nowadays create the perfect opportunity to offer you a favor (e.g., free shipping) in their marketing campaigns. Although prior research has identified elements to optimize the response to direct e-mail campaigns (Ellis-Chadwick & Doherty, 2012), the use of trivial apologies is still left unexplored. To help fill this void, we investigate whether and why trivial apologies have an impact. While apologies have mainly been investigated as an effort to *recover* from mistakes, this study will perceive apologies as a proactive strategy.

To explain the impact of trivial apologies, we rely on the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM), stated by Friestad and Wright (1994). According to the PKM, people develop knowledge about persuasion tactics that may help them to identify and cope with future persuasion attempts (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Persuasion attempts not recognized as such inhibit the activation of persuasion knowledge (PK) and may eventually result in greater compliance with the persuasive message (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000; Friestad & Wright, 1994; Wei, Fischer, & Main, 2008). We believe that trivial apologies hide the actual persuasive intent of a message, inhibit PK activation, and, therefore, exercise a positive impact on consumer responses to the message.

For **Study 1** ($N=20640$) we received field data from Sacha, a European footwear company. Two direct e-mail campaigns were sent to reactivate customers that did not buy for one year. Customers randomly received a mail with either 'sorry' or 'good news' as subject line. Except for subject lines, the content of both e-mails was the same, including a 20% discount to encourage reactivation. Results show that 37.67% of the customers opened the 'sorry' e-mail, whereas only 28.66% opened the 'good news' e-mail ($z=13.73$; $p<.001$).

Study 2 ($N=37$) aims to replicate in the lab that a persuasive message accompanied by an apology for a trivial mistake can generate more positive consumer responses compared to an identical message without apology. Study 2 also investigates if the activation of PK mediates the effect of apologizing on responses. A one-way between-subjects experiment with two conditions (apology: yes vs. no) was set up. Participants were randomly exposed to an e-mail campaign with or without trivial apology, this time in the e-mail message itself. Both before and after exposure, attitude toward the company (A_c ; 3-item measurement; $\alpha=.97$) and intention to purchase from the company (I_c ; single 100-point item) were measured. The differences in pre- and post-measures were used as dependent variables. Two items measured PK activation after exposure ($r=.88$).

Two independent samples t-tests revealed that a trivial apology (vs. no apology) increases Ac ($M_{\text{apology}}=.96$ vs. $M_{\text{no_apology}}=.12$; $t(35)=-2.31$; $p=.03$) and Ic ($M_{\text{apology}}=10.89$ vs. $M_{\text{no_apology}}=.16$; $t(35)=-2.96$; $p=.01$). Mediation analyses confirmed that a trivial apology leads to less PK activation, which in turn leads to a more positive Ac ($ab=.38$, 95% CI[.01;.95]) and a higher Ic ($ab=3.62$; 90% CI[.16;8.74]).

Results indicate that the integration of a trivial apology in a persuasive message enables companies to cover up its persuasive intent and as such influence responses. Study 3 provides more evidence for this, by manipulating rather than measuring the mediator.

Study 3 (MTurk; $N=143$) aims to replicate the effect of Study 2 by manipulating the extent to which PK is evoked. Therefore, we designed an explicit (i.e., desire to persuade is verbalized) versus implicit (i.e., desire to persuade is *not* verbalized) persuasive message (Reinhard, Messner, & Sporer, 2006). In the implicit condition, consumers were informed about a large assortment of winter coats, while in the explicit condition the desire to sell one of these coats was underlined.

If our assumption is valid that a trivial apology hides persuasive intent and thus, inhibits PK activation, we expect a positive effect of the inclusion of a trivial apology only in *explicit* persuasive messages, as for *implicit* persuasive messages PK activation is low overall. A study with a 2(apology: yes vs. no) x 2(explicitness persuasive intent: explicit vs. implicit) between-subjects design was conducted.

A significant interaction between trivial apology and strength of persuasive intent on intention to respond to the campaign (Ir; measured by a 100-point item) was found ($F(1,139)=7.70$; $p=.01$). Simple effects analyses revealed that Ir is higher when a trivial apology (vs. no apology) is offered, however only for an explicit persuasive message ($M_{\text{apology}}=69.64$, $M_{\text{no_apology}}=44.80$, $F(1,139)=11.55$, $p=.001$). For an implicit persuasive message, no difference in Ir was found ($M_{\text{apology}}=39.45$, $M_{\text{no_apology}}=42.82$, $F(1,139)=.23$, $p=.63$).

Results show that a trivial apology is effective because it reduces PK activation if the attempt to persuade is readily apparent (i.e., explicit). If the desire to persuade is only implicit, trivial apologies cannot provide any additional effect. This also rules out an alternative explanation that the apology in itself may merely evoke additional interest.

Study 4 (lab; $N=82$) examines whether the positive effect of apologies is attenuated when consumers recognize its persuasive impact. Therefore, we tested the impact of disclosing (vs. not disclosing) the use of trivial apologies on consumers' PK and Ac ($\alpha=.97$). A study with three between-subjects conditions (apology with disclosure, apology without disclosure, no apology) was conducted. As in Study 2, participants were shown a direct e-mail campaign with or without trivial apology. In the disclosure condition, participants saw an article where the use of trivial apologies was described as a persuasion tactic.

Simple effects analysis reconfirmed that the use of a trivial apology in a persuasive message increases Ac. As in Study 2, this study replicated full mediation of PK in the effect of apologizing on Ac. Furthermore, simple effects analysis showed that Ac is significantly lower for 'apology with disclosure' than 'apology without disclosure'. Lastly, we found that PK mediates the effect of 'apology with disclosure' on Ac. Thus, disclosing the use of trivial apologies increases PK, which in turn has a negative effect on Ac (*see Fig. 1*).

		DV: Attitude toward the Company	
Simple effect analyses		<i>M</i>	<i>t</i>
IV: Apology:	(1) With disclosure		
	(2) Without disclosure		
	(3) No apology		
	<u>(2) vs. (3)</u>	.79 vs. -.14	2.21*
	<u>(1) vs. (2)</u>	-1.74 vs. .79	-5.43***
	<u>(1) vs. (3)</u>	-1.74 vs. -.14	-3.59**
Mediation Analysis: MED x IV		<i>a x b</i>	95% <i>CI</i>
	<u>MED x (2)</u>	.62	(.01; 1.31)
MED: Persuasive Intent	<u>MED x (1)</u>	-1.29	(-2.42; -.34)

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

FIG. 1 Results simple effect analyses and mediation analyses

In conclusion, trivial apologies in commercial messages enable companies to mask their persuasive intent, which activates less PK, and eventually leads to more beneficial responses.

References

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