

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

LAURA DE KERPEL¹

ANNELEEN VAN KERCKHOVE¹

TINA TESSITORE²

¹Ghent University, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Department of Marketing, Twekerkenstraat 2, 9000 Ghent, Belgium, E-mail: Laura.DeKerpel@UGent.be; Anneleen.Vankerckhove@ugent.be

²IÉSEG School of Management (LEM-CNRS UMR 9221), 3 Rue de la Digue, 59000 Lille, France, E-mail: t.tessitore@ieseg.fr

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

Summary

Apologies usually follow a notable mistake. However, recently companies have started to apologize in their persuasive communications for committing nothing but a trivial mistake. This article examines whether and why the use of *trivial apologies* can serve as an effective persuasion technique in direct e-mail campaigns. A field experiment reveals the beneficial impact of a trivial apology on consumers' behavioral responses. Furthermore, results from three studies 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) disclosing trivial apologies as a persuasion tactic can attenuate this impact. Implications for both marketers and public policy makers are discussed.

Keywords: Apologies; E-mail marketing; Persuasion knowledge; Persuasive intent; Disclosure

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

'Sorry! Yesterday our cat ate our website speed. Please accept FREE SHIPPING on us as a token of our apologies!' Similar messages increasingly pop up in consumers' e-mailbox. From a consumer perspective, these messages may seem unexpected, as consumers may not be aware of a slower website speed. From a company perspective however, an apology—even if for a trivial mistake that consumers are not aware of—presents a great opportunity to offer a favor in return, like free shipping or an extra discount. By doing so, companies hope to show their goodwill and to positively influence consumers' responses to their direct e-mail campaigns.

Research on how to stimulate consumer responses to direct e-mail is limited, despite the popularity of direct e-mail as communication tool (Cho & Khang, 2006; Gopal, Tripathi, & Walter, 2006). These prior studies have focused on length of the message and images in the e-mail (Chittenden & Rettie, 2003), timing and frequency (DuFrene, Engelland, Lehman, & Pearson, 2005), and subject line (Chittenden & Rettie, 2003). However, the impact of trivial apologies on consumer responses to direct e-mail campaigns remains unexplored. Therefore, this paper investigates *whether, how, and why* trivial apologies influence consumer responses to direct e-mail.

Apologies are defined as 'statements of responsibility and remorse or regret' (Tomlinson, Dineen, & Lewicki, 2004). Extant research on apologizing has mainly highlighted the use of apologies by companies and individuals as a way to recover from *real* mistakes. When used in response to a real mistake, both positive (e.g., the potential to recover from the mistake; Wooten, 2009) and negative consequences (e.g., reduced trustworthiness because of the admission of guilt; Schlenker, 1980) may eventually follow the apology. The final outcome of apologizing depends upon whether the positive consequences of apologizing were strong enough to offset the negative consequences of the mistake (Marcus & Goodman, 1991). Our research, however, investigates the use of apologies for a *trivial* rather than a real mistake, which implies that the negative consequences arising from this mistake are minor or even non-existent. Hence, we expect only the positive aspect of apologizing to remain, which may benefit the company in terms of consumer responses.

To explain the impact of trivial apologies in persuasive messages, we rely on the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) (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). When an attempt is recognized as being persuasive, consumers are likely to activate the appropriate coping processes so as to protect themselves from the potential impact on their behavior (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; Wei, Fischer, & Main, 2008). As apologizing can be perceived as a reconciliation attempt to restore a social relationship (Tavuchis, 1991), we believe that the inherent social purpose of apologies prevents consumers from relating apologies to any commercial attempt. Consequently, we believe that trivial apologies can hide the actual persuasive intent of a message, inhibit PK activation, and, therefore, exercise a positive impact on consumer responses to the message.

In the current article, we present four experiments designed to explore whether the inclusion of trivial apologies positively influences consumer responses to persuasive messages. A field experiment shows a positive effect of trivial apologies on consumer

responses to a real direct e-mail campaign. Study 2 replicates the field experiment in the lab, and shows – by means of a statistical mediation – that this effect is driven by a lack of PK activation. Study 3 provides more evidence for this mechanism by adopting a moderation-of-process approach (Spencer, Zanna, & Fong, 2005). Study 4 gauges whether the influence of trivial apologies on consumer persuasion may be attenuated or even reversed by disclosing its persuasive intent to consumers.

Study 1

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 reactivation¹.

Results show that 37.67% of the customers opened the ‘sorry’ e-mail, whereas only 28.66% opened the ‘good news’ e-mail ($z=13.73$; $p<.001$). Moreover, the click-through rate (CTR) (which reflects how many customers actually clicked on any link in the e-mail) went up to 5.29% in the ‘sorry’ condition, while it only amounted to 4.67% in the ‘good news’ condition ($z=2.06$, $p=.040$). Eventually, the ‘sorry’ e-mail campaign yielded a revenue of €628.74, while the total revenue for the ‘good news’ e-mail campaign only amounted to €277.13.

Study 2

A lab study ($N=37$) aims to replicate the results of Study 1, but also investigates if PK activation mediates the effect of trivial apologies on responses. A one-way between-subjects experiment with two conditions (trivial apology: yes vs. no) was set up. Participants were randomly exposed to an e-mail campaign of a discount retail chain with or without trivial apology. While in the field experiment the apology was included in the subject line, this study integrates the trivial apology in the content of the e-mail message. The campaign that did include a trivial apology apologized for recent problems with the website and promised a unique offer in return, by stating: “On top of your next purchase you get a diary for free.” The campaign without the trivial apology did not mention any possible problems and immediately proposed the unique offer to the consumer.

Both before and after exposure, attitude toward the company (A_c ; 3-item measurement; 11-point scale; $\alpha=.97$) and intention to purchase from the company (I_c ; single 100-point item) were measured. To compute our dependent variables, we subtracted pre- from post-measures. Finally, we measured PK activation with two items (11-point scale): “The purpose of the direct e-mail campaign was to change my behavior,” and “While I read through the direct e-mail campaign it was pretty obvious that the author of the message was

¹ Results of a pretest ($N=218$) indicate that there is no significant difference in the level of curiosity that is evoked by the ‘sorry’ subject line ($M=4.98$, $SD=1.32$) compared to the ‘good news’ subject line ($M=4.77$, $SD=1.79$) ($p > .05$). The pretest also measured need for an apology (7-point scale from 1 = very unnecessary to 7 = very necessary) for the problems as stated in the e-mail campaigns in all further studies (i.e., no contact between the customer and the company during one year (Study 1); difficulties with the company’s website (Study 2 and 3) and malfunction of the factory some years ago (Study 4)). Results show that consumers do not expect an apology for these problems (p ’s $<.05$), which indicates that these problems are perceived as trivial.

attempting to persuade me.” (Pearson’s $r = .88$) (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000; Williams, Fitzsimons, & Block, 2004).

Two independent-samples t-tests were conducted with trivial apology (vs. no apology) as independent variable and the ‘post – pre’ measures of Ac and Ic as dependent variables, respectively. Results show that a trivial apology increases Ac ($M_{apology}=.96$ vs. $M_{no_apology}=.12$; $t(35)=-2.31$; $p=.03$) and Ic ($M_{apology}=10.89$ vs. $M_{no_apology}=.16$; $t(35)=-2.96$; $p=.01$) to a higher extent than no apology. 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 use of a trivial apology can mask the persuasive intent of a direct e-mail campaign, and as such pave the way to consumer persuasion. The main aim of the third study is to provide stronger evidence for this idea by manipulating, rather than measuring the mediator.

Study 3

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 (trivial apology: yes vs. no) x 2 (explicitness persuasive intent: explicit vs. implicit) between-subjects design was conducted. The same problem that was used in Study 2 (i.e., difficulties with the company’s website), is now reused in a different e-mail campaign for an online clothing retailer. We measured intention to respond to the campaign (Ir) with a 100-point item, stating ‘*To what extent are you inclined to click on the link in the e-mail?*’

A significant interaction between trivial apology and explicitness of persuasive intent on Ir 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 ($M_{apology}=69.64$, $M_{no_apology}=44.80$, $F(1,139)=11.55$, $p=.001$). For an implicit persuasive message, no difference in Ir was found ($M_{apology}=39.45$, $M_{no_apology}=42.82$, $F(1,139)=.23$, $p=.63$).

Results suggest that a trivial apology can hide persuasive intent, as it is only beneficial when it is included in a message with explicit persuasive intent. If the desire to persuade is already 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

Study 4 (lab; $N=82$) examines whether the positive effect of apologies is attenuated when consumers recognize its persuasive impact. According to Friestad and Wright (1994) consumers can learn about persuasion tactics and develop PK over time. In our case, a disclosure of the use of trivial apologies as a persuasion tactic may help individuals to develop their PK. This increase in PK enables them to recognize this seemingly innocent tactic as a

persuasion attempt (i.e., change-of-meaning principle; Friestad & Wright, 1994) and consequently, a negative change in consumers' responses is likely to ensue (e.g., Milne, Rohm, & Bahl, 2009; Schlosser & Shavitt, 2009).

Therefore, we tested the impact of disclosing (vs. not disclosing) the use of trivial apologies on consumers' PK and Ac (identical measures as in Study 2). A study with three between-subjects conditions (apology with disclosure, apology without disclosure, no apology) was conducted. Like in Study 2, participants were shown a direct e-mail campaign with or without trivial apology, now for an eco-friendly paper producer. In the disclosure condition, participants read an article where the use of trivial apologies was described as a persuasion tactic prior to their exposure to the e-mail campaign with trivial apology.

A contrast analysis reconfirms that an apology without disclosure significantly increases Ac ('post – pre-measure') to a higher extent than no apology ($M_{Apology\ without\ disclosure} = .79, SD = 2.12$ vs. $M_{No\ apology} = -.14, SD = .91; t(79) = 2.21; p = .030$). Moreover, this study replicates full mediation of PK activation in the effect of apologizing on Ac ($ab = .62; 95\% CI [.09; 1.41]$). Additionally, Ac is significantly lower for 'apology with disclosure' than for 'apology without disclosure' ($M_{Apology\ with\ disclosure} = -1.74, SD = 1.76$ vs. $M_{Apology\ without\ disclosure} = .79, SD = 2.12, t(79) = -5.43; p < .001$), and PK activation fully mediates this effect ($ab = -1.29; 95\% CI [-2.67; -.36]$). This finding implies that disclosing trivial apologies as persuasion tactic increases PK, which in turn has a negative effect on Ac. Furthermore, Ac is lower in case of an apology with disclosure than in the control condition where no apology is offered ($M_{Apology\ with\ disclosure} = -1.74, SD = 1.76$ vs. $M_{No\ apology} = -.14, SD = .91; t(79) = -3.59; p = .001$). This result suggests that the use of a trivial apology can even backfire when consumers become aware of the persuasive intent of the apology.

General Discussion

Four studies show that trivial apologies in commercial messages hide the persuasive intent of the message, which activates less PK, and eventually leads to more beneficial consumer responses (i.e., behavior (Study 1), attitudes (Study 2 and 4) and intentions (Study 2 and 3)). Mediation by PK activation is shown not only by means of a statistical mediation, but also by means of a moderation-of-process approach, which can be seen as an important strength of this paper. Moreover, Study 4 concludes that disclosing the use of trivial apologies as a persuasion tactic may attenuate the positive effects as found in Study 2. Even more, a backlash effect occurs when a disclosure is provided.

This research has three important theoretical contributions. First, we contribute to the literature on apologies by studying the impact of *trivial* apologies. Whereas prior research focused on the potential of apologies to recover from important downturns (Pace, Fediuk, & Botero, 2010), we highlight how companies can purposefully make use of trivial apologies as a proactive strategy to generate favorable consumer responses. This implies that 'those who haven't done anything wrong' can also use apologies as a communication tool.

Second, we contribute to the e-mail marketing literature by identifying trivial apologies as a factor that positively impacts response rates to direct e-mail. This positive result is peculiarly interesting because adding a trivial apology in the content of the e-mail lengthens the e-mail, while prior research indicated that e-mail length negatively impacts response rates (Chittenden & Rettie, 2003).

Third, we contribute to the persuasion and communication literature by classifying a trivial apology as a hidden marketing technique that could influence consumers unconsciously

and as such, raise ethical concerns. Nevertheless, disclosing the use of trivial apologies helps consumers to recognize trivial apologies as marketing tactic upon which a backlash effect takes place. This conclusion is consistent with research by Skarlicki, Folger, and Gee (2004), which states that apologies can backfire if they come across as manipulative and insincere. Finally, recent persuasion literature started to argue that explicit persuasive messages may yield better results than implicit persuasive messages, but *only* in the presence of other factors (Reinhard et al., 2006). Our research contributes to this view by identifying trivial apologies as such a factor that has the potential to hide the explicit persuasive intent of a message.

From a practical point of view, this research implies that trivial apologies can be used as an effective persuasion tactic for marketing purposes such as in direct mailing or in service contexts. Finally, our findings of Study 4 are relevant for public policy makers who aim to protect consumers against the influence of 'hidden' persuasion tactics.

References

- Campbell, M. C., & Kirmani, A. (2000). Consumers' use of persuasion knowledge: The effects of accessibility and cognitive capacity on perceptions of an influence agent. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 27(1), 69-83.
- Chittenden, L., & Rettie, R. (2003). An evaluation of e-mail marketing and factors affecting response. *Journal of Targeting, Measurement and Analysis for Marketing*, 11(3), 203-217.
- Cho, C. H., & Khang, H. (2006). The state of internet-related research in communications, marketing, and advertising: 1994-2003. *Journal of Advertising*, 35(3), 143-163.
- DuFrene, D. D., Engelland, B. T., Lehman, C. M., & Pearson, R. A. (2005). Changes in consumer attitudes resulting from participation in a permission e-mail campaign. *Journal of Current Issues & Research in Advertising*, 27(1), 65-77.
- Friestad, M., & Wright, P. (1994). The Persuasion Knowledge Model - How People Cope with Persuasion Attempts. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 21(1), 1-31.
- Gopal, R. D., Tripathi, A. K., & Walter, Z. D. (2006). Economics of first-contact email advertising. *Decision Support Systems*, 42(3), 1366-1382.
- Marcus, A. A., & Goodman, R. S. (1991). Victims and shareholders: The dilemmas of presenting corporate policy during a crisis. *Academy of management journal*, 34(2), 281-305.
- Milne, G. R., Rohm, A., & Bahl, S. (2009). IF IT'S LEGAL, IS IT ACCEPTABLE? Consumer Reactions to Online Covert Marketing. *Journal of Advertising*, 38(4), 107-122.
- Pace, K. M., Fediuk, T. A., & Botero, I. C. (2010). The acceptance of responsibility and expressions of regret in organizational apologies after a transgression. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 15(4), 410-427.
- Reinhard, M. A., Messner, M., & Sporer, S. L. (2006). Explicit persuasive intent and its impact on success at persuasion - The determining roles of attractiveness and likeableness. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 16(3), 249-259.
- Schlenker, B. R. (1980). *Impression Management*: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company.
- Schlosser, A. E., & Shavitt, S. (2009). The effect of perceived message choice on persuasion. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 19(3), 290-301.
- Skarlicki, D. P., Folger, R., & Gee, J. (2004). When social accounts backfire: The exacerbating effects of a polite message or an apology on reactions to an unfair outcome. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 34(2), 322-341.
- Spencer, S. J., Zanna, M. P., & Fong, G. T. (2005). Establishing a causal chain: Why experiments are often more effective than mediational analyses in examining

psychological processes. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 89(6), 845-851.

Tavuchis, N. (1991). *Mea culpa: A sociology of apology and reconciliation.*: Stanford University Press.

Tomlinson, E. C., Dineen, B. R., & Lewicki, R. J. (2004). The road to reconciliation: Antecedents of victim willingness to reconcile following a broken promise. *Journal of Management*, 30(2), 165-187.

Wei, M. L., Fischer, E., & Main, K. J. (2008). An examination of the effects of activating persuasion knowledge on consumer response to brands engaging in covert marketing. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 27(1), 34-44.

Williams, P., Fitzsimons, G. J., & Block, L. G. (2004). When consumers do not recognize "benign" intention questions as persuasion attempts. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31(3), 540-550

Wooten, D. B. (2009). Say the right thing: Apologies, reputability, and punishment. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 19(2), 225-235.