BRIBING THE CUSTOMER: CAN COMICS IMPROVE SALES ETHICS TRAINING?

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ABSTRACT

Recent international bribery cases and changes to the UK Bribery Act prompted research on how ethical information is presented to sales professionals. The present research examines if, when, and why, ethics training strategies utilizing case studies and comic style versions can effectively increase recall and satisfaction. Additionally, a study is presented using the Styles of Processing scale (SOP), to study how individual preferences (towards visual or verbal stimulus) can be manipulated to produce positive effects on employee satisfaction and recall. Drawing from research in consumer behavior, sales training, and social psychology, a theoretical framework is developed to test how training methods can be more memorable and useful in evaluating ethical dilemmas.

Introduction

Two of the most important factors for a sales force include hiring and training (Hunter and Perreault 2007). Researchers have found positive correlation between satisfaction and the number of hours spent in training as well as the sales representatives’ perception of the company’s ethical policy (Valentine 2009). A company’s ultimate goal is to increase sales and revenue. Training sales representatives appropriately helps save the company money and time (Ricks, Williams, and Weeks 2008). Research results from training professionals, however, suggest that currently training techniques are not effective and that employees are often dissatisfied. Spiro, Stanton, and Rich (2003) estimated that 90 percent of sales representatives were dissatisfied with training.

In the current study, information processing research, using the Styles of Processing (SOP) scale, will be extended into the field of training for personal selling. Focus on training medium in which the message reaches the audience will include two different forms of training (case study and comic style) to further applications in pedagogy and practical application. Furthermore, the researcher will show how an individual’s innate processing style may be influenced to increase message recall and satisfaction. Focusing the stimulus on current ethics bribery issues, the researcher will argue that priming the participant to process information verbally or visually in congruence with the modality message will improve recall and overall satisfaction (Fransen, Fennis, and Pruyn 2010). In this study, three ethical scenarios on bribery will be used to examine
the effects on SOP congruency, recall, and satisfaction. Finally, sales representatives will be questioned on their processing of these ethical situations.

Research Propositions

**Primed versus Innate Processing as a Predictor Variable** Changes in the training environment and the use of technology have created a demand for individuals to use both verbal and visual processing. In the search for the most effective training method, being able to prompt an individual to process information in a particular way could benefit companies financially. Consistent training with information processing (i.e., congruency) has been proven to increase the processing of information (Mendelson and Thorson 2004) and recall (Jiang and Wyer 2009). Taking this a step further, in using both cases and comic as training tools, I attempt to determine the priming effects that most influences information processing for the specifically tested training approaches.

P1a: Prompting individuals to process information verbally (rather than visually) in congruence with the modality of the message will improve recall.
P1b: Prompting individuals to process information verbally (rather than visually) in congruence with the modality of the message will improve satisfaction with the training method.

**Emotion as a Mediator of the Information Processing Effect:** An additional component to the study will include the use of comics (i.e. an applied shorter version of a graphic novel) as a training tool. Graphic novels (or comics) enable individuals to discuss abstract or highly emotional topics in a more familiar or neutral setting (Tabachnick 2009, 51). Training using components of comics will allow the reader to process the information at a higher level and may result in improved recall. Because comics have not been used in many academic research studies, the findings will be exploratory and will determine how the different processing styles respond to this form of training. In addition, prompting verbal and visual cues will explore which type of individual processes the information with greater recall.

P2: Comic training may produce higher recall in understanding sales ethics scenarios.

With the plethora of digital information, technology, and media communications, understanding how individuals process information in the newer formats will help meet the needs of the changing consumer (Lawrence et al. 2009). Moreover, because verbal and visual processing is an additive effect, exploring how mixed-method training increases recall and satisfaction may be valuable to companies and managers. Finally, exploring the ethical issues in these training formats will help to explain how individuals’ process information related to sensitive topics found in the business setting.

P3: Utilizing comics in training may produce a more conducive environment for processing information on sensitive topics such as sales representative ethical issues (i.e. bribery).

**Potential Contributions**
Although the study is limited to conceptual and theoretical domain, it may aid in utilizing sales training to better understand individual information processing. Research on consumer information processing creates a substantial base for understanding for applying comic and case study training techniques into personal selling. Using Jiang and Wyer’s (2009) priming technique opens up several opportunities for further research on how we might reduce the need for multiple information processing mediums. The potential benefits for studying recall and satisfaction of sales training could result in substantial company savings as well as reduced time spent on training sales representatives, thus, increasing sales hours in the field.

The use of comics or graphic novels as a key component for processing sensitive information could become a major resource for companies. As a learning tool, the graphic novel has been proven to get students to think critically about sensitive issues. Taking this a step further, the comic style could create a unique training tool of value to companies and managers.

References


