
Attractive Salespeople Don't Always Boost Sales



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Attractive sales people may actually decrease shoppers' purchase intentions.

There is a common belief that people have more favourable reactions to physically attractive individuals than to physically unattractive ones. So it is assumed that when we go shopping and see a highly attractive salesperson, we are more willing to spend time interacting with the salesperson and more likely to buy the products. Past research on consumer behaviour also qualified this assumption, as evidenced by consumers' greater satisfaction with the service and their intentions to purchase the products being sold.

But in my recent paper, **"Consumer Reactions to Attractive Service Providers: Approach or Avoid"**, with Robert Wyer, a visiting professor from the Department of Marketing in CUHK Business School, we find that an attractive salesperson may actually keep people from wanting to buy his or her products, and consumers may react more negatively to a highly attractive service provider than to an average looking one.

This is because attractive salespeople can sometimes lead consumers to have self-presentation concerns about their ability to make a good impression on others.

We studied the consumer reactions to physically attractive and average-looking salespeople through a pilot study and five experiments.

Self-presentation concerns

We predicted that when consumers' self-presentation concerns are heightened, they often avoid interacting with physically attractive salespeople, hence making it relatively ineffective for the salespeople to sell their products.

Individuals with high social anxiety have stronger self-presentation concerns than those with low social anxiety. So, to an extent, consumers with chronically high social anxiety should react less favourably to attractive than to unattractive salespeople in an actual retail environment.

Anxious liaisons

We conducted a pilot study at a store in a Hong Kong shopping centre that specialises in Japanese figures, models and gifts, a popular place for *otaku* to shop. A Japanese term, *otaku* refers to a group of people who have an obsessive interest in online games and anime, who are typically socially awkward in interpersonal interactions. These individuals are regarded as those who have high social anxiety and self-presentation concerns.

In the study, two female fellows with different levels of attractiveness – one highly attractive and the other average-looking – were posted as salespeople. The highly attractive female wore makeup to accentuate her attractiveness while the average-looking female did not wear any makeup. Then, two observers were asked to stay in the shopping centre to collect the data. They recorded the total number of male consumers who stopped to take a look at the window display, the number of consumers who entered the store and looked at the products, the number of consumers who interacted with a salesperson, the duration of interaction time between the salesperson and consumer, and the amount of consumers' purchases.

The results of the study show that fewer male consumers entered the store when the attractive salesperson was on duty than when the average-looking attendant was present. Only 40.8 percent of consumers interacted with the

attractive salesperson but 59.2 percent of consumers interacted with the average-looking salesperson. Finally, fewer males made a purchase from the attractive salesperson as compared to the average-looking one, and the average cost of the products they purchased was also less than the latter.

The pilot study provides evidence that when consumers have chronic social anxiety, they are less willing to interact with a highly attractive service provider.

Embarrassing situations

Apart from high social anxiety, these self-presentation concerns can also be induced by the differences in the consumption situations.

According to our research, the consumption of some products or services such as condoms, medical check-ups and weight-loss services can generate embarrassment. These embarrassing consumptions are likely to endanger the positive self-image a person is motivated to convey in social situations, particularly when others are attractive and the ones he or she wants to impress. If this is the case, consumers may wish to avoid interacting with attractive service providers in an embarrassing consumption situation.

In one of the experiments, a total of 132 female participants were told that a company wanted to receive feedback about their new product, a thermal waist belt, and the likability of the sales representative. Each of the participants was placed in a room where she could touch the belt and see some advertising posters about the product. The posters were manipulated to show the belt as being either an embarrassing product described as a weight-loss aid, or a non-embarrassing product intended to relax muscles, improve circulation and relieve lower back pain.

A physically attractive man serving as the salesperson to all the participants was presented in two different conditions. In the highly attractive condition, the salesman styled his hair and wore a t-shirt that fitted him well. In the average-attractive condition, the same salesman was ungroomed and wore an oversize t-shirt with a pair of glasses to detract from his appearance.

All participants had a chance to interact with the salesman and were then asked to complete a questionnaire rating their purchase intentions, their liking for the salesman and the extent to which they felt nervous when interacting with him.

As expected, the results show that participants in the embarrassing consumption condition were less likely to make a purchase when the salesperson was presented in an attractive way than when he was not, and had a greater concern with the impression they created when he was attractive than when he was ungroomed.

The study demonstrates that when a consumption situation is likely to be embarrassing, attractive opposite-sex providers can lead consumers to have self-presentation concerns. And when it occurs, it has a detrimental effect on purchase decisions.

Same-sex interactions

Will consumers behave the same way and be less willing to interact with a physically attractive salesperson of the same sex when they are buying embarrassing products? The answer is yes. In same-sex interactions, according to the study, embarrassing consumption conditions will increase consumers' feelings of jealousy and negative mood, and decrease their self-perceptions of attractiveness and liking of the attractive same-sex salesperson. So consumers will be less willing to interact with the salesperson.

When the provider is of the same sex, self-presentation concerns appear to be driven by social comparison processes, leading consumers to dislike the provider and to avoid interacting for this reason.

Implications for practitioners

This suggests that attractive service providers might not always increase the sale of products. To be more specific, the strategy to employ attractive service providers for the purpose of increasing the sale of products may be effective only when the product being promoted is not embarrassing. When the product is embarrassing, however, the effect can be adverse.

Online shopping is the exception – the positive use of attractive models or celebrities in advertisements for embarrassing products does not present the same issue.

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