

NEGATIVE WORD-OF-MOUTH AND REDRESS STRATEGIES: AN EXPLORATORY COMPARISON OF FRENCH AND AMERICAN MANAGERS

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ABSTRACT

This research studies the strategies used by managers to cope with negative word of mouth. We investigated seven different coping strategies across French and North American managers. The results revealed that, for coping with negative word-of-mouth, managers evaluate as the most efficacious strategy that of increasing trust in the negatively discussed product, service, or company. The results also suggest that doing nothing is perceived as less effective than increasing trust or denying negative word of mouth. Finally, we find a high degree of similarity in the perceptions of the utility of negative word-of-mouth redress strategies across the two managerial cultures.

INTRODUCTION

It has long been acknowledged that word-of-mouth (WOM) is an important marketplace phenomenon. Over the past decades, WOM has been intensively examined in the marketing literature (De Bruyn and Lilien 2008; Richins 1984; Wangenheim and Bayón 2004; Westbrook 1987). To date, investigators have mostly studied the antecedents of WOM, such as customer satisfaction/dissatisfaction (e.g., Anderson 1998; East, Hammond and Wright 2007; Godes and Mayzlin 2004; Mangold, Miller and Brockway 1999; Oliver 1980; 1981; Westbrook 1987) and factors that encourage individuals to engage in WOM (e.g., Sundaram, Mitra and Webster 1998; Tax, Chandrashekar and Christianser 1993). Some have examined the consequences of WOM, for example, on brand choice and market share (e.g. Arndt 1967;

Chevalier and Mayzlin 2003; East, Hammond and Lomax 2008; Herr, Kardes, and Kim 1991; Mittal, Ross and Baldasare 1998), or companies' growth (Reichheld 2003). It has been shown that negative WOM (NWOM) tends to decrease purchase probability (East et al. 2008) and thus can be financially damaging for a firm (Lau and Ng 2001). In addition, NWOM may affect product or service evaluations (Herr, Kardes and Kim 1991). Therefore, it is in the best interest of companies to take steps to prevent NWOM, as well as to adopt counter strategies to cope with customers' NWOM, once it occurs. However, it is not clear how managers should deal with NWOM, and redress strategies are still largely under-used and under-researched, in spite of the considerable impact customers' negative comments may have (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2003; East et al. 2008; Nyer and Gopinath 2005).

With limited exceptions, the efficacy of specific strategies for coping with NWOM has not been empirically addressed by researchers (cf. Kimmel and Audrain 2002; Nguyen 2008). For example, Ainsworth (2004) assessed perceptions of corporate efforts to respond to destructive complaints. His survey of 158 consumers revealed that 32% of the respondents agreed that companies should directly respond to the allegation through its own Website, whereas 24% believed that it was best to "do nothing." Other coping strategies (e.g., legal action, ask to cease and desist, register all possible domain names) were viewed as relatively ineffective. As is typical of such WOM investigations to date, however, Ainsworth's study did not consider the efficacy of coping strategies from management's perspective.

This research represents a preliminary effort to rectify this deficiency in the WOM literature by exploring NWOM redress strategies from the point of view of company representatives. Specifically, we identify the various redress strategies actually utilized by brand managers to cope with NWOM and to assess their effectiveness. Utilizing a variation of the critical incidents technique (Fivars 1980; Flanagan 1954), we surveyed North American and French managers of consumer goods companies in order to gauge their perceptions of the effectiveness of various potential redress strategies for specific instances of NWOM that previously had reached their ear. A comparison of the effectiveness of the strategies used across these two national samples has some important advantages. It can provide insight into whether context-specific responses to external corporate threats can be recommended, despite the recent evolution of market globalization, and it provides an opportunity to assess differences across two corporate cultures characterized by different managerial styles.

LITERATURE REVIEW

WOM Defined

WOM has been defined in various ways in the marketing literature (e.g. Dichter 1966; Fornell and Bookstein 1982). Richins (1984) defined the term as interpersonal communication among consumers concerning a marketing organization or product. Westbrook (1987) viewed WOM as a post-purchase phenomenon consisting of informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services and/or their sellers. Similarly, Sundaram, Mitra and Webster (1998) defined WOM as a form of interpersonal communication among consumers concerning their personal experiences with a firm or a product.

WOM and Rumors

Given that typical definitions of WOM make no statement about the veracity of the informal information that is transmitted among consumers, WOM shares certain similarities with rumor. Rumor represents a story or statement in general circulation without confirmation or certainty as to the facts (Allport and Postman 1947; Knapp 1944). According to the American Psychological Association's *Encyclopedia of Psychology*, a rumor is "an unverified proposition for belief that bears topical relevance for persons actively involved in its dissemination" (Kimmel 2004). In our view, WOM and rumors are distinct on several points. Firstly, WOM differs from rumors on its evidential basis: WOM is presumed to be founded on evidence; whereas the veracity of rumors is unknown at the time of its spread (Rosnow 1991). Secondly, WOM is perceived as having a more reliable, credible and trustworthy source of information than rumors (Kamins, Folkes and Perner 1997). These differentiating points can be partly explained by the fact that the content of WOM typically involves comments about product performance, service quality, and trustworthiness passed from one person to another (Charlett and Garland 1995). Indeed, WOM is often defined as a piece of advice that is offered by one consumer to another (East 2002). Persons who convey WOM often have had personal experience with products or services from a particular organization and tend to be regarded as fairly objective sources of information by receivers. By contrast, the original source of rumor content typically is undefined or vague (e.g., "a friend of a friend") (Kimmel and Audrain 2002).

The Effects of Negative WOM

The respective impacts of negative and positive WOM have been extensively discussed in the marketing literature. NWOM

is viewed as interpersonal communication among consumers concerning a marketing organization or product which denigrates the object of the communication (Richins 1983). Various investigations have underlined the damage that NWOM can entail for retailers and manufacturers (Charlett and Garland 1995; Theng and Ng 2001; De Carlo, Laczniak, Motley and Ramaswami 2007). Whereas PWOM includes recommendations to others, conspicuous display, and interpersonal discussions relating pleasant, vivid, or novel experiences, NWOM has to do with product denigration, unpleasant experiences, and private complaining (Anderson 1998).

An initial stream of research focused on the assumption that WOM is determined by consumer satisfaction, with consumer satisfaction leading to PWOM (Oliver 1981; Westbrook 1987; Anderson 1998) and consumer dissatisfaction leading to NWOM (Diener and Greyser 1978; Richins 1983; Westbrook 1987; Anderson 1998). A second stream of research focused on the incidence and effects of negative versus positive WOM (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2003; Godes and Mayzlin 2004), with studies revealing that NWOM has a stronger impact on market share than PWOM. Whether dissatisfaction or unfavorable attitudes lead consumers to engage in more or less WOM than satisfaction or favorable attitudes has been widely debated and the research literature is somewhat conflicting. Holmes and Lett (1977), for example, reported that customers with favorable brand attitudes talked significantly more to others than those with unfavorable attitudes about the brand. More recently, Anderson (1998) found that dissatisfied customers do engage in more WOM than satisfied ones, but that the common suppositions concerning the size of this difference appears to be exaggerated. Godes and Mayzlin (2004) and Chevalier and Mayzlin (2003) found a preponderance of positive appraisals as opposed to negative ones, respectively, for online evaluations of

TV programs and books. In their analysis of the ratio of PWOM to NWOM in 15 separate studies involving a range of product and service categories, East, Hammond, and Wright (2007) found an average ratio of 3:1, with consumers more likely to transmit PWOM in every case. However, they also found that NWOM was related to market share in three out of five categories studied (for computers, leather goods, and mobile phone handsets, but not for mobile phone airtime and cameras), consistent with Charlett and Garland's (1995) contention that NWOM—whatever its frequency—can be particularly insidious for firms. More recently, East et al. (2008) provided evidence that the impact of PWOM and NWOM is strongly related to such factors as the pre-WOM probability of purchase, whether the WOM pertains to the consumer's preferred brand, and the strength of the expression of the WOM.

Although PWOM can be an effective form of marketing promotion for company offerings, it is also the case that NWOM may strongly endanger companies' products and services (De Carlo et al. 2007; Arndt 1969; Lau and Ng 2001; Chevalier and Mayzlin 2003). With the proliferation of brands and the growing convergence in their quality, NWOM represents a fundamental means by which consumers can rule out brands in their product choices or influence the choices of others. For example, in their study of online book reviews, Chevalier and Mayzlin (2003) found that although the reviews tended to be overwhelmingly favorable at two popular sites, the impact of negative reviews far outweighed the impact of positive reviews on relative sales. Arndt (1967) finds that NWOM can accelerate or retard the acceptance of new products. More precisely, Arndt's research underlines that NWOM may retard sales of a food product more than twice as strongly as PWOM may promote sales of that product. De Carlo et al. (2007) also argue that NWOM as compared to PWOM has a

stronger effect on consumers. Their research outlines that NWOM may lower customers' attitudes toward stores. Nonetheless, in spite of the seriousness and potential effects of NWOM, little is known about how managers typically respond when they learn of an increase in its spread, and to what extent selected coping strategies effectively offset the damaging effects of NWOM.

Coping Strategies

As mentioned, little attention has been devoted to investigating the effectiveness of strategies to cope with or prevent NWOM, in spite of evidence suggestive of the considerable impact NWOM may have on brands, products, services and even on companies themselves (Kimmel and Audrain 2002; Sametrex 2008). The present research explored seven coping and prevention strategies managers use when they become aware of NWOM. Consistent with the literature (Lazarus and Launier 1978; Lazarus, Averill and Opton 1974) we define WOM coping strategies as strategies involving the problem-solving efforts managers take to master, tolerate, or minimize WOM considered as threatening for the product, service, markets, or the company itself. Specifically, we explored North American and French managers' perceptions of WOM coping strategies utilized by their firms.

We chose to compare French and North American managerial strategies because of their varying managerial styles. Overall, American managers are understood to be more interventionist and customer-oriented than French managers. Baudry (2002) and Gelfand, Erez and Aycan (2007) also suggested that American managers use more formalized approaches than French managers, the latter of whom are likely to be more flexible. Given these differences, we intuitively expected a greater flexibility in the tactics used by French managers to respond to

NWOM, with American firms relying more on formalized, pre-determined redress strategies.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

A total of 119 French and American marketing professionals from consumer goods firms responded to a questionnaire pertaining to WOM. We chose consumer goods firms because we expected them to serve as likely targets for consumer WOM. We also expected brand managers and corporate communication specialists to be sensitive to NWOM in the consumer marketplace. The participants were employed by a representative range of consumer goods companies, including food and beverage, apparel, electronics, cosmetics/beauty/hygiene, pharmaceuticals, health care in both countries, and were similar across the two samples. The purposive sample of 66 French and 53 American product or brand managers and communication specialists was obtained from business school alumni directories, continuing education classes, and professional marketing association directories. We invited volunteers selected in these ways to participate in a survey concerning their experiences with consumer word-of-mouth. They were included as respondents based on the understanding that they had the professional experience upon which to provide information relative to the study's objectives. All respondents were assured that their anonymity would be protected and that their questionnaire responses would remain confidential. Overall, we concluded that our sample size was adequate to achieve the objectives of our exploratory investigation. Smaller sample sizes typically are viewed as justified when purposive sampling is utilized (Cohen 1962, 1963; Haase, Waechter and Solomon 1982; Rosenthal and Rosnow 1991). Further,

according to Cohen's (1988) assessment of sample sizes required to detect various effects, a total N of 85, split evenly into two groups, is sufficient to conduct statistical comparisons with power = .80 at the 5% level of significance (two-tailed).

Procedure

The English version of the questionnaire was translated into French for administration to French respondents. Two bilingual professionals, one French and one American, independently assessed both versions of the questionnaire in order to assess the accuracy of the translation. Following minor changes to the translated questionnaire, the two versions were again independently compared in order to confirm the elimination of all apparent discrepancies.

To identify instances of WOM, a variation of the critical incidents technique (Flanagan 1954) was utilized, in order to gain insight into the nature of WOM that reaches the ear of managers and the perceived effects of the WOM. We asked respondents to describe some situations in which they encountered either positive or negative WOM. Respondents first were asked to indicate how frequently, on average, they became aware of WOM. They then rated seven strategies according to whether they were used by the company to prevent and/or neutralize the negative effects of WOM. Specifically, we listed seven strategies (see Table 1) which might be used to prevent or counter customers' negative WOM. These strategies were derived from the authors' earlier studies in this program of research. The first strategy, which may be seen as an absence of response, is that of ignoring

customer WOM or choosing to do nothing. This passive strategy may well typify the reaction of many firms, because many of them apparently ignore or fail to take seriously customer NWOM (Charlett and Garland 1995). This strategy can be understood as preferred by companies given that it does not require any financial or managerial investment. The second and third strategies may be defined as 'active' ones, consisting of denying the content of customers' NWOM, either by a company official (see Table 1, strategy two) or by a trusted outside source (see Table 1, strategy three). The fourth strategy consists of spreading counter information directly to deny the content of the NWOM in circulation. This strategy aims at delivering a message consistent with the company's expectations or interests and contrasts with the 'do nothing strategy'. The fifth strategy (see Table 1) focuses on customers trust towards the company's offended products or services or even towards the company *per se*. It specifically aims at increasing or reinforcing customers' trust. The sixth and seventh strategies (see Table 1) consist of establishing a hotline or a Website to provide customers with information or to respond to their questions related to the content of the NWOM. These approaches provide the opportunity for customers to get in touch with the company (in the case of strategy six and seven) and to interact with company officials (strategy six).

For each strategy, respondents rated the effectiveness on four-point Likert scales (1=not effective at all to 4=high average effectiveness).

TABLE 1

Strategies Used to Cope with or Prevent Negative WOM

Coping strategy	Illustration
1. Ignore the NWOM	Non-reaction to NWOM in circulation
2. Deny the NWOM by company official	The company president denies the WOM content in a full-page newspaper ad
3. Deny the NWOM by trusted outside source	The cooperation of a respected community leader is enlisted to deny the content of NWOM in circulation
4. Spread counter information to NWOM	Customers are provided directly with information that disproves or otherwise counters the NWOM content
5. Attempt to increase trust in the company/product/ service	The company communicates its return policies and guarantees for dissatisfied customers
6. Establish a hotline to provide customers with information related to the topic of the NWOM	A 24/7 telephone hotline is created in order to respond to customers' questions and concerns
7. Establish an interactive Web site	An online corporate blog, forum, or message board is set up in order to take questions and respond to customer complaints

RESULTS

Effectiveness of NWOM Redress Strategies

Table 2 summarizes the results regarding the strategies used to cope with or prevent NWOM for the two samples. According to the French and North American managers studied, the most successful strategy to cope with NWOM involves efforts to increase trust in the product, service, or company that serves as the focus of NWOM content (average effectiveness = 3.68). This strategy was viewed as more effective than denying NWOM ($t = 4.79$; $\text{sig.} < .05$). Trust has been shown to be a key construct in the marketing literature, especially with respect to relationship marketing (e.g. Morgan and Hunt 1994). Defined as a generalized expectancy held by an individual that the word of another can be relied on (Rotter 1967), trust also

expresses someone's willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence (Moorman, Deshpandé and Zaltman 1993). According to Morgan and Hunt (1994), trust leads to cooperative behaviors, which is important in order to counter NWOM. Accordingly, anecdotal evidence suggests that companies that are successful in creating conversational or collaborative connections with customers are those whose initiatives are built on trust (Oetting 2006; Tapscott and Williams 2006). Thus, it appears that enhancing trust in the company or its offerings when faced with the spread of NWOM increases cooperative behaviors among the participants in the marketing exchange and therefore help to reinforce the customer/firm relationship. Openness fosters trust, which in turn can provide a strong counter to potentially damaging NWOM.

TABLE 2

Perceived Effectiveness of NWOM Redress Strategies

1. Attempt to increase trust in the company/ product/service	3.68
2. Deny the NWOM by company official	3.24
3. Deny the NWOM by trusted outside source	3.24
4. Ignore the NWOM	3.06
5. Establish an interactive Web site	2.97
6. Establish a hotline to provide customers with information related to the topic of the negative word-of-mouth	2.86
7. Spread counter information to NWOM	2.58

Measured on four-point Likert scales (1= not effective at all to 4 = high average effectiveness).

The second most effective strategy identified by the managers was that of denying NWOM content, either by a company official or an outside source (average effectiveness = 3.24, see Table 2). Although denials might appear quite difficult to effectively implement, because consumers likely expect companies to deny negative comments that reflect poorly on the firm or brand image, this NWOM redress strategy apparently proves more useful according to managers than the decision to do nothing ($t=1,75$; sig. < .05). The strategy of ignoring NWOM was perceived as lower in effectiveness by the respondents (average effectiveness = 3.06). Though this result might appear counter-intuitive, ignoring NWOM may be seen as a financially interesting strategy for companies, given that it does not require any financial or time investment. In contrast, the seven other strategies we investigated require the company to be more active and invest time, training and money.

The data also revealed that establishing a Website is comparable to the do nothing strategy, i.e., ignore the NWOM ($p=0.105$). One possible explanation for this somewhat surprising result is that building a Website or using the company's official Website, though conceivably an effective and potentially trustworthy means for countering NWOM, may be perceived as too expensive in contrast to the other strategies. Additionally, countering NWOM on an internet Website might be deemed as risky because it can expose the NWOM to millions of consumers with just the click of a mouse. Consistent with Ainsworth's (2004) finding that consumers view the company Website as an appropriate channel for responding to NWOM, we expect that in the future such websites will contribute to the building of buyer-customer relationships and will play a key role in the strategies aimed at preventing or coping with customer NWOM. Our findings also revealed that the redress strategy

of establishing a hotline (average effectiveness = 2.86) was viewed by managers as less effective in countering NWOM than ignoring the NWOM. Yet, one lesson that can be applied from the crisis management literature is that the establishment of a telephone hotline, like that of creating a customer-oriented Website, could help to nurture an interactive relationship with customers and offset the consequences of NWOM (e.g. Fearn-Banks 1996; Kimmel 2004).

Our respondents also claimed that consumers rarely utilize a company's official channels for information following the reception of NWOM about the firm or the company's service / product. Finally, attempts to spread information counter to NWOM were considered the least effective redress approach (average effectiveness = 2.58). This stands to reason, given the informal nature of WOM and the difficulties in establishing credibility for information that runs counter to the prevailing marketing buzz.

Effectiveness of the Strategies Used to Cope with Negative WOM across the French and American Samples

Overall, our results revealed a high degree of similarity among the French and North American managers in their perceptions of the effectiveness of the NWOM redress strategies (see Table 3). This is counter-intuitive, since we expected different response patterns in view of the general philosophical and managerial differences existing between French and American managers. Out of seven possible redress strategies, we obtained a significant difference between the two samples only for the decision to ignore NWOM, with American managers ($m = 3.26$) having rated this strategy as significantly more effective than the French managers ($m = 2.89$) ($t = 2.745$; $p < .05$). This finding is somewhat surprising given previous indications that American managers tend to be

more interventionist than French managers when faced with various threats to the firm (Baudry 2002). However, French managerial methods have also been described as being highly developed for controlling risk and avoiding uncertainty, whereas American managers tend to score low on uncertainty avoidance measures (Hofstede 1983; Reihlen 2004). Further, in a cross-cultural assessment of leadership styles within the US and France, Peters and Kabacoff (2003) found that French managers characterized themselves as more

“hands-on” than their American counterparts, and were more oriented towards proactively soliciting and acting on the ideas and input of specialists. In light of these differences, one might intuitively have expected a greater flexibility in the tactics used by French managers to respond to NWOM, and American managers relying more on a formalized pre-determined strategies for negative WOM control (including the strategy of ignoring NWOM).

TABLE 3

Perceived Effectiveness of NWOM Redress Strategies for French and North American Managers

	US	French	t	Sig.
Attempt to increase trust in the company/ product/ service	3.77 (1)	3.61 (1)	1.108	0.270
Deny the NWOM by company official	3.38 (2)	3.12 (3)	1.664	0.099
Deny the NWOM by trusted outside source	3.34 (3)	3.15 (2)	1.215	0.227
Ignore the NWOM	3.26 (4)	2.89 (6)	2.745	0.007
Spread counter information to NWOM	2.55 (5)	2.61 (7)	0.458	0.648
Establish a hotline to provide customers with information related to the topic of the NWOM	2.75 (6)	2.94 (5)	0.246	0.806
Establish an interactive Web site	2.94 (7)	2.98 (4)	1.464	0.146

Measured on four-point Likert scales (1=not effective at all to 4=high average effectiveness).

Overall, our findings indicate that the strategies used by North American and French managers are very similar. Across both samples, efforts to increase trust and deny NWOM emerged as the redress

strategies perceived as most effective in dealing with NWOM. These findings offer preliminary evidence that managers can utilize similar strategies across varying country settings in their efforts to counter NWOM. The question remains, however, as

to whether similar means can be employed cross-culturally to increase trust and establish greater openness with customers.

DISCUSSION

Although limited in scope, we believe this exploratory study makes several contributions to our understanding of managerial reactions to NWOM. It underlines that in general strategies to prevent or cope with NWOM are viewed by consumer goods managers as useful in coping with NWOM threats. All seven redress strategies studied were rated on average as medium to high in effectiveness. Specifically, managers believe that it is better to do something to prevent or cope with potentially damaging WOM than to do nothing in the hope that it will eventually disappear over time. As opposed to the “do nothing” approach, the managers viewed two redress strategies as significantly more effective in countering NWOM: (1) increase trust in the company, product, or service that serves as the target of NWOM and (2) deny NWOM by a company official or an outside source.

These findings coincide with the extant literature on the strategies most likely to offset the harmful consequences of marketplace rumors (Kimmel 2004). Further, our results revealed a high degree of similarity in redress strategies utilized by managers within two different cultural contexts. In fact, with the exception of the “ignore NWOM” approach, all of the redress strategies were perceived similarly in terms of their effectiveness across the French and American samples. Overall, as an initial attempt to investigate the strategies aiming at coping with NWOM, our results provide preliminary insight into managerial coping strategies in light of the growing threats posed by consumer NWOM. Perhaps most importantly, our investigation suggests that trust appears to play an especially significant role in the ways that companies can effectively deal with NWOM. In our view, whatever

coping strategies are employed by management to counter NWOM, they need to be based on and reflective of the company’s

genuine interest in building trusting and open relationships with consumers.

Lastly, a comparison of our findings to the rumor literature suggests parallels and divergence regarding the strategies used to cope with either NWOM or insidious rumors. For example, it is often advocated that the most obvious means of fighting a rumor is to strongly deny it (Kimmel 2004). In contrast, our analysis reveals that increasing trust is viewed as the most powerful strategy to cope with NWOM. Yet, restoring customer trust appears to be key in both cases. Additionally, the ‘do nothing strategy’ is frequently used in both cases.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As an exploratory investigation, the present research has several limitations. One limitation pertains to the fact that only seven NWOM redress strategies were evaluated. In light of emerging communication technologies, it would be interesting to monitor new approaches by which managers can leverage the PWOM being transmitted by current and potential customers. It also is important to bear in mind that the implications of our results for marketing practitioners are tempered by certain limitations inherent in the methodology. Our data were derived from a critical incidents procedure dependent on participants’ free recall of the effectiveness of the evaluated redress strategies. A self-serving bias cannot be ruled out in the reported effectiveness of strategies highlighted by managerial respondents. Accordingly, we encourage replications utilizing other methodologies, perhaps focusing on managerial response to real-time incidents of NWOM.

Another limitation lies in the fact we did not take into account situational, political, economic and legal factors which have the potential to exert powerful effects within culture (Gelfand, Erez and Aycan 2007). We therefore encourage future research to control these factors to assess the cross-cultural differences across French and American managers to cope with NWOM.

Future research could benefit from a focus on the mechanisms that account for the perceived efficacy of the various redress strategies highlighted in the present study and the means by which they operate to reduce the threats stemming from the spread of NWOM. It also would be interesting to enlarge the focus to other countries and managerial cultures, so as to assess the utility of these strategies in other settings. More work is also needed to compare the redress strategies to cope with NWOM versus the strategies used to cope with rumors.

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