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Research Dialogue

Cultivating admiration in brands: Warmth, competence, and landing in the “golden quadrant” ☆

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Abstract

Although a substantial amount of research has examined the constructs of warmth and competence, far less has examined how these constructs develop and what benefits may accrue when warmth and competence are cultivated. Yet there are positive consequences, both emotional and behavioral, that are likely to occur when brands hold perceptions of both. In this paper, we shed light on when and how warmth and competence are jointly promoted in brands, and why these reputations matter.

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Judgments of warmth and competence play important roles in consumers' perceptions of organizations and brands (e.g., Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004; Aaker, Vohs, & Mogilner, 2010). For example, non-profits tend to be perceived as relatively warm, whereas for-profits are perceived as more competent (Aaker et al., 2010). Not only do these perceptions form stable impressions of firms, they color consumers' willingness to engage with brands made by these organizations. When firms are perceived as both warm and competent, consumers become more willing to buy brands from these organizations.

Recent research suggests that the cultivation of both competence and warmth is needed now more than ever, with

perceptions of brand quality decreased by 24% and trust in brands experiencing a decline of nearly 50% since 1993 (e.g., Gerzema, 2009). Admiration in brands may be the emotional antidote to both kinds of tarnished perceptions. Indeed, prior work has shown that cultivating both warmth and competence leads to admiration, whereas the absence of one of these dimensions has been found to elicit negative emotions: If competence is lacking, pity is experienced, and if warmth is lacking, envy is felt (Caprariello, Cuddy, & Fiske, 2009; Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2007; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002).

The emotional benefits resulting from the combination of warmth and competence have behavioral consequences as well. Warmth is typically associated with cooperative intentions and prosocial behavior, inducing others to come to one's aid when needed, whereas competency is typically associated with the ability to execute one's intentions (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008). From a customer perspective, being perceived as both warm and competent corresponds to increased willingness to buy from an organization (Aaker et al., 2010) that can ultimately translate into increased consumer engagement, connection, and loyalty, which are cornerstones of social brand building (Fournier, 1998; Fournier & Avery, 2010).

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So when can reputations of warmth and competence be developed in brands? And what are the positive consequences that result from these reputations? To address these questions, we report the results of a study in which we tested how warmth and competence interact to affect admiration and purchase intent. Subsequently, we discuss how brands can foster reputations that are both warm and competent. In doing so, we hope to illuminate how brands might land in this “golden quadrant.”

Understanding warmth and competence

In Kervyn, Fiske, & Malone (2012—this volume), the authors build on the Stereotype Content Model to suggest that consumers assess brands’ perceived intentions and abilities, which elicit certain emotions and drive consumer behavior. Warmth perceptions answer the question, “What intentions does this entity have?” People or social objects with cooperative intentions are seen as warm, approachable, and trustworthy. Competence perceptions answer the question, “Is this entity capable of carrying out its intentions?” Being perceived to have the ability to implement their intentions indicates competence. In this light, brands—as social objects—with cooperative intentions should be seen as sincere, trustworthy, and friendly, whereas brands perceived to possess a skill set to execute competently should be associated with intelligence, success, and leadership (Aaker, 1997).

How do these reputations play out in the marketplace? Although it has been established that the combination of warmth and competence results in positive emotional consequences, such as admiration (Cuddy et al., 2007), in addition to behaviorally-oriented consequences, such as increased purchase intent (Aaker et al., 2010), it remains unclear how warmth and competence combine to impact purchase intent and whether consumer admiration fuels the impact of warmth and competence on purchase intent. We designed an experiment to examine these questions.

The “golden quadrant” study

The goal of our study was two-fold: first, we sought to investigate whether warmth and competence interact to affect purchase intent. That is, do warmth and competence contribute individually to affect purchase intent or do brands receive an extra boost when they possess both dimensions? Second, to investigate what drives purchase intent, we examined the impact of warmth and competence on admiration, and in turn on purchase intent. We drew on the methodology and stimuli developed by Kervyn et al. (2012—this volume), and further refined by Bennett & Hill (2012—this volume), to examine the downstream consequences associated with warmth and competence.

Procedure

Four hundred and eight adults (57.1% female; mean age=34.51, SD=12.54) participated in an online study on brands. Based on random assignment, participants were exposed to one of the following brands: McDonalds, Burger King, BP, Shell, Tropicana, Minute Maid, Tylenol, or Advil, selected by

Bennett & Hill (2012—this volume) because they represent four diverse product categories that vary in degrees of warmth and competence (fast food, gasoline, orange juice, and pain relievers). Specifically, participants were asked to think about the brand, and then indicate the extent to which it was seen as warm and friendly ($r=0.76$) and competent and capable ($r=0.85$) on a 5-point scale (1 = “not at all descriptive,” 5 = “extremely descriptive”). In addition, feelings of admiration toward the brand were captured on a 7-point scale (1 = “not at all,” 7 = “extremely”). Next, purchase intent (“how likely you would be to buy the brand if you had need for such a product during the next 30 days?”) was assessed on a 7-point scale (1 = “not at all,” 7 = “extremely”). Demographics and brand familiarity were also measured. Last, participants were paid (\$0.50) and debriefed.

Results

We argue that the combination of warmth and competence is ideal for brands to achieve, but are the positive behavioral effects associated with their achievement additive or interactive? The results of a regression analysis involving warmth, competence, and an interaction between the two constructs on purchase intent revealed a significant main effect of competence ($\beta=0.69$, $t=3.12$, $p=0.002$), but no main effect of warmth ($\beta=0.21$, $t=0.67$, $p=0.51$), a finding echoing that of Aaker et al. (2010), who also found that competency perceptions are more important than warmth for spurring consumers to purchase. In addition, the results suggest that warmth and competence interact with one another to marginally affect purchase intent ($\beta=0.14$, $t=1.70$, $p=0.09$). Thus, it appears that achieving a status of both warmth and competence provides firms with an additional boost that surpasses the individual effect that each provides.

To examine the process underlying the above effect, a mediation analysis was conducted. First, purchase intent was regressed on competence ($\beta=0.69$, $t=3.12$, $p=0.002$), warmth ($p=0.51$), and their interaction ($p=0.09$). Next, admiration was regressed on competence ($\beta=0.30$, $t=2.36$, $p=0.02$), warmth ($p=0.83$), and their interaction ($p=0.51$). Finally, purchase intent was regressed on admiration and competence, along with warmth and the interaction of competence and warmth (the latter two continued to be nonsignificant). Supportive of partial mediation, the effect of admiration was significant ($\beta=0.49$, $t=5.77$, $p<0.001$), whereas the effect of competence declined in predictive ability ($\beta=0.54$, $t=2.55$, $p=0.01$), as evidenced by a bootstrap analysis which yielded a 95% confidence-interval of [0.04, 0.27] for the difference between the coefficients of competence in the two regressions (with and without the mediator). These results suggest that competence is indeed a direct driver of purchase intent, supportive of past work (Aaker et al., 2010), and that admiration partially mediates the impact of competence on purchase intent.

General discussion

The idea that, at their core, warmth and competence describe the vast majority of perceptions that people have about others is well-established (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007). However, the fact that this lens is also used when people perceive other

entities, such as organizations and brands, is just beginning to be uncovered (Aaker et al., 2010; Kervyn et al., 2012—this volume). The finding that the same framework that people use to judge others is applied to objects in the marketplace attests to the power and efficiency of the Stereotype Content Model in helping people make sense of their world.

In this paper, we explored the impact of warmth and competence on purchase intent, while integrating a new component, admiration for the brand, into the pathway. The results of our study showed that warmth and competence interactively affect purchase intent, such that being high in both dimensions provides firms with an extra benefit that surpasses the individual contributions of each. This positive outcome on purchase intent can be explained by feelings of admiration for brands, establishing how worthwhile it can be for brands to obtain admiration from consumers by cultivating both warmth and competence.

From a purely theoretical perspective, our results indicate an intriguing pathway, where the genesis for consumer purchase intent (a behavioral outcome) starts with basic perceptions—those of warmth and competence. In the right combination of high warmth and competence, this cognitive appraisal can produce feelings of admiration. Admiration appears, then, to play the more proximal role in changing behavior and spurring consumers to want to buy from the firm. The sequence from basic perception to cognitive appraisals to emotions and ending in behavior affects much of the psychological system and therefore is likely to account for the robustness of the effects of warmth and competence perceptions on intentions toward the brand (Aaker et al., 2010).

Next, we elaborate on the downstream effects of feeling admiration for a firm in addition to cultivation issues—namely how firms that are seen as high on one dimension (either warmth or competence) can come to be seen as high on the other.

Admiration redux: spillovers into awe

We are not the first to focus on the emotion of admiration as a key centerpoint of consumers' feelings about firms. CNNMoney.com recently reported its annual list of “World's Most Admired Companies” (March 21, 2011). Topping the list were Apple, Google, Berkshire Hathaway, Southwest Airlines, and Procter & Gamble. Unsurprisingly, these firms are for-profit organizations that tend to be seen as high on competence and warmth.¹ To garner more confidence in the results of our experiment on competence and warmth predicting admiration and to diminish the chance that halo effects could explain our results, we performed a reanalysis of our data excluding the one highly admired firm, McDonald's (#10 on the Most Admired List), that had been in our initial dataset. Speaking to the robustness of our model, the results remained stable without the potential influence of that highly admired firm.

When consumers are brimming with feelings of admiration for a firm—they see it as maxing out on competence and warmth—where else can they go with those feelings? We propose that in these (relatively rare) cases, one emotion likely to arise is awe. Awe is defined as a feeling of the immenseness of an object or

event that causes people to rethink their views on the world (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). The experiencer feels small in relation to the vastness of the awesome event. Indeed, so powerful is awe that it seemingly halts time in its place (Rudd, Vohs, & Aaker, in press).

Do highly admired firms also induce awe? In addition to a positive significant correlation between admiration and awe ($r=0.13$, $p=0.01$), results of a follow-up survey ($n=22$) suggest yes. Consumers asked to rate their feelings of awe for the first five brands on the Most Admired List reported feelings of awe far above the midpoint of the scale ($M=5.6$, where 1 = no awe; 7 = maximum feelings of awe). Moreover, the #1 brand on the list, Apple, received an almost uniform rating of 7 ($M=6.95$; one respondent reported a rating of 6). This result suggests that as brands move toward the positive endpoint of admiration, consumers seek to express their intense feelings about the firm in another way—namely through feelings of awe.

Can warm brands be seen as competent?

If people indeed perceive brands as being either warm or competent, not both—and they are much more likely to do business with the competent one—this is unfortunate for nonprofits, which are often seen as more warm than competent (Aaker et al., 2010). But being warm might not be an insurmountable barrier. In some cases, a warm brand can become competent in the eyes of consumers and employees.

The best place for warm brands to communicate competence well is likely in services and goods that are themselves related to warmth. Providers of care (e.g., nursing homes, hospitals) could transfer the perception that they are high on warmth to being high(er) on competence if they position themselves around delivering a high quality caring environment. Cigna, a health insurance giant, linked the idea of competence and warmth in their motto, “A business of caring.” Simple positioning and messaging tactics like these can go far in tying the strength of being warm to the ability to be competent. Not incidentally, Cigna is a for-profit firm. Nonprofit firms, in contrast, have often struggled at tying competency to their brand image. Salvation Army's motto, “Doing the most good,” works only to solidify their place as an organization that is high on warmth.

Verbal messaging, however, might not be sufficient to shift consumers' perceptions of a firm's competency. Our prior work found that small and incidental reminders of a powerful image associated with competence—namely, money—were enough to give warm firms a boost in competency. Similarly, a ringing endorsement from a high profile and highly competent source (e.g., Wall Street Journal) also helped bring up competency impressions in otherwise warm brands (Aaker et al., 2010). Last, when the culture of a warm nonprofit is based on rigorous research and data-driven approaches toward the goal of fighting cancer (e.g., HopeLab; Liu & Aaker, 2008), nonprofits can more effectively cultivate reputations of competence.

One last consideration concerns the deficit in trust that consumers feel recently toward firms and brands (e.g., Gerzema, 2009). Given that trust can connect to both aspects of the Stereotype Content Model, in that trust can mean to have someone

¹ Future research is needed to empirically test this claim.

else's interests in mind or be able to carry out the intended actions, firms that are high on warmth might think about accentuating the idea that they have others' best interests in mind. That trust has both components of others' interests and competency, it is possible that if a firm can persuade consumers that it is trustworthy in the warmth sense, there might be positive spillover to consumer perceptions that the firm is trustworthy in the ability sense too.

Can competent brands be seen as warm?

So how do competent brands develop perceptions of warmth? Because warmth is readily perceived and quickly processed (Fiske et al., 2007; Ybarra, Chan, & Park, 2001), warmth judgments might be more malleable than competency judgments and consequently, may be easier to credential after a brand's competence has been established. In such cases, small touches of warmth to a competent firm might be sufficient to offer a burst of warmth to their brand image, making messaging and positioning likely to matter (Aaker, Stayman, & Hagerty, 1986). The pharmaceutical company, Merck, whose motto, "Where patients come first," is directly in line with the strategies that we are suggesting. Further, it could be that the mere presence of others aids perceptions of warmth. Not all images of people, however, would likely be effective. Images of a sole person or people simply near each other might not be enough to trigger perceptions of warmth as they may suggest a failure to connect in a meaningful way; however, showing people interacting or connecting may indeed be more effective (Bales, 1999).

A corollary of this idea may be explored not from a customer perspective, but from an employee perspective. Do firms that cultivate both warmth and competence benefit employees? Most of the work in this area—and that on well-being more generally—shows that increasing time spent at work does not increase one's happiness (Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2006); however, this finding appears to be based on data from for-profit, and hence more competent, firms. In cases where employees work together on meaningful goals (which is more likely for non-profit organizations), work may be associated with happiness because the organization's meaningful mission causes employees to feel more connected to the firm. Along these lines, when competent firms seek to land in the golden quadrant by becoming warmer, their employees may reap personal benefits by becoming even more satisfied with their current positions.

Concluding remarks

In this research, we hoped to illuminate when and why brands might seek to land in this "golden quadrant." The results of our study suggest that the downstream consequences associated with being perceived as both warm and competent are significant and worth systematic study as they result in greater willingness to purchase. Moreover, these results underscore the importance of understanding when consumer admiration—and indeed, even awe—might be cultivated by brands. Specifically, admiration follows when a firm is perceived as being both warm and competent and our study showed that this emotion plays a key role in predicting consumer willingness to purchase.

Whereas it may appear difficult for a firm to establish an image of both warmth and competence, we provide suggestions for brands that already possess one dimension and seek to attain the other. We hope these recommendations demonstrate that while firms tend to be seen as either warm or competent, it is possible to achieve an image of both and that doing so is typically a worthwhile investment of effort and resources. In the current era of consumer pessimism, insecurity, and distrust, firms that are seen as both competent and warm will stand out. And if they hit the "golden quadrant," they might just be heralded by admiring consumers.

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