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Can You Beat Around the Bush and Still Get the Sale?

Barbara Bickart, PhD, Maureen Morrin, PhD, and S. (Ratti) Ratneshwar, PhD

Customers can pose challenging questions, for which salespeople (despite their best intentions) may not know the answer. In these situations, a salesperson has several options. First, the salesperson could admit to not knowing the answer to the question, with the downside of damaging perceptions of expertise. Second, the salesperson could lie with a false answer. In addition to the ethical issues raised with this approach, in the long run lying is likely to harm the salesperson’s credibility. Finally, the salesperson could obfuscate or “beat around the bush.” We define obfuscation as a providing a response that dodges the actual question and provides a pseudo-answer with irrelevant, tangential or vague information. Obfuscation could buy the salesperson some time, and could potentially limit damage to perceptions of expertise and credibility.

In our research, we survey consumers to determine the extent to which they perceive obfuscation occurs in their interactions with salespeople as well as the situations in which they feel that salespeople are most likely to use this approach. In addition, we conduct experiments to examine if and when obfuscation is most likely to affect a salesperson’s persuasiveness. We find that consumers encounter obfuscation in their interactions with salespeople, and that they believe obfuscation is most likely to occur when the salesperson works on commission. Further, in situations where consumers trust the salesperson, obfuscation can be as persuasive as an honest admission of a lack of knowledge.

Marketplace Beliefs about Obfuscation

In a survey of 300 individuals recruited from an online panel, we find that over two-thirds of participants (70%) have had an experience with a salesperson who “beats around the bush” or has been very vague or longwinded in answering a question. Examples of obfuscatory responses provided by participants fell into two general categories. First, participants described situations where the salesperson talked a lot but did not provide an answer to the consumer’s question. Second, participants provided examples in which the salesperson was asked a very specific
(yes/no) question but did not give a direct answer. Consumers felt that salespeople obfuscated primarily because they were trying to get more money (38%) or were not knowledgeable (28%).

We also asked participants to rate the likelihood that fifteen different types of sales professionals would obfuscate in response to a consumer’s question. Perceptions of obfuscation varied significantly across the professions. Consistent with the finding that consumers perceive monetary motives as a key driver of obfuscatory responses, obfuscation was seen as more likely for salespeople who worked on commission. Of the fifteen professionals evaluated, real estate agents were high on the list in terms of likelihood to obfuscate, just after telemarketers and car salespersons. These perceptions are driven by the strong monetary motives associated with real estate sales.

When is Obfuscation Effective?

To follow up the results of the survey, we conducted a series of experiments examining how obfuscation affects a salesperson’s persuasiveness. In these studies, participants read a hypothetical conversation between a salesperson and a consumer. The conversation included a question from the consumer for which we varied the salesperson’s response. In some conditions, the salesperson admitted to not knowing the answer to the question, while in other conditions the salesperson gave an obfuscatory response. We then asked participants to rate their trust in the salesperson and their likelihood to purchase the product in question. Across several sales contexts (i.e., electronics and insurance sales), we find that prior expectations of a dishonest response affect the impact of an obfuscatory response (relative to an honest “don’t know”) on both trust in the salesperson and purchase intentions. Specifically, when consumers’ expectations of an obfuscatory response are high, either due to the presence of a monetary motive (e.g., commission) or because the participant is more focused on honesty, an obfuscatory response results in lower perceptions of trust and lower purchase intentions than a “don’t know” response. In contrast, when expectations of a dishonest response are low, obfuscation does not affect trust in the salesperson or purchase intentions. In other words, when the consumer’s radar is down, salespeople can “get away with” an obfuscatory response without damaging perceptions of trust or purchase intentions.

Implications for Real Estate Agents

Our work has several important implications for real estate agents. First, obfuscation can be tempting when a salesperson does not know the answer to a question. It can help the salesperson avoid a loss of credibility associated with admitting a lack of knowledge and also avoids the risk of an outright bluff. Salespeople must understand that when buyers are aware that there is a monetary motive—for example, the salesperson will gain a commission on a sale—consumers are more vigilant and obfuscation is likely to backfire. In those situations, salespeople are much
more likely to be successful if they are direct and admit to not knowing the answer to a question than to obfuscate.

Further, because consumers in general expect obfuscatory responses from salespeople who work on commission, real estate agents will need to be particularly careful about the use of obfuscation, as this response strategy is likely to hurt their effectiveness. Although our work does not specifically address the length or nature of the sales relationship, it seems likely that these concerns are greatest at the beginning of the relationship. As the sense of connection between the agent and the consumer increases, consumer awareness of the monetary motive could be diminished and consumers may be less vigilant in their response to obfuscation.

Prior research has shown that extrinsic monetary incentives can undermine prosocial behavior and that commission-based salespersons may be more prone to unethical selling tactics (e.g., Ariely, Bracha, & Meier, 2009; Honeycutt, Glassman, Zugelder & Karande, 2001). Our findings suggest that consumers hold beliefs or have schemas about such types of motivated behavior and adjust their expectations accordingly. Thus, salespeople who work on commission are likely at a disadvantage simply due to the nature of their firm’s compensation structure. These salespeople will need to work hard to earn their customers’ trust.

More generally, consumer perceptions about obfuscation can feed into the stereotypes that exist about salespeople who work on commission and thus can potentially harm the profession. Our work suggests that consumers believe that salespeople resort to obfuscatory responses to questions when they are motivated to earn money on the sale or lack knowledge on a topic. These beliefs have a negative impact on consumer decision-making. Thus, the profession may want to consider steps to discourage this behavior, including training on effective communication and establishing a code of conduct that delineate examples of unacceptable response strategies.

**Conclusion**

Consumers believe that salespeople obfuscate or beat around the bush in response to their questions, particularly when the salesperson works on commission. From the salesperson’s perspective, obfuscation is most likely to damage perceptions of trust and purchase intentions when a monetary motive is salient. The findings highlight the importance of building strong
relationships with clients and establishing training procedures and professional guidelines that
discourage the use of obfuscation in response to customers’ questions.

**Recommended Reading**


**References**


**About the Authors**

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Dr. Barbara Bickart (PhD – University of Illinois at Urbana) examines how the context of communication influences consumers’ inference and judgment processes. Current projects explore how consumers create connections (e.g., emotional, affinity, shared experiences) in the context of both consumer-to-consumer and business-to-consumer communication and how such connections influence the interpretation, perceived value and persuasive impact of a message. Her work has appeared in a number of journals including *Journal of Marketing Research, Journal of Consumer Research, Journal of Consumer Psychology, Journal of Interactive Marketing*, and *Journal of Advertising*. She is currently an Associate Editor at *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing* and has previously served on the editorial review boards of the *Journal of Consumer Research, the Journal of Marketing Research, the Journal of Marketing*, and the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*. She is also a past president of the *Journal of Consumer Research Policy Board*. Prior to joining Boston University, she held appointments at as Director of the BEBR Survey Research Program at the University of Florida and was an associate professor of marketing and director of the MBA program at Rutgers-School of Business, Camden.
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