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Are Clients Persuaded by Boastful Agents?
Grant Packard, PhD, Andrew D. Gershoff, PhD, and David B. Wooten, PhD

Boasting, or speaking with excessive pride and self-satisfaction about one’s achievements, possessions or abilities (Oxford English Dictionary 2015) has become endemic in online media. Research shows more than half of survey respondents admit to boasting online about travel adventures before returning home (Travelmail Reporter 2012) and that word-of-mouth transmissions are often driven by self-enhancement motives, the desire to depict oneself in a favorable or “expert” light (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). For real estate professionals, asserting marketplace expertise is key to capitalizing on referrals and gaining new customers, and oftentimes, asserting expertise is equated with boasting. We examined whether boasting by a persuasion agent (any person trying to persuade another) has positive or negative impacts (or both) on moving the consumer towards a purchase decision.

We theorized that the presence of cues about the persuasion agent’s trustworthiness can “change the meaning of boasting.” If consumers have or predict a reason to distrust a source of product information (a “low trust cue”), boasting leads to heightened vigilance and perception of ulterior motives of the boastful source, making the consumer like the product even less than they would have otherwise. However, when consumers feel trusting of the source, boasting can have the opposite effect and lead to persuasion to make a purchase decision. For example, when interviewing two agents to sell a home, both agents may boast about their history in getting top dollar for recent sales. Clients may not be persuaded by a boastful, new agent with no client referral history (i.e. low trust cue), suspecting this agent is only considering this sale for the higher commission. Clients may be persuaded, however, by the other boastful agent who shares a referral list of satisfied clients and who appears on local billboards as a “top producer” (i.e., a high trust cue).

Our Study

To test our theory, we completed three studies and found that boasting with low trust cues decreases the persuasiveness of the product information source while boasting with high-trust cues actually increases the persuasiveness of the source. For reasons pertaining to experimental design, the studies were conducted in the context of one consumer attempting to persuade others in online reviews.
Study One

Participants were instructed to imagine they were shopping for a beach vacation through an online travel website and read online hotel reviews. Similarity between reviewer and reader were manipulated by altering the demographics of the reviewer to be more or less similar to the reader. For example, a high-similarity condition described a same-aged person, same gender, and from a nearby location. The low-similarity condition described an older person from a different location.

The results of this study found that boasting, which is typically considered a negative social behavior, can actually have both negative and positive effects on persuasion. When participants read the boastful review in the high similarity condition, they were more likely to trust the reviewer and purchase the hotel stay. In contrast, when participants read the boastful review in the low similarity condition, they were more likely to question the motives of and distrust the reviewer, avoiding the hotel.

Study Two

In study two, rather than providing demographics of the reviewers, we provided a reviewer trustworthiness scale, which is commonly found on online review sites as a “rate the reviewer” tool. This provides a trust cue about prior consumers’ attitudes towards the persuasion agent, signaling either a high trust cue (four-star rating) or low trust cue (two-star rating). There was also a control condition with no rate the reviewer information.

Boastful statements, combined with the trust derived from the higher “rate the reviewer” score, led to a higher likelihood of study participants choosing the hotel stay relative to the control condition. However, given the low trust cue, boastful statements led consumers to be suspicious of the persuasion agent, and made them less likely to choose the hotel than participants in the control condition.

Study Three

In our final study, we asked participants to read one of two news articles prior to reading online reviews in order to establish trust (or lack thereof). The articles described the character in a theatrical play, one describing the character as dishonest, selfish and deceptive, while the other article described the character as honest, trustworthy and empathetic. This was expected to provide a very subtle cue of distrust or trust about people generally.

After this subtle trust cue was established, participants were asked to read an online consumer reviews about wine (unrelated to the previous newspaper article), which contained either high or low boasting, before indicating how likely they were to select the wine being reviewed.
Participants who were exposed to a newspaper article about the dishonest character were more likely to suspect negative/ulterior motives behind the boastful review, and reject the recommended wine. Conversely, those exposed to the article about the honest character were more likely to view the wine reviewer as an expert and subsequently select the wine.

**Establishing Positive Trust Cues in Real Estate**

Real estate professionals can begin to establish positive trust cues with clients and online followers by building a personal brand as trustworthy, knowledgeable and successful professionals. This reputation is, of course, built from the foundational one-on-one interactions with individual clients, but it can also extend to the firm’s marketing and communication strategy. If an agent is the top producer for the firm, for example, the agent’s email signature block and social media page description or photo could include that recognition. Firms oftentimes promote their top producing agents via online or billboard advertising to further promote these specific agents. Agent ratings that are available to consumers online are also an important source of whether the agent’s attempts to present him- or herself in a positive light help or hurt the ability to help clients in the decision-making process.

Industry credentials also establish trust with clients. Having (and promoting) certifications such as REALTOR® designation, Counselor of Real Estate, Military Relocation Professional, Accredited Land Consultant, etc., may not only increase trust cues, but may also spark conversation and, in turn, result in new leads.

Finally, when posting customer reviews or photos online, carefully consider posting demographic information of clients. In instances of posting photos of clients, consider including photos of clients with varying demographics so that visitors to the firm’s website or agent’s social media page are able to find descriptions or photos of clients with high similarity.

**Conclusion**

For real estate professionals, lead development, referrals and livelihood often depend on the ability to share success stories or expertise that might be perceived as a form of boasting. While our research indicates boasting can produce negative and positive reactions, partnered with the
right strategy to develop a foundation of trustworthiness, agents and brokers can utilize boasting
to the advantage of the individual agent and the firm.

**Recommended Reading**

Packard, Grant, Andrew D. Gershoff, and David B. Wooten (2016), “When Boastful Word of
Mouth Helps versus Hurts Social Perceptions and Persuasion,” *Journal of Consumer Research*,
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Travelmail Reporter (2012), “Wish You Were Here! 60% of Britons Boast Online While They’re
on Holiday, with 15% Aiming to Make an Ex Jealous,” [http://www.dailymail.co.uk](http://www.dailymail.co.uk).

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Grant Packard’s (PhD – University of Michigan) research explores self-concepts, motivation,
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Andrew D. Gershoff (PhD – University of Texas) studies consumers’ evaluations and decisions
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others, how consumers react to betrayals or violations of trust after relying on individuals, service providers, and products, and how consumers evaluate the fairness of marketing and manufacturing tactics. His research and writing has been published in *Journal of Consumer Research, Journal of Marketing Research, Journal of Consumer Psychology, Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, Marketing Letters, and the Financial Times*. Andy also works as a consultant and executive educator on issues related to marketing, marketing research, and marketing education. He has worked in the U.S., Spain, China, Kazakhstan, Croatia, Turkey, and Egypt for numerous clients including IBM, Pfizer, Bristol-Meyers Squibb, and USAID.

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