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Power Distance Belief: A Tool to Design Tailored Appeals to Persuade Your Audience

Lingjiang Lora Tu, PhD, JaeHwan Kwon, PhD, and Huachao Gao, PhD

The art of selling is no easy task to master. Imagine the possibilities that could emerge by adapting your message to your client’s mindset. You would wonder less, sell more, and be able to tailor messages to specific consumers. In consumer-based businesses, understanding how to effectively design marketing messages is key. Studies on power distance belief bring salespeople one step closer to understanding what is going on in the minds of different consumers. This knowledge increases the power to persuade audiences through appeals tailored directly toward specific consumer mindsets.

What is Power Distance Belief?

Power distance belief, or PDB, is a term that describes how people perceive and accept hierarchy and inequality in social interactions.1 PDB gives us a better understanding of people, and it can be used to appeal to individuals in a more personalized way. Understanding PDB is the first step in learning how to persuade your audience through tailored appeals.

Individuals with a high PDB accept inequality as a fact of life. High-PDB individuals honor hierarchy, and they support lifestyles that have clear boundaries and roles. For example, high PDB are more likely to consume luxury products that signal high status and respond to educational advertising appeals that promise higher status degrees and jobs. On the other hand, those with low PDB believe in equality for all members of a community. These individuals support lifestyles that are participative with power distributed equally. For example, educational appeals work best when they emphasize enjoyable learning and positive experiences.

Tailoring a message to someone with high PDB is done much differently than to someone with low PDB. Since power distance belief affects a wide range of consumer behaviors, it is important to understand how to best utilize it to maximize the impact of sales messages with each type of consumer.

Appealing to the High-PDB Consumer

High-PDB individuals believe in inequality, and they are attracted to structure. Messages aimed at high-PDB consumers will be better received when they target cognitive appeals. Cognitive appeals are rational claims. They are appeals with logical and clear reasons behind them. High-
PDB consumers find cognitive appeals more attractive because they focus on outcomes that are more rational and externally oriented, promising status, advantage, and superior results.

How individuals respond to the appeals presented to them depends on their learning mindset. High-PDB individuals have an activated outcome-learning mindset, which means consumers use reason to see messages presented to them as essential tools that will help lead to success. For high-PDB consumers, everything boils down to where they fall in the hierarchy. This is because high-PDB consumers care about the destination more than the journey. Structuring a sales message in a way that emphasizes success is an effective way to take advantage of the high-PDB consumer learning mindset.

Furthermore, when trying to reach high-PDB consumers, you should infuse your messages with rational appeals. Use outlines and structure. Emphasize the final reward, and don’t be afraid to mention status. By understanding a high-PDB consumer mindset, you can create selling advantage.

**Appealing to the Low-PDB Consumer**

By contrast, low-PDB consumers respond to appeals and perceive outcomes differently than high-PDB consumers. While high-PDB consumers are attracted to cognitive appeals, low-PDB consumers respond to affective appeals, which appeal to emotion and experience. When using affective appeals, it is best to lead with emotion and mention feelings of satisfaction. Low-PDB consumers also find affective appeals more attractive because they align with a preference for equality and respect for individual preference.

Low-PDB individuals respond to appeals with a process-learning mindset. These consumers see messages as part of their journey and love being involved in the processes. They respond to appeals to discover more about themselves as they learn and grow. At the end of the day, low-PDB consumers are going to care more about how they were impacted by their interactions rather than the status they’ve achieved. Aiming marketing messages toward a consumer’s journey or self-discovery will be best for activating a process-learning mindset.

When trying to effectively persuade low-PDB consumers, salespeople should build messages around the experiential benefits the product/service has to offer. Messages that engage strong emotions involve the consumer and engage low-PDB buyers in anticipating positive experiences.

**Real Estate Application**

Real estate is a consumer-based industry where success can hinge on the ability to understand and interact with consumers. When trying to lease or sell a property, it is essential to highlight what the asset has to offer compared with what your client is specifically looking for and the
approach most likely to engage them depending on which PDB orientation the client demonstrates.

With clients who lean towards high PDB, focus on the status of the desired neighborhood. Additionally, you might emphasize the luxury associated with the features of the home. A message focusing on how the consumption of the product could lead to economic gain would also be a productive way to win over the client. In contrast, low-PDB clients will respond better to a message focusing on the experiences that will occur within their homes. Rather than making the process structured, salespeople could paint verbal pictures of enjoying a new home in various situations. It would also be beneficial to pull in emotions and nostalgia that surround a new home purchase. No matter who you are dealing with in your transaction, taking the time to recognize customers’ power distance belief can pay off.

**Recommended Reading**


**Reference**


**About the Authors**

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Dr. Lingjiang Lora Tu’s (PhD – University of Texas at San Antonio) research focuses on consumer psychological issues such as identity and thinking style and their marketing implications for cross-cultural differences. Her research received prestigious awards including the Sheth Dissertation Award by ACR and the Best Paper Award by American Marketing Association. Her research has been published in leading marketing journals including *Journal of Marketing Research, Marketing Letters* and *International Journal of Research in Marketing*. 
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Dr. JaeHwan Kwon (PhD – University of Iowa) has received a variety of awards, most recently the Young Researcher Award from the Hankamer School of Business. He has two years of strategic consulting experience with over seven such international firms as LG electronics, GM Korea, and SK Telecom. His research interests include human evaluative judgment and decision making, new-tech products, visual information processing, and consumer mindset. His research has been published in highly respected marketing and business journals such as the *Journal of Marketing, Journal of Consumer Research, European Journal of Marketing, and Journal of Advertising, among others.*

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Dr. Huachao Gao’s (PhD – University of Texas San Antonio) research centers on exploring consumers’ purchase decisions from a cross-cultural perspective. Specifically, he examines how individual consumers from different countries/regions or with different cultural backgrounds might be different in processing marketing information, evaluating marketing offerings, and making final purchase decisions. Dr. Gao’s research interests focus on pricing, status consumption, loyalty program design, and consumer identity. His research has been published on top marketing journals such as *Journal of Consumer Research, Journal of Marketing,* and *Journal of Marketing Research.*