

## **Consumer resistance in case of negative publicity –**

### **Analyzing the effects of inoculation**

**Sabine Einwiller**

University of Applied Sciences Northwestern Switzerland

School of Business

Riggenbachstrasse 16

4600 Olten

Switzerland

[sabine.einwiller@fhnw.ch](mailto:sabine.einwiller@fhnw.ch)

Tel: +41 62 286 0121

**Gita Johar**

Columbia University Business School

Columbia Graduate School of Business

Columbia University,

New York, NY 10027

USA

[gvj1@columbia.edu](mailto:gvj1@columbia.edu)

Tel: +1 212 854 3480

## **Consumer resistance in case of negative publicity –**

### **Analyzing the effects of inoculation**

#### **Abstract**

Post-hoc refutations of negative publicity have been proven less effective than exposing consumers to a mild form of attack and counter argumentation just before an accusation breaks. According to inoculation theory, inoculation effectiveness is driven by threat elicited by the mild attack communicated prior to the negative message. Our research showed, however, that inoculation only significantly reduced negative attitude change and lead to more positive intentions for consumers that do not identify with the firm under attack. Identifiers on the other hand were rather unaffected by inoculation. This indicates that the reasoning behind inoculation effectiveness, threat drives inoculation effectiveness, is not unrestrictedly valid.

#### **Keywords**

Negative communication, identification, inoculation

Negative publicity and how a company deals with it are important factors influencing consumers' buying decisions. Therefore, firms are inclined to refute negative information about them. Denying and trying to reduce the offensiveness of an accusation are common refutation strategies. It has however been shown that post-hoc refutations are less effective than exposing people to a mild form of attack and counter argumentation just before an accusation breaks (Pfau et al., 1990). Inoculation theory postulates that exposing individuals to a weak attack on strongly held beliefs elicits threat which motivates them to defend their beliefs by generating supportive arguments (e.g., McGuire & Papageorgis, 1961).

In line with McGuire's inoculation paradigm, marketing researchers have tested inoculation assumptions for example on a firm highly regarded by the subject population (Easley et al. 1995) or beliefs that had not been called into question before (Szybillo & Heslin, 1973). However, consumers are often not favorable but rather indifferent or even negative toward a firm or brand. If inoculation treatments are to be considered for marketing practice it is therefore important to take consumers' prior stance into account. In our research we tested the moderating power of consumers' level of identification with the firm under attack. Consumer-company identification has been defined as the degree to which consumers feel a sense of connection to the company, aspects of the perceived corporate identity are self-referential and self-defining and emotions are positive (Einwiller et al., 2006).

According to inoculation theory, consumers should experience threat if a firm they highly identify with was accused of wrongdoing because their personal identity would be endangered if the accusation was true. They should engage in counter arguing which protects their attitudes from negative influences of an accusation. Those that do not identify with the firm should not feel threatened by an accusation. Consequently, they should not generate any counter arguments and should therefore not be protected against the persuasive effects of the accusation. These assumptions were tested by means of an experiment.

## **EXPERIMENT**

A two-phase experiment was conducted using an online consumer panel testing a 2 (identification: high vs. low) x 3 (prior message: refutational inoculation vs. supportive message vs. no inoculation) between subjects design. The stimulus object was a well known electronics discounter that was accused of deceptive advertising. In phase one, consumers'

level of identification (5 items) and prior attitude (3 items) were measured and the prior message condition was manipulated. In phase two (10 days later) participants were confronted with the accusation (a mock newspaper article) and asked to provide answers to the dependent variables (attitudes, intentions, counter arguments against accusation). The items to measure identification showed a high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .89). To work out the differences between high and low identifiers, we focused on the extreme groups representing the lowest quartile (scores 1.00 to 2.00, N=67) and the highest quartile (scores 3.60 to 7.00, N=74) of all respondents.

Results revealed that those who identified with the discounter perceived the article containing the accusation as more threatening than the ones not identified with the firm ( $M_{\text{high id}} = 4.99$  vs.  $M_{\text{low id}} = 5.73$ ,  $F(1, 138) = 7.64$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Results on consumers' attitude change (index phase 2 - phase 1) showed a significant interaction effect ( $F(2, 139) = 3.14$ ,  $p < .05$ ). There was significantly less negative attitude change in low identifiers when they had received a refutational inoculation in phase 1 than when they had been presented with a supportive or no message ( $M_{\text{refut inocu}} = -.31$  vs.  $M_{\text{control}} = -.96$ ,  $t = -2.54$ ,  $df = 64$ ,  $p < .05$ ;  $M_{\text{supo message}} = -.70$  vs.  $M_{\text{control}} = -.96$ ,  $t = -1.04$ ,  $df = 64$ ,  $p = \text{n.s.}$ ). There was no difference in attitude change for people with a high identification level ( $M_{\text{refut inocu}} = -.62$  vs.  $M_{\text{supo message}} = -.42$  vs.  $M_{\text{control}} = -.30$ , all comparisons n.s.), but data even indicated a tendency of attitude deterioration in the case of inoculation.

There was also a significant interaction of identification and inoculation on people's negative word-of-mouth intention ( $F(2, 140) = 3.44$ ,  $p < .05$ ). While those identifying with the firm do not intend to do so ( $M_{\text{high id}} = 3.03$ ), those not identifying are likely to speak negatively unless they had been inoculated ( $M_{\text{refut inocu}} = 4.14$  vs.  $M_{\text{supo message}} = 5.25$  vs.  $M_{\text{control}} = 5.22$ ). The comparison between refutational inoculation and control group was significant ( $t = 2.22$ ,  $df = 64$ ,  $p < .05$ ). When asked about the intention to shop at the store, a similar effect arose. The interaction was marginally significant ( $F(2, 138) = 2.31$ ,  $p < .10$ ). High identifiers unanimously planned to shop at store ( $M_{\text{high id}} = 5.47$ ). However, those not identifying were more likely to do so if they had read a refutational inoculation message ( $M_{\text{refut inocu}} = 3.52$  vs.  $M_{\text{supo message}} = 2.59$  vs.  $M_{\text{control}} = 2.61$ ). The comparison between refutational inoculation and control group was marginally significant ( $t = -1.78$ ,  $df = 63$ ,  $p < .09$ ).

At the end, participants were asked to write down all the arguments that came to their minds that spoke against the accusation. Apart from the significant main effect of identification ( $M_{\text{high id}} = 1.20$  vs.  $M_{\text{low id}} = .78$ ,  $F(1, 140) = 4.73$ ,  $p < .05$ ) data revealed a significant main

effect of prior message ( $M_{\text{refut inocu}} = 1.48$  vs.  $M_{\text{supo inocu}} = .73$  vs.  $M_{\text{control}} = .74$ ,  $F(2, 140) = 8.06$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Planned comparisons between the refutational inoculation and the other two conditions are significant ( $M_{\text{refut inocu}} = 1.48$  vs.  $M_{\text{control}} = .74$ ,  $t = 3.52$ ,  $df = 138$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $M_{\text{refut inocu}} = 1.48$  vs.  $M_{\text{supo inocu}} = .73$ ,  $t = 3.53$ ,  $df = 138$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Furthermore, mediational analyses revealed that the effect of the refutational inoculation on low identifiers' attitudes is mediated by the number of counter-arguments they generated. The supportive inoculation did not show such an effect.

## **DISCUSSION**

Our research shows the effectiveness of a refutational inoculation message on consumers' attitudes and behavioral intentions compared to a supportive or no message communicated before an accusation. However, and contrary to predictions, an inoculation message only significantly reduced negative attitude change and lead to more positive intentions for those consumers that did not identify with the firm. Identifiers on the other hand were rather unaffected by either form of message; results even indicate that a refutational inoculation message leads to more negative attitudes. Therefore, the reasoning behind inoculation effectiveness, that threat drives inoculation effectiveness, might not be unrestrictedly true. Results revealed that those who did not feel threatened by the accusation, the low identifiers, also generated counter arguments against the accusation which in turn mediated the effect of inoculation on their attitudes. Further research has to shed more light on the underlying processes of inoculation effectiveness.

## REFERENCES

- Easley, R. W., Bearden, W. O., & Teel, J. E. (1995). Testing predictions derived from inoculation theory and the effectiveness of self-disclosure communications strategies. *Journal of Business Research, 34*, 93-105.
- Einwiller, S., Fedorikhin, A., Johnson, A., & Kamins, M. (2006). Enough is enough! When identification no longer prevents negative corporate associations. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 34*, 185-194.
- McGuire, W. J. & Papageorgis, D. (1961). The relative efficacy of various types of prior belief-defense in producing immunity against persuasion. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 62*, 327-337.
- Pfau, M., Kenski, H. C., Nitz, M., & Sorenson, J. (1990). Efficacy of inoculation strategies in promoting resistance to political attack messages: Application to direct mail. *Communication Monographs, 57*, 25-43.
- Szybillo, G.J. & Heslin, R. (1973). Resistance to persuasion: Inoculation theory in a marketing context. *Journal of Marketing Research, 10*, November 1973, 396-403