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Coming second can be a winner

Getting your message across is all about context, so get your word in after a poor act rather than trying to trump a great one



Public speakers, entertainers and politicians know that a good act is tough to follow. Now research from Zakary Tormala, an associate professor of marketing at Stanford Graduate School of Business, Richard Petty of Ohio State University and Joshua Clarkson of Indiana University suggests that the same is true for anything designed to persuade – be it a television advert, speech or information campaign.

Messages are more powerful when they are preceded by other messages that appear to have relatively less substance or come from people with relatively less credibility.

In other words, if you want your message to look good, place it after something not so good. It's like having an opening act that sets the bar low, making the main event seem much better by comparison.

What is significant is that it does not matter whether the first message is related to the second or totally unrelated. In one study, receiving an advertisement with less information about one product led people to feel that an advert for a second, unrelated product was more informative, making the second advert more persuasive.

In another study, researchers looked at how the credibility of sources affected the persuasiveness of a message by leading students to believe that their university was considering a new exam regime. All participants received a pitch about the change that they were told had been written by someone perceived as moderately credible – a local community college instructor.

Earlier, students had read a different message supporting another new policy requiring campus community service. Researchers told some students that this message had been written by

someone with low credibility – a 14-year-old high school pupil – while they told others that it was written by someone of high credibility – a Princeton professor. Participants responded much more favourably to the second exam pitch – the one supposedly written by the community college instructor – when they were told that the source of the first message was the 14-year-old rather than the Princeton professor.

This research suggests that it is as important for advertising campaigns to think about tailoring the context of their message as it is to think about the content. They may, for example, want to place their commercials after something relatively more vapid.

“They might even go a step more radical and consider buying the previous ad spot and filling it with a less compelling message for a different brand or product. Following a less compelling ad for something else will help to make your ad seem more persuasive when it arrives.”

Excerpted with permission from Stanford Knowledgebase, published by the Stanford Graduate School of Business. www.gsb.stanford.edu/news/knowledgebase.html



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