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Don't Settle for Less: Using Negations in Advertising

Todd Pezzuti, PhD and James Leonhardt, PhD

The intent behind advertising is never just to spend money, but to engage consumers. Our research links the use of negations to increased consumer engagement. Negations, which advise what not to do, are created by using words like no, not, can't, don't, never, couldn't, and such. Slogans using negations are common, such as Snickers' "You're not you when you're hungry" or Old Spice's proclamation "If your grandfather hadn't worn it, you wouldn't exist." Negations make the slogans more interesting: compare "You're you when you're full" and "You exist because your grandfather wore it." Our paper examines how the use of negations impact consumer engagement, while also considering negations' effect on how powerful brands seem. First, we briefly discuss the importance of consumer engagement in business.



Consumer engagement in social media refers to comments, likes, shares, or retweets about the brand and its message. In the context of email marketing, engagement can refer to responding to the company's email or spreading positive word-of-mouth. Positive consumer engagement is proven to increase customer loyalty and referrals, both of which are critical to real estate firms.^{1,2} Despite its

importance, limited research has been conducted on how to increase consumer engagement, especially online.

Negations Signal Brand Power

Brand power represents how influential a brand is perceived to be. Recent research indicates brands can appear more powerful by imitating communication styles of powerful people, such as using negations.³ Negations often make the communicator seem more powerful by deviating from common norms by speaking negatively.

Historically, the majority of research around negations has been from linguists and does not consider the marketing implications of using negations in advertising. Our research links negations directly to consumer engagement. It also shows that negations are linked to consumer engagement by influencing how powerful a communicator seems. We conducted four distinct studies, all of which found a positive relationship between negations and consumer engagement. Our studies accounted for other factors that could influence the effect of negations on consumer

engagement. Despite these types of statistical controls, the effect of negations and brand power and consumer engagement persisted.

For example, Study 1 focused on brand messaging on Facebook. Using 52 million unique customer interactions with brands, we analyzed the relationship between using negations in brand messages and the number of likes, comments, and shares a message receives. The results show that using negations related to increased consumer engagement.

In Study 2, we used the same textual analysis program and evaluated over 8,000 tweets made by brands in various industries. Even after accounting for the number of words in the tweet, sentiment, expressing certainty, and the tweets' readability, negations related to increased consumer engagement.

To dive deeper into the effect, Study 3 used a controlled experiment and measured consumers' reactions to messages. Participants in the experiment read one of two versions of an online advertisement styled as Facebook posts. One message contained negations, the other one did not. Participants were asked how likely they would be to like, comment, or share the post. They also rated how powerful the brand seems. Participants noted that the brand seemed more powerful after reading the ad that included negations. Because people want to engage with powerful brands, they also reported that they would be more likely to engage with the brand that used the negation.

Study 4 was similar to the prior experiment, but focused on email marketing rather than social media marketing. Participants read one of two emails, one with negations and one without. The purpose of the email was to encourage readers to subscribe to a newsletter. Participants indicated their word-of-mouth intentions. Again, using negations made the brand seem more powerful and increased intentions to engage with the brand by spreading positive word-of-mouth.

Across all the studies, negations resulted in more consumer engagement. And the results show that this occurs because negations make communicators, including brands, seem more powerful and because people want to engage with powerful brands. The final experiment showed that this effect is even stronger when communicating with people that desire status.

Real Estate Implications

The implications for real estate professionals are straightforward: real estate professionals should use negations in advertising. One of the most powerful and oft-cited phrases in real estate contains a negation: "Don't let your dream home slip away!" From park benches to posts on Facebook, the strategic use of negations can amplify the effectiveness of real estate advertisements across a variety of media platforms. Even simple changes in wording, from "We fight for you" to "No one fights harder for you" can boost consumer engagement. While these details may seem trivial, our studies show that even small changes can significantly boost consumer engagement.

Recommended Reading

Pezzuti, Todd and James Leonhardt (2022), “What’s Not to Like? Negations in Brand Messages Increase Consumer Engagement,” *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 2023(51), 675-694.

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About the Authors

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Dr. Todd Pezzuti’s (PhD – University of California, Irvine) research lies at the intersection of marketing and consumer psychology, particularly in how the linguistic features of marketing communication and culture influence consumer behavior. His areas of expertise include digital and social media marketing, international marketing, and social influence. His research has been published in the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, *Journal of International Marketing*, *Journal of Business Research*, and *Journal of Services Marketing*, among others.

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Dr. James Leonhardt’s (PhD – University of California, Irvine) research interests and expertise are in consumer behavior, specifically cross-cultural consumer information processing using an interdisciplinary, multi-method approach to inform traditional and digital marketing communications strategies, as well as transformative marketing initiatives in areas such as health, sustainability, and public policy. Dr. Leonhardt’s research has been published in leading academic journals, such as the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, and *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, and has been featured in popular outlets, such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *US News*, and *Medscape*. For

his scholarly contributions, Dr. Leonhardt received the Phil & Jennifer Satre Endowed Professorship in Marketing (2023), and he is the recipient of the Dean's Research Professor Award (2021-2023), a three-year award for sustained excellence in research. His research has been supported through several grants and fellowships, most recently the Harold and Muriel Berkman Charitable Foundation and the Ozmen Institute for Global Studies.



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