Proposal for Russell Ackoff Doctoral Student Award
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Advice Taken but not Followed: Vividness, Identifiability and Word-of-Mouth Behavior

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Description of Research:
TITLE:
Advice Taken but not Followed: Vividness, Identifiability and Word-of-Mouth Behavior

The purpose of this research is to investigate how decision makers are influenced by the vividness of word-of-mouth information as well as the identifiability of the source of the information. Previous research shows that people are more affected by vivid than pallid information. For example, people are more influenced by graphic accounts of a serious illness than statistical information on the probability of such an illness. Research also shows that an identifiable victim has a greater impact on sympathy and altruistic behavior than does an unidentifiable victim or statistical victims. This greater altruism for identifiable victims has implications for communication of charity drives, political causes, and other appeals to the public.

Though this 'identifiable victim effect' has been demonstrated in public appeals, it has not been generalized to inter-personal persuasion, in which the persuasive message comes from the victim him/herself rather than from another source. As well, previous research on the 'identifiable victim effect' has primarily focused on how identifiability affects altruism to the victim rather than taking advice from the victim. Our research expands upon the existing literature by providing insight on how identifiability affects advice taking in word-of-mouth behavior. By testing both vividness and identifiability simultaneously in this context, we can better understand their similarities and their differences.

The specific domain of investigation for our research will be websites that provide consumer-generated reviews of products and services. Vividness and identifiability vary naturally across such sites. In terms of vividness, consumers reading review sites sometimes have access to pallid, statistical information, such as summary ratings of the product or service reviewed, as well as vivid, anecdotal testimony. In terms of identifiability, product reviewers can choose to remain anonymous by keeping all personal information private. Alternatively, consumers can reveal their true identity. For example, Amazon.com allows users the option to input their real name instead of a username in their product reviews. Thus, product review sites can provide insight for our research where traditional word-of-mouth research cannot. In traditional word-of-mouth, identifiability of the source of the information is a given, and pallid, statistical information from several word-of-mouth sources is rarely available.

We have already completed one successful experiment for this research. We conducted an experiment in a hypothetical online restaurant review context consisting of a 2 (identifiability) x 2 (vividness) between subjects design. Only participants in the identifiable reviewer conditions saw the profile of a reviewer on the website. Only participants in the vivid review conditions read a negative testimonial by a displeased consumer. Information about the quality of the restaurant was held constant by providing the same average rating across all conditions and by always stating that one reviewer rated the restaurant as being one of the worst restaurants in its category. After reading the restaurant review, participants answered questions about their attitudes, feelings, and behavioral intentions towards the restaurant. Our results provide support for differences between vividness and identifiabilty. Vivid testimonials led to lower judgments of consumers' experiences than did ratings. Although testimonial advice was often taken, it was

not necessarily used. Only when a review came from an identifiable source were subjects motivated to punish the restaurant that was the subject of the negative review.

Though this successful experiment is a promising first step in our research, we still have much work left to obtain a better picture of vividness and identifiability in word-of-mouth behavior. A few lingering questions remain – How does emotion play a role in the differences between vivid information and identifiable sources of word-of-mouth information? Are decision-makers differentially impacted by similar, identifiable others versus dissimilar, identifiable others? Do our results obtain under different levels of severity, valence, and domain of the victim's experience?

To answer these sorts of questions, we will need to run further experiments. I plan on looking at other domains of product review sites, and have consumers make actual purchases in an experiment. In addition, we will approach firms that provide consumer-generated reviews (such as Amazon.com, Zagat.com, Epinion.com, etc.) in the hope of using real-world data to support our predictions. Finally, to disseminate our findings and obtain feedback from the marketing academy on our research, I will present this research at various conferences.