

Highlight facts or appeal to feelings? The psychology of persuading individuals to contribute to a collective goal

March 8 2023, by Marilyn Stone



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Researchers from Fudan University, China Europe International Business School, and Peking University published a new *Journal of Marketing* article that examines how marketers can use different messaging to persuade individuals to contribute to a collective goal. The

study addresses the specific question of the type of message—fact-based vs. affected-based—that is more effective in eliciting participation based on how near the goal is to completion.

The study is authored by Liyin Jin, Yajin Wang, and Ying Zhang.

Firms frequently launch group-buying promotions that offer a discount when a certain number of buyers commit to the deal. Political parties urge millions of voters to rally around a candidate. Organizations ask individuals for donations to collectively reach a financial target.

When campaigns involve efforts from multiple individuals, marketers seek to tailor the message to persuade them to join the [campaign](#). These collective goals require many people to make a one-off contribution, and they can choose to support the goal at any stage of the completion process—while leaving the final outcome in others' hands. Specifically, people who contribute money to these causes have no past interaction with the collective goal and, in most cases, cannot put in more effort to ensure its eventual success.

Marketers often disclose information about the remaining distance to completion when soliciting a contribution in a collective campaign. For example, "\$0.86 million has been raised to meet the target of \$1 million" or "23,000 people have signed a petition that needs 100,000 participants." As the remaining distance to completion changes, the effectiveness of different persuasive messages should change accordingly.

Fact-based vs. affect-based appeals

Seven studies demonstrate that the relative impact of fact-based versus affect-based appeals changes with varying distance to the completion of the collective goal. Jin explains that "We find that when the distance to

the completion of collective goal is large, the path to the end remains uncertain. As a result, people who are deciding whether to contribute to the goal may question if and how the collective goal can be accomplished."

This consideration tends to be thinking-oriented and reasoning-based (e.g., "Is this feasible?" or "What needs to be done?"). Thus, fact-based appeals better match consumers' thinking-oriented psychological state—and are more effective in persuasion.

By comparison, when the collective goal is nearing completion, people tend to base their decision on whether the goal is valuable and worth contributing to. The value assessment usually involves simulating the outcome and imagining the emotional reaction to reaching the goal, a process that relies on feelings and emotions (e.g., "How would I feel about being part of this?").

"Therefore, when the distance to the collective goal completion is small, affect-based appeals match people's feelings-oriented psychological state better and should be more effective in persuasion," says Wang.

The findings in this research advance understanding the effectiveness of persuasive messages in the context of collective goals. Because the distance remaining to completing the goal plays a role in consumers' psychological state, their tendency to follow a persuasive message depends heavily on whether these messages match their psychological state of thinking or feeling. These conditions require marketers to focus on the audience's situational psychological state and match it to the appropriate persuasive message.

Lessons for chief marketing officers

This research is particularly relevant in today's marketplace as social

media and digital platforms play an increasingly central role in campaigns. Zhang notes that "Technology not only enables [real-time](#) tracking and sharing of information about the progress toward the goal in collective campaigns but also makes it possible for marketers to change the content of persuasive messages midway through the campaign to suit the context and to ensure maximum effectiveness."

The findings offer the following key insights for marketers trying to elicit more participation in collective goals:

- The use of fact-based appeals might be more useful early in a collective campaign, but marketers should consider switching to appeals that focus on feelings as the campaign gets closer to the target. For example, when universities ask for donations from alumni to reach a campaign goal, they should consider fact-based messages such as school ranking, educational performance, and information about student and faculty diversity when the fundraising target is still far away. However, they should switch to affect-based appeals and evoke more emotional elaboration as the total amount gets closer to the target.
- Marketers should consider employing an appropriate mix of textual versus [visual communication](#) at different stages of their campaigns. Whereas visual illustrations with text and less feeling-based messages may be effective at an early stage of campaigns, marketers may wish to include more affect-rich visuals to evoke stronger emotions to push the goal over the finish line in the more advanced stages.

More information: Liyin Jin et al, EXPRESS: Give Me the Facts or Make Me Feel: How to Effectively Persuade Consumers to Act on a Collective Goal, *Journal of Marketing* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/00222429231152446](#)

Provided by American Marketing Association

Citation: Highlight facts or appeal to feelings? The psychology of persuading individuals to contribute to a collective goal (2023, March 8) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-03-highlight-facts-appeal-psychology-individuals.html>

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