The Brand Has Two Faces: Examining the Impact of an Accented Spokesperson on Brand Perceptions

Christine M. Bennett, University of Minnesota, USA
Barbara Loken, University of Minnesota, USA

A person’s accent is a persistent reminder of the diverse world in which we live. It signals that we are from different backgrounds, communities and cultures. Many commercials airing in the United States today feature spokespeople with British accents. Brands currently employing this practice include Orbit (gum), Luvs (diapers), Victoria’s Secret (lingerie), Reach (toothbrushes), Aquafina (water) and All-Bran (cereal). In this research, we compare the effects of using a British-accented spokesperson, which for our sample is a differently-accented spokesperson, with the effects of using an American-accented spokesperson, which for our sample is a same-accented spokesperson. We explore this relationship by analyzing brand personality and other brand attribute perceptions, and by implementing the Brand Concept Maps technique (John, Loken, Kim and Monga, 2006) to examine linkages between the salient brand associations that underlie consumer perceptions of the brand.

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Christine Bennett, University of Minnesota, USA
Barbara Loken, University of Minnesota, USA

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

A person’s accent is a persistent reminder of the diverse world in which we live. It signals that we are from different backgrounds, communities and cultures. Many commercials airing in the United States today feature spokespeople with British accents. Brands employing this practice include Orbit (gum), Luvs (diapers), Victoria’s Secret (lingerie), Samsung HDTV, Dyson (vacuum cleaners), Reach (toothbrushes), Aquafina (water) and All-Bran (cereal). This use of accented spokespeople has also been implemented in non-visual mediums such as the use of British accented announcers on Internet radio advertisements for companies such as Vontage broadband telephone company and Launch.com internet radio. Possible reasons for using British accented spokespeople include the notion that the relative uniqueness of the sound of their speech will enhance consumers’ attention toward the advertisement, the belief that British accented speech may bring to mind the stereotypical British nanny or butler that may be thought to be authority figures in childcare and proper home maintenance, the notion that doing so adds an air of refinement and sophistication to the respective brands or the fact that the brands may actually originate from abroad. To date, however, we know very little about the impact an accented spokesperson can have on consumers’ perceptions of the advertised brand.

In this research, we report some initial findings about how a British accented spokesperson influences consumers’ perceptions of the advertised brand. Drawing on the stereotyping literature, findings from the examination of language attitudes and models of belief formation and meaning transfer, we investigate whether and how stereotypes evoked by accented speech impacts brand perceptions.

Across cultures, the standard accent variety (i.e. the accent perceived to be correct) is usually rated high on status and low on personal integrity. Rural accents tend to show the opposite pattern: low on status and high on personal integrity. Ko, Judd and Blair (2006) argue that while social psychologists have traditionally focused on salient visual cues such as race and gender as a basis for categorization, auditory cues such as those provided by the voice may be just as salient in social settings since vocal cues are often the first cues elicited when encountering someone for the first time. These authors argue and find that vocal cues are used to categorize a person’s gender and this category information then leads to gender-stereotypic inferences. Specifically, these researchers find that participants associate more feminine-sounding voices with female-stereotypic attributes for both female and male voices. In addition, female-stereotypic inferences continued to be made even when gender was a salient cue. This research suggests an important link between the voice as an auditory cue and the activation of stereotypic information.

Spoken language identifies the speaker as a member of a specific ethnic or cultural group. Edwards (1999) indicates that listening to a given accent variety can act as a trigger or stimulus that evokes attitudes, prejudices and stereotypes concerning the relevant speech community. The attitudes of the listener toward members of that particular group may be generalized to the speaker (Lambert, Hodgson, Gardner and Fillenbaum, 1960). For example, upon hearing a British accented person, stereotypes concerning the British (i.e. highly educated, proper) may become salient.

In examining the influence of celebrities as sources of persuasion information, McCracken (1989) developed the meaning transfer model which suggests that celebrity endorser effectiveness depends on the cultural associations and meanings associated with the celebrity which are transferred to the product and then to the product user. We suggest that a similar meaning transfer process takes place when consumers are exposed to an accented spokesperson. For example, in the first stage, stereotypes about a speech community or country are formed based on past experiences, societal influences and learning about the community or country. In the second stage, these stereotypes are transferred to the products when accented speakers serve as product endorsers. Finally, these meanings can potentially transfer from product to product user in the final stage. In the present research we concentrate on the first two stages.

Incorporating these streams of research, we hypothesize that hearing an accent will evoke stereotypes of the relevant community (i.e. hearing a British accent activates the stereotype that the British are highly educated, etc.) and that these stereotypes can impact brand perceptions. We compare the effects of using a British-accented spokesperson, which for our sample is a differently-accented spokesperson, with the effects of using an American-accented, which for our sample is a same-accented spokesperson. We explore the impact of accented spokespersons on brand perceptions by analyzing brand personality and other brand attribute perceptions, and by implementing the Brand Concept Maps technique. Brand Concept Maps (BCM) is a technique that allows us to examine linkages between the salient brand associations that underlie consumer brand perceptions (John, Loken, Kim and Monga, 2006).

The BCM Technique can be described in three stages. In the first stage, the elicitation stage, important brand associations are elicited from consumers. In the second stage, consumers create maps to show how brand associations are connected to the brand and to one another. In the final stage, researchers aggregate these individual brand maps to create a consensus brand map. Results from an experiment suggest that different Brand Concept Maps are created when different accents (American vs. British) are featured in a radio commercial. For example, the brand map in the American condition is relatively simple whereas the brand map in the British condition is much more complex with a greater number of associations and interconnections. This suggests that using an accented spokesperson in a commercial can enhance the associations and perceptions that consumers have of a brand, provided that consumers have mostly positive associations of the speech community represented by the selected accent.

In addition, participants had a more favorable overall opinion of the brand in the British condition than did participants in the American condition. Also, there was a marginally significant effect on quality perceptions in that participants in the British condition perceived the brand as higher quality than did participants in the American condition. In addition, participants in the British condition rated the brand as more unique, more expensive (even though no pricing information was provided) and more sophisticated. Participants in the American condition did, however, rate the brand as more “All-American” than did participants in the British condition.
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