

The power of low blows: when attacking communication works

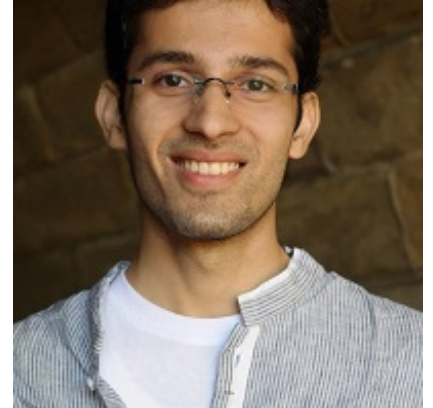
 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2015/02/17/the-power-of-low-blows-when-attacking-communication-works/

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We are delighted to announce **Laya Maheshwari** as the winner of the StockWell Communications Polis Research Prize 2015. The award went to the best research proposal by an LSE post-graduate student on the topic of **'Corporate Reputation, Media and Society'**.

Anthony Silverman, partner at StockWell said:

"Laya's research topic of whether going negative works is a fascinating topic particularly in an election year. Negative campaigning is something that is associated more with the political world than corporate, but it's definitely something that we increasingly battle with."



Laya Maheshwari is an Indian student enrolled in the MSc in Social Policy and Planning program at LSE. His writing has appeared in The Guardian, The LA Review of Books, Vice and Playboy. He is intrigued by situations where emotions and manipulation win out over rationality and reason, which motivated him to pursue this research, the proposal for which you can read below:

The power of low blows: when attacking communication works

In January 2013, Phil Schiller, Senior Vice President of Worldwide Marketing at Apple, was locked in a tense email conversation with the company's ad agency, Media Arts Lab. He ended one particularly curt message with the line: "Something drastic has to change. Fast."

The reason Schiller and Apple's executives had lost their cool was simple. It was an ad by Samsung, starring Hollywood celebrities Paul Rudd and Seth Rogen, part of a campaign that mocked Apple relentlessly. In a separate email to CEO Tim Cook, Schiller suggested terminating the contract with Media Arts Lab and pursuing a new communications strategy, with a new agency.

Apple was feeling the heat. Its stockholders were losing faith. And, as a [Wall Street Journal](#) feature indicated, the world was noticing.

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How does a brand convince consumers to go for its products? How does a candidate make her constituents believe her policies are the best investment of their franchise? One of the many ways is to highlight the features, benefits, service etc. through messaging, and hope the recipients are rational enough to make the right choice. However, in a free marketplace, there are usually multiple providers for any good or service, and the distinctions between them no longer black and white. This is true for cellular networks, political interest groups, fast food chains, electoral candidates, and many other avenues where the consumer has choice.

One tactic several firms and individuals have tried in the past is aimed at not just making the audience buy their product, but hate and/or dismiss the other products. The stakes are high. If you attack your competitor but the message is unclear, mistimed, or unwarranted, then not only is your communication strategy rendered ineffective, but you also have a public relations issue brewing. There may be a crisis in the near future.

Why are firms and parties so willing to take this risk? Perhaps the payoffs make it worthwhile. If a confrontational

communication strategy works, then it improves your performance while simultaneously debilitating your competitors' performance. Moreover, the customers or believers you gain through such moves come attached with a sense of brand loyalty; that is the power of a cult.

Perhaps that is why Pepsi has tried this strategy with Coca-Cola (evidence [here](#)) and Coca-Cola has never been afraid of shooting back (like [this](#)). Apple itself has tried mocking Microsoft's PCs, most famously with the "Get a Mac" campaign ([case in point](#)). There is no shortage of political anecdotes where one candidate has emerged successful partly, or primarily, by casting doubt on her opponent.

My research will delve into the usage of negativity in strategic communication, the nuances to making it work, and how to best respond to it. I shall look upon successful—and unsuccessful—case studies, and attempt to spot trends and similarities.

I do not claim I shall find a patentable magic recipe for The Right Way To Mock Your Opponent. But I believe I can:

1. Unearth findings regarding tried-and-tested levels of hostility, courtesy, irreverence, and sincerity in order to achieve maximum impact.
2. Delineate what mistakes can be predicted and, thus, should be avoided.
3. Identify strategies employed by firms and parties at the receiving end of attacking communication. How did they tackle the glare?
4. Find limitations of negative communication: does it only work with important or unimportant attributes? Is binary competition a prerequisite?

This topic feeds into the subjects of reputation management, corporate or individual narratives, and cohesive brand communication; it requires their confluence. It would draw on literature and insights from brand management, political science, social psychology, communication, and other fields. A substantial body of scholarship in political science, for example, shows how negative campaigning by politicians can lead to more votes. (Lau and Pomper, 2002; Mayer, 1996) However, similarly rigorous analysis in the corporate world, with corporate examples, is missing.

By definition, such battles occur on the public stage, in full view of society, and rely on the media not just to initiate the discussion but also act as the venue where the victor is eventually decided. In some cases, such as political battles, the back-and-forth is so important it is part of the news cycle and vital to its circulation. Thus, the subject of this study falls squarely within the ambit of Polis. The think tank's reputation, along with its network of academics and industry professionals, would be integral to the research's lift-off. There are very few other places where such a study would even be possible, let alone encouraged.

I hope these details are sufficient to underline the real-world importance of this study, and present my proposal convincingly.

If not, would my chances have improved if I had spent 1000 words disparaging the other submissions for this competition instead?

Research proposal by Laya Maheshwari [@lazygarfield](#)

You can see details of last year's winner and the study of corporate apologies [here](#)

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