

How audiences come to embrace and support new products, ideas or politicians



Resonance only occurs when people reach an emotional or rational identification with what (or who) is being sold, writes [Simona Giorgi](#).

During the U.S. presidential campaign of 2016, the media greatly downplayed the chances of Donald Trump's electoral success, because many of this candidate's proposals seemed unfeasible, or improbable. What political pundits had overlooked, however, was the power of emotions.

More recently, in the UK, Theresa May's supposed "inability" to show emotion to the public proved fatal in the elections, and her political career. In contrast, Jeremy Corbyn played up the power of emotions by hugging people and presenting himself as authentic, natural, and at ease across social strata. These examples suggest that emotions are essential to political success in these uncertain times, when people need hope and desire change, but would these lessons translate well to the business realm?

In a [recent article](#), I argue that emotions are important for business as well. For example, companies such as Apple, or Google, have realised that legitimate products or services are not sufficient for thriving in highly competitive marketplaces: customers need to love the products and become enthusiastic fans that post glowing reviews online, tweet about the products' features, and post on Instagram beautiful pictures of their purchases. Every company would like its customers to become its (free) public relations team, but can the emotion be sparked?

I point to the importance of rituals – that is, dramatic cultural performances that create an emotional state – in fostering customers' identification with a product or a company that gives meaning beyond its mere functionalities. Rituals are effective at fostering identification because they are carriers of values, beliefs, desires, and aspirations that the participating actors can 'experience' and 'feel' and not simply learn.

For example, by providing detailed descriptions of the rituals of setting a Thanksgiving table or vacuuming, Martha Stewart fostered audiences' identification with her as a domestic goddess and elicited emotions about an aspirational lifestyle that resonated across social strata. Similarly, dining rituals at Oxford and Cambridge aim at fostering students' identification with the British elite, its traditions, and its values. Rituals matter even in business settings. In the business sphere, Apple's descriptions of the iPhone as an object of beauty (even more than function) hint at aspirations of a perfect, beautiful, and simplified world that are geared at creating customers' emotional attachment, which spills into a sense of pride tied to product ownership and display.

Emotions are important, but they are not the only route to product success. An alternative pathway to resonating with one's audience is cognitive, and derives from an alignment with people's existing understandings and beliefs. I argue that the main mechanism that leads a frame to achieve cognitive resonance is familiarity, that is, the display of elements that are known or close to the intended audience.

As a mechanism, familiarity underpins the achievement of resonance because it establishes connections between a novel and an established domain: in other words, it makes familiar the unfamiliar. The value of familiarity is that it provides the audience with the means for quickly understanding the value or application of the object of framing. At the same time, the value of familiarity extends beyond the mere comprehension of a novel product or event because it transposes a sense of value and appreciation associated with the known domain.

For example, sushi really took off in the Western world when it leveraged familiar ingredients such as rice, avocado, and cucumber that aligned with consumers' existing tastes and understandings. Many firms, as well as professionals, rely on a mix of familiar and unfamiliar elements that allow them to spark customers' interests, and at the same time, ensure a sought-after feeling of familiarity.

For instance, architects often win client engagements by blending established materials with novel designs. Even in the world of art, new market categories, such as modern Indian art, became established through the work of art critics and dealers that emphasised similarities with well-established art categories, such as impressionism.

In sum, in this paper, I show two main routes for connecting with an audience, one based on an appeal to the audience cognition – its interpretive orientations, beliefs and understandings – and one based on an appeal to the audience emotions – its feelings, passions, and desires. Only a few frames can strike a chord with an intended recipient, and resonance occurs only when the audience experiences a strong reaction to a frame, either at the cognitive or emotional level. Challenges along the way abound, making it difficult to predict *ex ante* how a new product (or political candidate) will really fare. This analysis of resonance offers a starting point for understanding how audiences come to embrace and support new ideas, products, or people. It has sketched two pathways to resonance, cognitive and emotional, and brought attention to the overlooked power of two mechanisms – familiarity and emotional identification – in ‘lighting up’ audiences beyond mere considerations of interest.

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About the author



Simona Giorgi – Boston College

Simona Giorgi is an Assistant Professor of Management and Organization at the Carroll School of Management at Boston College. Her research examines culture, evaluations, framing, and change in the context of financial markets, food movements, environmental non-profits, the Catholic Church, and the automobile industry. She received her Ph.D. from the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University.