

**Affective responses to direct mail messages: The effect of gratitude and obligation**

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In today's increasingly competitive global economy, wine producers use significant resources to identify their customers and communicate with them. There has long been recognition in the wine business that developing ongoing relationships with customers can lead to brand loyalty (Dodd, 1999). Fountain, Fish and Charters (2008) state that making a connection with customers is a way to build brand loyalty. Likewise, Nowak and Newton (2008) find that trust and quality influence perceptions of brand equity. One way to attract and retain customers is through remotely delivered marketing messages (direct mail). Thomas (2007) points out that direct mail needs to be strategic, relying on a careful plan to achieve long-term goals of building brand loyalty. Thus, direct marketing is about focused, well planned communication with targeted customers. The challenge then becomes determining the most effective ways to craft these messages.

## Literature Review

The outcome of previous research on the nature and quality of communication between a business and its customers has been a growing recognition that consumer attitudes and purchasing behaviors are formed not merely through cognition but also through affective processing. Previous studies identified the ability of advertising to generate affective responses strong enough to influence consumer behavior and brand perception (see Batra and Ray, 1986; Edell and Burke, 1987). Defining affect as “emotions, moods, feelings, and drives,” Batra and Ray (1986, p. 235) provided a comprehensive review of affective typologies. However, certain types of affective responses have been overlooked. One of the more interesting gaps in terms of communication messages centers on gratitude and obligation, key components of reciprocity theory.

This study explores affective facets of consumer responses to direct mail messages. We present a theoretical framework to investigate the dimensions of two affective responses that have been overlooked in literature – gratitude and obligation.

### Theoretical Background: Reciprocity

Alvin Gouldner (1960), the author of the original reciprocity theory, claimed that for a social system to be stable, there must always be some mutual exchange of benefits. People feel obligated to reciprocate positive behavior through two conditions that make the reciprocity rule work: gratitude and obligation. That is, beneficiaries of favors feel indebted to repay benefits due to a compliance with social norms resulting from a state of obligation. Alternatively, a beneficiary may reciprocate out of a desire to express gratitude.

We suggest that gratitude and obligation are important dimensions of wine consumer behavior. For example, winery visitors may feel appreciation (gratitude) to the personnel for services provided at wineries. On the other hand, visitors may feel pressure (obligation) to make a purchase in return for services received.

Most previous research on the reciprocity norm focused on the relationship between receiving a favor and subsequent compliance with a request from the favor-giver. Although previous studies were conducted in face-to-face interaction settings, we suggest that direct mail messages can stimulate gratitude and obligation affective responses to the extent that these feelings may influence consumer behavior. In the current research, we explore whether gratitude-inducing and obligation-inducing direct mail messages will be strong enough to influence consumer purchasing behavior.

Because gratitude and obligation were found to function independently for reciprocal behavior (Kolyesnikova, Dodd, and Laverie, 2007; Watkins, Scheer, Ovnicek, and Kolts, 2006), we suggest that gratitude and obligation messages will evoke different consumer responses. Specifically, because gratitude is usually considered a positive desirable state associated with contentment, pride and happiness (McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, and Larson, 2001), we hypothesize that:

**Hypothesis:** *Gratitude-inducing messages will have a stronger effect on consumer purchase intent than will obligation-inducing messages.*

## Method

### Sample

A total of 124 subjects were recruited to participate in the study. Because the experiment was conducted in two sessions, two groups of participants were recruited. The first group consisted of 64 former and current students of a wine appreciation class. The expectation was that the socio-demographic background of this group would be similar to the profile of a wine consumer in general

– middle-aged, educated, and with higher incomes (Chaney, 2001; Dodd and Bigotte, 1997). The second group consisted of 60 undergraduate students (seniors) enrolled in a hospitality management class at a large southwestern U. S. university. Four incomplete questionnaires were discarded, yielding a final sample size of 120 participants. The experiment employed a within-subjects repeated measures design.

### Stimulus Materials

For our study, we used a scenario of a small winery sending direct mail (follow-up postcards) to tasting room visitors. For stimulus materials copy pretest, 62 people whose demographic characteristics were similar to the study participants were recruited. None of the individuals from the copy pretest was included in the formal experiment. Participants in the copy pretest viewed the textual portion of a total of 18 messages. The subjects rated each message in terms of feelings of either gratitude or obligation. Because the terms *gratitude* and *obligation* may be ambiguous, an explanation of the feelings was included – *feel thankful (appreciated)* and *feel obliged (like I owe)*, respectively.

Based on the means and standard deviations, two messages were determined to be most evocative of gratitude and two most evocative of obligation<sup>1</sup>. To conceal the purpose of the experiment, two control postcards were employed. These cards did not load strongly on either of the two factors in the copy pretest and were further edited to express neither gratitude nor obligation.

The stimulus materials were graphically designed to appear as typical direct mail postcards. A total of six postcards were used in the formal study (i.e., two gratitude-inducing, two obligation-inducing, and two neutral controls). All six postcards looked identical, varying only in the text message. For precision control, all factors, such as card size, design, graphics, font style, font size, were held constant across all postcards.

### Procedures

The experiment was administered in a large conference room of a business building. As the participants arrived at the facility, they were given random seating assignments in order to minimize the risk of interaction between participants who may have been acquainted. The study was introduced to participants as a market pretest of a communication campaign. Participants were instructed as follows:

*Please imagine that you have visited a winery in the past. Today in your mailbox, you received a postcard from that winery. Your task is to examine the message on the postcard and answer a series of questions after each card. As you look at the postcard, please remember, we are interested in your evaluation of the **message** in the postcard, not the wine shown or the graphic design of the postcard.*

For the presentation purposes, the postcards and immediate measures were placed in binders. Participants were instructed to evaluate one card at a time in the order they were placed in the binder. The binder ended with a one-page questionnaire collecting demographic data.

Each binder contained six postcards. All the participants were exposed to all six cards, but the order of the postcards in the binders was systematically varied using the Latin square method for a total of

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<sup>1</sup> *Example of gratitude-inducing message:* “We appreciate a good neighbor, a good friend, and, of course, a good wine. At our winery, we truly appreciate good customers like you. Come by anytime. For you, our door is always open.” *Example of obligation-inducing message:* “We count on you to recognize our hard work. We press the best grapes to make our wines. Now we press ourselves to get them ready. The time is ripe. Where are you?”

sixteen different rotations. This enabled the estimation of the main effect of each message without possible confounding interactions due to the sequence of exposure.

### Measures

After viewing each postcard, the participants responded to the key measure of interest - purchase intent (PI). In addition, previous consumer attitude studies (Bruner, Hensel, and James, 2005) guided the design of a new affective response attitude toward the ad scale. The new instrument measured the degree of gratitude and obligation feelings experienced by participants when viewing a direct mail message.

**Purchase intent.** Purchase intent (PI) was measured with three items: (a) likelihood of purchasing, with ratings on an 11-point scale response from 0 (*very unlikely*) to 10 (*very likely*); (b) the number of bottles of wine the respondent would purchase; and (c) the dollar amount the respondent would spend on the purchase. Because the three items measured the PI from different perspectives, the ratings on the items could not be grouped together and averaged. Data analysis then included the investigation of each PI measure separately.

**Attitude toward the direct mail message (gratitude and obligation).** To determine whether the respondents made the cognitive distinction between the different types of the manipulated messages, we embedded attitude toward the message ( $A_{ms}$ ) measurement. The instruction statement, *This postcard made me feel*, was followed by sixteen items on an 11-point Likert-type scale, anchored between 0 (*not at all*) and 10 (*completely*). The structure of the measurement was adapted from the affective response to ad scale originally developed as the Reaction Profile for TV Commercials by Wells, Leavitt, and McConville (1971).

### Preliminary Analyses

#### Data Reduction

To determine the underlying structures of the newly developed  $A_{ms}$  scale, the sixteen items were subjected to a principal component analysis with varimax rotation. An examination of factor loadings, eigenvalues greater than one, and the scree plot suggested two factors, labeled *gratitude* and *obligation*. The two factors accounted for 80.25% of the total variance (42.07% and 38.18%, respectively). Of the sixteen items entered in the analysis, no single item loaded on both factors. The lowest loading was .81.

The gratitude factor showed high loadings on eight items which measured positive affective responses to messages in the postcards, namely *grateful*, *recognized*, *thankful*, *valued*, *acknowledged*, *positive*, *pleased*, and *honored*. The obligation factor was composed of the remaining eight items which measured negative affective responses to messages in the postcards, namely *uncomfortable*, *obligated*, *indebted*, *reluctant*, *guilty*, *pressured*, *irritated*, and *owing*.

Correlation analysis revealed that the items on each factor showed a high degree of internal consistency indicating that the eight items on each factor were measuring a single, similar construct (gratitude  $\alpha = .95$ ; obligation  $\alpha = .93$ ). Scores for the items that loaded highly on a given factor were averaged.

#### Manipulation Check

Manipulation check indicated that gratitude-inducing messages were perceived significantly higher on the gratitude items on the  $A_{ms}$  scale ( $M = 7.39$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ) than the obligation-inducing messages ( $M = 2.63$ ,  $SD = 1.92$ ) and the control messages ( $M = 3.16$ ,  $SD = 2.12$ ),  $F(2, 238) = 313.03$ ,  $p < .001$ . Likewise, the obligation-inducing messages were perceived significantly higher on the obligation

items on the  $A_{ms}$  scale ( $M = 5.46$ ,  $SD = 2.04$ ) than the gratitude-inducing messages ( $M = 1.29$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ) and the control messages ( $M = 1.31$ ,  $SD = 1.39$ ),  $F(2, 238) = 326.89$ ,  $p < .001$ .

## Results

### Description of the Sample

Females comprised just over 50% of the sample; and 49.2% were males. The average age of the participants in the first group was 45 years old; more than 40% of the participants reported their annual household income to exceed \$80,000; and only one-fourth of the group did not hold a college degree. Participants in the second group were between ages 19 and 27; more than one-third (34.6%) in this group reported their annual income to be lower than \$20,000; and 91.2% in this group had a level of college education but no degree.

### Hypothesis Testing

Our hypothesis predicted that gratitude messages would have a stronger influence on customer purchase intent than would obligation messages. The hypothesis was supported. The results were similar across the three measurements of PI. Specifically, a significant main effect was found for the message type on likelihood of purchasing,  $F(2, 232) = 243.78$ ,  $p < .001$ ; on the number of wine bottles likely to be purchased,  $F(2, 232) = 101.41$ ,  $p < .001$ ; and on the dollar amount likely to be spent at the winery,  $F(2, 232) = 88.84$ ,  $p < .001$ . Post-hoc tests revealed that the mean scores of gratitude, obligation, and control messages were significantly different across all three measurement of PI, with gratitude consistently yielding more positive scores, followed by the control and then obligation (see Figure 1).

### Discussion

Considering that most wineries in the U. S. are relatively small businesses that rely on tasting room sales and experiences to build customer relationships (Barclay, 2006), the ability to maximize the effectiveness of any marketing opportunity is critical. Strategically crafted direct mail communication is one opportunity.

The support for our hypothesis suggests that wine consumers are more willing to make a purchase, buy more bottles of wine, and spend more money in response to gratitude messages. Obligation-inducing messages were the least motivating for purchasing. Our findings provide strong empirical support for the use of gratitude-inducing messages targeted at consumer behavior. On the contrary, consumers who feel obligated are less likely to make a purchase than grateful consumers.

The use of control messages in this study revealed another interesting insight into the value of targeted messages. Conventional marketing wisdom posits that a negative message is more effective than a neutral message; the theory being that to leave consumers with a negative impression is better than leaving no impression at all (see Brown, Homer, and Inman, 1998). Contrary to this position, our findings suggest that neutrally worded messages in fact have the capacity to generate higher levels of purchase intent than messages that pressure the consumer.

### Implications

Consumers in this study appear to incorporate affective responses in their attitudes toward direct mail messages and their purchasing intentions. It seems reasonable then for marketing decision-makers to deliberate on the influence of gratitude and obligation on winery visitors' purchasing decisions not only at the cash register but also post purchase. Because feelings of gratitude appear to exert a significant positive influence on buying intentions, the incorporation of gratitude-inducing messages into direct mail interactions with customers deserves serious consideration. Moreover, any use of obligation-inducing messages should be carefully scrutinized. Although creating a sense of obligation may have a short-term impact on sales, obligation may also

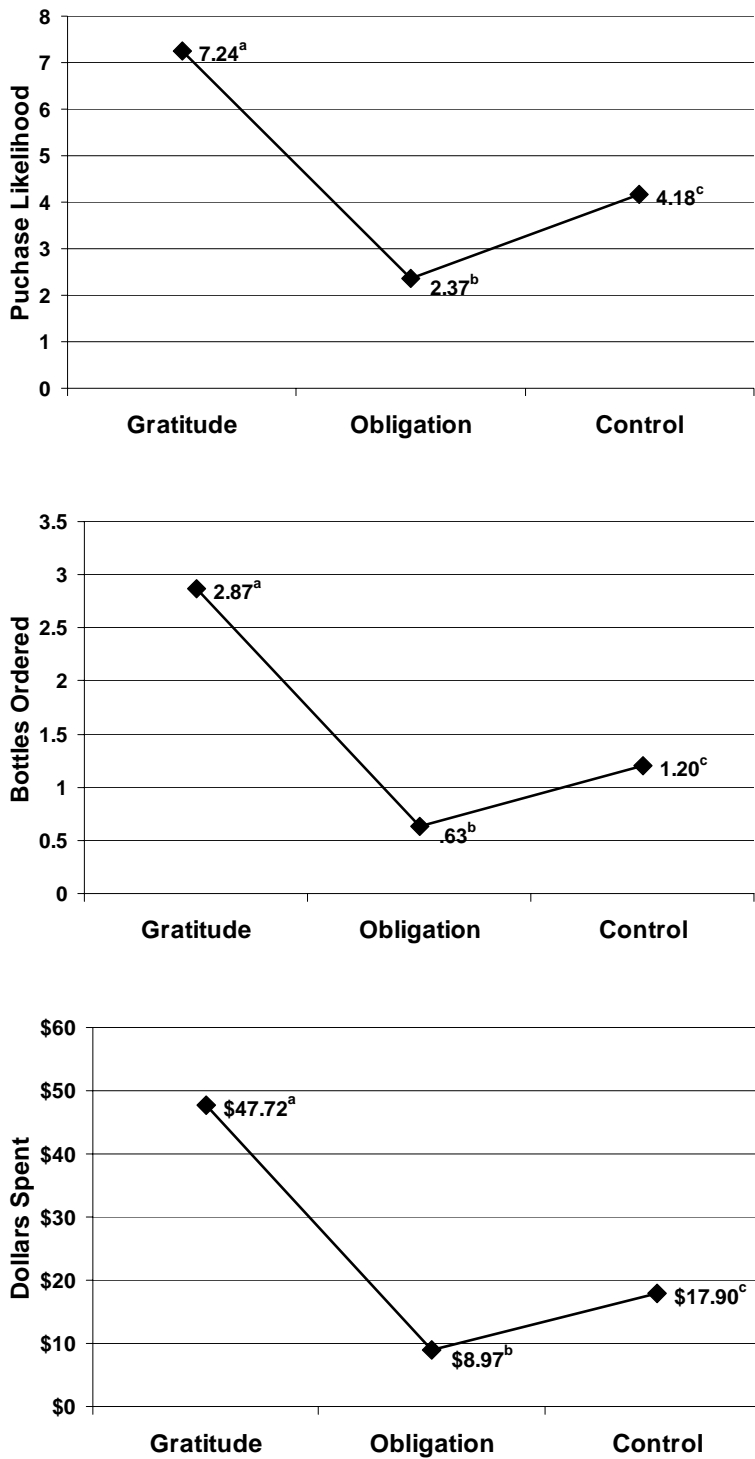
create customer resistance to a long-term relationship with the company. Where the message deviates from gratitude or other positive affective response, it would be better for messages to err on the side of neutrality than to cross over to obligation.

This research opens new ways of utilizing emotional content in direct mail messages. For the academy, this research signals the need to explore in greater depth the persuasive capacity of different communication media. For the business practitioner, the results of this study serve as a road map on producing more effective direct mail messages for customers.

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Figure 1  
Mean Responses to Purchase Intent Measurements



Note. Means with different superscripts differ significantly at  $p < .05$  by Tukey post-hoc tests