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# Summary Brief

## The Pitfalls of Publicizing Ethics Research

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*What happens to our research once it hits the popular media? Do marketers know how to promote our research in a way that is understandable and complete, while still capturing an audience? This case study follows the dissemination of the results of a consumer ethics study via a single press release, along with the resulting media coverage, interviews and audience comments. Perhaps in their quest for a touch of controversy, the story picked up by the popular press was not the one intended by the authors. If getting the public story right is important, marketing academics need to spend as much time carefully crafting their press releases as they do writing journal manuscripts – they may not be able to rely on the ethics of media sub-editors who choose controversial headlines.*

### Introduction

One of the metrics used to promote marketing academics is the impact of our research. Measuring impact is an inexact science, but partly results from how well publicised our research is through the popular media, and how well the research is integrated into education and managerial practice. Academics can count column inches in newspapers, the number of radio and television interviews (or air time), and online articles featured on the Internet. The university to which the lead author belongs has a strong and effective media unit that helps publicise research by using targeted press releases.

### The Study

The research that was publicised in this case is a ten-year study on consumer ethics that has been accepted for publication in a late 2010 issue of the *Journal of Services Marketing*. The study involved over 3700 respondents in ten countries between 1997 and 2007. Respondents were asked to rate the acceptability or unacceptability of 14 consumer behaviours, ranging from illegal to legal (but perhaps questionable). An example of an illegal behaviour was of an anonymous consumer who filed a false insurance claim after a fire at their house – i.e. they claimed for CDs they never owned. An example of a legal but perhaps questionable behaviour was of a consumer who told a retailer of a cheaper price for a television (in order to take advantage of price matching) without ever checking the alternate retailer.

Overall, the study found that consumers rated four of the fourteen questionable consumer actions acceptable. Illegal activities were mostly viewed as unethical, while some legal actions that were against company policy were viewed less harshly. Differences across continents emerged, with Europeans being the least critical, while Asians and Africans shared duties as

most critical of consumer actions. Over time, consumers have become less tolerant of questionable behaviours. The manuscript concluded that business cannot always trust their customers to do the right thing, and so they need to design service processes – especially self-service technologies – with this in mind.

### The Press Release

Writing the press release was an iterative process undertaken by the lead author and the university media officer. The media officer read the accepted manuscript, constructed the first draft of the release and provided recommendations. For example, the officer indicated that the results listed in the journal manuscript were too much for one press release, and she advised breaking the study into two or three documents, to be released over time. In the first press release, she advised to concentrate on the results from Australia – the home country of the lead author – and leave the country comparisons for future media releases.

### Newswires

Shortly after the press release was made public, the document was picked up by one of the bigger newswire services. The journalist who wrote the initial newswire story chose a controversial (and incorrect) slant to the study. Specifically, they depicted the research as a slide in the ethics of young consumers – which then morphed into an attack on Generation Y. The headline was “Young Aussie consumers have loose ethics” with *have loose ethics* in quotation marks. Nowhere in the press release contained the words “have loose ethics”.

The sub-heading revealed that the researchers (us) blamed technology, and that the ethics of these youngsters were actually getting worse. In reality the data revealed the opposite – younger consumers were harsher critics of these questionable behaviours in 2007 than in 1997. This newswire story set off an avalanche of me-too articles. Of the 15 newspapers that picked up the story, 14 of them used the “loose ethics” words in the headline. For the ten online news providers who ran the story, all ten used the “loose ethics” quote, and depicted a slide in the ethics of the young. Only the reports resulting from radio interviews showed a more balanced coverage – and that is largely because the lead author was able to correct and define the issues within the opening few sentences of the interview.

### Analysing the Comments

Immediately after the first major media company ran the story on their website, reader comments started to flow in. The first reader comment was posted three minutes after the article

became available online, and over the following four hours and 52 minutes, 112 additional comments followed. The comments were analysed for content, and have been categorised into the following seven groups.

**Constructively criticise** [N=35] – almost 31% of the comments offered some constructive argument surrounding the issue. These readers may not have agreed with the results, but they generally focussed on the issue, and sometimes related their own experiences on the topic. Some offered alternative implications for the results, which were included in the journal manuscript, but because of space, did not make it into the press release.

**Attack the research** [N=13] – these comments focussed on the accuracy of the research and the research methods used. A typical quote was “*All I can say is if this survey has been going for 10 years the data is well out of date and irrelevant now*”. Most of these comments seemed to come because the reader was either not given complete information, or they are unaware of the constraints and applications of marketing research. These readers displayed a certain level of anger at the methods used or the conclusions resulting from the data collection.

**Attack the researcher** [N=6] – another stream of comments focussed squarely on attacking the researcher instead of the research. These comments still had the element of anger noticed previously, but were more personal in nature.

**Proves our point** [N=20] – this interesting group seemed to justify the need for the research by admitting to doing things they know are wrong, or trying to justify and rationalise their actions.

**Comment on comments** [N=10] – as would be expected in an online message forum, some of the later readers commented on the earlier readers’ comments directly instead of referring to the research. This banter is mostly welcome if it focuses on the issues, but it can occasionally get personal. Generating debate and discussion is one useful outcome of promoting our research, even though it may occasionally get out of control.

**Blame it on the newswire** [N=27] – this significant group of readers vented their frustrations via their comments, but it seems their anger was contributed – at least in part – by the controversial slant given by the original newswire feed article. Most of the comments focussed on the unfairness of attacking younger people, at the exclusion of other consumers. Most of these people would likely have been placated by relaying the facts instead of pushing controversy.

**Critical readers** [N=2] – the final group we call critical readers because they are the only ones who seem to acknowledge there might be a difference between what is written, and what is broadcast.

Almost a quarter of those who commented were angry at the outcomes of the research, but this was largely due to the bias provided by the first newswire story. Only two readers out of 113 showed the critical thinking skills required to navigate media coverage of a topic.

## **Not Discussed**

One of the interesting outcomes of this publicity was that not one of the newspaper stories, or any of the online articles picked up on the gender differences mentioned on the third last paragraph of the press release. The quote we included was “For every one of the 14 scenarios we investigated, women were more critical of the questionable behaviour than men.” The media officer at the lead author’s university cautioned us about this, and told us that a

statement like that might derail our whole study and turn it into another male/female conflict. Since we could justify the debate with our data, we went ahead and included the statement. However, because it was not picked up by the newswire service, it went unnoticed except for a handful of radio interviewers who asked relevant questions.

## **Conclusions**

There are lessons to be learned from this case, especially for early career academics who are trying to promote their research to a wider audience using press releases. First, be prepared to discuss research other than your own if the journalists and audience don’t find yours interesting enough. If the journalist cannot find enough controversy, they may conclude your research is not worth broadcasting. Second, write the press release very carefully, and take advice from more experienced academics and public relations specialists. In an effort to be transparent with our press release, we included the fact we surveyed young consumers, and not all age ranges. We did this so as to better compare consumers across countries – as ethics can change over time, but this academic point was lost in the debate. Generation Y turned out to be the defining hook that the journalists were looking for.

The third lesson is that the first major article that is published is the most important. Almost all subsequent newspaper and online articles used the same headings and thrust of the initial newswire feed. Busy journalists may not be critical enough in what they publish, and stories can take on a life of their own once released.

Fourth, interviews – such as live radio shows – where you can calmly present your research are a good way to level the playing field, and to disseminate your side of the story. Be well prepared however, and have your facts at hand and your message clear.

The fifth lesson is that we need to better equip our students to critically evaluate the information they receive – not just from the media, but from academics as well. Some are already doing this, but the opportunities for messages to be derailed are becoming more frequent, and this skill will become increasingly valuable.

Last, and perhaps most importantly, this case should serve as a reminder to academics to find the original source material when citing and referring to the works of others. The slants and biases provided by subsequent authors can dilute or alter the message. Retrieving and reading the original material is not only best practice, but necessary.

Media releases are a useful way of publicizing academic research, and improving the impact of research. This case study of promoting consumer ethics research ironically points the finger at the questionable ethics of journalists who take the story in a more controversial direction, and those who re-run stories without investigating further. Marketing academics (in this case our research team) are not blameless. Hindsight would have helped us write a tighter press release. The resulting attack on the customers of our university (Generation Y) was unfair and unwarranted given the results of our data.

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