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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5bw31074>

Journal

Academy of Management Journal, 43(1)

ISSN

0001-4273

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Publication Date

2000-02-01

DOI

10.2307/1556387

Peer reviewed

HOW THE PACKAGING OF DECISION EXPLANATIONS AFFECTS PERCEPTIONS OF TRUSTWORTHINESS

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We used an experimental vignette to examine how two aspects of a decision explanation's packaging—its language and labeling of the decision process—affected perceptions of a decision maker's competency-based trustworthiness. These perceptions were higher when either easy-to-understand language or a legitimating decision process label was present than when both hard-to-understand language and no decision process label were present. These findings suggest that peripheral cues related to decision explanations' packaging may play an important role in improving perceptions of trustworthiness.

A growing amount of psychological research suggests that the way people explain decision outcomes affects the way audiences perceive decision processes and decision makers (see Whitener, Brodt, Korsgaard, and Werner [1998] for a review). In many professional contexts, perceptions of decision makers' ability to competently make decisions in a given organizational domain—that is, perceptions of their competency-based trustworthiness—are of particular importance. Such ability has been theorized to be a primary component of a person's overall trustworthiness (see Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman [1995] for a review). In addition, perceptions of competency-based trustworthiness are suggested to be primary antecedents of the following: interparty trust, which Mayer and colleagues defined as "the willingness of one party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party" (1995: 712); the acceptance of decision outcomes (Lind, Kulik, Ambrose, & de Vera Park, 1993); supportive behavior on behalf of the decision maker (Konovsky & Pugh, 1994); and job satisfaction and commitment to the decision maker's organization (Schaubroeck, May, & Brown, 1994).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

In light of these important effects of decision explanations on perceptions of trustworthiness, a

significant amount of research in the area of procedural justice (Lind & Tyler, 1988) has examined what types of decision explanations are most effective in improving perceptions of trustworthiness. This research has shown that decision explanations that audiences perceive as "adequate" may improve their perceptions that both the decision process and the decision maker are trustworthy (Bies, Shapiro, & Cummings, 1988; Shapiro, 1991). Further, recent research suggests that the content of explanations (that is, detailed information about the decision process) is most important to improving the adequacy and acceptability of an explanation. For example, Shapiro, Buttner, and Bruce (1994) found that specific and detailed information about the rationale for a hiring decision was more important for increasing the perceived adequacy of a verbal explanation than the interpersonal sensitivity of the explanation's delivery. Similarly, in studies where adequacy of explanations was intentionally manipulated, explanations labeled "adequate" typically contained more information about the logic and fairness of the decision process than did explanations labeled "inadequate," and the former were more effective in eliciting perceptions of the trustworthiness and fairness of the decision maker and his or her organization (Bies et al., 1988). This research suggests that the logical rationale or information content of a decision explanation may be important in determining its adequacy.

None of this research on procedural justice, however, has directly examined the presentation or packaging (the labeling and language) of written decision explanations as a predictor of their adequacy. Yet research outside of the procedural justice literature suggests that factors related to the

We wish to thank Sythan Voun and Bob Drazin for their assistance in completing this publication. We also wish to thank Greg Northcraft and our anonymous *AMJ* reviewers for their insight and direction.

packaging of explanations affect audience perceptions of those explanations and their "senders." Many of these factors appear to have symbolic—rather than practical—meaning and seem to affect perceptions of the expertness and competency of a decision maker.

For example, research on impression management (Tedeschi, 1981) suggests that a legitimating label for a controversial or unethical act may improve perceptions of the transgressor's credibility and legitimacy by implying that he or she used normative and widely used guidelines for appropriate behavior in carrying out the act and in justifying it (Elsbach & Sutton, 1992). Similarly, in the area of communications research, several studies suggest that the sophistication of the language used in decision explanations may affect perceptions of the decision maker by signaling his or her abilities and motivation (Thompson, Brown, & Furgason, 1981). Thus, although the presentation of decision explanations has received limited attention in frameworks of procedural justice, recent research in impression management and communications studies suggests that such explanation packaging may signal a decision maker's abilities and motivations and thus may affect both perceptions of her or his trustworthiness and acceptance of the decision outcome. In the following sections, we develop three hypotheses about the relationship between the packaging of decision explanations and perceptions of a decision maker's competency-based trustworthiness.

Understandability of the Language of a Decision Explanation

We define the understandability of decision explanation language as the ease or difficulty with which the logic or rationale for a decision can be construed from the language used to communicate that logic. A decision maker's choice of language may send important signals about him or her. In particular, psychological research on the symbolic management of organizations (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978) has suggested that the understandability of the language used to explain a decision may be viewed symbolically as evidence of the decision maker's ability and motivation to communicate the decision process. For example, audiences may believe that a difficult-to-understand explanation means the decision maker is intentionally obfuscating the decision process in order to make it difficult to refute (Browning & Folger, 1994). Elsbach, Sutton, and Principe (1998) showed that patients believed hospitals used obfuscation tactics like complex complaint-handling systems and hard-to-read

bills to signal that they were highly bureaucratic organizations and that patient challenges to bills would be futile.

Similarly, in research on the use of professional jargon in evaluations and reports in education, recommendations for curriculum revisions presented in jargon-laden language led to significantly lower ratings of evaluators than did recommendations written in jargon-free language. Both expert and nonexpert audiences rated evaluator believability and logicity lower when they encountered jargon (Thompson et al., 1981).

Finally, in the area of speech and communication studies, researchers have shown that speech styles contain information about a speaker's social status and competence (Scherer & Giles, 1979). In general, this research suggests that the more familiar the speech style (for a given audience), the more positive the evaluations of the speaker. Because familiar speech is often more easily understood, it seems probable that understandable language also leads to favorable evaluations of speakers, including evaluations of their competence and competency-based trustworthiness. Recent reviews of language comprehension research support this notion by providing evidence that sentence processing involves integration of word and syntax meanings with contextual factors, such as preconceptions about the status of a speaker who uses familiar language, that influence a reader's comprehension (Carpenter, Miyake, & Just, 1995).

Together, these findings suggest that explanations presented in hard-to-understand language may lead to less positive evaluations of a decision maker than explanations presented in easy-to-understand language. In particular, easy-to-understand language may improve perceptions of competency-based trustworthiness. In view of these findings, we offer the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1. Decision explanations that are presented in easy-to-understand language will lead to higher evaluations of the competency-based trustworthiness of a decision maker than decision explanations that are presented in hard-to-understand language.

Legitimizing Labels for Decision Processes

We define legitimating labels as labels that define a decision process as normative and acceptable to constituencies important to the decision maker. This definition fits a theoretical perspective suggesting that legitimacy is socially and locally constructed (versus objectively and globally constructed) in the minds of key audiences (Suchman,

1995). Impression management theorists have widely studied how the legitimacy of explanations affects perceptions of the explanation givers (cf. Tedeschi, 1981). For example, recent research on accounts of organizational controversies suggests that, if organizational spokespersons refer to legitimate processes and structures in justifying illegal or unethical organizational actions, they may improve perceptions of organizational legitimacy by focusing attention on the use of widely accepted practices in carrying out the controversial act (Elsbach, 1994).

In interpersonal contexts, impression management research has shown that individuals can maintain images of competency-based trustworthiness by adhering to the norms and legitimate requirements of their roles (Mintzberg, 1973), even when the goals or outcomes of their actions are negative (Elsbach & Sutton, 1992). In this respect, Elsbach and Sutton (1992) found that members of two radical organizations (Earth First! and ACT UP) were able to gain legitimacy for themselves and their organizations by carrying out illegitimate protest acts, such as blocking logging roads, while following legitimated normative procedures like police guidelines for nonviolent protest. By signaling that they used legitimate procedures in carrying out their protests, these individuals improved their legitimacy with key audiences (environmental stewardship supporters), even though many others considered outcomes of their protests illegitimate.

Similarly, Feldman and March (1981) suggested that decision makers may cite information and information-gathering techniques in explaining decisions merely because they add legitimacy to the decision-making process:

When legitimacy is a necessary property of effective decisions, conspicuous consumption of information is a sensible strategy for decision-makers. . . . Decisions that are viewed as legitimate will tend to be information-intensive. Decision-makers who are persuasive in securing acceptance of decisions will request information, gather information, and cite information. (Feldman & March, 1981: 178)

They also suggested that such legitimating actions will ultimately affect perceptions of the decision makers' expertise and competence: "Information use symbolizes a commitment to rational choice. Displaying the symbol reaffirms the importance of this social value and signals personal and organizational competence" (Feldman & March, 1981: 182).

Finally, research on effects of impression management tactics in a role-play vignette involving

randomly assigned "supervisors" and "subordinates" showed that those who added legitimating claims to their performance evaluations (for instance, claims that they had prior supervisory experience and thus were qualified to take on this role) were viewed by subordinates as having greater "leadership ability" than those who did not attach such legitimating labels to themselves and their evaluations (Kacmar, Wayne, & Wright, 1996).

Together, these findings suggest that individuals who signal that they made their decisions or evaluations using normative and legitimate procedures are likely to be viewed as competent, expert, and credible and therefore as having high competency-based trustworthiness.

Hypothesis 2. Decision explanations that communicate the use of legitimate decision processes will lead to higher evaluations of the competency-based trustworthiness of a decision maker than will explanations that do not make such communications.

Cognitive Processing of Packaging Cues

Although the above hypotheses predict that both the understandability and legitimacy of decision explanations will affect perceptions of the competency-based trustworthiness of decision makers, research on information processing suggests that the evaluation of these two packaging characteristics may not occur at the same time and may, thus, have an interactive effect on perceptions of trustworthiness. In particular, a great deal of research on information processing and decision making suggests that individuals follow a "cognitive miser" model (Taylor, 1981), in which "the capacity-limited thinker searches for rapid, adequate solutions, rather than slower, accurate solutions" (Fiske & Taylor, 1991: 13). People might use a number of simplifying, efficiency-oriented schemas or heuristics in evaluating a message, such as focusing on salient cues, available cues, or self-affirming cues (Fiske & Taylor, 1991), rather than on all cues. Such heuristic approaches are especially prevalent when people evaluate peripheral cues (Fiske & Taylor, 1991), like the packaging cues discussed above.

Research on information processing has also suggested that individuals' use of these simplifying schemas may follow a hierarchical approach (Brewer, 1988). For example, according to the "dual-process" perspective (Fiske & Taylor, 1991: 138), individuals initially attempt to evaluate and categorize others using simple, holistic categories. If these categories are not good fits, or if the target is personally relevant to them, they use category sub-

types, recent exemplars, or more tailored schemas. In a more specific manner, the widely cited elaboration likelihood model of persuasion (ELM; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) suggests that people will initially evaluate a message on the basis of its ease of comprehension and personal relevance. If the message is difficult to comprehend (for instance, is expressed in difficult-to-understand language) or of low personal relevance, the evaluator will next look to peripheral cues (such as the expertise of the message source or legitimacy of the decision process) as sources of information and persuasion (Petty, Cacioppo, & Goldman, 1981). Thus, both the ELM and the dual-process models suggest a hierarchy organizes the way people process message attributes. These models suggest that individuals evaluate targets with less or no vigilance as soon as they can adequately identify or categorize the targets on the basis of message cues.

If we extend these notions about efficiency in information processing to the current study, they suggest that the language and labeling of a decision maker's message may be evaluated separately, and that information processing regarding trustworthiness may end (or become less careful) as soon as any cue of trustworthiness is encountered. Thus, if an audience member evaluates the comprehensibility of language first (as suggested by the ELM), and a decision explanation has been in easy-to-understand language, the audience member will easily evaluate competency-based trustworthiness and will not rely much on subsequent information (a legitimating label) in developing perceptions of the decision maker's trustworthiness. Similarly, if an individual evaluates the decision process label first, he or she should also evaluate competency-based trustworthiness quickly and not rely much on subsequent cues based on language. Both of these scenarios suggest not only that a decision explanation with either a legitimating label or easy-to-understand language will lead to quicker, more positive evaluations of trustworthiness than will explanations containing neither of these cues, but also that the presence of both types of cues will not further improve trustworthiness perceptions (because information processing will stop after the first cue). Drawing on this reasoning, we offer the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3. Decision explanations that are packaged with either a legitimating decision process label or easy-to-understand language will lead to higher perceptions of a decision maker's competency-based trustworthiness than decision explanations that are packaged with no legitimating label and hard-to-under-

stand language. However, the presence of both a legitimating label and easy-to-understand language will not further increase trustworthiness perceptions.

In sum, the above hypotheses suggest that factors related to the packaging of a decision explanation (versus the content of the decision explanation) are important to audiences' perceptions of decision makers and their acceptance of decision outcomes, but that having multiple packaging cues signaling trustworthiness may not have an additive effect on trustworthiness perceptions. In the following sections, we discuss an experimental vignette we used to test these hypotheses.

METHODS

Setting, Design, and Procedures

We tested our three hypotheses about decision explanations and perceptions of decision makers using an experimental vignette in which participants communicated their perceptions of the competency-based trustworthiness of a political analyst after reading a recommendation about a business opportunity in Poland and an explanation of how the analyst arrived at that decision. A political analyst was used as the decision maker because we had reason to believe that participants had no expertise in political analysis and would base their perceptions of trustworthiness on the decision explanation rather than on their evaluation of the expert's advice. The political analyst's decision explanation consisted of information on the individual's background and an explanation of the decision logic used. The decision logic, which was generated by an expert systems software package that is commonly used as an aid in making these types of complex decisions, was based on the decision experience of a known and legitimate expert (Eloffson, 1994).

One hundred twenty-four graduate students (62 men, 62 women) at a large U.S. university participated in a paper-and-pencil vignette study as part of a class exercise. Participants' ages ranged from 24 to 43 years and averaged 28.6 years. All had had at least 1 year of work experience, and the average was 6.42 years of experience. No participant had high familiarity with the experimental materials or their context (the political climate in Poland and political consulting).

The experimental design was completely randomized. We began by testing for baseline differences in participants' perceptions of trustworthiness, because research on perceptions of trustworthiness has suggested that there is considerable individual variation

in people's baseline perceptions of others' trustworthiness (Kramer & Isen, 1994). Elofson (1994) developed the baseline vignette in a previous study, which showed the vignette had no effect on perceptions of a decision maker's trustworthiness. We used a ten-item scale (see the dependent variable explanation below) to measure participants' perceptions of competency-based trustworthiness. The independent variables were two aspects of decision explanations—the legitimacy and the understandability of the decision process—each of which had two levels. We therefore had a two-by-two design with four treatment conditions.

We told participants that we were interested in their evaluations of two political analysts' recommendations about a business contract in Poland. In a packet of typed information, participants received background information on a company (Eagle Corporation) that was considering an overseas investment, a recommendation about the contract from the first political analyst, Analyst A, and an explanation of this analyst's decision logic. This recommendation and information constituted the baseline vignette. Immediately following their reading of analyst A's conclusion, we asked participants to answer a set of questions about their perceptions of analyst A. Next, participants read the conclusion of a second analyst, analyst B, about the same investment opportunity. Analyst B's conclusion was followed by one of four different explanations of the analyst's decision logic. This variation established the four treatment conditions. Participants then filled out the analyst questionnaire a second time, answering the same questions they had answered about analyst A. Next, they answered a series of open-ended questions about their reasons for their evaluations of analysts A and B. We used these questions as an indirect manipulation check (see below) to verify that participants perceived the decision explanations as legitimate or not legitimate and as easy-to-understand or hard-to-understand. We also used these questions to provide some qualitative evidence (see below) about why language and labeling affected participants' perceptions of trustworthiness. Participants also answered a number of demographic questions.

Measures

Independent variables. We operationally defined the *understandability* of the decision explanation by changing the language used to communicate the decision process. The two levels of understandability were (1) hard-to-understand technical language and (2) easy-to-understand colloquial language. The hard-to-understand version

was produced by an expert systems computer program. The decision explanations typically produced by these programs consist of a series of "if-then" statements that are difficult—but not impossible—for naive participants (those untrained in expert systems logic or currently unfamiliar with logic-based sciences) to understand. Studies comparing the understandability of similar logic-based messages with messages communicated in colloquial language have shown that the latter were more understandable (Nosek & Roth, 1990). A portion of the hard-to-understand language explanation for analyst B is as follows:

IF the Pro-Regime Actors' Belief in Violence is Strong
and the Anti-Regime Actors' Belief in Violence is Somewhat Strong
and the Institutional Support for Pro-Regime Actors is Moderate
and the Institutional Support for Anti-Regime Actors is Strong
Then a condition of political turmoil being highly likely is indicated.

The easy-to-understand explanation was a translation of the computer-generated explanation into colloquial language:

If Poland's dominant political party thinks that violence will definitely help their situation
and the Solidarity worker's union believes fighting is a good solution to their problems
and the Polish government officials are behind the dominant political party
and the other worker unions are strongly united
Then political turmoil is highly likely.

The two levels of our second independent variable, *legitimacy*, were (1) legitimating decision process label and (2) no decision process label. The text establishing the legitimating label condition stated:

Analyst B used Stanford University's Hoover Institute for the Study of War 4 Point Analysis for Political Turmoil for making this and other assessments of political violence. The 4 Point Analysis is widely used by scholars of political science to determine levels of political turmoil.

For the no label condition, the decision processes were merely labeled "analyst B's."

Dependent variables. Participants' perceptions of the competency-based trustworthiness of analyst B were measured with a ten-item scale ($\alpha = .92$). Principal components analysis with varimax rotation and an eigenvalue of 1.0 showed that these ten items loaded onto one factor explaining 58 percent of the total variance. These items were based on McCroskey's (1966) *authoritativeness* scale, which

has been shown to be a reliable measure of credibility or competency-based trustworthiness (Wanzer & Powell, 1993) and is most applicable when a decision maker is not familiar to the target audience. Sample scale items are "I have confidence in this analyst," "I would consider this analyst to be an expert on the topic," "The analyst is well informed on this topic," "This analyst is an authority on this topic," and "This analyst is a reliable source of information on the topic." Participants responded to all items on a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly agree to 5 = strongly disagree).

Manipulation check. To validate that the decision explanations effectively communicated the use of a legitimate decision process, or communicated the decision process in an easy- or hard-to-understand manner, we coded participants' written explanations of their reasons for trusting the decision maker for evidence that they believed (1) the decision process was legitimate and (2) the decision process was understandable. Two independent coders, blind to the study, coded the participants' explanations for their perceptions of the decision maker into the categories "legitimate" and "understandable." To rule out the possibility that the content of the decision explanation (the actual rationale for making the decision) was influencing perceptions of the decision maker, we also examined the explanations for evidence that the decision processes were perceived as logical. We predicted that all four treatment conditions would be perceived as equally logical, since they all contained the same information about the decision process (they were only labeled differently and presented in different language in the four conditions). Our instructions to the coders included the following definitions of these categories: "'Legitimate' may be indicated by references such as credible, professional, experienced, believable, academic; 'Understandable' may be indicated by references such as clear, easy to follow, made sense, organized, well-presented; and 'Logical' may be indicated by references such as logical process, good reasoning, analytical, well thought out." Typical remarks from participants included "Analyst B wrote clearly in language I could understand," "I could not easily follow Analyst B," "Analyst B had more credibility," and "The source Analyst B used seems more intellectual." Intercoder reliability based on Cohen's (1960) kappa was .85. Because participants' reasons for their perceptions of the decision maker were coded into these categories by outside coders, these data do not provide direct evidence of our intended manipulations. But because of the unambiguity of participants' comments and the high intercoder reliability, we be-

lieve the data provide a good indirect check of our manipulation.

Next, we used Hildebrand's del (Drazin & Kazanjian, 1993) to verify our predictions about the categorical data. We used del as a manipulation check to verify that (1) the legitimately labeled decision processes would be perceived as more legitimate than those without labels and (2) that the decision processes that were explained in colloquial language would be perceived as more understandable than those explained in technical language. We also used it as a manipulation check to show that all treatment conditions were similar in how logical they appeared, since all of them contained the same reasoning.

Analysis of variance. We analyzed scores for participants' perceptions of analyst B (the treatment scenario) using a fully factorial analysis of variance (ANOVA). We used a Scheffé test to examine planned comparisons between the four treatment conditions (Glantz & Slinker, 1990).

Qualitative analysis of open-ended comments. We also qualitatively analyzed (Glaser & Straus, 1967) participant comments about the underlying character, goals, and abilities of the two analysts; 30 percent of the participants made such comments. We searched for comments indicating a reason for perceiving trustworthiness, including perceptions of the decision maker's character, perceptions of the decision maker's motives or goals, and perceptions of the decision maker's competence, intelligence, and ability.

RESULTS

Manipulation and Baseline Checks

As desired, our del analysis indicated no differences among the four treatment conditions in producing perceptions that the decision process was logical. Thus, the logic of the decision process was communicated equally well in all four treatments. The del analysis also indicated that participants in the legitimate label condition perceived the decision process as more legitimate than did participants in the no label condition (del = .23, $p < .0001$) and that participants in the colloquial language condition found the decision process to be more understandable than did those in the technical language condition (del = .27, $p < .0001$). It is also important to note that, although participants found the technical language difficult to understand, none said that they found it impossible to understand or incomprehensible. Thus, all of the intended manipulations appeared to have had the desired effects.

We performed a one-way ANOVA to determine if the participants in each of the four treatment conditions had significant mean differences in their baseline perceptions of a target person's trustworthiness. This analysis showed no differences across treatments ($F = 1.29$), suggesting that individual differences among participants were randomized across the four treatment groups.

Main Analyses

Mean trustworthiness scores for analyst B across the four treatment groups are summarized in Table 1.

In relation to Hypothesis 1, stating that easy-to-understand decision explanations will increase the perceived competency-based trustworthiness of decision makers, results of our ANOVA showed a significant main effect of decision explanation language on perceptions of competency-based trustworthiness ($F_{1,120} = 7.64, p < .01$). Colloquial language led to higher values of competency-based trustworthiness than technical language. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

In relation to Hypothesis 2, stating that decision explanations communicating the use of a legitimate decision process will lead to higher perceptions of the competency-based trustworthiness of a decision maker than explanations not communicating use of a legitimate decision process, results of our ANOVA showed no significant effect of decision process label ($F_{1,120} = 1.32$). Thus, although the means were in the predicted order, Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

In relation to Hypothesis 3, stating that explanations having either a legitimating label or easy-to-understand language will lead to higher perceptions of trustworthiness than those having neither cue—but that having both cues will not lead to further increases in trustworthiness—results of our fully factorial ANOVA showed a significant interaction effect ($F_{1,120} = 7.11, p < .01$). Follow-up comparisons in which we used Scheffé's method (Winer, 1971) to specifically contrast the hard-to-

understand language/no label treatment with the other three treatments showed significant differences (vs. easy-to-understand/no label, $p < .05$; vs. easy-to-understand/label, $p < .05$; vs. hard-to-understand/label, $p < .05$), but no other significant differences across treatments were shown. These findings support Hypothesis 3.

Participants' open-ended comments also suggested that their perceptions of the decision maker's character (for example, seeing the decision maker as warm or cold) were based, in part, on the packaging cues found in the decision explanation and may have influenced their perceptions of competency-based trustworthiness. In particular, we found almost complete agreement in the character traits attributed to the analysts in the two language conditions.

Trust in the easy-to-understand analyst was almost always related to perceptions that the analyst was "understanding" and "sensitive to human issues." Participants' comments included "He seems more open-minded," "He seems to understand the human dynamics of situations like these," and "He seems to look at the big picture. He's sensitive to people issues."

In contrast, the hard-to-understand analyst was uniformly perceived as "cold and calculating": "He doesn't seem to consider people's feelings," "He seemed too detached from the situation," and "I didn't feel comfortable that he was in tune with the real-world situation." Participants based very few inferences about the decision maker on the presence or absence of a legitimate label. Most comments here were statements like "I trusted the use of the model" rather than statements about the analyst's motives or character.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Theoretical Implications

Our findings make two primary contributions to models of trustworthiness perceptions in organiza-

TABLE 1
Effects of Decision Explanations' Legitimacy and Understandability^a

	Hard-to-Understand Language	Easy-to-Understand Language	Legitimacy Means
Legitimacy			
No label	25.61 (31, 3.83)	31.03 (31, 5.68)	28.32
Legitimating label	29.42 (31, 4.75)	29.52 (31, 7.35)	29.47
Understandability means	27.52	30.28	28.90

^a Values are means for the competency-based trustworthiness of a decision maker. Numbers in parentheses indicate cell size and the standard deviation for the cell.

tions: (1) they suggest that packaging cues related to the legitimacy and understandability of a decision explanation may significantly affect perceptions of a decision maker's competency-based trustworthiness and (2) they are consistent with a hierarchical or cognitive miser approach (rather than an additive approach) for evaluating the competency-based trustworthiness of a decision maker on the basis of such cues. Both inferences suggest that researchers could enhance models of procedural justice by including the packaging of decision explanations as a variable likely to affect audience perceptions.

First, our data suggest that the differing effects of understandability on competency-based trustworthiness were not due to differences in the communication of decision-making logic. Instead, our qualitative analysis of participants' comments suggested that the effects of understandability on trustworthiness were due to cues this variable provided about the decision maker's motivation and character. Easy-to-understand language appeared to signal openness and understanding of real-world, human concerns. In contrast, hard-to-understand language signaled that the decision maker was cold and calculating; the use of such language was perhaps seen as an attempt to rationalize arguments and make it hard to refute the analyst's logic. Previous research has shown that managers may use such tactics to fend off expected challenges from customers (Elsbach et al., 1998) and that subordinates use such tactics to protect themselves when they communicate with their superiors (Eisenberg & Witten, 1987). Yet our results suggest that resorting to such tactics may leave an audience in doubt about a decision maker's competency-based trustworthiness and may thus decrease the willingness of the audience to comply with a decision or to trust the decision maker in the future.

Second, our interaction findings (that legitimating labels only increased trustworthiness if the explanation was hard-to-understand, and vice-versa) indirectly support the cognitive miser approach. As soon as our research participants encountered a reliable cue indicating trustworthiness, they did not process further cues or did not weight them heavily in their evaluations of trustworthiness. These findings extend procedural justice models by suggesting that peripheral packaging cues about the legitimacy of a decision process may carry extra weight in improving perceptions of trustworthiness if information about the decision maker's logic or rationale is obscured by hard-to-understand language. A lack of packaging cues, however, may handicap decision makers who must communicate decisions in technical language or rely on expert

systems to relay information about decision procedures. Understanding when such packaging cues are most critical to improving perceptions of trustworthiness is an important addition to models of procedural justice.

Practical Implications

Our findings also provide insights valuable to the practice of management in two primary ways: (1) they suggest that, to improve their competency-based trustworthiness, managers should spend time crafting the language and labeling of decision explanations and (2) they suggest that decision explanation language may be important to an audience's long-term evaluation of a decision maker.

First, recognizing that the components of a message's packaging are at least partially responsible for engendering the perception of competency-based trustworthiness suggests that better messages can be created. This finding becomes particularly useful with the advent of virtual organizations, whose members are separated by time and location but connected through technology channels such as electronic bulletin boards, e-mail, and group decision support systems. In such organizations, the cues used to determine decision maker credibility are sparse at best, and understanding the role of message packaging in establishing competency-based trustworthiness becomes particularly useful. Similarly, ad hoc teams, which require "swift trust" (Kramer & Tyler, 1996), may benefit from practical templates for guiding their communications.

Second, the present study confirms and expands social psychological theories of "person-perception" (Jones, 1990) and interpersonal impression formation (Greenberg, 1990) suggesting that an individual's temporary and specific motives in communicating a given decision may be interpreted as cues about the person's stable personality and character. In particular, research on attributional approaches to person-perception and impression formation has shown that people often use stereotypes based on salient cues such as race, gender, and social status to infer dispositional traits from behavior (Jones, 1990; Spears, Oakes, Ellemers, & Haslam, 1997). Our findings suggest that the language in which explanations are presented may be an additional cue audiences use to evaluate a decision maker.

Conclusion

The positive effects of trustworthiness in social dilemmas have been shown in a number of instances, including labor-management relations (Taylor, 1989), organizational performance (Hart,

Capps, Cangemi, & Caillouet, 1986), organizational communication (Roberts & O'Reilly, 1974), and prosocial behavior (Rotter, 1980). Perceived trustworthiness has been credited with being essential in all social situations that demand cooperation and interdependence (Kramer & Tyler, 1996). Our findings suggest that paying attention to the packaging of communications, not just to their content, may yield significant benefits through enhancing competency-based trustworthiness.

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