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Friends vs. Strangers: How Closeness Impacts Social Sharing

David Dubois, PhD, Andrea Bonezzi, PhD, and Matteo De Angelis, PhD



The art of being a successful real estate agent largely depends on the need to interact socially. How you interact with your own clients indeed affects their opinion of the services you provide and ultimately shape their opinions about you or your company. In turn, clients may share their opinion with others which could potentially lead to positive referrals or negative reviews.

This article explores the likelihood that clients will take the next step to share positive reviews with others or to tarnish your reputation with a negative review. In brief, we dive into a key factor shaping the likelihood of sharing positive or negative information – the extent to which the client feels close vs. distant with the real estate agent. Across several studies, we find that people share more positive information with people they feel distant from but negative information with people they feel close to. As a result, strongly connected social media networks are more conducive to sharing negative information with friends, while social networks with weak ties between users tend to facilitate sharing positive information among strangers.

Motivation to Share

Why does this effect occur? It boils down to how talking changes the motives of the speaker which, in turn, carries over the extent to which a speaker shares positive vs. negative information.

On the one hand, if the speaker lacks an emotional connection with the other person, often the motive to self-enhance prompts the speaker to emphasize positive information. During the conversation, it is common for each party to wonder how he compares socially with the other, and to ask, “Am I better than him?” (Argo, White, and Dahl 2006). When social comparison begins, the sharer may engage in behaviors to enhance her own self-worth and project a picture of perfection to the stranger (Brown, Collins, and Schmidt 1988). Due to self-enhancement efforts, the sharer may avoid talking about her own negative experiences (Sedikides 1993). By discussing positive news and avoiding complaints, the sharer subconsciously hopes that the listener’s opinion of the sharer will increase (Berger and Milkman 2012; Hamilton, Vohs, and

McGill 2014). By sharing positive information, the sharer subconsciously hopes that the listener will think highly of the speaker.

On the other hand, if the speaker has a strong emotional connection with the other, the motive to protect the listener incentivizes the speaker to share negative information. In this situation, the sharer becomes more focused on the other's wellbeing and less worried about the impression he is making on the other (Clark, Fitness, and Brissette 2001). Being other-focused leads the sharer to feel a sense of responsibility towards his friend and results in behaviors aimed to protect the friend from harm (Heine et al. 1999). For an easy example, we can look to the parent-child relationship. Because parents feel a strong sense of closeness with their children, parents share information about their own negative experiences with their children to protect the child from harm (Elder et al. 1995). Through conveying negative information, the speaker aims to prevent the listener from undergoing a negative experience.

What causes Relational Connectedness?

Feeling like a friend vs. a stranger can alter the motives of the sharer and the content of the discussion, but what influences those feelings of relational connectedness? Existing relationships often have defined their level of connectivity. Although you speak with a co-worker or neighbor on a regular basis, this does not mean that the relationship has reached a final level. The development of a relationship into a friendship may take time or may be instantaneous. For example, the nature and depth of a conversation, or even the mere physical proximity between two individuals, can influence feelings of connectedness (Sedikides et al. 1999; Vohs, Baumeister, and Ciarocco 2005). Realtors may move quickly from the level of stranger to friend due to the depth of the conversation by discussing personal things such as family, house design preferences, and finances. In addition, relational connectedness may arise from incidental factors which influence the perceived similarity between two people, such as sharing the same birthday or the same name (Jiang et al. 2010).

Social Transmission by Recipients

What is true offline also has implications for online information sharing. The less relational connection on social media – for instance, the less the overlap in connections between two people, the more positive the information shared. For instance, in one study we asked managers to share a message featuring the pros and cons of a service on LinkedIn with either a close friend or a distant acquaintance and found that they shared more cons than pros with their close contacts but more pros than cons with their distant ones. In fact, we found that the number of overlapping connections positively predicted message valence: the more friends in common between a sender and a recipient, the more negative she tended to be.

Building on this study, we asked young adults to share a message featuring pros and cons of a product to someone they knew on LinkedIn vs. Facebook. Within this consumer group, Facebook is typically used to foster and maintain personal connections whereas LinkedIn is used for professional connections. We found that participants, overall, included a greater number of pros than cons when sharing on LinkedIn but the reverse pattern when sharing on Facebook – confirming our hypothesis.

Real Estate Implications

In real estate, the best compliment an agent can receive from a client is a positive referral of his/her services. How do you create the greatest likelihood of a positive referral occurring? This may depend on how you want to market your services. If you desire to expand your geographic footprint, it may be best to build a vast network of relationships with relative strangers. Our findings suggest that a network of people with low



connectedness may be unlikely to share negative information about your services due to enhanced activation of their need to self-enhance. It would also disseminate information swiftly to distant groups of other strangers. However, the information shared may be only surface-level and the recipient may place little value on the information due to hearing it from a stranger.

Alternately, a strategy to strengthen your existing footprint may prove beneficial. By building a network of friends, the information shared would not be conducive to expanding your regional footprint due to the probability those friends may refer your services to a few, close others. While the network would not expand rapidly, the information shared would be received by friends as valuable and memorable. However, of importance, an enhanced motive to protect recipients may make them particularly sensitive and likely to share any negative information about your services in an effort to prevent their friends from experiencing a negative service. This might prove a particularly effective strategy for high-end real estate services that deliver exceptional services and limit potential negative information about these services.

Conclusion

Overall, the level of perceived relational connectedness with potential prospects or clients may have great effect on outcomes for a realtor. In fact, the development of a network of referrals is pivotal to the growth of a realtor's business. It is important to understand when interacting with

clients how you project yourself, how the client perceives your services, and the likelihood the client will provide a positive or negative referral. While it is important to understand how and when positive vs. negative referrals occur, it will be more effective to provide outstanding customer service to all to avoid negative reviews being shared through any network.

Recommended Reading

Dubois, David, Andrea Bonezzi, and Matteo De Angelis (2016), “Sharing with Friends Versus Strangers: How Interpersonal Closeness Influences Word-of-Mouth Valence,” *Journal of Marketing Research*, 53(October), 712-727.

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David Dubois joined INSEAD in 2012 after being on the faculty at HEC Paris. His broad research interests lie in word-of-mouth, virality, social influence, luxury consumption and status processes. His work has appeared in top academic journals such as *Journal of Consumer Research*, *Journal of Marketing Research*, *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, *Psychological Science*, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, and *Harvard Business Review*. At INSEAD, he teaches both in the MBA and Executive Education programs such as Sanofi, Abbvie, Biogen, Moët Hennessy, Diageo, Pernod Ricard, Mizuho, etc. and co-directs the Leading Digital Marketing Strategy Programme. He holds a PhD in Marketing from the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University

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Andrea Bonezzi joined New York University Stern School of Business as an Assistant Professor of Marketing in July 2012. Professor Bonezzi's research investigates fundamental behavioral phenomena that can inform marketing practice. He studies consumer judgment and decision-making, and is currently focused on understanding (1) how consumers' goals and mindsets

influence their choices and behaviors, (2) how marketing reward and incentive systems influence consumers' choices, attitudes and loyalty, and (3) how psychological drives influence word-of-mouth and social transmission of information. Professor Bonezzi's research has been published in leading marketing journals such as the *Journal of Marketing Research*, *Psychological Science*, and the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*. Professor Bonezzi received a BS in Business Administration from the University of Parma and a Master of Business Administration and Management from Bocconi University, both in Italy. He has a PhD in Marketing from the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University.

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Associate Professor of Marketing at Luiss Guido Carli University, Dr. Angelis teaches Marketing, Web Marketing, and Marketing Planning. He also teaches Marketing Management at MBA, part-time MBA, EMBA and specialized master programs held at Luiss Business School. He is Director of the Master in Trade Management of the Away-from-Home Consumption. He is member of the X.ite Research Center at Luiss Guido Carli. He has been Visiting Scholar at Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois from 2007 to 2008 and Visiting Professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee from 2009 to 2011. He has over 50 impactful publications, including 2 books, about 10 articles published in A or A+ journals such as *Journal of Marketing Research*, *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, *Psychological Science*, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* and *Journal of Business Research*, other scientific articles and reputed international conference proceedings.

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