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Can I Live Up to That Ad? Impact of Implicit Theories of Ability on Service Employees’ Responses to Advertising

Daniel Wentzel,¹ Sven Henkel,¹ and Torsten Tomczak¹

Abstract

Service researchers have postulated that ads have an important “second” audience, namely an organization’s own service employees. Specifically, ads may depict how employees deliver on the service promise, thereby communicating to other service employees what kind of behaviors they are expected to perform. This research examines when and to what extent service employees are motivated to live up to such ad models. Two experiments at a Swiss bank demonstrate that the effectiveness of an ad model is determined not only by the challenge presented by the model's behavior but also by an employee's implicit beliefs. Employees who believe that their abilities are fixed (i.e., entity-focused) are more motivated to imitate an ad model if the model’s behavior is moderately challenging rather than strongly challenging. In contrast, employees who believe that their abilities are malleable (i.e., incremental-focused) are not affected by how challenging the model’s behavior is. Moreover, the reactions of entity-focused employees to challenging ads may be improved by encouraging them to mentally simulate the process they need to go through to achieve a similar performance as the model.

Keywords

advertising’s internal audience, advertising models, implicit theories of ability, mental simulation

Much research has emphasized that advertising services may require different strategies than advertising goods (e.g., Hill et al. 2004; Mattila 2000). Since most services are essentially intangible in nature, one of the primary challenges of service advertising consists of increasing the tangibility of the services offered (Berry and Clark 1986; Stafford 1996). One particularly effective way of increasing the tangibility of a service consists of depicting explicitly how employees deliver on the service promise (Mittal 1999). Although this research has increased our knowledge of how services can be advertised effectively, ads also have an important “second” audience, namely an organization’s own service employees (Acito and Ford 1980; Gilly and Wolfinbarger 1998).

Ads are of relevance for service employees because ads may help define what kind of behaviors employees are expected to perform (Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman 1988). For instance, a recent ad by Bank of America shows how a customer who is rushed for time is helped straightforwardly by a service employee. Such ads not only may help to shape consumers’ expectations by promising helpful, unburdaercratic service but also may tell the bank’s service employees how management expects them to behave when dealing with their own customers (George and Berry 1981). As such, an employee featured in an ad may set a relevant guideline for other, real employees and may thus act as a “model.” However, thorough empirical work that has investigated how employees react to ads and ad models has been fairly limited (for exceptions, see Gilly and Wolfinbarger 1998; Wolfinbarger and Gilly 2005).

This issue is of important theoretical and practical concern since service employees are ultimately responsible for delivering on advertising promises (Gilly and Wolfinbarger 1998; Morhart, Herzog, and Tomczak 2009; Wentzel 2009). For instance, Berry (2000) emphasizes that service employees “make or break a brand, for the customers’ actual experiences with the service always prevail in defining the brand for them. With their on-the-job performances, service providers turn a marketer-articulated brand into a customer-experienced brand” (p. 135). Hence, managers need to consider two different audiences when designing their ads. On one hand, most managers want to send as positive a message as possible to consumers; on the other hand, managers

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must keep in mind that ads can only be effective when service employees live up to the ads’ service promise. Put differently, managers need to realize that their service employees are regularly faced with the challenge of needing to emulate the behavior of “ideal” advertising models.

The purpose of this research is to examine how employees deal with such challenges and how they react to ad models. Drawing on social-cognitive theories of achievement, we propose that the degree to which employees are motivated to emulate an ad model depends on their implicit theory of ability. Research in social psychology (e.g., Dweck and Leggett 1988; Tabernero and Wood 1999) suggests that individuals develop core beliefs about their own abilities, which, in turn, set up different patterns of response to challenges. In the present research, we apply this framework to understand how service employees react to ad models and also suggest ways in which employees’ natural reactions to challenging models may be improved. Two experiments conducted at a Swiss bank provide support for the hypothesized relationships and may help managers in increasing the internal effectiveness of their advertising.

**Conceptual Development**

Why do service employees pay attention to ads of their own organization? First, ads may provide an important input for employees’ self-definition by providing them with vivid images of the social group they belong to (Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail 1994). Second, ads may also help to define for employees management’s expectations of them, which is especially likely to be the case when the ads portray a real or reenacted service encounter (Gilly and Wolfinbarger 1998). For instance, Acito and Ford (1980) interviewed employees after their bank had launched an ad campaign emphasizing the service promise. The investigators found that the ads set a new standard in the bank and that “nearly 75 percent [of employees] indicated that they had become more concerned with pleasing the customer and were more likely to go out of their way for customers” (p. 59). If employees featured in ads can indeed serve as models, then this raises the question of how service employees are affected by such models. To address this question, we will develop a conceptual framework that is based on a social-cognitive model of achievement developed by Dweck and her colleagues. The conceptual framework is depicted in Figure 1; the relevant literature for developing the hypotheses is summarized in Table 1.

**Dweck’s Social-Cognitive Model of Motivation and Achievement**

Dweck and her colleagues (e.g., Dweck, Chiu, and Hong 1995; Dweck and Leggett 1988; Dweck and Molden 2005; Hong et al. 1999) have found that individuals develop an implicit theory about the mutability of their own abilities. On the one hand, individuals may favor an *entity* theory of ability, believing that their abilities are fixed and cannot be altered; on the other hand, individuals may lean more strongly toward an *incremental* theory of ability, believing that their abilities are malleable and can be developed over time (Dweck, Chiu, and Hong 1995).

Distinguishing between these two different theories is important because one’s implicit theory creates a motivational framework that determines how an individual responds to achievement situations. Put differently, even when individuals at both ends of the continuum have the same level of ability, their implicit theory can affect what goals they set for themselves and how they perform in achievement settings (Dweck and Molden 2005).

Individuals that conceive of their abilities as a fixed entity (i.e., entity-focused individuals) tend to focus on *performance* goals. That is, when a certain ability is regarded as fixed, “people become very concerned with demonstrating that they have a sufficient amount of it and with avoiding a demonstration of deficiencies” (Hong et al. 1999, p. 589). Put differently, entity-focused individuals are intent on proving to themselves and to others that they have a certain level of ability, viewing achievement situations as tests of their competence. In addition, entity-focused individuals organize their attributions around their abilities. When explaining their own performance, these individuals place a greater weight on their abilities than on more malleable aspects such as effort or experience (Dweck and Molden 2005). As such, achievement settings can be highly threatening events for these individuals. Because they believe that their performance level is diagnostic of their innate ability, they would attribute a failure to a lack of ability and would consider themselves immutably incompetent. Hence, entity-focused individuals may prefer easy challenges that allow them to gain favorable judgments of their ability, thereby minimizing the probability of negative outcomes (Elliott and Dweck 1988).

In contrast, individuals conceiving of their abilities as a malleable quality (i.e., incremental-focused individuals) are more likely to hold *learning* goals, the goal of improving one’s abilities. That is, when people think that their abilities are malleable, they place less emphasis on proving their abilities and more emphasis on developing them through effort (Hong et al. 1999). Incremental-focused individuals typically do not interpret initial failures as a lack of ability but as an indication that their current strategies do not match the challenge and need revising (Dweck and Leggett 1988). Therefore, these individuals are able to develop adaptive, mastery-oriented strategies in the face of difficult challenges, such as exerting more effort or engaging in remedial actions. As a result, they are less likely to avoid difficult challenges and are also more likely to succeed at them than entity-focused individuals (Cury et al. 2008; Tabernero and Wood 1999).
Entity Focus, Incremental Focus, and Reactions to Ad Models

To understand how service employees react to ad models, it is useful to consider implicit theories and the goals that are triggered by these theories. Ads can be more or less challenging for service employees, depending on what kind of behaviors are portrayed in the ads. That is, when managers decide to feature employees in their ads, they also need to determine what behaviors these employees should enact. Since most ads are aimed at attracting customers, managers may prefer to portray “ideal” service encounters, in which a model behaves in a positive, above-average manner (Gilly and Wolfinbarger 1998). When the model’s behavior is very positive (i.e., when it deviates very strongly from an employee’s average behavior), the model should be more challenging and more difficult to emulate. Conversely, when the behavior of the model is moderately positive (i.e., when it does not deviate very strongly from an employee’s average behavior), the model should be less challenging and easier to imitate.

Arguably, an employee’s implicit theory of ability may affect how she or he reacts to these different kinds of models. Entity-focused employees may be very sensitive to how challenging the behavior of an ad model is. As elaborated, an entity focus causes individuals to become very concerned with demonstrating that they have an adequate level of ability. All things being equal, an ad model that is moderately challenging should be easier to imitate than one that is strongly challenging. Hence, entity-focused employees should feel more inspired by moderately challenging models because they may feel that such models provide them with an opportunity to gain a favorable judgment of their ability (Elliott and Dweck 1988).

On the other hand, ads portraying very challenging patterns of behavior may seem threatening. Entity-focused employees may believe that emulating a challenging model is inherently risky since they may fail to live up to the model’s behavior. As elaborated, they would attribute such a failure to an innate lack of ability and would be concerned about being exposed as incompetent (Dweck, Chiu, and

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**Figure 1.** Conceptual model.
Hong 1995; Hong et al. 1999). To cope with this threat, they may engage in a self-protective strategy and may refrain from emulating the model when interacting with their own customers (Cury et al. 2008). That is, by distancing themselves from the model, entity-focused employees may not run the risk of failing and of having to generate negative attributions for their abilities. Hence, entity-focused employees may feel more inspired when the model’s behavior is moderately challenging than when it is strongly challenging.

**Hypothesis 1**: Service employees who are entity-focused will exhibit a greater intention to emulate an advertising model when the model’s behavior is moderately challenging compared to when it is strongly challenging.

### Table 1. Literature Overview by Hypothesis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relevant Literature</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Main Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Entity focus (EF), incremental focus (IF), and reactions to ad models (Hypotheses 1 and 2)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cury et al. (2008)</td>
<td>French college students</td>
<td>Participants with an EF showed a weaker performance on tests of conceptual ability than those with an IF. Furthermore, two important mediators are identified. First, EF individuals experienced greater anxiety during the test, impairing their cognitive performance. Second, EF individuals also engaged in self-protective strategies such as avoiding practice trials prior to taking the real test.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elliott and Dweck (1988)</td>
<td>U.S. fifth-grade students</td>
<td>School children with an IF were more likely to choose tasks that were difficult but enabled them to acquire new skills than did children with an IF who, in turn, favored tasks that were easy to complete but did not promote the development of new skills.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hong et al. (1999)</td>
<td>Chinese and U.S. college students</td>
<td>After receiving negative feedback on a test of conceptual ability, IF participants attributed their substandard performance more strongly to malleable factors such as a lack of effort than did EF participants. Furthermore, IF participants were more likely to take remedial actions after experiencing a failure (i.e., by continuing to work on the task) in order to improve their skills.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lockwood and Kunda (1997)</td>
<td>U.S. college students</td>
<td>EF students felt more deflated and reported lower self-evaluations after comparing their academic abilities to those of an outstanding fellow student, whereas the reverse was true for IF students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tabernero and Wood (1999)</td>
<td>Spanish college students</td>
<td>IF participants were more successful at a complex management simulation than EF participants. Specifically, EF individuals construed initial difficulties as indicative of a low ability, thus eroding their sense of self-efficacy. As a result, they set less ambitious goals for themselves and were less effective than LF individuals.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Impact of mental simulation on entity-focused service employees (Hypotheses 3-5)</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Cury et al. (2008)</td>
<td>French college students</td>
<td>EF individuals experienced anxiety during a test of conceptual ability, which deteriorated their performance. Decreasing anxiety, in turn, had a positive impact on performance.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Escalas and Luce (2003, 2004)</td>
<td>U.S. college students</td>
<td>Participants exhibited greater intentions to adopt a product depicted in an ad after performing process simulation (PS) (i.e., imaging themselves using the product) relative to outcome simulation (OS) (i.e., imaging the benefits gained from using the product). This effect was more (less) pronounced for ads with strong (weak) arguments, suggesting that PS makes individuals more discerning consumers.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pham and Taylor (1999)</td>
<td>U.S. college students</td>
<td>Several days prior to an exam, college students were asked to engage in either PS or OS concerning the exam. Students engaging in PS experienced less anxiety, spent more time studying for the exam, and eventually obtained higher grades than students performing OS.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rivkin and Taylor (1999)</td>
<td>U.S. college students</td>
<td>Participants were asked to focus on an ongoing stressful event in their lives and to perform either PS or OS. After 1 week, participants performing PS reported more positive affect and had engaged in more active coping strategies compared to participants performing OS.</td>
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<td><strong>Impact of mental simulation on incremental-focused service employees (Hypotheses 6 and 7)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Blackwell, Trzesniewski, and Dweck (2007)</td>
<td>U.S. high school students</td>
<td>Students focused on an incremental theory were found to hold strong effort beliefs, that is, the belief that effort and meticulous planning are means to succeed at difficult tasks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elliott and Dweck (1988)</td>
<td>U.S. school students (fifth-graders)</td>
<td>IF students not only set themselves more ambitious challenges by choosing more difficult tasks but also developed mastery-oriented responses, such as rehearsing their strategies and changing strategies after an initial failure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tabernero and Wood (1999)</td>
<td>Spanish college students</td>
<td>In a management simulation, IF participants recognized that ambitious goals are a necessary means for improving one’s skills and set themselves more challenging goals than did EF participants.</td>
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</table>
Service employees who are more incremental-focused may not be as sensitive to the degree of challenge. Since these employees believe that they can develop their abilities through effort (Dweck, Chiu, and Hong 1995), they may not be as concerned about comparing themselves to an ambitious ad model. That is, incremental-focused employees may feel that they can live up to the ads even when the model’s behavior is very challenging (Lockwood and Kunda 1997). They may also be less worried about experiencing initial setbacks since they are prone to attribute these setbacks to malleable factors such as a lack of effort or experience (Dweck and Molden 2005). Thus, incremental-focused employees may find ad models that are strongly challenging to be as inspiring as ad models that are moderately challenging. Hence,

Hypothesis 2: Service employees who are incremental-focused will not exhibit a greater intention to emulate an advertising model when the model’s behavior is moderately challenging compared to when it is strongly challenging.

If the hypotheses outlined above are confirmed, managers may face somewhat of a dilemma. On one hand, most ads are primarily targeted at consumers. Hence, managers may want to send as positive a message as possible to consumers in order to attract them to the organization and to build a favorable image. On the other hand, managers may not want to discourage employees who are entity-focused by launching very challenging ads, thereby decreasing the likelihood that these employees would behave in similar ways as the model. Hence, the external and internal objectives of an ad may be at odds in such cases.

This dilemma could be resolved by improving the reactions of entity-focused employees to challenging ad models. Specifically, we have argued that these employees feel discouraged by challenging models because they are anxious that they may be exposed as incompetent when trying to emulate the model. If this reasoning is correct, then helping entity-focused employees to cope with their anxiety may improve their reactions. Therefore, the second part of our conceptual model examines how this can be achieved by manipulating the kind of mental simulation employees rely on when processing the ads (see Figure 1).

Impact of Mental Simulation on Entity-Focused Service Employees

Mental simulation refers to the imitative mental representation of an event or a series of events (Taylor and Schneider 1989). Research in this area has made a crucial distinction between two different kinds of mental simulation, namely outcome simulation and process simulation (Escalas and Luce 2004; Pham and Taylor 1999; Zhao, Hoeffler, and Zauberman 2007). Process simulation encourages people to think of the process they need to go through before being able to reach a certain goal, whereas outcome simulation encourages people to think of the desirable benefits that are associated with fulfilling the goal (Pham and Taylor 1999).

Research has shown that process simulation helps people to cope with stressful events and leads to higher levels of achievement than outcome simulation (Pham and Taylor 1999; Rivkin and Taylor 1999). For example, Pham and Taylor (1999) found that participants who were asked to think of the steps that were necessary to achieve a good grade in an exam (i.e., process simulation) spent more time studying for the exam and eventually obtained higher grades than participants who were instructed to think that they had performed successfully on the exam (i.e., outcome simulation). Process simulation may prove to be more effective since it helps people to regulate their emotional responses to challenging situations and may instigate a planning process that ultimately leads to effective, goal-directed action (Rivkin and Taylor 1999).

Arguably, entity-focused employees may benefit more (less) strongly from engaging in process (outcome) simulation when processing challenging ad models. Specifically, we have postulated that entity-focused employees may be concerned about failing to live up to challenging models. Process simulation may prove to be very helpful in this respect. When entity-focused employees are asked to think of the steps that are necessary for achieving a similar performance as the model, they may feel more confident that they will succeed and that they will gain positive judgments of their ability. That is, process simulation may decrease the expression of emotions that hamper effective action, such as anxiety, and may lead to goal-directed action (Cury et al. 2008; Pham and Taylor 1999). Thus, one may hypothesize that entity-focused employees will show a greater willingness to imitate the model after engaging in process simulation.

Hypothesis 3: Compared to a no-simulation control condition, service employees who are entity-focused will show a greater intention to emulate an advertising model that is strongly challenging when they are asked to engage in process simulation.

In contrast, outcome simulation should not help entity-focused employees to cope with challenging ad models. Encouraging such employees to imagine how they would feel after having enacted a similar behavior as the ad model should be less effective since it does not alleviate their concern that they may be exposed as incompetent when trying to live up to the model. Put differently, outcome simulation should not succeed in reducing their anxiety and in making the model’s behavior seem like a more realistic feat (Rivkin and Taylor 1999). Hence,
Hypothesis 4: Compared to a no-simulation control condition, service employees who are entity-focused will not show a greater intention to emulate an advertising model that is strongly challenging when they are asked to engage in outcome simulation.

Next, the underlying process is investigated. As outlined above, anxiety may play a key role in explaining how different kinds of mental simulation affect the reactions of entity-focused employees. Asking these employees to engage in outcome simulation should not be effective in reducing their anxiety. On the other hand, asking them to engage in process simulation should reduce their anxiety. As a result, they should be more willing to imitate the model’s behavior. Summarizing, anxiety should act as a mediator between process simulation and the evaluation of challenging ad models. Hence,

Hypothesis 5: For entity-focused service employees, anxiety will mediate the relationship between process simulation and the intention to emulate a strongly challenging model. Specifically, process simulation will be negatively associated with anxiety, which, in turn, will be positively associated with behavioral intentions.

Impact of Mental Simulation on Incremental-Focused Service Employees

As outlined above, employees who are incremental-focused are unlikely to avoid difficult challenges and may naturally exhibit a positive reaction to ambitious ad models (Elliott and Dweck 1988; Tabernero and Wood 1999). Therefore, these employees should not be affected as strongly by different kinds of mental simulation. For instance, asking incremental-focused employees to imagine the process of enacting the behavior (i.e., process simulation) should not affect their intentions since they are used to dealing with difficult challenges and may already have adaptive, mastery-oriented strategies in place (Dweck and Molden 2005). Hence, they are unlikely to show more positive reactions to the model after engaging in process simulation. Thus,

Hypothesis 6: Compared to a no-simulation control condition, service employees who are incremental-focused will not show a greater intention to emulate an advertising model that is strongly challenging when they are asked to engage in process simulation.

In a similar vein, incremental-focused service employees should also be less affected when they are asked to focus on the desirability of performing the behavior (i.e., outcome simulation). Remember that these employees mainly pursue learning goals; as such, they are likely to value difficult challenges and may realize that they can only improve their abilities by mastering such challenges (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, and Dweck 2007). Hence, outcome simulation should not affect the extent to which they are motivated to live up to an ad model’s behavior. Thus,

Hypothesis 7: Compared to a no-simulation control condition, service employees who are incremental-focused will not show a greater intention to emulate an advertising model that is strongly challenging when they are asked to engage in outcome simulation.

Empirical Investigation

To test our hypotheses, we conducted two experiments with service employees from a Swiss bank. Study 1 tested Hypotheses 1 and 2, whereas Study 2 was designed to test Hypotheses 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7. Before reporting the results of these studies, however, we will delineate how employees’ implicit theories and the ad model’s behavior were operationalized.

Operationalization of Implicit Theories of Ability

Since implicit theories are relatively stable beliefs, one may assess these beliefs by using standardized measurement scales. One limitation of using such scales is that they may yield results that are correlational in nature (Chiu, Hong, and Dweck 1997). However, Dweck’s model explicitly posits causal relations; that is, implicit theories are thought to activate different goals, which, in turn, affect how individuals react to challenges. To address this issue, one may also manipulate an individual’s implicit theory by temporarily activating one of the two theories.

Necessarily, both approaches entail different operationalizations. Whereas chronic differences are measured through the implicit theory inventory (e.g., Levy, Stroessner and Dweck 1998), the manipulation of implicit theories is usually achieved by means of persuasive articles (e.g., Hong et al. 1999, Experiment 3). In the latter case, participants are asked to read an article that is purportedly extracted from a scientific magazine and that depicts ability either as an inborn trait or a malleable quality. Hence, such articles are effective in causing people to temporarily focus more strongly on an entity or an incremental theory of ability. Importantly, self-reported implicit theories and experimentally induced implicit theories operate in the same manner and have the same effects on other variables (Cury et al. 2008). Indeed, many of the studies in the field have successfully combined both approaches. Following this tradition, the current research also features one study that manipulates implicit theories (Study 1) and another one that measures chronic differences (Study 2), thereby enhancing the generalizability of the findings.
Research Context and Operationalization of Ad Model Behavior

The bank at which the studies were conducted is one of the largest banks in Switzerland with an operating income of roughly US$ 30 bn. in 2007 and more than 80,000 employees worldwide. A few years ago, the bank developed a new service promise focused on personal service. Specifically, the bank promises customers to take the time that is necessary to understand their individual needs and to select financial solutions that are designed to meet those needs. Thus, the bank’s ads typically emphasize how employees live up to this promise when dealing with their customers. Given that a significant part of the bank’s advertising is focused on print ads, we also relied on print ads in our studies.

Both studies were conducted with employees who were being trained as financial advisors. Before designing the ads, we conducted several interviews with experienced advisors from the bank to identify a number of behaviors that would reflect the service promise. On the basis of these interviews, we wrote several scenarios that depicted an interaction between an advisor and a customer, varying how challenging the advisor’s behavior was. To enhance the generalizability of the results, both studies focused on different model behaviors. Whereas the scenario used for Study 1 depicted an advisor having to work overtime because of a short-term change in a client’s schedule, Study 2 employed a scenario in which an advisor helped a client in setting up a new business. Next, we instructed the bank’s advertising agency to create a number of print ads that would reflect these scenarios. This procedure served to ensure that the ads seemed realistic and complied with the bank’s design guidelines. For instance, all ads were accompanied by an identical picture showing an advisor interacting with a customer.

Study 1: Entity Focus, Incremental Focus, and Reactions to Ad Models

Design, Participants, and Procedure. The study used a 2 (implicit theory: entity-focused, incremental-focused) × 2 (model’s behavior: moderately challenging, strongly challenging) between-subjects design. A total of 102 financial advisors (51 females, 51 males) participated in the study. All participants worked in the German-speaking part of Switzerland and interacted with customers daily. On average, participants were 21.2 years old and had worked for the bank for 2.7 years.

The study took place during several training seminars at a professional facility in Zurich, Switzerland. At the beginning of the study, participants read one of two primes that were intended to manipulate their implicit theory of ability. The priming task was disguised as a study on the comprehension of scientific texts, reducing the probability that participants would be able to detect a relationship between the priming task and the main study. After completing the priming task, participants were asked to evaluate a print ad. To increase the relevance of this task, they were told that these ads may be launched in the future and were being pretested with a sample of employees. Once participants had responded to the dependent measures, they were informed about the purpose of the study and thanked for their participation.

Independent Variables. As outlined above, Study 1 temporarily manipulated implicit theories of ability through a priming procedure adapted from Hong et al. (1999). Participants were instructed to read an article that was intended to induce a specific theory and that was purportedly extracted from a scientific magazine. Half of the participants read an article that was intended to trigger an entity theory by emphasizing that scientists were gathering increasing amounts of evidence that most of a person’s abilities are determined by genetic factors. The other half read an article that was aimed at activating an incremental theory by emphasizing that abilities are malleable and shaped through effort. For example, one paragraph in the entity-focused article said,

In his talk at the Swiss Psychological Association, behavioral scientist Dr. Matthias Eggli argued that “most of a person’s abilities are due to genetic factors. These abilities can only be modified to a very limited extent during early childhood. Learning new abilities and skills during adulthood, however, is largely impossible.”

The same paragraph in the incremental-focused article said,

In his talk at the Swiss Psychological Association, behavioral scientist Dr. Matthias Eggli argued that “most of a person’s abilities can and must be acquired through learning and effort. In most cases, genetically determined talent is not sufficient. Learning new abilities and skills is possible even at a very advanced age.”

The model’s behavior was manipulated through short scenarios that were depicted in the ads. In the scenarios, a customer calls his advisor to tell him that he will be late for an appointment for the same day due to a delayed flight. In the moderately challenging ads, the customer arrives at the branch a few minutes before the official business hours come to an end. In the strongly challenging ads, the customer’s flight is delayed to such an extent that he only manages to reach the branch many hours after the official business hours have ended. In both scenarios, the advisor waits for the customer and takes all the time that is needed to discuss and review the customer’s financial needs. Hence, the extent to which the advisor’s behavior was challenging was
manipulated through the amount of overtime the advisor needed to put in to satisfy the customer’s needs. We chose this particular manipulation since the advisor’s behavior constitutes an authentic reflection of the bank’s service promise.

**Dependent Variable, Covariates, and Manipulation Checks**

**Behavioral intentions.** We measured participants’ intentions to emulate the behavior of the model as an average of five 7-point items adapted from Lockwood and Kunda (1999) (“The ad inspired me to search for ways that would enable my clients to have a similar experience as the client in the ad,” “...to think more strongly about how I can delight my customers through similar behaviors as the ones portrayed in the ad,” “...to think more strongly about how I can delight my customers through similar behaviors as the ones portrayed in the ad.”; \( \alpha = .79 \)). All items in the study used 7-point scales.

**Covariates.** To remove extraneous influence from the dependent variable, we included two variables as potential covariates. First, employees may differ in the extent to which they are generally interested in ads of their own organization (MacKenzie and Lutz 1989). As such, service employees who are highly interested in ads may also be more motivated to act in accordance with the advertising model. Therefore, before exposing them to the experimental ads, we measured participants’ general interest in ads of their bank on one 7-point item (not interested/interested). Second, gender may also affect how service employees react to ads. Since women may, overall, be more emphatic and more receptive to emotional communication than men (Mattila, Grandey, and Fisk 2003), they may also be more likely to imitate positive, interpersonal behaviors depicted in ads. Hence, we also measured participants’ gender. Both variables did not emerge as significant covariates and were excluded from the analyses.

**Manipulation checks.** As a check on the model’s behavior, participants rated on one item how challenging they thought the model’s behavior was (not very challenging/very challenging). To determine whether implicit theories had been manipulated effectively, participants responded to two items (“No matter what kind of a person someone is, they can always change very much” and “People can change even their most basic abilities”; \( r = .55 \)) adapted from Levy, Stroessner, and Dweck (1998).

**Results and Discussion**

**Manipulation checks.** As expected, a significant main effect indicated that the strongly challenging ad model was considered more challenging than the moderately challenging ad model, \( M_{\text{mod}} = 3.18, M_{\text{strong}} = 5.36, F(1, 98) = 37.78, p < .001 \). Participants who had received an incremental-focused prime believed more strongly that people can change their abilities than participants who had received an entity-focused prime, \( M_{\text{mod}} = 4.32, M_{\text{perm}} = 3.59, F(1, 98) = 4.38, p < .04 \). No other treatment effects were significant for both checks, suggesting that each manipulation was effective and was not affected by the other manipulation.

**Hypothesis testing.** A 2 \( \times \) 2 analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed a significant effect for the model’s behavior, \( F(1, 98) = 20.02, p < .001 \). More important, this main effect was qualified by an interaction between the two independent variables, \( F(1, 98) = 6.26, p < .02 \). Following the logic of Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2, planned contrasts were subsequently performed for entity-focused and incremental-focused employees. As Figure 2 shows, entity-focused employees were significantly affected by how challenging the model’s behavior was. That is, they were more motivated to emulate the behavior of the model when they had been exposed to a moderately challenging ad compared to a strongly challenging ad, \( M_{\text{mod}} = 4.42, M_{\text{strong}} = 4.28, t(49) = 4.80, p < .001 \). Incremental-focused employees, however, were not affected by the model’s behavior. That is, their intention to emulate the model did not differ as a function of the model’s behavior, \( M_{\text{mod}} = 5.24, M_{\text{strong}} = 4.91, t(49) = 1.44, p > .16 \). Hence, Hypotheses 1 and 2 are supported.

**Discussion.** The results of Study 1 show that employees with different theories of ability react differently to ad models. Whereas entity-focused employees reacted more favorably to models that were moderately challenging, incremental-focused employees were unaffected by how challenging the model’s behavior was. Building on these results, Study 2 sought to investigate whether different kinds of mental simulation may help entity-focused employees in coping with challenging models. Furthermore, another purpose of Study 2
was to gain insights regarding the cognitive process driving the evaluation of ad models.

**Study 2: Impact of Implicit Theories of Ability and Mental Simulation**

**Design, Participants, and Procedure.** Participants were randomly assigned to one of three mental simulation conditions (i.e., control, process simulation, outcome simulation). Furthermore, we also measured participants’ implicit theory using a scale from Levy, Streossner, and Dweck (1998). A total of 122 financial advisors (63 females, 59 males) participated in the study. All of them worked in the German-speaking part of Switzerland and interacted with customers daily. On average, participants were 22.1 years old and had worked at the bank for 2.8 years. As in Study 1, the experiment was conducted during several seminars at a training facility in Zurich, Switzerland. In the first part of the study, participants indicated which theory of ability they believed in. Following this, they received a booklet that contained the manipulation of mental simulation and a fictitious ad. After working through the materials, participants responded to the dependent measures and were informed about the real purpose of the study.

**Independent Variables.** Participants’ theories of ability were measured by using a three-item scale adapted from Levy, Streossner, and Dweck (1998) (“The abilities a person has, is something basic about them, and can’t be changed very much.” “People can do things differently, but their basic abilities and skills can’t really be changed,” “Everyone is a certain kind of person, and there is not much that they can do to really change that”). These items used a 1 (disagree completely) to 7 (agree completely) scale, such that lower (higher) scores represent an incremental (entity) orientation. The individual scores were summed and averaged to form an implicit theory index ($\alpha = .75$).

Consistent with previous research, mental simulation was manipulated through different sets of instructions (Escalas and Luce 2003, 2004; Pham and Taylor 1999). All participants were asked to evaluate the print ad in the booklet. Participants in the control conditions received no further instructions and served as a baseline. Participants in the process simulation conditions were instructed to imagine what they would need to do to enact a similar behavior as the model, that is, to focus on the activities necessary for achieving a similar level of performance. Participants in the outcome simulation conditions were instructed to imagine having performed a similar behavior as the model, that is, to focus on the benefits associated with achieving a similar level of performance. The specific instructions are provided in Appendix A.

Since the purpose of Study 2 was to examine how mental simulation affects the reactions to challenging ads, the behavior of the ad model was not manipulated. That is, all participants were exposed to the same ad that described an advisor behaving in a very positive manner (see Appendix B). The ad depicted a scenario in which a customer needs to take out a loan in order to start his own business. The advisor not only grants the loan without much hassle but also helps the customer start his business (e.g., by helping him in developing a financing plan and in establishing relations with business partners). Hence, the employee lived up to the bank’s promise by providing her customer with a service that addressed his individual needs.

**Dependent Variables, Covariates, and Manipulation Checks**

**Behavioral intentions.** The same five items as in Study 1 were used to measure the intention to imitate the model’s behavior ($\alpha = .82$). All items in the study used 7-point scales.

**Anxiety.** Participants’ level of anxiety while processing the ads was assessed with five items adapted from Pham and Taylor (1999) (not nervous/nervous, not tense/tense, relaxed/not relaxed, not anxious/anxious, not pressured/pressured, $\alpha = .84$).

**Covariates.** As in Study 1, we also measured participants’ general interest in ads of their bank and their gender as potential covariates. Again, both variables did not yield any significant effects and were thus excluded from the analyses.

**Manipulation checks.** As a check on the model’s behavior, participants rated on the same item as in Study 1 how challenging they thought the employee’s behavior in the ad was.

Consistent with prior research (Escalas and Luce 2004), two different checks ensured that mental simulation had been manipulated effectively. First, we measured self-reported process simulation on one item (“While viewing the ad, I thought strongly about what I would need to do in order to behave similarly as the employee in the ad”). Second, we measured self-reported outcome simulation on one item (“While viewing the ad, I thought strongly about how I would feel after having behaved similarly as the employee in the ad”).

**Results and Discussion**

**Manipulation checks.** As expected, all participants considered the model’s behavior to be very challenging, $M = 5.44$ on a 7-point scale, $t(121)_{\text{diff from 4}} = 13.21, p < .001$. This judgment did not differ between the conditions, $F(5, 116) < 1$.

The manipulation check for process simulation showed a significant main effect, $F(2, 116) = 5.93, p < .01$. As expected, participants in the process conditions reported greater levels of process simulation ($M = 4.36$) than participants in the outcome condition, $M = 3.48$, $t(84) = 2.77, p < .01$, and the control condition, $M = 3.23$, $t(76) = 2.35, p < .002$. The outcome and the control conditions, however, did not differ significantly, $t(78) = .58, p > .56$. The check for outcome simulation also revealed a significant main effect,
As expected, participants in the outcome conditions reported greater levels of outcome simulation ($M = 4.80$) than did participants in the process condition, $M = 4.05$, $t(84) = 2.19$, $p < .04$, and the control condition, $M = 3.83$, $t(78) = 2.76$, $p < .01$. The process and the control conditions did not show any differences, $t(76) = .63$, $p > .53$.

**Hypothesis testing.** To test our hypotheses, we conducted an ordinary least squares regression analysis. In this regression, we mean-centered the implicit theory scores and included them as a continuous predictor variable in the model. Moreover, we specified two dummy variables for mental simulation (i.e., one dummy comparing the control condition to outcome simulation and one dummy comparing the control condition to process simulation) as well as two terms for the interactions between implicit theories and the dummy variables. Regressing behavioral intentions on these variables yielded results that were consistent with our hypotheses (see Table 2). That is, the analysis revealed a main effect for implicit theories such that a lower score (i.e., more incremental focus) was associated with higher behavioral intentions ($\beta = -0.52$, $p < .01$). Of greater importance, this effect was qualified by a significant interaction between implicit theories and the dummy comparing the control condition to process simulation ($\beta = .42$, $p < .01$). All other effects were not significant.

Next, we regressed self-reported anxiety on the independent variables. Again, the results were consistent with our theoretical reasoning. The analysis revealed a significant effect for implicit theory such that a higher score (i.e., more entity focus) was associated with higher anxiety ($\beta = .45$, $p < .01$). In addition, the analysis revealed a significant effect for the dummy comparing the control condition to process simulation ($\beta = -.21$, $p < .05$) such that process simulation was negatively associated with anxiety. More important, the interaction between these two variables was also significant ($\beta = -.33$, $p < .02$). All other effects were not significant.

Figure 3 depicts the interaction between implicit theories and different kinds of mental simulation for behavioral intentions as well as self-reported anxiety. The slopes suggest that whereas employees who were more incremental-focused reacted similarly to the ad model across all three conditions, employees who were more entity-focused responded more favorably when they engaged in process simulation. To follow up on this effect, we conducted separate “spotlight” analyses (Fitzsimons 2008; Irwin and McClelland 2001) for employees who were more entity-focused (i.e., one standard deviation above the mean) and those who were more incremental-focused (i.e., one standard deviation below the mean).

**Entity-focused employees.** Hypothesis 3 and Hypothesis 4 were tested by conducting a spotlight analysis for employees who leaned more strongly toward an entity focus (i.e., one standard deviation above the mean of implicit theory). Specifically, we compared the no-simulation control condition to the outcome simulation condition and the process simulation condition (see Figure 3). Consistent with Hypothesis 3, this analysis revealed a significant main effect for the dummy comparing the control condition to process simulation ($\beta = .50$, $p < .01$). That is, entity-focused employees exhibited a greater intention to emulate the model when they had been asked to engage in process simulation ($M_{\text{proc}} = 5.12$) relative to the control condition ($M_{\text{control}} = 4.19$). However, the main
effect for the dummy comparing the control condition to outcome simulation was not significant ($\beta = .04, p > .80$). That is, asking entity-focused employees to engage in outcome simulation did not change their reactions compared to the control condition ($M_{\text{out}} = 4.25, M_{\text{control}} = 4.19$), supporting Hypothesis 4. These results show that process simulation can improve the natural reactions of entity-focused employees to challenging models, whereas outcome simulation is less effective.

Next, we investigated the underlying process. As expected, mental simulation affected how anxious entity-focused employees felt when processing the ads. A spotlight analysis revealed a significant effect for the dummy comparing the control condition to process simulation ($\beta = −.46, p < .01$), such that entity-focused employees felt less anxious after engaging in process simulation ($M_{\text{proc}} = 2.35, M_{\text{control}} = 3.77$). However, the effect for the dummy comparing the control condition to outcome simulation was not significant ($\beta = .06, p > .70$), suggesting that outcome simulation was not effective in reducing anxiety ($M_{\text{out}} = 3.94, M_{\text{control}} = 3.77$).

To examine whether reduced levels of anxiety mediated the impact of process simulation, we followed the recommendations from Baron and Kenny (1986). That is, the previous analyses showed that process simulation exerted a positive impact on behavioral intentions (the dependent variable, $\beta = .50, p < .01$) and a negative impact on anxiety (the proposed mediator, $\beta = −.46, p < .01$). In a next step, we included the anxiety scores as a predictor in the regression model and regressed behavioral intentions on all of these variables. As expected, anxiety emerged as a significant predictor of intentions ($\beta = −.43, p < .001$), whereas the impact of the dummy variable focusing on process simulation was reduced considerably ($\beta = .31, p < .03$). A Sobel test confirmed the significance of the mediation ($z = 2.72, p < .01$). Hence, Hypothesis 5 is supported.
**Incremental-focused employees.** Similar to the previous analyses, Hypothesis 6 and Hypothesis 7 were tested by conducting spotlight analyses for employees who leaned more strongly toward an incremental focus (i.e., one standard deviation below the mean of implicit theory). As expected, incremental-focused employees were not affected by the kind of mental simulation they were asked to perform. Consistent with Hypothesis 6, the main effect for the dummy comparing the control condition to process simulation was not significant ($\beta = -0.15, p > 0.28$), suggesting that employees did not react differently across the two conditions ($M_{\text{proc}} = 4.83, M_{\text{control}} = 5.11$). Furthermore, the same effect was found for the dummy focusing on outcome simulation ($\beta = -0.02, p > 0.87, M_{\text{out}} = 5.07, M_{\text{control}} = 5.11$). Thus, Hypothesis 7 is also supported.

These results suggest that incremental-focused employees were confident that they could imitate the model’s behavior, regardless of the kind of mental simulation they performed. The anxiety scores provide support for this line of reasoning. That is, the effect of the dummy comparing the control condition to process simulation was not significant ($\beta = 0.04, p > 0.75, M_{\text{proc}} = 2.59, M_{\text{control}} = 2.45$) and the same held true for the dummy comparing the control condition to outcome simulation ($\beta = 0.17, p > 0.25, M_{\text{out}} = 2.97, M_{\text{control}} = 2.45$). Hence, these results show that anxiety did not vary as a function of mental simulation.

**Discussion.** Study 2 confirms the hypothesized relationships. Specifically, entity-focused employees reacted more positively to the ad model and experienced less anxiety after engaging in process simulation. In contrast, outcome simulation did not improve their reactions because it was not effective in decreasing anxiety. As expected, a different pattern of results emerged for incremental-focused employees. These employees were unaffected by different kinds of mental simulation. Presumably, they believed that they would be able to imitate the model’s behavior and did thus not experience great levels of anxiety in response to the ad.

**General Discussion**

The objective of this research was to investigate if employees featured in ads can serve as effective models for other service employees. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first research to examine the internal impact of ads in an experimental setting, using a sample of real service employees. The data supported our basic premise that an employee’s implicit theory of ability affects how he or she reacts to ad models. Study 1 showed that whereas incremental-focused employees were unaffected by the model’s behavior, entity-focused employees evaluated an ad more favorably when the model’s behavior was moderately rather than strongly challenging. Study 2 extended these findings by examining how mental simulation affects the evaluation of challenging ad models. Consistent with our theorizing, entity-focused employees reacted more positively to a challenging model when they engaged in process simulation, but not when they engaged in outcome simulation. As expected, incremental-focused employees were not affected by the kind of simulation they were asked to perform.

**Theoretical Implications**

This research makes several contributions to the literature. First, the studies contribute to research on the internal effects of advertising. Previous research in this area has mostly focused on the ads themselves (e.g., Acito and Ford 1980; Gilly and Wolfinbarger 1998). For instance, service researchers have argued that many ads tend to “overpromise” and to exaggerate the true achievements of the organization (Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman 1988). Such ads not only will disappoint customers but will also demoralize employees by portraying a level of service that they will not be able to deliver. Our research builds on these findings by showing that the internal impact of ads may be determined not only by factors that are inherent to the ads (e.g., overpromising) but also by employees’ implicit beliefs. Both of our studies show that entity-focused and incremental-focused employees react differently to an ad model, even when the behavior depicted in the ad is the same.

Second, the studies contribute to research on implicit theories of ability. Consistent with prior research, we found that employees with an entity focus react more negatively to difficult challenges than employees with an incremental focus. In addition, our results indicate that asking entity-focused employees to engage in process simulation may yield beneficial effects. As such, our studies demonstrate that findings from the mental simulation literature constitute a valuable extension to research on implicit theories of ability.

Third, our research adds to the literature by investigating the process through which different kinds of mental simulation affect the evaluation of challenging ads. As Study 2 demonstrates, process simulation may enable entity-focused employees to cope with their anxiety in an effective manner, whereas outcome simulation may prove to be less effective in this respect. On a more general level, Study 2 suggests that if the anxiety entity-focused individuals experience in challenging situations can be alleviated, self-defeating behaviors like withdrawing from the task at hand may be reduced (Cury et al. 2008; Hong et al. 1999). At the same time, our results also show that incremental-focused employees are less likely to feel anxious, which helps to explain why they are motivated to emulate challenging models.

**Managerial Implications**

The results of this research have important managerial implications. Notably, ads may be used to communicate to employees what behaviors are expected of them. For instance,
the ads of the airline Lufthansa concentrate on the service promise “There’s no better way to fly.” That is, these ads typically portray how Lufthansa manages to deliver an exceptional level of service through the behavior of its employees. One ad, for example, depicts a scenario where a child destined for Rome forgets her teddy bear at the departure gate. A ground employee realizes the imminent need to act and puts the bear on the next flight, thereby managing to reunite the child with her favorite toy. An ad like this, however, will only be effective if Lufthansa’s ground personnel are willing to live up to the model’s behavior (Wentzel 2009).

As our results demonstrate, this is not automatically the case. Specifically, employees may distance themselves from models that are very challenging, which is especially likely to be the case when they believe that their abilities are relatively fixed. Hence, what can managers at Lufthansa do to ensure that ad models are imitated successfully? Again, the results of our studies may provide some indication. That is, managers may be well-advised to disseminate ads internally before they are launched to the public and to prepare employees for the behavioral challenges that are associated with ad models (Mitchell 2002). Such strategy may require increased managerial emphasis on training employees. However, these efforts are likely to pay off by increasing employees’ readiness to carry out the advertising promise.

Returning to the previous example, supervisors at Lufthansa may organize workshops with ground employees before the ads are officially launched. At these workshops, supervisors may discuss the purpose of the ads and explain to ground employees that passengers may be expecting similar behaviors from them after seeing these ads. More important, such workshops may also be used for introducing ground employees to mental simulation techniques. For instance, supervisors may outline in detail how employees should deal with lost baggage and what steps they need to consider for achieving a similar performance as the model. Afterwards, supervisors may ask ground employees to imagine that they would find themselves in a similar situation and to mentally rehearse each of the steps that have been described previously. Such an intensive exchange may have at least three beneficial effects. First, process simulation may help employees in realizing that they will be able to deliver a complex service (i.e., handling lost baggage quickly and effectively) by performing a number of interrelated steps. Second, supervisors can ensure that ground employees perform process simulation correctly and may help them if they run into difficulties during the exercise. Third, supervisors may also explain that process simulation not only is useful for dealing with lost baggage but is a broader skill that may help them deal with complex service requests. Overall, such workshops should boost employees’ confidence that they can live up to challenging ad models.

If such workshops are not feasible due to budgetary or time constraints, managers may still benefit from disseminating ads by featuring them in the company’s in-house magazine, by sending them via e-mail, or by placing them on the company’s intranet. Even in such cases, managers may implement process simulation. As our results show, process simulation can be triggered through brief, written instructions that are provided to employees before they are exposed to the ads. For instance, supervisors may send their ground employees an e-mail containing the ads and a letter encouraging process simulation, such as, “Please look at these ads carefully. Once they are launched, it is very likely that your customers will expect a similar service from you. To help you prepare for this, you may find it useful to think of how you would proceed, of what steps you would need to carry out to satisfy your customer.”

To ensure that employees would not ignore this e-mail and would actually perform process simulation, supervisors may ask employees to write down how they would proceed when dealing with lost luggage and to send those suggestions back. This procedure would help supervisors determine which employees have problems in performing process simulation correctly and need individualized coaching. These accounts may also be useful for identifying internal barriers that may preclude employees from emulating ad models successfully.

Finally, process simulation not only may prove beneficial for disseminating ads but may also be of relevance in a broader training context. For instance, training manuals—instead of merely documenting the individual components of service delivery—may emphasize that employees should mentally rehearse the entire process before interacting with customers.

On a more general level, our results may also imply that employees ascribing to an incremental focus may be better able to deal with the behavioral challenges that inevitably arise in complex service environments. Although we have not explicitly investigated this issue, implicit theories of ability may form part of a firm’s recruitment decisions. Of course, we do not wish to claim that the decision to hire an applicant should be solely based on the applicant’s implicit theory; nevertheless, implicit theories may provide an indication as to how potential employees will deal with challenges and how effective they will be in delivering the service.

**Limitations and Future Research**

Although this research presents findings that contribute to the literature focused on the internal effects of advertising, it also has some limitations that call for future research. One limitation concerns the fact that the studies were conducted during training seminars and that participants were only exposed to a single print ad. While this procedure allowed us to control for the influence of extraneous factors, it may also have had some drawbacks. Specifically, the experimental setting may have introduced a degree of artificiality. In real
life, employees are likely to be exposed to a number of print ads, TV spots, and billboards which may be targeted at different stakeholders and which may also convey slightly different messages. Hence, service employees may have several models at their disposal and may need to integrate numerous, potentially conflicting ads into a coherent impression (Scott and Lane 2000).

In Study 1, we manipulated the model’s behavior through a scenario that depicted an employee having to work overtime to satisfy a customer’s needs. We relied on this manipulation because we believed that it reflected a difficult and challenging situation for an employee. That is, the employee not only had to stay late but also had to deliver a complex service (i.e., financial advising) when she or he may be exhausted from a long day’s work. However, one may argue that our scenario also manipulates an employee’s willingness to work overtime and his or her commitment to the client, rather than his or her ability to perform successfully under difficult circumstances. Hence, one limitation of our experimental scenario may be that it is difficult to isolate the effects of ability from the effects of willingness and commitment.

Study 1 used a priming procedure to manipulate employees’ theory of ability. As outlined in the methods section, previous research has frequently used such primes to isolate the hypothesized effects and to address issues of causality. However, one may question whether a short article depicting the results of scientific studies can really succeed in manipulating an individual’s implicit theory of ability. That is, given that an individual’s implicit theory is relatively stable over time, it may be more fruitful from a theoretical as well as a managerial perspective to examine chronic differences. Hence, the use of primes constitutes a limitation of Study 1. To address this concern, we examined chronic differences in Study 2. Both studies led to consistent results, increasing our confidence that our results were not affected too strongly by the particular manner in which implicit theories were operationalized.

We have implicitly assumed that service employees will consider the model’s behavior as a guideline for their own behavior. However, there may also be instances in which the model’s behavior may be discounted and may not be considered as a relevant guideline. For instance, Friestad and Wright (1994) have proposed that consumers develop dynamic knowledge structures about persuasion and draw on this knowledge to identify and cope with other people’s attempts to influence them. Although persuasion knowledge has mostly been examined in consumer contexts, one may argue that employees also develop beliefs about how their own organization may be trying to persuade them. That is, employees may infer that ads are created not only to persuade consumers but also to persuade the employees themselves. As a result, they may activate their persuasion knowledge and may discount the model’s behavior. Hence, employees’ persuasion knowledge may constitute an interesting boundary condition for our findings.

Finally, we only focused on one group of service employees in our analyses, namely financial advisors at a retail bank. Future research should investigate whether our findings apply to different groups of service employees within a bank (e.g., call center agents) and to service employees in different industries (e.g., travel agents, flight attendants).

While a number of issues are waiting to be explored, this research extends the literature in two important ways. First, it demonstrates that implicit theories of ability provide a useful framework for understanding how service employees respond to ad models. Second, and more important, this research shows that managers can help employees deal with such challenges by encouraging them to engage in process-oriented simulation. In doing so, managers can ensure that their employees will live up to the service promise, even when they initially thought that they would not be able to do so.

Appendix A

Instructions for Mental Simulation Exercises

No-Simulation Control Instructions. The ad you will see next has been created explicitly for this study. At this time, we are pretesting the ad and may launch it in the future. Specifically, the ad shows how a colleague of yours lives up to our service promise. This is a promise that [bank’s name] makes to all its customers. Therefore, it is extremely important that all employees of [bank’s name] try to live up to this promise every day.

Please take a good look at the ad and tell us what you think.

Process Simulation Instructions. The ad you will see next has been created explicitly for this study. At this time, we are pretesting the ad and may launch it in the future. Specifically, the ad shows how a colleague of yours lives up to our service promise. This is a promise that [bank’s name] makes to all its customers. Therefore, it is extremely important that all employees of [bank’s name] try to live up to this promise every day.

Please take a good look at the ad and imagine that you would need to deal with a similar situation in a few days from now. As you imagine, think of what you would need to do in order to help the customer effectively. Think of what you would do after the customer had come to you and laid out his business proposal before you. What would you do? How would you proceed? Think about how you would feel while you are helping your customer and bringing our service promise to life. It is very important that you actually see yourself behaving in an effective manner and have that picture in your mind.

(continued)
Appendix A (continued)

Outcome Simulation Instructions. The ad you will see next has been created explicitly for this study. At this time, we are pretesting the ad and may launch it in the future. Specifically, the ad shows how a colleague of yours lives up to our service promise. This is a promise that [bank’s name] makes to all its customers. Therefore, it is extremely important that all employees of [bank’s name] try to live up to this promise every day.

Please take a good look at the ad and imagine that you would need to deal with a similar situation in a few days from now. Imagine that you behaved in a similar manner as the colleague in the ad. That is, imagine that the customer had laid out his business proposal before you and that you had solved all his concerns effectively. How would you feel? How would the customer feel? Think about how you would feel after having helped your customer and having brought our service promise to life. It is very important that you actually see yourself having performed in an effective manner and have that picture in your mind.

Appendix B

Ad Copy Used in Study 2

Headline. You & Us. The good feeling that your advisor at (bank’s name) will work toward your dreams.

Main Copy. Our client simply wanted to take out a loan to start his own business for environmental engineering in Switzerland and China. His advisor, Heike Schwarz, did not only grant the loan without hassle. When talking with her client about his dreams, she realized that he also needed help in developing a financing plan and she took action. On the same day, Heike Schwarz started working on a draft for such a plan. Furthermore, she took advantage of our strong, global network to help her client establish business relations. The result: Today our client runs a successful business with over 50 employees in Switzerland and in China.

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Note

1. An alternative analysis would consist of median-splitting the implicit theory scores and testing the hypotheses through a 2 × 3 ANOVA. However, dichotomization has received much criticism lately because it may lead to erroneous results; for a more detailed discussion, see Fitzsimons (2008) and Irwin and McClelland (2001). Nevertheless, both forms of analysis lead to results that are completely consistent in terms of their significance as well as in terms of their direction.

References


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