

## ENCOURAGING UNDERGRADUATE PARTICIPATION IN INTERNSHIP PROGRAMS

# An application of Message Sidedness

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Message sidedness theory is used to investigate communications with undergraduate students about internship participation for students enrolled in communications majors. A quasi-experimental design tested three message formats relative to message credibility, beliefs about internships, and behavior intentions, and investigated the role of prior thought and intent. Study results do not confirm previous message sidedness research, but do support the significant role of prior thought and intent. Practical implications for communicating with undergraduate students about internship opportunities in the communications field and future research directions are offered.

### INTRODUCTION

One of the most familiar forms of experiential education available today, and one that is thriving on almost every college campus, is internship programs for undergraduate students (Bourland-Davis, Graham & Petrausch in Sallot & De Santo, 2003; Katula & Threnhauser, 1999). Previous research shows that internship experience is mutually beneficial for students and employers. Interns can provide inexpensive help to an employer, fresh ideas, and a talent pool from which future full-time employees may be drawn (Bourland-Davis, Graham & Fulmer, 1997; Cannon & Arnold, 1998). Students gain an understanding of organizational structure and protocol within a professional working environment (Katula & Threnhauser, 1999). In addition, Knouse, Tanner and Harris (1999) assert internship experiences can improve student performance in college by helping them master time management and communication skills, and help students develop an overall better self-concept. Internships help students gain professional experience (Beard & Morton, 1999; Cantor, 1995; Cannon & Arnold, 1998; Katula & Threnhauser, 1999) and may lead to a permanent position (Bourland-Davis et al., 2003; Cannon & Arnold, 1998).

Despite their popularity, internships have received little scientific scrutiny. Gault, Redington and Schlager (2000) argue this diminishes the perceived legitimacy of field internship programs. While several educators have suggested how to improve career placement of their students (Fulmer, 1993; Graham & Bourland-Davis, 2001; Cannon & Arnold, 1998; Gault, et al, 2000; Scott & Frontczak, 1996) by allocating additional resources to encourage student participation and present incoming students with appropriate information, few have addressed how a college should communicate with students about these opportunities. How do students process persuasive messages relative to internship opportunities? What type(s) of message(s) would be most persuasive? This study addresses these questions.

### INTERNSHIPS

Katula and Threnhauser (1999) state that an internship has traditionally been defined as any carefully monitored work or service experience in which an individual has intentional learning goals and reflects actively on what she or he is learning throughout the experience. Most internship programs specify work hours, compensation (if any), credit awarded, and faculty/university and sponsor oversight (Gault et al., 2000). The internship's purpose is to provide students with an understanding of organizational structure and a protocol within a professional working environment, as well as an opportunity for professional development (Katula & Threnhauser, 1999; Cannon & Arnold, 1998).

Previous research shows internships are a "win-win" situation for students, employers and schools. Students relate classroom concepts to practical application. According to Coco (2000) students also gain improved knowledge of an industry as it relates to their career paths and personal interests, and their career ambitions also may become better crystallized. Students may benefit by entering the workplace after graduation in a reduced state of shock, and gain faster advancements than non-interns (Cannon & Arnold, 1998; Jarvis, 2000).

Internships allow a company to evaluate a prospective employee nearly risk-free (Cannon & Arnold, 1998; Coco, 2000). Other benefits include: access to highly motivated and productive employees, the release of full-time employees from routine tasks, and the opportunity to evaluate and cultivate potential full-time employees (Coco, 2000).

Internships may help validate the university's curriculum in a real-world environment and help with student placements after graduation (Coco, 2000). In addition, successful internship relationships may assist with garnering monetary support, guest lecturers and field trips.

While research suggests that schools should communicate to students more intensively about internship opportunities and benefits, (Knouse et al., 1999), previous research does not address how to develop such messages or how students would react to such persuasive messages.

### MESSAGE SIDEDNESS

Message sidedness refers to the style of argumentation within the message content. Allen (1991) delineates three types of message sidedness: a one-sided message presents only those arguments in favor of a particular position; a two-sided message presents the arguments in favor of a proposition but also considers the opposing arguments. Two-sided messages can be further delineated into non-refutational and refutational messages, where a two-sided refutational message mentions the counterarguments and then refutes them in an effort to demonstrate why the counterargument is inferior to the position advocated by the communicator. The two-sided non-refutational message, like the refutational message, mentions the counterarguments of the position advocated, but does not offer refutation. The results of Allen's meta-analysis demonstrate that a two-sided message with refutation is more persuasive than a one-sided message, while

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a one-sided message is more persuasive than a two-sided message without refutation.

Other research also has generally documented that two-sided persuasive messages (such as advertisements) tend to be viewed as more credible than their one-sided counterparts (Pechmann, 1992). Kamins, Brand, Hoeke, & Moe (1989) found that a two-sided communication elicited significantly higher advertising credibility and effectiveness ratings, higher evaluations of the sponsor in terms of perceived overall quality of service, as well as a significantly greater intention to use the advertised service than when compared to a traditional one-sided celebrity endorsement. Etgar and Goodwin (1982) also found that a two-sided appeal produced more favorable attitudes toward a new product introduction versus the traditional one-sided appeal. These few studies support Allen's (1991) recommendation that future studies should compare all three types of messages.

#### PRIOR THOUGHT AND INTENT

As previously stated, prior thought and intent may strongly influence message processing, creating a bias in the cognitive processing of persuasive messages such that individuals with high prior thought and intent evidenced significantly higher positive belief change and behavior change than did persons low in prior thought and intent, but not attitude change (Smith, Morrison, Kopfman, & Ford, 1994).

**Table 1. Recurring Expressed Perceived Benefits and Drawbacks of Internship Participation**

BENEFITS	DRAWBACKS
<p><b>Experience/Knowledge:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gain real-world experience</li> <li>• Work in a professional setting</li> <li>• Apply education</li> <li>• Build skill set</li> </ul> <p><b>Networking:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish relationships</li> <li>• Build your reputation</li> </ul> <p><b>Future Pay-offs:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Get an edge over others in job market</li> <li>• Get your foot in the door</li> <li>• Receive higher salary</li> </ul>	<p><b>Pay/No Pay:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not enough, or any</li> </ul> <p><b>Time Commitment</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If participating and taking classes, leaves no time for self</li> <li>• Time conflicts with classes; or have to forfeit classes (delays graduation)</li> </ul> <p><b>Work Environment</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not treated with respect, or as inferior</li> <li>• Unfriendly atmosphere; not appreciated; taken advantage of</li> <li>• Doing unrelated tasks</li> </ul>

Crowley and Hoyer (1994), in developing an integrative framework of two-sided persuasion, provide two propositions regarding the relationship between a person's prior knowledge and the effectiveness of two-sided messages relative to attitude change. The authors posit that if a person is not aware of negative information, counterarguments will increase and a two-sided message will be less effective than a one-sided message. Second, if a person has prior awareness of negative information about the issue, a two-sided and one-sided message will be equally effective. However, extant research has yet to empirically test these propositions.

#### RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

H1: Respondents exposed to a two-sided refutational message about the benefits of internship participation will generate more positive beliefs and behavioral intentions than respondents exposed to the one-sided or the two-sided non-refutational message.

H2: Respondents exposed to a two-sided non-refutation-

al message about the benefits of internship participation will generate less positive beliefs and behavioral intentions than respondents exposed to a one-sided message.

H3: Respondents exposed to either type of two-sided message about the benefits of internship participation will rate message credibility higher than those exposed to the one-sided message.

RQ1: Does prior thought and intent mediate the relationship between message sidedness and persuasiveness?

However, before investigating the above hypotheses and research question, relevant concerns of the population in question must be assessed in order to create the messages. Therefore, an additional research question is offered:

RQ2: What are the specific concerns associated with student internship participation?

#### PHASE ONE

This initial phase obtained information about the sample's relevant concerns associated with internship participation in order to address only these concerns in a refutational message.

Respondents in this phase were 274 undergraduate students enrolled in beginning level advertising and public relations courses at a major four-year, public Midwestern university where internships are not required, but highly recommended. Respondents received extra course credit for their participation. They were recruited to visit an online survey regarding internships. The survey was broken into several distinct sections, but the first is most relevant to the research question at hand. Students were asked to write in what they felt were the biggest benefits and drawbacks of internship participation. Immediately after all responses were gathered, the researchers met to note the respondents' common perceptions and concerns. Table 1 summarizes these results.

The table indicates that students realize the traditionally advertised benefits of internship participation: "real world" or practical working experience, professional contacts, and a possible long-term advantage after graduation over others who have not participated in internships.

However, students had prevalent concerns – namely compensation. Many believed internships did not pay and stated that, even if the internship did provide compensation, they could still make more money elsewhere in service positions, such as in retail or restaurant positions. This is a real issue since many students have to hold part-time jobs in order to meet the rising demands of college expenses. Other recurring concerns included the perceived time commitment required for internships and treatment of interns. Students perceive internships as taking them "away" from their course work, studies and the social aspect of their college experience. Internships also may conflict with their course schedules and if they decided to forfeit classes one semester in lieu of an internship opportunity, this forfeiture would delay graduation. Finally, students believe that interns are not treated well in the business world – that full-time employees look down on interns, may take advantage of them, and do not appreciate their work.

In addition to filling out this open-ended question in Phase One, students also were asked to fill out several scale items to measure attitudes and perceptions of internships (these results are not reported on in this particular manuscript). Respondents also completed scale items relating to prior thought and intent, an independent variable in this study that will be explored in more depth in Phase Two. The scale contained five Likert-type statements (e.g., I have previously thought about obtaining an

internship, I have considered the benefits of getting an internship, I have considered asking someone about internships, I intend to obtain an internship, and I intend to ask someone about obtaining an internship), where 1 = low agreement and 7 = high agreement, and produced an alpha = .8680.

### PHASE TWO

Phase Two utilized the concerns identified in Phase One to create persuasive messages designed to vary by sidedness of the message – one-sided, non-refutational and refutational.

The same students recruited from Phase One of the study were re-recruited to participate in Phase Two. This delayed re-recruitment process occurred after Phase One was complete and is similar to the procedure used by Smith et al. (1994). A total of 241 of the original 274 students participated. Students were asked to randomly visit one of three Web sites that contained one of the three messages developed about internships and asked to complete a post-exposure survey.

The post-exposure survey contained scale items to measure the dependent variables of message credibility, internship beliefs, and behavioral intent to participate in, or seek information about, an internship. The message credibility scale contained 5 seven-point responses to adjectives (e.g., effective, appropriate, thorough, reliable, and believable) where 1 = low and 7 = high. High overall scores indicate higher credibility. The reliability of this scale across these items was alpha = .83. Internships beliefs also were measured using a scale item, where 1 = low and 7 = high agreement. Five statements were used (e.g., internships are a worthwhile experience, internships are right for me, internships provide real benefits, internships are important to my future success, and participating in an internship is a smart thing) and resulted in an alpha = .87. Behavior intent was measured across a three-item scale, where 1= high and 7 = low. Hence, higher scores indicate lower behavioral intent. The statements produced an alpha = .92.

### GENERAL SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

The sample of 241 responses was 66 percent female (N=159) and 34 percent male (N=82). The distribution of student class standing was as follows: 31 percent freshman (N=75), 32 percent sophomore (N=77), 23 percent junior (N=56), and 14 percent senior (N=33). The academic major cited by most respondents was advertising, at 35.7 percent (N=86); however, 17 percent (N=41) classified themselves as business majors, 12 percent (N=28) were communication majors, 10 percent (N=24) were telecommunication majors, and 18 percent (N=44) classified themselves as “other” majors with several students citing packaging, merchandise management, and no preference majors. (This university has no public relations major; it has a specialization in public relations for those majoring in advertising, communications or journalism.) The majority (54 percent) of students report holding either part- or full-time jobs in addition to taking their classes, as well as participating in extracurricular activities (57 percent). Only 18 percent of the sample (N=43) had previously participated in an internship.

H1: Hypothesis 1 posited that respondents exposed to a two-sided refutational message about benefits would generate more positive beliefs and behavioral intentions than respondents exposed to the one-sided or the two-sided non-refutational message. In order to test the hypothesis, two one-way ANOVAs were performed (message type X belief; message type X intent). See Table 2.

The results of both the omnibus ANOVA suggest that overall, message type produced no variation in either

strength of beliefs about internships ( $F(2,237)=.237$ ,  $p=.789$ , n.s.) or behavioral intentions ( $F(2,235)=2.02$ ,  $p=.135$ , n.s.). Therefore, H1 is not supported.

H2: Hypothesis 2 posited that respondents exposed to the two-sided non-refutational message about benefits will generate less positive beliefs and behavioral intentions than respondents exposed to the one-sided message. This hypothesis was tested using independent sample t-tests. See Table 3.

Results indicate that the non-refutational message did not produce less positive beliefs ( $M=30.11$ ,  $SD=4.94$ ) than the one-sided message ( $M=30.67$ ,  $SD=5.09$ ),  $t(df=161)=.702$ ,  $p=.483$ , n.s.. However, results did illustrate that the non-refutational message did produce less behavioral intention than the one-sided message ( $M=5.68$  v.  $4.84$ , respectively), but the difference was marginally significant  $t(df=159)=-1.92$ ,  $p=.057$ ). Therefore, H2 is only partially supported.

H3: Hypothesis 3 posited that respondents exposed to either type of two-sided message about benefits would rate message credibility higher than those exposed to the one-sided message. In order to test this hypothesis, a one-way ANOVA (message type X credibility) was completed. See Table 4.

Omnibus ANOVA results indicate that message type did not produce significant variability in perceptions of message credibility, ( $F(2,239)=1.13$ ,  $p=.324$ , n.s.). Therefore, H3 is not supported.

**Table 2. Omnibus ANOVA Results of Message Type by Belief and Message Type by Behavioral Intent**

MESSAGE BY BELIEF	Mean	SD	Statistic	Significance
One-sided (N=79)	30.67	5.09	.237	p=.789, n.s.
Non-refutational (N=84)	30.12	4.94		
Refutational (N=75)	30.53	5.99		
MESSAGE BY INTENT	Mean	SD	Statistic	Significance
One-sided (N=77)	4.84	2.50	2.02	p=.135, n.s.
Non-refutational (N=84)	5.68	2.98		
Refutational (N=75)	5.07	2.68		

**Table 3. T-Test Results between One-Sided and Non-Refutational**

MESSAGE BY BELIEF	Mean	SD	Statistic	Significance
One-sided (N=79)	30.67	5.09	.702	p=.483, n.s.
Non-refutational (N=84)	30.12	4.94		
MESSAGE BY INTENT	Mean	SD	Statistic	Significance
One-sided (N=77)	4.84	2.50	-1.92	p=.057.
Non-refutational (N=84)	5.68	2.98		

**Table 4. Omnibus ANOVA Results of Message Type by Message Credibility**

MESSAGE	Mean	SD	Statistic	Significance
One-sided (N=80)	29.39	4.16	1.13	p=.324, n.s.
Non-refutational (N=84)	28.40	4.03		
Refutational (N=76)	28.74	4.54		

**Table 5. Message Credibility by Prior Thought and Intent and Message Type**

PTI/Message	One-sided	Non-refutational	Refutational	Overall
Low PTI	28.78	27.36	28.11	27.98
High PIT	30.13	29.54	28.74	29.54
Overall	29.55	28.27	28.40	

RQ1: Research Question 1 asked whether prior thought and intent mediates the relationship between message sidedness and persuasiveness. In order to investigate this relationship, the sample was first divided into two groups – those with high prior thought and intent and those with low prior thought and intent. This Hi/Lo split was achieved by taking the lowest one-third scores (those at or below 30) and the highest one-third scores (those at or above 35). Those respondents with scores in the middle

range of 31-34 were excluded from the analysis. Therefore, only 166 responses were used in the analysis. Subsequently, message credibility was analyzed in a prior thought and intent (hi vs. low) by message type (one-sided, non-refutational, refutational) between subjects factorial analysis of variance. See Table 5 for cell and marginal means.

Results indicate a significant main effect of prior thought and intent on message credibility ( $F(1,164)=4.63, p<.05$ ), such that those with higher prior thought and intent rated message credibility significantly higher than those with lower prior thought and intent scores, regardless of message type. However, no main effect of message type was present ( $F(1,163)=1.05, p=.352, n.s.$ ), nor was there a significant interaction effect between message type and prior thought and intent ( $F(2,163)=.455, p=.635, n.s.$ ).

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Determining current students' perceptions of the benefits and drawbacks of internships is instrumental in developing relevant messages. Hence, if students can acknowledge and understand the benefits of internship before participating in an internship, then universities communicating these benefits may not only be wasting their time, but also their money on redundant messages. This study indicates that students are concerned about the nature of their compensation for internships, the time commitment involved in internship participation, and their possible treatment on the job. It may be that developing messages that communicate about these issues may prove more beneficial than those generically addressing the benefits of participation.

This study also attempted to use message-sidedness theory to possibly inform educators about how to communicate with their students about internship participation. Previous research has indicated that in the hierarchy of message sidedness, relative to persuasiveness, two-sided refutational messages are the most persuasive, followed by a one-sided message, and lastly, a two-sided

non-refutational message. However, very few empirical studies have utilized all three formats in their experiments. In this study, most hypotheses were not supported, and therefore the results cannot support previous assertions about the effectiveness of message sidedness relative to communications about internships. However, one hypothesis that was supported was that a one-sided message did marginally affect behavioral intentions, such that the one-sided message was related to stronger behavioral intentions than a non-refutational message. This seems logical because the one-sided message only presented the most positive of information, while the non-refutational message included reasons why a student may not want to participate.

The research does, however, support the notion that prior thought and intent exhibits a strong influence on message processing. This suggests that in order to develop an effective message strategy, it is important to gauge the characteristics of your audience. While this study didn't examine the role of class status, it could be a variable that impacts perceptions of message credibility. It is likely that a strong relationship exists between class status and prior thought and intent. Juniors and senior-level students are likely to exhibit more prior thought and intent than freshmen and sophomores because they are closer to solidifying career choices and entering the job market. In addition, juniors and seniors are possibly more likely to have received prior messages about internships from counselors, academic advisors or professors than those just entering college (Bourland-Davis, Graham & Petrausch in Sallot & De Santo, 2003).

One possible explanation for why so few of the hypotheses were supported could be attributed to the nature of the test messages. While every attempt was made to construct messages that addressed the sample's concerns over internship participation, the messages themselves were not pre-tested to ensure the manipulation of the different levels of message sidedness. Future message sidedness research ought to take this precautionary measure.

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