Calibrating the Corporate Voice: The Interplay of Focus, Magnitude, and Expectancy Violation in a Polarized Climate

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Abstract

Many companies engage with diverse social issues to meet growing stakeholder expectations. However, this can be challenging and risky amid opinion polarization. Building on the lens of Corporate Social Advocacy (CSA), Social License to Operate (SLO), and Expectancy Violation Theory (EVT), this study tests public reactions to corporate communication strategies in this context. A 2 (expectancy: high vs. low) x 2 (communication focus: advocacy vs. defense) x 2 (communication magnitude: extensive vs. reserved) between-subject experiment was conducted. Findings show that communication focus shapes public reactions directly. This effect is moderated by communication magnitude, and this interaction is further moderated by perception of expectancy violations. Specifically, an extensive defense strategy backfires under conditions of high expectancy violation. Taken together, this study offers new insights for strategic communication management on controversial social issues, moving beyond simple decisions about whether to take a stance.

***Keywords*:** Communication Management, Public Relations, Expectancy Violation, Corporate Social Advocacy, Social License to Operate