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Consumers Faced with Telephone Selling: Metacognition, Resistance and Strategies

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ABSTRACT

This research aims at deepening knowledge of resistance phenomena by exploring individuals' perception of telephone selling. Analysis of the corpus constituted by written account of telesales episodes, followed by long, semi-structured interviews with 24 respondents, enriches four levels of understanding: respondents' cognition of telesales and their pre-existing schemas when faced by this type of influence; the way in which their metacognition is constructed over time; the strategies they adopt and the levels of resistance these reveal; and the individual and situational factors that possibly moderate their reactions.

INTRODUCTION

Consumer resistance has been the subject of numerous studies since the pioneering work of Peñaloza and Price (1993). Some of these have explored the collective aspects of resistance through protest organizations and groups committed to oppositional activities or ways of bypassing the market (Friedman 1999; Giesler 2006; Hemetsberger 2006). Others have endeavored to look at individual manifestations of resistance from the standpoint of the rejection of codes and brands (Duke 2002; Moisio and Askegaard 2002; Thompson and Haytko 2002; Klein 1999; Holt 2002; Dalli, Gistri, and Romani 2005), of anti-consumption and voluntary simplicity (Dobscha and Ozanne 2001; Shaw and Newholm 2002; Shepherd 2002; Zavestoski 2002) or of various persuasion devices such as advertising (Rumbo 2002) and sales techniques (Kirmani and Campbell 2004).

Despite the need emphasized by Holt (2002) to situate understanding of resistance mechanisms on an interactionist—rather than simply critical or postmodern—basis, few studies succeed in highlighting the linkage between consumers' reactions and the motives giving rise to them. Many papers emphasize the static finding of consumers' dissatisfaction, withdrawal and opposition without necessarily grasping what provokes these or what processes have resulted in them. At the theoretical level, studies of consumer resistance have provided many more descriptive accounts than frameworks of analysis suitable for explaining the phenomenon. In this respect Friestad and Wright's (1994) Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) offers interesting perspectives for understanding how individuals construct a representational system of the market and its influencing mechanisms. From this standpoint, analysis of individuals' perception of telephone selling provides a relevant context for understanding how the representations they construct of this type of enticement form the basis of their resistance mechanisms and of the strategies they develop. Adopting the perspective offered by Kirmani and Campbell (2004) on the various kinds of responses to sales personnel's influence attempts, this approach aims at deepening knowledge of resistance phenomena by selecting situations particularly favorable to their emergence. However, in contrast to the conditions studied by these authors—in which respondents initiate the contact with an influence structure—, they are subjected here to a relation that they have not chosen in terms of either its timing or its content. This difference, which is likely to

accentuate potential resistance reactions, enables us to observe how, in the interaction, individuals interpret the influence attempt and what processes follow in terms of coping strategies. Further to the work carried out by the above-mentioned authors, the present study aims to reveal individuals' pre-existing cognitive systems and to show how these are directly linked to the forms of response adopted.

Analysis of the corpus constituted by written account of telesales episodes, followed by long, semi-structured interviews with 24 respondents, ultimately enriches four levels of understanding: respondents' cognition of telesales and their pre-existing schemas when faced by this type of influence; the way in which their metacognition is constructed over time; the strategies they adopt and the levels of resistance these reveal; and the individual and situational factors that possibly moderate their reactions. We discuss the implications of our findings and indicate avenues of future research on consumer resistance that these results suggest.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Approaching consumer resistance through "marketplace metacognition" opens up a significant line of research for understanding both its reactive nature and its construction over time (Friestad and Wright 1994; Wright 2002). These authors indeed show that consumers possess, to a greater or lesser extent, a set of beliefs about (1) their own mental states and processes—a metacognition (Matlin 1989)—, (2) general procedures of persuasion and influence, and (3) the expertise firms have in regard to these. Marketplace metacognition thus consists of awareness individuals have about persuasion techniques, their relevance and effectiveness in convincing them, and their own susceptibility to these tactics. Such cognitive schemas vary in extent and are linked to people's development. They depend on their environment, culture and what they have successively acquired in the course of social interactions in the private and market spheres. However, faced with these tactics, individuals try to remain effective in their coping, i.e. continue carrying out their physical and psychological activities independently of what the influencer is trying to obtain. From this perspective, consumer resistance can be analyzed as the implementation of particular coping strategies "for struggle, opposition or delaying tactics" (Fournier 1998), that aim at thwarting the influence attempt. This reaction is activated through the perception of elements incongruent with the individual's own orientations, which can be expressed in three registers—freedom of choice, autonomy in decisions and willingness to cooperate or not with a market partner (Roux 2007). According to Friestad and Wright (1994), such discordant notes can arise from the discrepancy between the individual's representations of the situation and the moral principles acquired in childhood, as well as behavior perceived as ethically acceptable when one views himself as an influencer.

Nevertheless, for an individual to resist the techniques used by firms, these must have previously been categorized as capable to acting upon him/her. In other words, persuasion attempts are likely to influence if a connection is established at a given moment between a situation and certain characteristics that will be noticed because their nature and effect are perceived. This particular form of awareness—which Friestad and Wright (1994) call "the change-of-meaning principle"—tends to displace, at a given moment, the attention given to the content of messages onto a broader perception

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of influence mechanisms. Thus there enter into the consumer's resistance the knowledge he/she has both of influencing processes and of his/her own reaction and defense mechanisms against the tactics used. This vulnerability, which underlies the effectiveness of persuasion techniques, derives from decoding the processes deployed, as well as the emotional reaction they give rise to (Friestad and Wright 1994). In the course of time, the progressive and cumulative incorporation of cognition and felt emotions thus contributes to feeding pre-established operational schemas. The consumer becomes capable of mobilizing "tactic recognition" heuristics that enable him/her to evaluate influence situations, even in the absence of precise knowledge of the agent or the subject of the message (Friestad and Wright 1994). On this point, inference mechanisms play a key role in the construction of "marketplace metacognition": negative judgments about a firm's communications skills are liable unfavorably to contaminate other perceptions such as those of its relational capacity or the quality of its products and services. Moreover, the encoding processes of influencing mechanisms and devices lead consumers to acquire increasingly extended knowledge over time: it therefore seems essential to explore the way in which this categorization provokes adverse reaction states, according to the meanings that are attributed to them.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The exploration of representations of telephone selling thus called for a comprehensive approach, which was implemented through a two-stage program: first, the collection, from 24 respondents, of a series of written accounts of telesales experiences they were asked to recall; second, a semi-structured in-depth interview lasting about an hour on average, conducted at the latest a few days after receiving the account. Respecting the principle of purposive sampling and of information saturation, 24 diaries were collected from individuals who were regularly contacted by phone telesales operatives in relation to a variety of product categories—such as telephony, cable TV, insurance, tax reduction schemes, renewal of windows, and wine offers. Having agreed to participate in this study, respondents were instructed to write one or more telephone selling episodes they still recalled. They were asked to mention the aim of the call and what was being sold, and then to describe the conversation as they had experienced it. It was made clear, in as neutral a way as possible, that the purpose of the questioning had nothing to do with marketing or any connection with the telephone selling business, but was guided by research aiming at a better understanding of telephone dialogue situations.

The final composition of the sample consisted of a slightly higher proportion of men (13) than women (11), aged from 23 to 76, with an average age of 38. Overall they were in employment in tertiary sector professions, living in an urban environment and with completed secondary education at the minimum (Table 1). The sample displays the characteristic of being relatively young, professionally active, educated and city dwelling. The number of episodes provided by the respondents lay finally between 1 and 4, with a mean of 1.75 per individual, that is to say, 42 episodes for 24 respondents.

Although the data collection can show biases, it does offer two advantages relevant to this topic over a real-time journal system (Kirmani and Campbell 2004). Its drawbacks, first of all, are due to the fact of increasing the risk of a memory bias among respondents insofar as it is impossible to be sure of the accuracy and the exhaustiveness of the recollections recounted. It is therefore difficult to control the nature of the material collected and to be able to confirm, from outside, that the facts really occurred as recounted. Hence this method is unable to control situational differences

relating to episodes collected other than by relying on what respondents allege, which compromises the quality of the sampling. On the other hand, a major advantage is being able to collect, more than purely factual stories, the salient elements that respondents have reacted to and which are then liable to influence their future behavior. Indeed, the processes of elaborating a message occur not only during the persuasion attempt, but afterwards as well (Friestad and Wright 1994). As a consequence, the narration of one or more past episodes allows the recovery of "sedimented" information on representations of telephone selling. The interview then enables the strata to be reconstructed, thereby bringing to light certain processes through which the cognitive elaboration of individuals is progressively constructed. The second advantage is being able to reduce the risk of artifacts (Rosenthal and Rosnow 1997), whose importance and effects are rarely discussed. Indeed, overly structured and insufficiently "naturalistic" conditions for collecting information are liable to give rise to inferences and interpretations among the respondents. Influenced by the effort to ascertain and understand the motives for the study, they can then be led to modify their mental attitudes and evaluations of the situations proposed. When too much pressure is put on a respondent, the bias possibly prompted by a repeated and restrictive protocol on the part of the researcher can be a major problem (Boring 1969).

FINDINGS

The written accounts of telesales experiences reveal a broadly similar narrative structure among the respondents. The narratives begin with a description of the object of the phone call and most often with their recollection of the telesales operator's opening words. Then follows a discursive section containing exchanges between them and the telesales operator as well as the repertoire of procedural knowledge and "ready to use" strategies that they mobilize according to the circumstances. Four themes structure the discourses in these episodes of influence: the updating of metacognition, its processes of construction, procedural knowledge and coping strategies which respondents use, and the situational and individual factors which moderate their resistance reactions and in which emotions play a large part.

Marketplace metacognition in action

The accounts given of telesales episodes are articulated around a pre-existing categorization of the objectives, intentions and mechanisms underlying such techniques, that respondents have classified over time. Several informants said they immediately spotted attempts to influence them and described the "tactic recognition" heuristics used in this type of telephone approach (Friestad and Wright 1994): "I know right away when it's a sales call" [1, F, age 53], "nine times out of ten, it begins with 'Hello, Mrs. D.' but I already know they're trying to sell me something" [10, F, age 50], "I see straight through their strategy" [19, M, age 26].

The accounts are categorized around two types of judgment on telephone selling. Some, highly negative, focus on the technique itself and on three of its characteristics: its intrusive aspect, its impersonal nature, and its often-suspected dishonesty.

- Calls to the individual's home are perceived first of all as acts of invasion of one's personal territory (Goffman 1971): "apart from advertising, home is the only place one can escape this pressure to consume, so these calls disturb that peace" [18, F, age 33]; "they disturb you at home, always in the evening or during mealtimes" [16, M, age 23]. In certain cases, cold calling is even seen as an infraction of the codes of decent behavior and an intolerable breach of respect for the individual: "it's a real violation of one's private life, it

TABLE 1
Summary of respondents' characteristics

Id	Age	Gender	Family situation, profession, educational level, residence	Type of products/business
1	53	F	Married, 3 children, medical secretary, technical diploma, affluent suburb	Health insurance
2	23	M	Cohabiting, no children, secondary, outdoors centre organizer, affluent suburb	Double glazing
3	25	F	Single, student, graduate, working class suburb	Telephony Bank products
4	28	M	Cohabiting, no children, IT engineer, secondary, affluent suburb	Telephony (3 episodes)
5	24	M	Single, engineer, higher degree, large town, affluent suburb	TV services Telephony
6	33	F	Single, researcher, higher degree, middle class town	Telephony Gas and electricity Liquor store Kitchen specialist
7	52	M	Married, 2 children, engineer, higher degree, large town, working class area	Bank products Broadband telephony
8	73	F	Widow, retired employee, secondary, capital city, working class area	Window installer
9	23	M	Single, engineer, higher degree, large town, affluent suburb	Telephony
10	50	F	Divorced, primary schoolteacher, graduate, capital city, working class area	Telephony Heating engineer
11	51	M	Married, 3 children, worker, technical diploma, large town, working class area	Life insurance Telephony
12	25	F	Cohabiting, schoolteacher, higher degree, capital city, affluent suburb	Internet connection Tax reduction scheme
13	47	F	Married, 1 child, engineer, higher degree, capital city, affluent suburb	Telephony Charitable association
14	37	M	Single, sales rep, higher degree, large town, working class area	Telephony
15	32	M	Single, artist, secondary, country village	Car salesman Encyclopedia publisher
16	23	M	Single, no children, student, graduate, large town, affluent suburb	Broadband telephony
17	24	M	Single, no children, student, higher degree, capital city, affluent suburb	TV services Tax-related products
18	33	F	Single, seeking work, higher degree, large town, working class area	Insurance Telephony
19	26	M	Single, no children, student, graduate, affluent small town	Internet connection
20	25	M	Single, 1 child, lawyer, higher degree, capital city, affluent suburb	Accident insurance (The Post Office)
21	32	F	Divorced, no children, higher degree, librarian, capital city, affluent suburb	Telephony
22	44	F	Divorced, 2 children, schoolteacher, higher degree, affluent suburb	Liquor store Telephony (3 episodes)
23	51	M	Married, 2 children, sales manager, technical diploma, poor suburb	Charitable association
24	76	F	Divorced, 1 child, retired nurse, poor suburb	Alarm systems

bothers me hugely and I'd like to be able to stop it" [10, F, age 50].

- In addition, the impersonal nature of these methods is frequently emphasized. Most of all, respondents feel "chosen at random from data bases" [15, M, age 32] and as a result the products being offered are usually of no interest to them. The combination of selection perceived as random and the insistence on crossing the boundary of their privacy thus creates a particularly strong resistance to the feeling of being manipulated and reified: "The salesman doesn't know the person being called. He doesn't know your desires or your needs. He knows nothing about you. From my side, I don't see him either and I don't know who's calling me" [15, M, age 32]. The caller's tone of voice also contributes to this feeling of standardization and robotization of human relations: "I hate how they introduce themselves. It's impersonal, totally formatted. And if they're disturbing you, they just don't care, they go on asking their inevitable little questions" [6, F, age 33]; "I can't stand their mechanical, repetitive, stereotyped patter. I always get the impression they take me for a complete idiot. Can't they teach them how to speak normally? They're talking to human beings, after all!" [24, F, age 76].
- The third theme reflects the fear of being trapped by an appealing offer, but one which necessarily has a snag: "They dazzle you with their offers, and in the end they're not so advantageous as all that... Or you find you can't cancel the contract afterwards" [19, M, age 26]. Doubt, mistrust, and the suspicion of dishonesty are the complaints often voiced in relation to these procedures: "The moment the salesman reaches you, he's out to rip you off" [11, M, age 51].

As well as the telesales technique, the salesman himself is subject to specific negative pre-established attitudes in terms of arguments he uses. While these vary according to the different products being promoted, recurrent features appear in terms of the way of operating, mainly in relation to the caller's insistence and lack of consideration for the respondent's time and requirements: "I get the feeling of harassment and that they are pushing us into a corner" [18, F, age 33]; "it gets on my nerves, they really bug me, they never call at a convenient time and always tell you about things you don't need" [13, F, age 47].

Alongside the majority of fixed negative opinions of telephone selling are found some features that temper the severity of judgments made about these practices. Some respondents thus include in their evaluations the difficulties of doing the job and sympathy for the salesperson: "I know it's not much fun, a job like that, and it must be difficult" [2, M, age 23]; "at the end, I wish them all the best, because it's crappy work" [23, M, age 51]. Nevertheless, such considerations about the salesperson's activity do not necessarily lead them to change their attitudes in the actual situation, as was indicated by one of the respondents: "I can understand they've got a lousy job, but anyway, once I know they're tele-selling, I never buy anything" [4, M, age 28].

Recursive construction of Marketplace metacognition

While many respondents have pre-established representational schemas on telephone selling, some of them recount how these were constructed as the result of one or more interactions, thereby testifying to the recursivity of resistance phenomena. We give the example of a female respondent [22, F, age 44] who was contacted by a company selling windows:

As I had a window in poor condition and was called up on the phone in this area, I wanted to give it a try. I had already inquired at a specialist shop. The salesman gave me a sales pitch for half an hour about the quality of his product, then on the basis of the measurements I gave him, he offered to call me back a while later. At that point, he quoted me a price, which I considered to be excessive. My problem in fact was that I had French window with a rounded top that allowed water to seep into the room at the base. At my outright refusal to replace the window, he made a big fuss. He put me on hold, during which time he supposedly called his boss, who was willing to make a huge reduction, 50%, but I had to decide immediately. I refused to do this, and he gave me 24 hours to make up my mind. I confess that I very nearly accepted. In the meantime, I took the advice of a friend who backed me up on the idea that one should never take a decision under pressure to give a quick response... and I repaired the window myself. Since that occasion, I know immediately when someone is trying to sell me something and I always answer in the same way: "Thank you, but I'm not interested".

The episode recounts a series of interactions in which the initial interest of the respondent was eroded by her perception of an excessive price, manipulated by a framing effect—the promised reduction by 50% —, as well as by the temporal pressure introduced by the salesman. These mechanisms appear to be the main determinants giving rise to resistance. This was then expressed through an evasive reaction, in particular because the financial advantage was offset by a temporal constraint. The respondent's recourse to external advice also played a determining role in reinforcing resistance. This provided a point of view outside the context of the interaction, which was able to resolve the internal conflict experienced by the respondent and to strengthen her initial reaction. The conclusion of the episode illustrates the "change-of-meaning principle" (Friestad and Wright 1994) insofar as it led to a lasting categorization of telesales events, all of which were subsequently perceived as attempts to influence and manipulate, and resulted in a systematic avoidance strategy.

The same construction mechanism of resistance attitudes is illustrated by another respondent [6, F, age 33] who dates her suspicion of telephone selling precisely to an episode that occurred some ten years previously with a company selling fitted kitchens. After being contacted for "having won a magnificent Hi-Fi unit through a prize draw", she remembers going to the shop with her husband to collect her prize. She was surprised, and later angry, to find that the Hi-Fi unit consisted of two shelves supported by four plastic feet "which collapsed under the weight of the television". On the other hand, she and her husband were perfectly well aware that their joint visit, expressly requested by the shop, had no other purpose than to try and sell them a new kitchen, which they had no need of at the time. These tactics, which she viewed as "dishonest and crude", gave her from then on a very low opinion of telephone selling. The coding of the perception of this respondent was organized around metaphorical images of fishing: "the hook of the free gift", "bait to catch people" which "had the sole aim of fishing for people by phone to bring them into the shop".

Procedural knowledge and response strategies to telephone selling

Recognition of an influence attempt leads to the deployment of relatively fixed response patterns, though these vary with the respondents. Few of them turned out to have adopted what Kirmani and Campbell (2004) call *seeker strategies*, which involve a reflec-

TABLE 2
List of situational factors affecting perceptions of TELESALERS

<i>Cognitive situational factors</i>
Nature of representations regarding telesales
Degree of interest on the part of subject
Extent of knowledge about the selling company
<i>Emotional situational factors</i>
Behaviour of the salesperson
Time of calling
Personal state of the prospect

tive and collaborative reaction in the face of telesales pitches. In such cases, their main interest lies in obtaining information “about being able to compare offers and gaining time in seeking information” [17, M, age 24]. However, because the initiative for these calls does not come from the respondents, few of them mentioned that they coincided with their current needs, contrary to what Kirmani and Campbell (2004) observed when people go to stores.

Conversely, most respondents make use of *sentry strategies* (Kirmani and Campbell 2004), i.e. vigilant and not very cooperative reactions in relation to telesales. In comparison with the range of responses revealed by these authors in face-to-face interactions, different emphases become apparent here. The narrative sequences collected recount the conversational exchanges remembered by the respondents, in which, fairly briefly as a rule, the salesman’s discursive procedures and their own fully prepared arguments follow on from one another. Indeed a number of respondents deploy pre-established strategies of the type “if... then”, particularly recognizable in their accounts: “*when* I realize they’re trying to sell me something, *I say* I’m not interested... *But* the guy insists... *Then* I *again* say I’m not interested” [3, F, age 25]. Others refer more explicitly to having recourse to “*ripostes*”. The term is used no less than three times in the account of a female respondent [13, F, age 45], who presents herself as a kind of catalogue of replies deployed according to the arguments put forward: “With pseudo-companies which are supposed to save me money on my taxes, the *riposte* is to ask them to send me a brochure rather than an adviser; they reply, ‘there are too many figures, it’s best that someone advises you in a personal way’, the *riposte* ‘no, I know how to read and I don’t have time to see anyone’. ...Or else, with telecom operators, I have another *riposte*. My husband works in France Telecom and I make a joke of it: ‘If I change operator, my husband will divorce me.’ They don’t usually have any answer to that.”

From the range of responses deployed by respondents, there emerges, after analysis, a gradation along a continuum of reactive intensity. The first stage is usually polite listening: “at first, I let them speak” [3, F, age 25], “I listen out of politeness to the beginning of the explanations” [5, M, age 24]. Then come avoidance tactics that enable the respondent to treat the caller respectfully and to preserve the “face of the other” (Goffman 1963): the delaying manoeuvres include asking for time to reflect: “I’ll think about it, I’ve decided never to buy anything without thinking it over” [7, M, age 52] or lying about their identity or the information asked for by the salesman: “They often call my mother, but I pretend to be her so she won’t be disturbed” or “when it’s about tax matters, I always say I’m below the tax threshold, so that they’ll leave me alone” [9, M, age 23].

At a third stage, and mainly if the salesman insists or does not realize that his approach is inopportune, respondents refuse to continue the conversation or resort to verbal aggression: “I asked him not to insist and to try someone else” [12, F, age 25], “He insisted and I cut him off to make him stop” [21, F, age 32]. These reactions are experienced by respondents as a direct response to the aggression they feel directed at them by telesales operators, even if what is recounted lies sometimes more in the register of intrusion or harassment: “More than anything, it’s this insistence I can’t stand. When I tell them ‘no’, it’s as if they don’t hear me. They just go on. I find this aggressive attitude very disturbing” [13, F, age 47]. Some of these reactions, as they are related, contain a certain degree of violence, which is probably more restrained and socially acceptable in reality than when subsequently reported in the course of the interview.

Degree of resistance to telephone selling and factors affecting the reactions expressed

Finally, analysis of telesales episodes brings out a continuum of resistant reactions (Fournier 1998), of which the weakest correspond to seeker strategies and with those of growing intensity indicating recourse to sentry strategies (Kirmani and Campbell 2004). However, among the latter, various situational factors presented in Table 2—cognitive and emotional—moderate resistance reactions. At the individual level, the gender of respondents emerges as a salient element in the different reactions observed.

- The degree of resistance to telephone selling is strongly influenced, as has been emphasized above, by pre-existing knowledge on the part of individuals and in particular by negative attitudes they have developed in the course of previous experience of this type of selling techniques. Further, as the literature on persuasion has clearly brought out, the degree of interest—or involvement—individuals have in what is being sold also influences their willingness to pay attention to the message (Petty and Cacioppo 1983). Lastly, whether or not the salesperson’s company is known to the individual is also a major factor influencing respondents’ reactions of trust/mistrust: “A man introduces himself and gives the name of the company. I don’t know it, and I say to myself: There’s no way, I’m not going to buy anything” [14, M, age 37]. The metaphor of “a wolf in sheep’s clothing” [22, F, age 44] expresses the strong sense of the potential risks, all the more so since the prospect has no information for verifying the salesperson’s claims, with often even the origin of the call appearing under an unlisted number. Like

the wolf who hides his identity in order to get close to his victim—what Cochoy (2004) depicts as a major market “capture device”—telephone selling is a dubious and threatening intrusion.

- At the same time, other factors influence the emotional response of the prospect, first and foremost the telesales operator’s behavior. In this regard, argumentative insistence, the tone adopted, and the psychological motives used are most frequently the factors triggering negative responses: “On one occasion it was a charitable organization. I explained to him that I already contributed to a number of other charities, but he tried to make me feel guilty. It was very unpleasant! And when he asked how I earned, well, it was too much, and I told him, ‘I’m not interested, thank you, goodbye.’” [14, M, age 37]

Reactions of anger are also reported when the telesales operator pays no attention to what the respondent is saying: “She was carrying on without letting me speak while I was telling her I was only interested in the SMS, but she was trying to make me take more. So I tried to bring in the competition by mentioning a competitor’s all-in package to see if she offered me something better. But without a moment’s hesitation she tried to prove to me by $2+2=5$ that what she was offering was cheaper. As a result, I hung up on her” [20, M, age 25]. Anger can also be provoked in return by the telesales operator’s irritation—because of his/her thwarted attempt to persuade—, resulting sometimes in disagreeable rejoinders addressed to the prospect. In such instances, the feeling of annoyance, doubly fed by the approach itself and by the uncalled for behavior of the salesperson, takes hold in a more lasting way: “She was raving about some new wine shop which has just opened in the neighborhood, and that the people involved think very highly of their services. This kind of secondhand recommendation from someone I don’t know just simply irritates me. As a result, I couldn’t help showing my exasperation, and then she said I was being rude. I went ballistic! These people intrude on you at home, then to make matters worse, they slag you off!! I almost called up the company to complain about people who aggress me in my own home when I’ve not asked them for anything.” [6, F, age 33]

Reactions of surprise as to the reason for the call, due to the telesales operator’s manipulative techniques, can also result in anger and rejection on the part of the respondent who feels deceived: “The most recent said to me: ‘Hello, Mrs R, I’m your adviser So-and-so. Do you remember me?’ I first thought it was someone I knew, because she introduced herself like that. I was surprised and irritated, and then I hung up” [1, F, age 53]. Conversely, a polite, respectful approach on the part of the sales operator and carefully judging and responding to the signals given out by the prospect are perceived as factors mitigating negative emotional reactions. “I gave him the brush-off, saying I wasn’t at all interested. In the end, he got the message and said goodbye quite politely...” [15, M, age 32]. Apart from the behavior of the telesales operator, the time of the call and the physical and psychological state of the respondent play an important role in his/her response. Although most calls are made in the evening to increase the chance of making contact, some companies recognize that this is often not a good time because people are tired after returning home from work. Tiredness is frequently mentioned as a reason for rejecting telesales approaches, but sometimes too it results in lowered resistance to an aggressive sales technique. “I was tired from work, so I let him talk” [4, M, age 28]. In reality, whatever the time of the call, its unpredictability for the respondent often makes it seem like an inappropriate time—calls made too early in the morning, daytime

calls characterized as “weird, because people are working then” [3, F, age 25], calls coming when the respondent is about to go out or in the middle of doing something.

At the individual level, analysis of the discourses and interviews indicates major differences according to respondents’ gender. Although the results cannot be generalized, they do provide possible indications of a difference in perception of sales approaches. Generally speaking, women tend to be more susceptible to, irritated by and aggressive towards this type of approach than men. The number of accounts containing expressions of negative emotions, violent feelings and reactions of rejection is larger among female respondents, in a proportion of more than 60%, while women represent only 45% of the sample. These reactions seem to be even more pronounced when female telesales operators call them. “I’ve found it’s worse with women than with men. Men are generally careful and reasonably pleasant, they don’t insist too much. But the women think they can do anything. They’re arrogant and aggressive” [18, F, age 33]. Men, on the other hand, mostly seem to be more tolerant of these influencing tactics, using irony or humor to withdraw from intrusive or undesirable situations.

DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The aim of the research was to explore the nature of representations attached to the respondents’ experience of telephone selling. These situations, liable to give rise to resistance reactions, provide a suitable analytic framework for identifying the determinants and consequences of such phenomena. The small size of the sample in this study does not permit the results to be generalized, but it does contribute to in-depth exploration of representations of this influencing technique. The accounts show in particular that far from reconstituting only the content of the interpersonal exchange with the telesales operator or the strategies adopted in response to his arguments (Kirmani and Campbell 2004), the interviewees provide many indications of the cognitive schema in which the decoding of the situation experienced lies. This in turn contributes to enriching their knowledge and shaping their later opinions of these practices. Such metacognition of market relations, as well as of their intentions and mechanisms, leads to the construction of a repertoire of avoidance strategies that in varying degrees reflects a high level of resistance. At the individual level, gender seems to influence the way telesales calls are perceived. However, it would be interesting to investigate in a more detailed way how these role identities, experienced through the concepts of masculinity and femininity, influence their reactions.

In relation to the many descriptive and comprehensive approaches to resistance phenomena (Dobscha and Ozanne 2001; Duke 2002; Peñaloza and Price 1993; Thompson and Haytko 1997), bringing to light the principles of construction and mobilization of market metacognition shows the importance of elucidating the conflict of representations from which adverse reactions to firms and the market arise. They constitute a unique terrain compared to other techniques of persuasion and of creating resistance, both because they engage people in an interactive relationship—unlike advertising which communicates in an impersonal way and which can partially be protected against by avoidance behaviors (Roux 2007)—and because this interaction has not been chosen by them, in terms either of time or content or the caller, in contrast to relations at points of sale (Kirmani and Campbell 2004). Other contexts can also be addressed with the help of this framework for analysis, since over time consumers construct a repertoire of representations of market functioning. Firms’ various schemes—their offerings and discourses and more generally the macro-

economic vision that supports the system as a whole—to a large extent feed these representations. The social fabric in which consumers develop also influences their beliefs. The progressive encoding of events in their environment thus contributes to the building of a structure of knowledge through which they categorize the situations and events they are exposed to and that as a consequence orient their consumption choices or non-choices.

The metacognition approach appears to have a number of important implications. As the results show, the heuristics of recognizing tactics, when these have been perceived, categorized and memorized, appear to be lasting and relatively unresponsive to the contingent arguments from the influencing agents. Resistance is simply triggered by the perception of the persuasion mechanism, independently of the content of the message it is transmitting (Friestad and Wright 1994). On the other hand, it is interesting to notice that most of the negative perceptions collected in this study bear more upon the telesales agents than on the sponsors of these approaches. The opaque nature of the techniques, with the respondent not always aware of its original source and possible attribution, is possibly the origin of this relative lack of comment on the brand itself. On the other hand, respondents' focus on telesales episodes has possibly contributed to a concentration on their comments on this subject rather than on the companies behind these operations. A more detailed exploration of the repercussions of these techniques on brand perception is thus a line of research to be developed.

The constructed and sedimented nature of respondents' awareness also shows that when a change of meaning has taken effect in the perception of a persuasive encoded mechanism, resistance increases. Friestad and Wright (1994) point out in this respect that the more educated and informed the consumer, the more he/she is capable of proceeding through "self-generated" warning signs and of opposing attempts to influence by defensive tactics. This last point questions the possible development of consumer/firm relations, such as Holt (2002) attempts to do when making various recommendations on brands' positioning arguments and their link with consumer resistance. Although the market is undeniably an incessant "polylogue" that absorbs and recycles criticism (Boltanski and Chiapello 2006), there is every reason to imagine what forms of action firms can deploy without fuelling conflicts that feed consumers' resistance. One of the main difficulties no doubt lies in the fact of pinpointing these conflicts. In this respect our results suggest several important recommendations for reducing negative reactions to telesales. First, a respectful attitude to customers proves to be essential. The lack of availability of the prospect at the time of calling should lead to polite withdrawal on the part of the telesales operator, even if it means renewing the call later and with the prospect's agreement. Lack of interest in a product should also be dealt with tactfully, by trying to find out the reasons for this and whether they are temporary or long term. Promises through which prospects are attracted to points of sale should also be restrained and should not turn out to be crude traps when the prospect arrives at the shop. The profession as a whole would gain by reducing and controlling pressure on people, in order not to generate, in the long term, systematic reactions of refusal that would generally jeopardize its effectiveness.

Extending our perspective, it would be important to obtain not only the prospect's perception during the influencing episode, but at the same time also that of the telesales operator—which is not necessarily symmetrical—and to analyze possible distortions between the two systems of representations (DeCarlo 2005). The lead-ins, lines of arguments and types of response used by telesales operators would require being previously tested in practice in order to understand the perceptions they give rise to among the respon-

dents. Thus a new technique used recently by telesales operators involves leaving a few seconds of silence, after the prospect has answered, to give him or her time to identify, through the background noise of the service, that it is a telephone sales call. The fact that the prospect abruptly hangs up without waiting for the operator indicates refusal to cooperate and constitutes an index, acquired in a less intrusive yet nonetheless very explicit way, of his or her intentions.

Another route would be to explore, over and beyond the telephone approach, the whole sequence of a sale and the meanings that it gives rise to throughout the process, including its possible recursive effects on the perception of telesales approaches which are often their point of departure. Finally, the difference in elaborations of cognitive systems according to people's age and educational level could make it interesting to study the mechanisms to which particular groups of respondent are, or become, sensitive and which contribute, at a given moment, to activating their resistance.

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