

Consumers have mixed reactions to puffery in advertising

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According to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, consumers don't always react positively to persuasion tactics that have nothing to do with the product (what the authors refer to as "puffery").

"In some cases advertisements describe technical details that are only appreciated by experts in the product domain to which the ads pertain," write authors Alison Jing Xu and Robert S. Wyer, Jr. (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign). "Other attribute descriptions, however, may be puffery. That is, they purport to be of great importance but are actually inconsequential and often meaningless."

The authors conducted a series of studies designed to elicit consumer reactions to advertising claims. They found that when descriptions are ambiguous, consumers interpret them in one of two ways: They may infer that the attributes refer to technical details that they personally don't understand but are likely to be informative to people that are more knowledgeable than they are. Or they might assume that the attribute descriptions are intended only to persuade (puffery).

The authors found that consumers' reactions depended on their perceived level of knowledge about the product and the media context in which they viewed the ads. For example, they found that when consumers perceived themselves to be less knowledgeable about the product than the intended recipients of beer or cleansing gel ads, they were more likely to assume that the descriptions were useful.

In another experiment, the authors manipulated participant perceptions of their knowledge about fabric. Afterwards, all participants read an ad about a down jacket and then evaluated the product. "The results showed that when participants perceived they had less relative knowledge than average consumers, addition of puffery increased their evaluation of the product no matter whether the ad came from a popular magazine or a professional magazine," the authors write.

"When participants perceived they had more relative knowledge than average [consumers](#), addition of puffery increased their evaluation of the product when the ad came from a professional magazine, whereas decreased their evaluation when the ad came from a popular magazine."

More information: Alison Jing Xu and Robert S. Wyer, Jr. "Puffery in Advertisements: The Effects of Media Context, Communication Norms and Consumer Knowledge." *Journal of Consumer Research*: August 2010.

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