

Head-scratching ad claims can alienate consumers, study finds

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A new University of Illinois study has bad news for advertisers who hope a sprinkling of glossy-but-obscure product claims will woo buyers.

Advertising that touts head-scratching scientific ingredients or other details only an expert could appreciate can turn consumers away instead, according to research by Alison Jing Xu and Robert S. Wyer Jr., of the U. of I. College of Business.

"When consumers suspect that advertisers are just trying to manipulate them with useless information, they may react negatively and lose trust," said Xu, a doctoral student in marketing. "And trust is very important in advertising."

The unique study, which will appear in the [Journal of Consumer Research](#), gauged consumer reaction to technical, tough-to-decipher advertising claims that seek to give products a competitive edge, which the researchers refer to as "puffery."

A fictional cleansing gel ad used in the survey trumpeted ingredients such as "Sebopur Complex," while another ad promoted a beer brewed through the "European Pilsen Method."

How consumers responded to the technical-sounding claims varied based on their own personal knowledge of the product and where the ad appeared, according to findings by Xu and Wyer, a professor of business administration in the nationally ranked U. of I. business school.

Consumers who considered themselves less knowledgeable than the target audience rated products higher, assuming the puzzling references were useful but merely over their heads, the researchers found.

However, consumers who considered themselves well-informed about a product reacted negatively, viewing puffery as an effort to trick them with meaningless information, according to the study.

Where puffed-up advertising appears also matters, the study found.

Consumers have differing reactions based on their personal product knowledge when ads appear in popular, [mainstream media](#), the study found. But all consumers generally have a positive impression of ads in media geared toward industry professionals, concluding that the claims are meaningful to the experts they serve.

Xu says the findings show that puffery could be counterproductive for companies that rely on ads in the popular media. Though murky claims can sway less-informed consumers, they can alienate the knowledgeable buyers who provide the greatest sales potential.

"Puffery can actually hurt in your target market," she said. "For instance, puffery in beer ads could influence women, but men are the primary buyers and may like a product less if ads include meaningless information they think is just there to persuade them."

The backlash could have long-term implications if consumers have a strong negative reaction to the claims, Xu said. "Positive impressions of products can change easily, but not negatives."

Puffery in advertising has been around for at least a half-century as companies seek to carve a niche in an increasingly competitive marketplace, said Xu, who will join the marketing faculty at the

University of Toronto this fall.

"Advertisers need to catch consumers' attention and make products impressive," she said. "But attention only helps when it's positive and this study says advertisers need to be careful as they try to set themselves apart. They can alienate the buyers they most seek."

Xu says the findings show that consumers filter ad claims, rather than accepting them blindly. As a result, she says, effective advertising should relate to [consumers](#) on a personal level, rather than talking down to them.

"When advertisers create campaigns, they should try to imagine that they're engaging in a conversation with their target audience," she said. "So if using technical terms is important, they should explain them. It's important that your audience knows what you're talking about."

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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