

# Is a little negativity the best marketing policy?

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Most marketing departments work hard to establish a flawless reputation for their product or service. But new research from Tel Aviv University is showing that perfection is not all it's cracked up to be.

Dr. Danit Ein-Gar of Tel Aviv University's Faculty of Management at the Leon Recanati Graduate School of [Business Administration](#), working in [collaboration](#) with Baba Shiv and Zakary Tormala from Stanford University, has uncovered the "blemishing effect," a counterintuitive benefit of negative information. When utilized in the right way, she says, a small flaw can actually improve consumer opinion of your product — and make people more likely to purchase it.

"Intuition tells me that if I have a small flaw in my product — nothing harmful, just a minor imperfection — I should hide it," explains Dr. Ein-Gar. "But providing consumers with information about both strong benefits and a small shortcoming may improve their overall evaluation." The surprising study will be published in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

## Think fast

According to Dr. Ein-Gar, three variables are involved in activating a positive response to negative information: the order in which the information appears; the magnitude of the negative information; and the effort the consumer is investing in processing the information.

To produce this effect, a consumer must first encounter positive information about the product and start leaning towards it. Only then can the introduction of a small piece of negative information, such as slightly torn packaging or limited color selection, be effective. Finally, the consumer must process the information quickly, making an effortless and fast purchasing decision without employing much cognitive effort.

From ads on buses to pop-up banners on Web sites, consumers quickly process advertising and marketing information to ease their cognitive burden, Dr. Ein-Gar says. This is the key to the "blemishing effect." If a consumer is already leaning towards a product based on the initial positive information they received, a small and seemingly insignificant piece of negative information causes the consumer to refocus on the positive appeal rather than put in the cognitive effort to re-evaluate their first impression.

Dr. Ein-Gar and her fellow researchers tested this theory in several ways. In one study, they invited two groups to evaluate a pair of hiking boots for purchase online. One group was allowed to go through the product information at their leisure. The others were interrupted by an additional task which created a distraction impeding their cognitive processing abilities. In addition, the hiking boots were presented in two different ways. Some participants were presented with positive written descriptions of the boots' positive qualities, followed by a picture with the boots and a damaged box. Others were shown the photograph with the damaged box first, and then given the positive description of the product. Given the right set of circumstances, says Dr. Ein-Gar, the first group had higher positive evaluations of the product.

## **Moving at the speed of modern life**

If people have time to consider, think rationally and invest effort in the process, negative information can impair positive judgement, Dr. Ein-

Gar says. Marketers can best put the "blemishing effect" to use when consumers are in a situation where they must process information with little effort, such as in impulse buying. Put a product with a small flaw near the cashier, such as chocolate with an impending expiration date, and buyers will compensate for the small downside with a more positive attitude toward the product.

Provided by Tel Aviv University

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