

Why do consumers dislike corporate brands that get too familiar?

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Although it is tempting to use the word "we" to make consumers feel like part of the family, people react negatively when brands overstep their boundaries, according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

"Marketers often desire to promote consumers' [feelings](#) of being in a close [relationship](#) with the brands they [market](#), and they frequently craft their communications using language that portrays brands as close partners with consumers," write authors Aner Sela (University of Florida), S. Christian Wheeler (Stanford University), and Gülen Sarial-Abi (Koç University).

"Our research shows that seemingly inconsequential changes, as subtle as using 'we' versus 'you and the brand,' can have both positive and negative effects on people's evaluations of real-world brands with which they have working relationships," the authors write.

Because "we" seems to represent more closeness and shared identity, it would seem that using "we" would increase people's feelings of closeness and loyalty to the brand. But the authors found that that depended on how close [consumers](#) felt to the brand in the first place.

In one study, participants read an excerpt supposedly taken from an ad for Wells Fargo, a prominent banking brand, or Aetna, a prominent health insurance company. The authors first discovered that people tend to feel closer to their bank than to their insurance company. The excerpts

were identical except for the use of the pronoun "we" versus "you and [the brand]."

Real Wells Fargo customers had more positive attitudes toward the banking company after reading the "we" version; but actual Aetna customers had more positive attitudes toward the brand when they read "you and Aetna." Interestingly, people who were not customers of either brand had more positive feelings about both companies when the ads used "you and [the brand]." "People who are not brand customers expect brands with which they are not affiliated to communicate with them using less intimate language—just as people generally expect strangers to interact with them using less intimate language," the authors conclude.

More information: Aner Sela, S. Christian Wheeler, and Gülen Sarial-Abi. "'We' Are Not the Same as 'You and I': Causal Effects of Minor Language Variations on Consumers' Attitudes toward Brands." *Journal of Consumer Research*: October 2012. ejcr.org/

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