

# When is controversy (not) good for building product buzz?

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A little bit of controversy can be intriguing, but too much turns consumers off, according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

"Controversial topics can make [consumers](#) uncomfortable (since they worry about offending others) and therefore less likely to discuss them. Whether or not consumers are willing to discuss a controversial topic depends on a combination of their level of interest and comfort (or discomfort)," write authors Zoey Chen (Georgia Institute of Technology) and Jonah Berger (Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania).

Conventional wisdom has it that controversy generates more buzz, but the authors found that consumers are less likely to discuss controversial topics or brands. And some topics or brands are more controversial than others. For example, brands like Quaker Oats and Hallmark are less controversial than Marlboro and Walmart. And topics like exercise or the weather are less controversial than abortion or same-sex marriage.

The authors analyzed more than 200 articles from a news website (Topix.com) to measure how the controversy level of an article corresponded to the number of comments it received. They found that moderately controversial articles received more comments than articles that were either less or more controversial.

Then, in a series of lab experiments, the authors found that context—such as whether or not people disclose identity and whether

they are talking to strangers or friends—affects comfort levels. "When [social acceptance](#) is less of a concern (when people are communicating anonymously), or less threatened by the discussion of controversial topics (when communicating with friends), the importance of the discomfort factor is reduced," the authors explain.

Even though consumers may touch on controversial topics with friends (or when they're posting anonymously), companies' attempts to evoke anything more than a moderate level of controversy can backfire and end up generating less buzz.

"While negative attention can sometimes make consumers more interested in a topic, you should avoid evoking more than a moderate level of [controversy](#) if you want to generate more word-of-mouth," the authors conclude.

**More information:** Zoey Chen and Jonah Berger. "When, Why, and How Controversy Causes Conversation." *Journal of Consumer Research*: October 2013.

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