

Physical contact + ethical marketing = increased consumer preference

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Can world-saving claims like "not tested on animals" and "phosphate free," help sell bottles of shampoo and bars of soap? A new study from Concordia University's John Molson School of Business proves such statements can make consumers more likely to buy, especially when one's sense of touch is appealed to alongside one's sense of social justice.

In a paper recently published in the *Journal of Business Ethics*, Concordia University marketing professor Onur Bodur shows that for ethical claims to help sell [products](#), they have to align with the product's primary benefits, be they functional, such as alkaline batteries, or symbolic, like a Montreal Alouettes jersey.

For the study, Bodur teamed up with Concordia colleagues Ting Gao and Bianca Grohmann. They asked 311 participants to rate the marketing of utilitarian products—cough syrups and printer ink cartridges, and symbolic products—high school rings and hockey team car flags.

Results showed that for ethical marketing to work, utilitarian claims like "made with organic ingredients" need to be matched with utilitarian products like [cough syrup](#), i.e., things that are actually used by [consumers](#). On the other hand, symbolic claims like "fair trade" should be paired with symbolic products like rings, i.e., products that consumers use to symbolise an attitude or indicate belonging to a certain group.

Bodur's research also uncovered the fact that ethical claims make consumers more likely to buy when they have physical contact with the

product during consumption. So, making a statement like "made from organic cotton" will be more likely to boost t-shirt sales. But apply "biodegradable" to something like printer ink, which barely requires any tactile interaction, and sales won't be affected.

"The importance of touch relates to what's known as the positive contagion effect," explains Bodur, who is also director of the Centre for Multidisciplinary Behavioural Business Research. "That means that consumers are quicker to perceive increased benefits from products that involve a higher degree of physical contact, like something that you eat or wear. This is due to consumers' belief that ethical benefits can be transferred through physical contact."

This research has practical applications for the marketing world. Use utilitarian ethical claims for a practical product that will come into close contact with consumers—be it moisturizer, bread, or paper towels—and sales are likely to increase. Says Bodur, "if managers want to reap the benefits of sustainable marketing, they have to carefully consider the amount of physical contact consumers will have with their products, alongside the ethical claim they're making about that product."

Provided by Concordia University

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