

When identity marketing backfires: Consumers don't like to be told what they like

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When choosy moms choose Jif peanut butter and sports fans who call themselves sports fans subscribe to DirecTV, identity marketing is hard at work. But what happens when this type of advertising misses the mark? According to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, when a person's sense of ownership and freedom is threatened they are less likely to respond positively to identity marketing campaigns.

"While people may be drawn to brands that fit their identity, they are also more likely to desire a sense of ownership and freedom in how they express that identity. Identity marketing that explicitly links a person's identity with a [brand](#) purchase may actually undermine that sense of freedom and backfire," write authors Amit Bhattacharjee (Dartmouth College), Jonah Berger (Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania), and Geeta Menon (New York University).

The researchers ran a series of five studies that compared two types of identity marketing, messages that simply referenced consumer identity or messages that explicitly tied consumer identity to a brand purchase. Participants were first asked to answer questions about the importance of a given identity in their overall life. They then viewed an advertisement for a brand that appealed to that specific identity. The advertisement used a headline that either referenced the identity or explicitly linked it to a brand. Participants then rated their likelihood to purchase a product from within the brand.

Study results showed that explicit identity marketing messages backfired with consumers who cared about the specific identity and resulted in a lower likelihood to purchase the product. This information may help brands understand why some people react negatively to products used in important areas of their lives.

"Contrary to the traditional thinking about identity marketing, our research shows that people who care deeply about an identity are not receptive to messages that explicitly communicate how a brand fits with their lifestyle," the authors conclude. "In fact, to restore their sense of freedom, some people may avoid purchasing a product that otherwise appeals to them and fits with who they are."

More information: Amit Bhattacharjee, Jonah Berger, and Geeta Menon. "When Identity Marketing Backfires: Consumer Agency in Identity Expression." *Journal of Consumer Research*: August 2014.

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