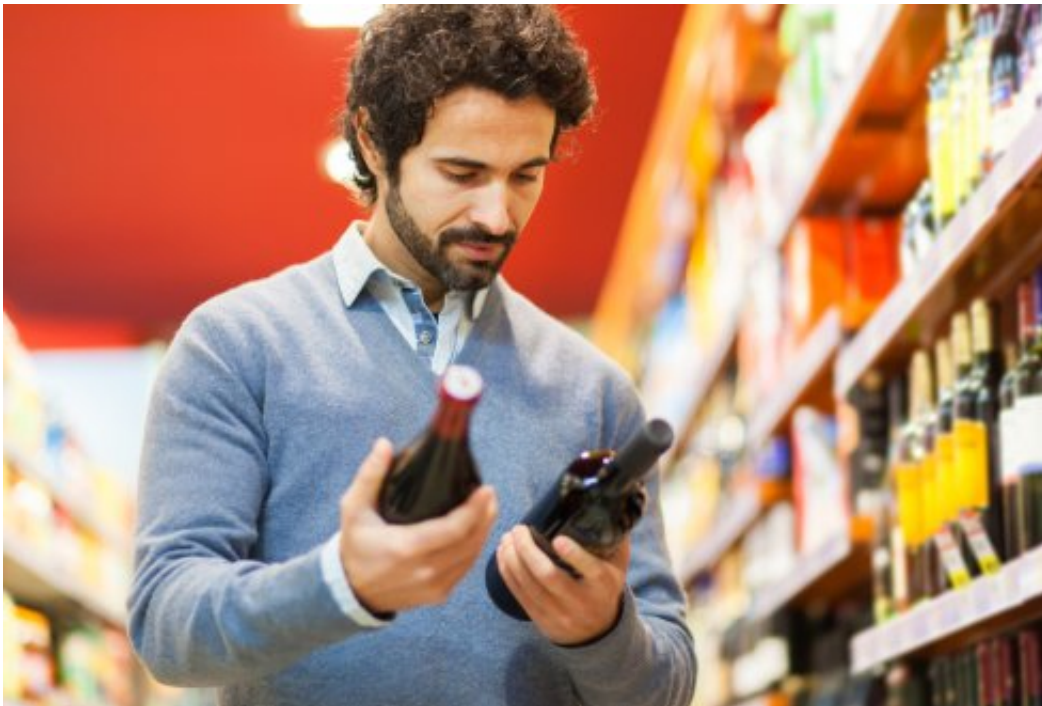


Appeal to consumers' concrete motives for more sustainable consumption

March 10 2016, by Tiffany Westry



To achieve beneficial long-term targets, you must appeal to important short-term motives. This is the conclusion reached by Ynte van Dam in his research into sustainable consumption and marketing, for which he was awarded a PhD by Wageningen University on 7 March. "In practical terms, you could encourage sustainable consumption by putting negative labels on less sustainable products."

For his thesis Sustainable Consumption and Marketing, Van Dam studied ways of encouraging consumers to choose more sustainable alternatives. In principle, all consumers want a sustainable future, but while shopping, they often make other choices based on price or convenience. This is because people make choices at a concrete level, says Van Dam. "The mental image at this low construal level is concrete, imminent and contextual. You could see it as thinking about a tree, whereby the image you create includes leaves, branches and bark. 'Sustainably produced' is an abstract concept, more like thinking about a forest. You don't see the branches and leaves, but you might get the urge to go for a walk in the woods."

At the higher construal level, we think in terms of ideal images, explains Van Dam. "Thinking at this high level of abstraction, you judge whether something is attractive or not. You will aspire to the things that you find attractive. At a concrete level, you are more likely to judge in terms of feasible or not feasible, and this is what determines your behaviour. So you can change people's behaviour and make them behave more sustainably by making them think at a more concrete level."

Negative labelling

In practical terms, Van Dam's research means that negative labelling is a good way of persuading consumers to make more sustainable choices: 'This is not fair-trade produced' on a pack of cacao works better than the positive message 'This is a fair trade product'. Van Dam: "By giving the least sustainable alternative a negative label, you can shift consumer preference to a more sustainable product."

His conclusions also imply that when companies, organisations and government bodies say that consumers should demand more sustainable products, this is actually the pot calling the kettle black. "These companies are guilty of the very thing of which they are accusing

consumers," says Van Dam. "Companies are obliged to state the level of sustainability clearly on all sustainable products, and preferably stop producing non-sustainable products altogether. If companies are not prepared to jeopardise their profits by doing this, they have no right to claim that they support sustainability. This is quite simply window dressing."

More information: Thesis Dr. Y.K. van Dam, Sustainable Consumption and Marketing, PhD Wageningen University, 2016.
library.wur.nl/WebQuery/clc/2149125

Provided by Wageningen University

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