

Businesses that show commitment to sustainability inspire greener customers

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Spending a little to prove a commitment to sustainability can help tourism industry businesses such as hotels inspire customers to conserve resources—and save money in the process, according to new research from SFU's Beedie School of Business. The study found that hotel guests' willingness to conserve resources—such as turning off lights, reusing towels, or setting the thermostat at a specific temperature—is affected by how "green" they perceive the hotel to be.

The more environmentally friendly consumers perceived the firm to be, the more patrons themselves conserved.

The paper, "[Turning Off the Lights: Consumers' Environmental Efforts Depend on Visible Efforts of Firms](#)," was co-authored by Brent McFerran, associate professor at SFU's Beedie School of Business; University of Michigan marketing professor Aradhna Krishna; and Wenbo Wang, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology.

In one study, the researchers tracked participants staying in two different hotels, one high-priced, and the other more economical. In both hotels, half of the rooms had notes asking guests to conserve electricity and set the thermostat to a certain temperature, while the other half contained no notes.

Each room was also randomly assigned either an environmentally friendly, but more expensive bamboo toothbrush—signifying a visible effort on the hotel's part to be green—or an environmentally unfriendly,

but cheaper plastic toothbrush.

The study found that guests in the rooms containing the notes requesting them to conserve resources were willing to do so, by using less electricity if the room also contained the [environmentally friendly](#) bamboo toothbrush.

Guests staying in rooms with the plastic toothbrush did not conserve electricity, even when asked to do so. Indeed, guests of the higher-priced hotel staying in rooms with the cheaper toothbrush actually used more electricity than normal when asked to conserve resources.

"This effect is driven in part by hypocrisy: high-price firms asking consumers to conserve when the firm does not do so itself results in backlash," says McFerran. "Firms should always couple their requests to consumers with proof that the firm is also exerting its own effort."

Although the bamboo toothbrush cost more to purchase, the higher cost was more than offset by the savings in [electricity](#) consumption.

The research has potential for firms in other industries, such as restaurants, whose customers could use fewer paper napkins, or airlines, whose customers could be asked to clean after themselves during flights.

More information: WENBO WANG et al. Turning Off the Lights: Consumers' Environmental Efforts Depend on Visible Efforts of Firms, *Journal of Marketing Research* (2016). [DOI: 10.1509/jmr.14.0441](https://doi.org/10.1509/jmr.14.0441)

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