

# Thoughts of God make fear-based advertising less effective

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Credit: Duke University

A burglar can be a powerful image to help sell an alarm system, but not if the viewer is thinking about God, according to new research from Duke University's Fuqua School of Business.

Professor Keisha Cutright found that when people have God in mind, they feel a sense of support that makes them less responsive to [fear](#)-based marketing.

"We find that people thinking about God aren't as interested in products that offer precautionary benefits when the advertising is rooted in fear," Cutright said. "If an ad tries to scare people into getting a new vaccine, for example, those who are thinking about God won't respond as strongly. We found they believe they will be supported no matter what happens, whereas people who were not thinking about God were not as likely to think things will be OK."

Cutright said the findings are useful for companies choosing how to present a product in different markets.

"Demographically speaking, marketers should think twice about using fear-based advertising in highly religious areas of the country, or among people who are more likely to be religious, as in older populations," she said. "You could likely sell the same product, but you should use a different tactic."

The research, *In God's Hands: How Reminders of God Dampen the Effectiveness of Fear Appeals*, is forthcoming in the *Journal of Marketing Research*. Cutright worked with Eugenia Wu of the University of Pittsburgh.

"We know religious believers draw great comfort from the thought that God is protecting and supporting them," Cutright said. "We thought this might have interesting and important implications for advertising. Given that there are many ads that seem to try to scare people, we were curious about who those ads worked for and who they didn't."

In one study with 186 [participants](#), some viewed commercials warning

about plastic water bottle chemicals in a non-denominational campus chapel while others took part in a business school classroom.

"People who showed up to the chapel responded less to the fear appeals than those who appeared at the business school," Cutright said.

The results were replicated across several different conditions. In one study, 404 people viewed a commercial warning against babies sleeping in the same bed as their parents. Some participants were shown a commercial with religious background music while others had a secular soundtrack. Another study had participants review fear-based print ads for water bottles on pages featuring a story about church buildings or government buildings.

"When God was really salient in their minds, people weren't as persuaded by fear appeals," Cutright said.

Another study had 217 participants write about their concept of God—or their favorite season—before reading ads for flood insurance. Those who wrote about God were less responsive to an ad that was based on fear.

A further study tested the researchers' hypothesis that it was a feeling of support from God that prompts people to be less responsive to fear. Among 602 participants, a third were given a quote about God providing support in tough times; a third read a quote about God encouraging self reliance; and a third read a non-religious quote. All participants then watched a plastic water bottle commercial that used fear, or one that didn't.

Those who read about God but without the sense of support responded to fear appeals just as did those who did not read about God at all.

"This suggests it is the sense of support that is significant," Cutright said. "What's interesting is that we saw the same effects, albeit a little weaker, even in atheists. We didn't expect to see that. But cultural traditions mean that most [people](#) have embedded associations with a higher power. So it's not religion per se, it's this notion of there being a sense of [support](#)."

Provided by Duke University

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