

Going green? Not so easy for mainstream brands

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Did you know that Nike makes a line of clothing and shoes created from recycled plastic bottles? Did you know that consumer products giant, Procter & Gamble, made eco-friendly industrial products for commercial use? Or that outdoor clothing manufacturer, Patagonia,

made fleece products and jackets from used soda bottles and recycled fabric?

If you answered no, it's probably for good reason: Recent research shows that when mainstream brands advertise using [visual cues](#) suggesting the product is [environmentally friendly](#) or "green" consumers may actually evaluate the product as being less effective and switch to a more niche green [brand](#).

San Diego State University marketing professor, Dr. Morgan Poor, along with Dr. Stacy Wood and Dr. Stefanie Robinson, both of North Carolina State University, conducted a survey of 565 consumers from across the U.S. to determine their choice among three real pesticide brands and whether a green cue (an earth image) on the product [label](#) of the largest mainstream competitor influenced this choice. Four hundred and twenty of the individuals surveyed identified themselves as [consumers](#) of pesticides and 352 responded "yes" when asked if they considered themselves "a consumer who prioritizes 'environmental friendliness' in purchase decisions."

The study, recently published in the *Journal of Advertising Research*, focused on one mainstream product from a large multinational company (the target brand), a second mainstream product with significant market share (the mainstream competitor), and one brand that sold only eco-friendly products (green competitor).

Survey participants were shown the full-size packages for all three brands and asked to evaluate them, however, there were three different product labels used for the target brand. One group of participants saw the standard target brand packaging with no added cue. A second group saw the target brand's packaging with a safety cue (an image of a home-in-hands). The final group saw the target brand's packaging with a green cue (an image of an earth).

The results showed that the choice share of the target brand differed based on the product label used on the package. When the survey participants were shown the package with the standard label with no cue or the safety cue, choice share was similar at 43.6 percent and 43.4 percent respectively. In comparison, when participants were shown the package with the green cue label, choice share dropped to 33 percent.

Upon further questioning, the researchers found that when survey participants were shown the package with a green cue, they perceived the product to be more environmentally friendly and less effective in its performance, thus leading them to be less inclined to purchase it.

The researchers noted that while packaging isn't the only attribute prompting consumer behavior, the colors, images and verbiage used on packaging labels seem to have a noteworthy impact on influencing consumer's decisions when considering a "green product."

"At one point, Clorox removed some of the environmental-friendly cues from the labels of their Green Works product line when sales started to decline. While Clorox didn't say why they took these steps, it certainly mirrors the results of our study," said Poor. "Our findings seem to indicate that mainstream green brands should consider keeping information about environmental friendliness under the radar and promote their products' performance instead."

More information: Stacy Wood et al. The Efficacy of Green Package Cues For Mainstream versus Niche Brands, *Journal of Advertising Research* (2018). [DOI: 10.2501/JAR-2018-025](https://doi.org/10.2501/JAR-2018-025)

Provided by San Diego State University

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