

No one cares about restaurants' stances on animal welfare, study finds

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Promoting grass-fed beef is one way that food brands use social cause marketing. Credit: University of Missouri

Businesses are increasingly embracing social causes as a way to promote brand trust among consumers while also attempting to better society.

Chipotle, for example, made headlines when it released "Back to the Start," an advertisement promoting more humane food production. Yet the restaurant industry, which is often criticized due to concerns about animal welfare and employee wages, has otherwise been slow to capitalize on this marketing trend.

Now, a new study from the University of Missouri suggests this type of marketing is ineffective for restaurants using animal welfare as a [marketing tool](#).

"Restaurants have faced a lot of criticism for how they source their food, and it is logical to think that social cause marketing could mitigate that criticism the way it has for issues in other industries," said Dae-Young Kim, lead author on the study and an associate professor of hospitality management in MU's College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources. "We found that this kind of marketing does improve trust in restaurants on a variety of issues when the ads include engaging visuals, but when it comes to animal welfare, it doesn't matter how the message is delivered. Customers don't care."

Along with Sung-Bum Kim, an assistant professor at Inha University in South Korea who worked on the study while earning a doctorate at MU, his research team created marketing messages from fictional restaurants to investigate how such messages can impact levels of consumer trust and corporate reputation. Each message had two versions—text only and text with visual elements such as illustrations and certification seals—and each embraced one of four social causes: health, human services, environmental concern and animal welfare. Researchers then surveyed 433 participants about their reactions to the ads.

Unsurprisingly for the researchers, the majority of causes elicited improved trust and reputation for the [restaurant](#) when presented in a visually engaging message, as opposed to a generic message with plain

text. But for the cause of animal welfare, consumer trust remained unchanged regardless of the type of message, indicating apathy on the part of customers.

"We have seen that visually appealing cause marketing works in a variety of contexts across many different industries," Dae-Young Kim said. "So when we see this marketing fall flat for restaurants addressing animal welfare, it tells us that the style of message isn't the problem. People are simply ignoring restaurants when they discuss that particular cause."

Kim said the problem is probably not that people don't care about animal welfare. One possible explanation is that not enough restaurants have taken a stand regarding animal welfare for customers to pay attention. Conversely, people might be more receptive to an animal [welfare](#) message in a pet food advertisement because pet food companies have been incorporating that message into their marketing for several years. In that case, more marketing from restaurants addressing [animal welfare](#) could prompt more customers to start listening, Kim said.

The study, "Building corporate reputation, overcoming consumer skepticism, and establishing trust: choosing the right message types and social causes in the [restaurant industry](#)," was published in *Service Business*.

More information: Dae-Young Kim et al. Building corporate reputation, overcoming consumer skepticism, and establishing trust: choosing the right message types and social causes in the restaurant industry, *Service Business* (2018). [DOI: 10.1007/s11628-018-0386-5](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11628-018-0386-5)

Provided by University of Missouri

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