Downplaying product greenness could increase sales

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New research suggests that companies looking to promote their latest environmentally friendly product should downplay its green credentials if they want consumers to buy it.

By highlighting green attributes through advertising, in some situations

firms risk generating associations with weak product performance, say researchers from the University of East Anglia (UEA) and University of Leeds. This is because of the performance ability sometimes associated with green products, whereby consumers perceive them as being less effective.

Instead, by downplaying the product's greenness firms may be more likely to persuade consumers to buy it, if it is promoted on more traditional, rather than performance, aspects.

Green products usually include environmentally friendly features that are less harmful to the planet and population, such as biodegradable and nontoxic ingredients, that enhance energy efficiency and include recycled components.

However, while it has been suggested that consumers are willing to buy such products, these attitudes rarely result in purchases and they often buy the conventional alternatives.

Previous research has found that consumers tend to choose products with superior functional performance over products with superior sustainability characteristics, and indicates that this choice is often related to assumptions about the performance ability of green products.

This new study, led by Dr. Bryan Usrey of UEA's Norwich Business School, shows that the product category can influence the effect of a green product advertising strategy on performance assessments, and that subtle, or 'implicit' messaging is more effective in conditions under which consumers have more concerns about the product's performance or have lower expectations about its greenness.

Published in the Journal of Advertising, the findings suggest that when product-related attributes are prominent, or 'explicit," in advertising, if

consumers perceive them as being at odds with the benefits associated with the product category, the resulting incompatibility will further reduce their performance evaluations.

Dr. Usrey, a lecturer in marketing, said: "Given consumers' perceptions of poorly performing green products, persuading them to alter their consumption habits remains a difficult task for marketers.

"While firms have often attempted to enhance their environmental credentials by emphasizing a new product's green attributes, we show that this may in fact have negative consequences.

"Our findings show that it would be sensible to match the advertisement and its information to the product being marketed, in terms of both its associated category and the optionality of the attribute. In addition, as green products are often associated with poorer performance, firms would do well to tailor their advertising to meet the expected benefits associated with a given product category."

The most prominent advertising strategy used by firms includes products' environmental characteristics. For example, car manufacturer Toyota makes the Prius's low emissions and fuel consumption prominent, clearly stating that the product has environmental benefits. By contrast, Tesla and BMW reduce the prominence of such information, focusing instead on products' performance-related characteristics, such as, acceleration time, handling ability.

These examples represent two distinct advertising strategies—namely, green emphasis and understatement. The former aims to make products' green characteristics clear, employing what the researchers term as 'explicit signals." The latter strategy reduces this prominence; the 'implicit signals' approach.

The researchers examined whether, why, and when an implicit (green understatement) versus explicit (green emphasis) advertising strategy leads to higher performance evaluation for green products.

They conducted two experiments, one with an advertisement for a new laundry detergent and the other using an advert for a washing machine that featured a new eco-mode, which reduces power and water usage.

They found that implicit, rather than explicit, communication about greenness leads to higher performance evaluations and purchase intent for products that are less commonly green (the detergent) and for products that have an optional green mode (the washing machine).

The authors say the findings have important implications for public policy makers and support the notion that consumers are more likely to engage in prosocial actions when the request for help is accompanied by some form of personal benefit. In the area of energy conservation, for example, a benefit appeal might emphasize money savings to the homeowner or, in the case of this research, highlight performance aspects.

"When encouraging consumers to act in a more sustainable manner, downplaying the environmental aspects of the behavior may further increase evaluations and intent to buy," said Dr. Usrey. "Our results also suggest that optionality could play a role in determining green behaviour. Informing consumers about and providing them with reasonable options may do more to encourage green behaviour, as they would be acting out of their own volition, rather than being forced to."

"How Downplaying Product Greenness Affects Performance Evaluations: Examining the Effects of Implicit and Explicit Green Signals in Advertising," Bryan Usrey, Dayananda Palihawadana, Charalampos Saridakis, and Aristeidis Theotokis, is published in the

Journal of Advertising.

More information: Bryan Usrey et al. How Downplaying Product Greenness Affects Performance Evaluations: Examining the Effects of Implicit and Explicit Green Signals in Advertising, *Journal of Advertising* (2020). DOI: 10.1080/00913367.2020.1712274

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