

Persuading consumers to go green

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Shopping habits and escalating consumption of many consumers are inflicting a heavy environmental toll, and while the majority of customers seem hesitant to act 'green' on their own, companies are increasingly expected to implement effective eco-friendly tactics. But efforts to increase towel reuse at hotels, paperless adoption in the

banking industry or 'ugly' food consumption at grocery stores have been challenging.

As a result, millions of tons of cosmetically imperfect produce are wasted every year in the United States while about one billion trees worth of paper are thrown away. Electricity consumption is impacted when those plain nonverbal stickers used in hotel bathrooms fail to significantly alter towel usage habits.

So, what's missing in the messaging? Persuasive language that combines [peer pressure](#) with what the consumer, or broader world, can gain by lightening carbon footprints. Humanize the earth with a smiling face or give the visually unappealing potato a name, and the persuasive green impact is further amplified, according to a study led by the University of Houston Conrad N. Hilton College of Hotel and Restaurant Management.

Researchers presented hypothetical scenarios to 776 experimental respondents across the hotel, banking and retail industries to identify low-cost and useful means to facilitate pro-environmental appeals. The work is published in *Psychology & Marketing*.

"Gain language is messaging that says 'you can save this amount of water if you reuse your towel or save this amount of electricity.' Highlight the positive benefit of the proposed action," said study co-author Priyanko Guchait, associate professor at UH's Hilton College. "Combine that strategy with peer pressure, or what's called normative influence, and convey that 75% of customers reuse towels, for example. Then customers will be more likely to do the same because of that established social norm."

Guchait collaborated on the research with visiting scholar The Khoa Do and Chen-Ya Wang from National Tsing Hua University in Taiwan.

Gain language does not work in all [social situations](#), just those defined as 'low risk,' such as green behavior, according to Guchait. "It's low risk because no one is going to die if you don't reuse a towel," he said. Loss language, or highlighting negative possible outcomes, is more effective in 'high risk' situations where lives could be at stake, such as calls to practice physical distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic, according to his previous research.

The study also uncovered that by adding anthropomorphism to the messaging, or giving objects human characteristics, green compliance increased. The researchers suggest that hoteliers should add a happy facial expression of the earth to their green signs in bathrooms to encourage the reuse of towels as well as discourage the excessive use of water and toilet paper.

"Retailers such as supermarkets can give a name to their ugly food promotion programs (e.g., Mr. Potato) to better entice customers' engagement in their green campaigns. Similarly, restaurant managers who want to sell foods made of ugly vegetables can create a menu with an anthropomorphized character," the authors wrote. "Banking managers who want to promote paperless behavior may also think of assigning a first-person pronoun to their green paperless initiatives."

Not only could these efforts positively impact the environment, the researchers suggest that by shifting customers' behaviors to be greener, businesses can save money while increasing their reputation.

"Businesses could reduce their losses and generate more revenue all while showing their customers they care about the environment," said Guchait. "That's a win-win situation."

More information: Khoa T. Do et al, When normative framing saves Mr. Nature: Role of consumer efficacy in proenvironmental adoption,

Psychology & Marketing (2021). [DOI: 10.1002/mar.21486](https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21486)

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