

Plant-based meat sales are stagnating. Research suggests playing down its green benefits could attract more consumers

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

It's difficult to tell if the recent [wave of anti-vegan sentiment](#) has affected the plant-based meat market, but denigrating the image of vegans has certainly gone mainstream.

Alongside [negative comments](#) about people who don't eat [meat](#) by figures like [Piers Morgan](#) and [Jeremy Clarkson](#), anti-vegan rhetoric has even slipped into [political discourse](#): Suella Braverman recently referred to supporters of Just Stop Oil campaigners as "[Guardian-reading, tofu-eating wokerati](#)." It seems our protein choices have become a surprisingly loaded issue.

These days, consumers are faced with a dizzying array of choices when it comes to protein, particularly since US plant-based producer Beyond Meat started its quest to [disrupt the market in 2012](#). Since then, its innovative take on the veggie burger, made from pea protein to mimic the taste and texture of meat, has helped the company become a runaway success.

But despite sustained growth for several years, sales of plant-based meat products [are now stagnating](#). Even market leaders like Beyond Meat are hitting [significant lows](#).

The environmental benefits of adopting a diet that is [less reliant on meat](#) have been well-established. As UK nature presenter [David Attenborough](#) [has pointed out](#): "We must change our diet. The planet can't support billions of meat-eaters."

So, working out why consumers are cooling towards this once-hot product is crucial, not only from a business point of view but to support the environmental benefits of low- or no-meat diets.

Price and healthiness are important. However, a growing ideological divide over the environment means traditional ways of encouraging people to eat plant-based meat—promoting its green credentials—could be harming sales, according to research.

Criticism of plant-based meat

The plant-based meat market has certainly been criticized for [high prices](#) compared with [animal meat](#). It also tends to be more expensive than traditional vegan protein sources, such as beans, lentils and tofu. Given the cost of living crisis, consumers are forced to make frugal choices when it comes to their shopping baskets, and may reject what could be seen as a premium product.

Others have questioned the healthiness of meat substitutes. As plant-based meat is a relatively new product, the [long-term health implications](#) of directly replacing animal meat with it are unknown. Research also [warns against assuming](#) that plant-based meat is nutritionally equivalent to animal meat.

But alongside price and healthiness, image also plays an important role in the success of plant-based brands, according to my research with [Krista Hill Cummings of Babson College](#), Massachusetts. In particular, how brands present the environmental benefits of plant-based meat can have a significant impact on the kinds of consumers that buy this type of food.

The issue of climate change and environmental concern is politically polarizing, however. Since the 1990s, environmentalism has been depicted as [a left-wing ideological issue](#), particularly in the US. So, our study sought to [examine the role of political beliefs](#) in driving sales of plant-based meat by, first, establishing a link between a person's ideology (either conservative or liberal) and their desire to engage with the plant-based meat market. This means everything from becoming aware of the product and developing opinions on it, right through to buying and eating plant-based meats.

A different survey shows that [more than half \(53%\)](#) of US consumers who have not bought or tried plant-based meat may be reluctant to buy a product they view as "woke." Our study further highlights the political

divide in views about plant-based meat, with the conservative consumers we polled less likely than liberals to try it, and generally less interested in even considering it.

We analyzed press releases from Beyond Meat to understand how the benefits of plant-based meat are being communicated to consumers, to see if this could be a driver of the ideological divide over plant-based meat. We found that taste, health and the environment are the main messages used by the firm.

Taste and health are product benefits that appeal to both liberal and conservative consumers, according to [other research](#). However, the environment emerged as a more controversial topic. This issue polarized liberal and conservative consumers when it came to [perceiving climate change as a problem](#) that could or should be addressed by eating plant-based meat.

Testing ads about the environment

To further test the idea that the environment could cause problems when advertising to conservative consumers, we created different messages, varying the environmental content. We developed mock Facebook ads that described either the health and environmental benefits of plant-based meat, or just the health benefits. We found that advertising content based on the environment turned off the conservative consumers involved in our study.

Of course, our study was carried out among US consumers. But the trend of [political polarization](#) seen across Europe, and recent comments about the vegan "wokerati" lifestyle from UK public figures, means we could see similar results in other countries.

For an advertising message to successfully resonate and change either a

consumer's attitude or behavior, "congruence" is required. This is when the message content aligns with the characteristics of its recipient. We found that environmental messaging is incongruent to conservative consumers, meaning these ads don't spark either their curiosity or interest. Without that spark, you can't engage consumers.

More research into, and development of, alternative meats [could no doubt improve](#) the nutritional profile, taste and texture of these products, but the environmental case for reducing meat consumption in our diets is clear. Plant-based brands need to change the way they speak to [consumers](#) about this issue to better engage steadfast meat-eaters.

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