

# New study shows marketing a brand's simplicity can backfire

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Irritability is a common side effect of heat. Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

When companies tout the simplicity of their products, they may unknowingly invite customer dissatisfaction, new University of Oregon

research finds.

For decades, "simpler is better" has been accepted as a universal truth in marketing.

Nick Light, assistant professor of marketing at the UO' Lundquist College of Business, has tested that assumption. He found that most consumers prefer offerings that appear to be easy to use and understand. However, trumpeting simplicity can have a hidden, costly downside.

"When marketing convinces consumers that things are simple and they inevitably go wrong, consumers get really angry or dissatisfied," he said.

Light's paper, co-authored by Philip Fernbach, a marketing professor at the University of Colorado, Boulder, recently [appeared](#) in the *Journal of Marketing Research*.

The lesson for marketers is to be careful about building branding and advertising strategies around simplicity because they could easily backfire if the product or service fails to deliver.

"Simplicity is not a silver bullet," Light said. "Like all [marketing strategies](#) it has its positives and negatives, and those negatives for some companies can be both unexpected and significant. The strategy might work for established companies with track records to back up their claims. But it can be risky for a start-up with no history or a [company](#) in a complex market category where flaws or malfunctions are more common."

The lesson for consumers is to try to look beyond reassuring marketing messages of simplicity and do more research to see what features or benefits align with their needs.

Light's earlier experience in the business world sparked his interest in the topic. He was a marketing manager at a direct-to-consumer mattress company that promoted its streamlined approach. With the tagline "one perfect mattress," the company offered only one mattress model shipped directly to the consumer's door, dramatically simplifying the mattress buying process.

"Some customers calling with even minor complaints, such as a ding from shipping or a slight discoloration in the fabric, would get really angry," Light said. "They would say things like, 'I don't understand what's so difficult about this,' even when the logistics of manufacturing, assembling, and shipping are quite complex. These customers were getting overly upset because the product and process had been portrayed as simple."

Through a series of lab experiments, surveys and an analysis of actual *Consumer Reports* data, Light found that when consumers view a brand as simple, they think its products are less likely to break or fail, which leads them to be more upset when things go wrong.

The data also showed that consumers judged the complexity of brands or products based on the complexity of their cognitive association networks, also known as [mental representations](#). For example, when study participants viewed sample ads for two different financial planning firms they formed mental pictures of the simplicity or complexity of the brand depending on how plain or busy the art was and the details provided in each ad.

The *Consumer Reports* data measured product reliability and [customer satisfaction](#) for grills, mowers, blenders and vacuums, which the researchers merged with independent data on consumers' perceptions of those brands' simplicity and complexity. The researchers found that consumers are less likely to recommend simpler brands after failures

compared to more complex brands.

**More information:** Nicholas Light et al, EXPRESS: Keep It Simple? Consumer Perceptions of Brand Simplicity and Risk, *Journal of Marketing Research* (2024). [DOI: 10.1177/00222437241248413](https://doi.org/10.1177/00222437241248413)

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