

Using social values for profit cheapens them, a new study cautions

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Businesses sometimes align themselves with important values such as a clean environment, feminism, or racial justice, thinking it's a win-win: the value gets boosted along with the company's bottom line.

But be careful, warns new research from the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management.

Using these values primarily for self-interested purposes such as profit or reputation can ultimately undermine their special status and erode people's commitment to them.

"It sets a different norm for appropriate use of the value," says research author Rachel Ruttan, an assistant professor of organizational behaviour and human resources at the Rotman School, who co-authored the study with Loran Nordgren, a professor of management and organizations at the Kellogg School of Management. "These are things that we are supposed to pursue as ends in themselves and this is shifting how people might think about that."

In multiple studies using hundreds of participants, Dr. Ruttan found that people exposed to more self-interested uses of "sacred" values not only demonstrated diminished regard for those values subsequently but were less willing to donate to causes that supported them.

A [social media](#) post wishing "Happy Earth Day," from NASCAR, the stock car racing organization, reduced people's subsequent respect for the annual environmental protection event, compared to a similar post from a group dedicated to ecological conservation. In another study, participants aware of a 2015 "paid patriotism" scandal, where the National Football League was revealed to have accepted money from the U.S. military for game-day flag presentations and the honouring of military members, showed less concern for patriotic displays than those unaware of the case.

Participants in yet another study were less likely to donate to an environmental cause after reading about a fictional report in which many organizations had launched pro-environmental campaigns in pursuit of

profits.

Typically, values that are obviously under threat trigger people's moral outrage, such as when money intended to promote workplace diversity is reallocated to cover other expenses. But that impulse isn't switched on when the value appears to be at least superficially supported—even if it's really being leveraged for a very different purpose. That less pure use gets subtly normalized and is how the value's status ends up corrupted, says Prof. Ruttan.

Still, it is possible for an organization to associate itself with social values and not diminish them, she says. But organizations must show "legitimate commitment" toward the value. She points to the example of an environmentally branded clothing company that discourages customers from purchasing replacements for its jackets, offering to repair their worn ones instead.

"That is a real commitment to sustainability, where they're actively taking on a cost," says Prof. Ruttan.

Consumers, meanwhile, should think critically about the campaigns they see and resist taking automatic cues from them about how to think about the values these campaigns appear to promote.

"Grassroots action is still important and upholding our own commitment to these causes is still very valuable in the face of all of this information," says Prof. Ruttan.

The paper is forthcoming in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

More information: Rachel L. Ruttan et al, Instrumental use erodes sacred values., *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2021).

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