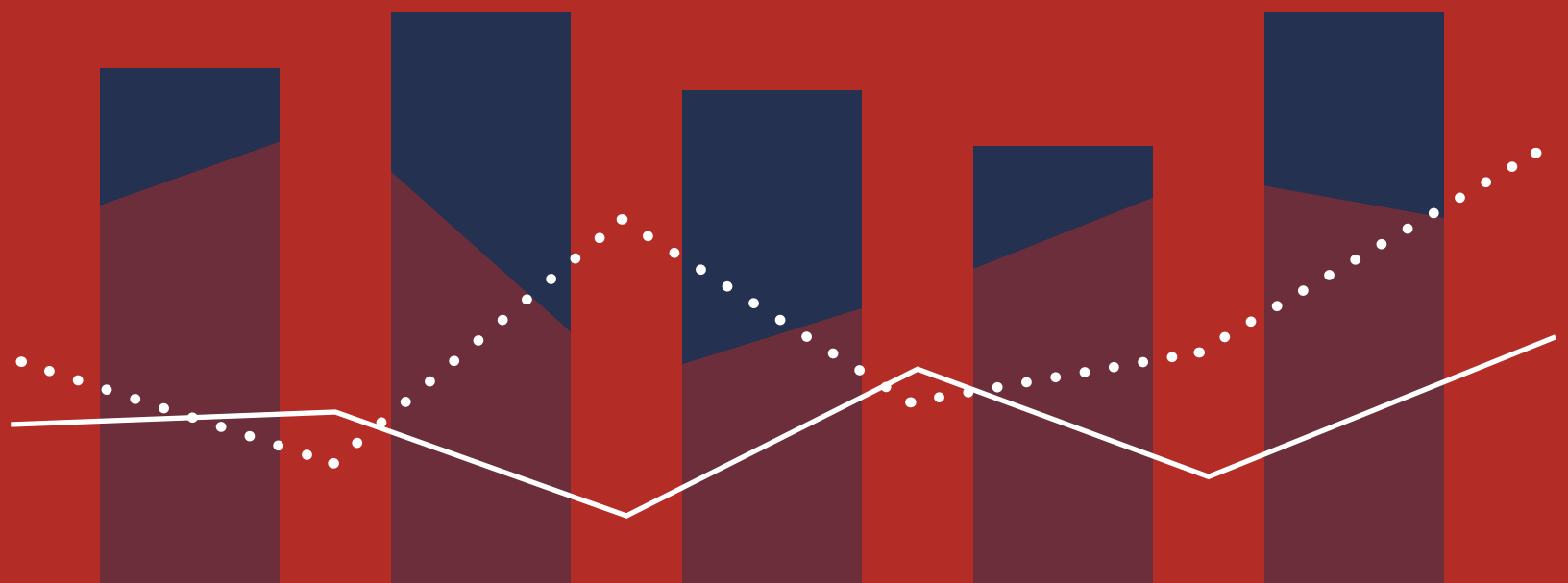


IMPACT AT JMR

JOURNAL *of* MARKETING RESEARCH



AMERICAN MARKETING
ASSOCIATION

Three Ways to Engage Consumers for Sustainable Consumption

By Karen Page Winterich | 9.22.2021

Companies have remained committed to sustainability even as the economy has been upended by the COVID-19 pandemic. Some have further emphasized sustainability initiatives, recognizing they are key to a resilient business.

Consumers agree. A global survey found that 40% of more than 13,000 consumers believe sustainability has become more important in their shopping decisions since the pandemic began.

Still, consumers' attitudes don't always align with their behaviors. Several recent academic articles provide insight into when and why consumer behaviors support organizational sustainability initiatives. Social influence plays a powerful role in sustainability, as consumers can be swayed by peer groups or mass media. Companies, too, can inspire consumers to engage in sustainable behaviors. But they must demonstrate their own commitment to sustainability before asking consumers to invest in the effort.

Make Sustainability Social

In a Journal of Marketing Research-published study, Chen and colleagues (2019) examined how climate change media coverage impacted hybrid vehicle sales. The researchers classified news articles containing

either "climate change" or "global warming" as admitting to, denying, or being neutral on climate change. Their findings revealed that media coverage admitting climate change was occurring positively impacted hybrid vehicles sales. For each major media report devoting 100% of its discussion to climate change and global warming, the researchers observed a sales increase of approximately six hybrid vehicles. They further suggested cumulative media coverage may result in 12 or more hybrid vehicle sales over the long term. The rationale for the effect is that the media's climate change admissions make sustainable behavior an implicit social norm.

The behavior of individuals in social groups can also impact the likelihood of sustainable behavior. Consumers are more likely to behave sustainably when others in their social groups do so. Notably, research has found that the behaviors of outgroup members of dissociative groups (i.e., those with whom one does not want to be associated) can be motivating. White, Simpson, and Argo (2014) found that consumers increased their sustainable

behavior when they learned a dissociative group member performed better at tasks like composting. In one study, the researchers told business school students in a coffee shop that their cups were compostable. When the participants were told computer science students were the most effective composters on campus, they composted their cups 25% of the time. When the researchers told the business school students they were the most effective composters on campus, the rate declined to 10%. The business students were 2.5 times more likely to compost when they knew a dissociative outgroup performed more sustainably than their ingroup. The effect was stronger when the sustainable behavior was public, as the motivation to outperform the dissociative group comes from the desire to demonstrate positive behavior to others.

Inspire Consumers to Waste Less

Not all behaviors are public and influenced socially, so companies must find other ways to spur sustainable action. Winterich, Nenkov, and Gonzales (2019) found that companies could increase consumer recycling by making the materials' transformation into new products salient. Though transforming waste into something new defines recycling, consumers do not naturally think about the process when considering their waste streams. When firms prompt consumers to think about the new life given to a product by recycling, such as clothier Eileen Fisher's "We'd Like Our Clothes Back Now: You bring back your old pieces, we find them another home—or turn them into entirely new designs" messaging, they are inspired to act.

In one study, the researchers asked tailgating sports fans to recycle bottles and cans and told them the materials could be made into other products, such as new cans, bicycles, and clothing. Other fans were simply asked to recycle the bottles and cans. Those told the recyclables could be made into new products recycled at a 49.2% rate, more than double the 23.8% rate of the second group.

Consumers are generally waste averse and tend to experience negative emotions when using more than they need but positive emotions when recycling. The positive emotions can induce the behavior, but emphasizing recycling without highlighting its costs, as well as consumption costs, can lead to greater resource consumption. Sun and Trudel (2017) found that study participants used 19% more paper to wrap a package when they saw the used material could be recycled than when they had to place it in the trash.

Demonstrate Commitment First

Wang, Krishna, and McFerran (2017) find that firms must first visibly demonstrate their own commitment to the environment before asking consumers to invest in the effort. In one study, consumers used 10% less hotel room electricity when the property owner provided a bamboo toothbrush in recyclable paper packaging than they did when the firm provided a plastic toothbrush in disposable packaging. Energy conservation was even greater when the hotel offered the bamboo toothbrush and asked consumers to conserve energy. However, when the firm made the request but did not invest in sustainable behavior itself (i.e., provided plastic toothbrushes),

consumers used 20% more energy. The researchers find the effect is greatest for high-priced brands.

As consumers become more interested in corporate sustainability, companies must also embrace the practice in their upstream supply chain. Vadakkepatt and colleagues (2021) present a framework for retailers to integrate reducing, reusing, and recycling across their marketing mix aimed at both suppliers and customers. For example, they suggest companies seeking to reduce consumption through rental models must both motivate consumers to part with ownership and work with suppliers to design durable products for repeated use and cleaning.

Sustainability is not limited to environmental conservation. Consumers also expect companies to treat employees fairly and support important social causes, being four times more likely to purchase from purpose-driven brands than other firms. Vadakkepatt and colleagues

(2021) incorporate social outcomes in their framework, and Levi's switch to digitally-finished denim provides an example of reducing environmental harm while providing a safe employee working environment.

Summary

Though more and more companies are adopting sustainability initiatives and goals, they must recognize how to engage consumers effectively. Social influence can be a powerful tool for encouraging consumers to adopt sustainable behaviors, but the tactic is most effective when others can observe the behaviors. Even without public visibility, firms can inspire consumers to recycle, but the initiatives can lead to increased overall resource consumption. In the end, companies must demonstrate their own commitment to sustainability via environmental and/or social initiatives before encouraging consumers to invest the effort to do the same.

.....

AUTHOR

Karen Page Winterich is the Gerald I. Susman Professor in Sustainability and Professor of Marketing at the Smeal College of Business, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pennsylvania.

CITATION

Winterich, Karen Page (2021), "Three Ways To Engage Consumers for Sustainable Consumption," *Impact at JMR*, (09/23/21), Available at: <https://www.ama.org/2021/09/23/three-ways-to-engage-consumers-for-sustainable-consumption/>

REFERENCES

Chen, Yubo, Mrinal Ghosh, Yong Liu, and Liang Zhao (2019), "Media Coverage of Climate Change and Sustainable Product Consumption: Evidence from the Hybrid Vehicle Market," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 56 (6), 995-1011. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022243719865898>

Sun, Monic, and Remi Trudel (2017), "The Effect of Recycling versus Trashing on Consumption: Theory and Experimental Evidence," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 54 (2), 293-305. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jmr.15.0574>

Vadakkappatt, Gautham G., Karen Page Winterich, Vikas Mittal, Walter Zinn, Lauren Beitelspacher, John Aloysius, Jessica Ginger, and Julie Reilman (2021), "Sustainable Retailing," *Journal of Retailing*, 97 (1), 62-80. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretai.2020.10.008>

Wang, Wenbo, Aradhna Krishna, and Brent McFerran (2017), "Turning off the Lights: Consumers' Environmental Efforts Depend on Visible Efforts of Firms," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 54 (3), 478-494. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jmr.14.0441>

White, Katherine, Bonnie Simpson, and Jennifer J. Argo (2014), "The Motivating Role of Dissociative Out-Groups in Encouraging Positive Consumer Behaviors," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 51 (4), 433-447. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jmr.12.0335>

Winterich, Karen Page, Gergana Y. Nenkov, and Gabriel E. Gonzales (2019), "Knowing What It Makes: How Product Transformation Salience Increases Recycling," *Journal of Marketing*, 83 (4), 21-37. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022242919842167>

About JMR

The *Journal of Marketing Research* delves into the latest thinking in marketing research concepts, methods and applications from a broad range of scholars. It is included in both the *Financial Times* top 50 business journals and the University of Texas Dallas research rankings journal list.

About Impact at JMR

Impact at JMR highlights important and actionable content published in the *Journal of Marketing Research*. Executives can leverage this content in their organization. Professors can use it in their classrooms. Researchers can learn about distinct scholarly insights for their next big idea. We invite everyone to read, enjoy, learn, think and act.