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Is specific message always better?

The double-edged effects of message specificity in green advertising

A key challenge for companies or brands when communicating about their corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives is to overcome consumer skepticism. Prior research suggests that message specificity may play a central role in enhancing the credibility of CSR message and reducing consumer skepticism toward CSR advertising. Drawing upon the brands as intentional agents framework (Kervyn, Fiske, and Malone 2012), this study investigates the impact of message specificity of green advertising on consumer reactions and reveals a novel, double-edged effect of message specificity which depends on the specific dimensions of the brand's image—i.e., its perceived competence and warmth. Through two experiments, we find that the positive effect of message specificity depends on the brand competence level, and more interestingly, that brand warmth interacts with brand competence, such that message specificity can even backfire and lead to negative consumer responses when brand warmth and competence are both low. We find that the perceived manipulative intent of the brand mediates this interactive effect. Our research thus contributes to the CSR communication literature by providing a nuanced picture of the effects of message specificity, and offers valuable guidelines to companies on how to communicate about their CSR activities more effectively.

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