



It is easy to do the right thing: Avoiding the backfiring effects of advertisements that blame consumers for waste

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the backfiring effects of waste-prevention advertising that blames consumers for waste. Five experimental studies provide evidence that message focus (on close versus distant social actors) has an impact on message perception—and, further, on waste intentions and behaviors. Providing information on transgressions incurred by close social actors makes consumers hold less negative attitudes toward waste and feel less able to implement tasks that help reduce waste; this may explain higher transgression rates. Furthermore, simple manipulations of perceived task difficulty through advertising are shown to help mitigate these negative effects and increase the effectiveness of anti-waste campaigns.

1. Introduction

Waste has long been acknowledged as a key environmental issue (UNEP, 1992). The global level of municipal solid waste is expected to rise from 1.3 billion tons per year in 2012 to 2.2 billion tons per year in 2025 (World Bank, 2017). Close to one-third of all fresh food purchased in developed countries ultimately becomes waste, making waste one of the key consumption challenges of developed societies (FAO, 2015; Goodwin, 2017; Gunders, 2012; TNS Sofres, 2012). Furthermore, in the United States, paper accounted for 26% of the 258 million tons of municipal waste generated in 2014, while yard trimmings and food accounted for 28.2% (EPA, 2016).

Public policy often considers waste prevention as having higher priority than reuse, recycling, recovery, and disposal (Article 1 of Directive 94/62/EC: European Parliament and the Council, 1994). According to the OECD (Vancini, 2000), waste prevention consists of actions that lead to avoidance of waste at the source. Therefore, managing and preventing waste is a major concern for businesses and policy makers and numerous activities are in place to prevent packaging waste (e.g., Tencati, Pogutz, Moda, Brambilla, & Cacia, 2016), household solid waste (e.g., Ferrara & Missios, 2012), food waste (e.g., Cristóbal, Castellani, Manfredi, & Sala, 2018) or plastic waste (e.g., Axelsson & van Sebille, 2017).

Waste reduction endeavors are complicated, because they require a concerted effort by consumers, industries, and advertisers. In developed countries, > 60% of food waste (68% in North America and Oceania, 61% in Europe) occurs during consumption (households and

restaurants) or distribution (retailers), while < 17% occurs during production; 6% of waste comes from handling and storage and 9% results from processing (Lipinski et al., 2013). It is therefore important to focus on food waste reduction efforts at both the consumption stage (Block et al., 2016), and at the distribution stage (and here we refer to restaurants and retailers) (Papargyropoulou, Lozano, Steinberger, Wright, & bin Ujang, 2014; Parfitt, Barthel, & Macnaughton, 2010).

Negative appeals (i.e. advertising that focuses on shaming consumers for their behaviors) are often used to convince consumers to adopt prosocial behaviors (Banerjee, Gulas, & Iyer, 1995; Brennan & Binney, 2010; Hibbert, Smith, Davies, & Ireland, 2007; Steenhaut & Van Kenhove, 2006) or pro-environmental behaviors, such as recycling (e.g., Elgaaid, 2012). In practice, social marketing advertisements commonly use messages that blame consumers for waste. Such messages include: “consumers in rich countries waste almost as much food as the entire food production of sub-Saharan Africa” (UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme), 2015), “over 300 million tons of plastic are produced each year, and only 10% of all plastic used is properly recycled!” (EarthDay, 2015), and “running your garden hose can waste 32 of these bottles [of water, shown in an image] in one minute” (AWE (Alliance for Water Efficiency), 2013). Advertisers use these messages to build awareness on the impact that certain negative behaviors can have. As consumers are often not aware of the gravity of their behaviors, advertisers use informative messages to emphasize the magnitude of the problem. Clearly, these campaigns focus on consumers' wrongdoing to motivate them to cut waste or recycle plastic items.

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However, research highlights the potential backfiring effects of focusing on consumers' wrongdoing. When blamed for their transgressions, consumers may feel that the acceptance of responsibility could act as a threat to their self-image and thus lead them to deny their culpability (Ditto, Scepansky, Munro, Apanovitch, & Lockhart, 1998; Rotella & Richeson, 2013). Therefore, rather than discouraging consumers, such advertisements achieve the reverse and give their target consumers greater license to commit transgressions.

Given that advertisers and policy-makers use such messages, what can they do to avoid the backfiring effects that have been found in the literature? Past studies suggest that these effects are especially pervasive when the transgressions mentioned are undertaken by members of respondents' in-groups, that is, individuals perceived to be close to respondents (Rotella & Richeson, 2013). Therefore, we suggest that messages striving to raise waste awareness should focus on targets that are more distant.

As previous research suggests (Peattie & Peattie, 2009; Wymer, 2010), behavioral changes should ideally involve many social actors, not only consumers. Peattie and Peattie (2009), for instance, mention the importance of influencing stakeholders aside from the end user (the consumer) to create a supportive environment for behavioral change. Wymer (2010) concurs with this idea and adds that a communication campaign aimed at changing behavior is more effective if the focal individual's environment (e.g. places where products are purchased and/or consumed) is included. As stated earlier, it is important when focusing on waste to take into consideration the places where products are distributed: stores or restaurants. Previous studies have already stressed the importance of looking at waste in stores (e.g., Theotokis, Pramartari, & Tsiros, 2012) and in restaurants (e.g., Wansink & van Ittersum, 2013).

We take this consideration one step further and propose to compare the effectiveness of campaigns that blame consumers for waste to campaigns that focus on other actors. Such campaigns are already in use. For instance, recent supermarket advertising campaigns on “ugly products” (Intermarché, 2014) implicitly acknowledge that food waste is the fault of retailers as well as consumers (Goerzen, 2015).¹ In fact, some supermarkets have begun reporting the amount of unsold food they throw away (BBC, 2013); restaurants are also implicitly recognizing their own responsibility for generating food waste by implementing campaigns to encourage the use of “doggy bags” (i.e., to-go boxes) (Daily Mail, 2016; NPR, 2016; Schira, 2012). Natuur & Milieu (an independent environmental organization in the Netherlands) assert that doggy bags are a necessity, since the catering industry wastes 50,000 tons of food every year (Catharine, 2014); meanwhile, Take-Away (a French company) is promoting “doggy bags” in France by blaming French restaurants for 14% of total food waste (de Foucaud, 2015b). Thus, some restaurants and stores have implemented campaigns through which they take partial responsibility for waste. However, to our knowledge, there are still no academic studies that test the effectiveness of such campaigns.

The main objective of this research is to provide a possible solution for the backfiring effects of many waste prevention advertisements that focus on blaming consumers for waste. We propose and show through five experimental studies that campaigns that focus on the accountability of more distant social actors (such as restaurants or stores) do not exhibit these backfiring effects. Further, because the literature on attribution theory suggests that when blamed for transgressions, individuals react by finding external excuses (such as task difficulty) for their behavior (Kelley, 1967), we test the effects of perceived task difficulty and show that low task difficulty messages can be successfully

¹ These campaigns point out retailers' responsibility in generating food waste by refusing to sell imperfect produce (Goerzen, 2015); they aim at selling produce with non-standard shapes and use messages such as “Ugly fruit and vegetables are just as good as they are ugly”, “A grotesque apple a day keeps the doctor away as well” (Intermarché, 2014).

utilized in waste avoidance campaigns. Note that this research is one of the first to focus on consumer waste, an important phenomenon for marketing researchers.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Social norms

Research on social norms (Cialdini et al., 2006; Schultz, Nolan, Cialdini, Goldstein, & Griskevicius, 2007) provides an explanation for the negative effects of messages that blame consumers: Consumers use descriptive norms (information about what people like them do) to orient their own behaviors. Social norm researchers typically distinguish between two types of norms. Injunctive norms (or ought norms) are activated when targets receive information about what they ought to do—that is, either the right thing to do in a given situation, or what others expect them to do (Goldstein, Cialdini, & Griskevicius, 2008). Meanwhile, descriptive norms simply provide information about what (most) people do in a given situation. Prevention campaigns that blame consumers for wasting food, energy, paper, and other resources use descriptive norms.

There is abundant evidence that descriptive norms influence behavior (for a review see Cialdini, 2003). Unfortunately, descriptive norms are quite effective for negatively framed behaviors. When messages describe what most people do wrong, targets of the messages also tend to do wrong (Cialdini et al., 2006; Schultz et al., 2007). When a certain behavior is perceived as being the “norm,” even if it is undesirable, people will be more inclined to adopt it (Köbis, Van Prooijen, Righetti, & Van Lange, 2015; Robinson, Otten, & Hermans, 2016; Schultz et al., 2007).

2.2. Closeness

As Goldstein et al. (2008) show, the effects of descriptive norms are stronger when the persons described in the messages are perceived to be close to the target audience. Similarly, Eyal, Liberman, and Trope (2008) and Rotella and Richeson (2013) show that morally offensive actions are perceived less negatively when committed by members of one's own social group. These findings are in line with the literature on in-group versus out-group forgiveness behaviors (Zourrig, Chebat, & Toffoli, 2015), showing that consumers are more likely to forgive employees whom they perceive to be from their in-group as opposed to an out-group. This stream of research suggests that if messages either do not blame consumers directly or blame more distant social actors, backfiring effects might be reduced.

While most anti-waste campaigns strive to represent consumers who are as close to the target audience as possible, few campaigns currently utilize a different approach. The aforementioned campaigns from retailers on ugly produce (BBC, 2013; Goerzen, 2015; Intermarché, 2014) or from restaurants on doggy bags (Daily Mail, 2016; NPR, 2016) are examples of campaigns that explicitly focus on more distant social actors who also share some responsibility for waste (de Foucaud, 2015a) and with whom consumers come in direct contact during consumption. The literature on social norms suggests that these campaigns should not exhibit the backfiring effects observed in consumer-focused campaigns since they focus on more distant actors.

The goal of waste-prevention campaigns is to influence actual waste-related behaviors. However, campaigns are not necessarily directed at behaviors, and often focus on intermediary outcomes, such as attitudes (Graham-Rowe, Jessop, & Sparks, 2015; Parizeau, von Massow, & Martin, 2015), intentions (Visschers, Wickli, & Siegrist, 2016), and emotions—guilt in particular (Quested, Marsh, Stunell, & Parry, 2013). Consequently, multiple outcomes appear to be of interest when focusing on the effects of anti-waste campaigns.

Research has shown that environmental attitudes can predict behavioral intentions (Minton & Rose, 1997; Roberts & Bacon, 1997), and

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