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If Donuts Could Talk They'd Tell You to Take the Elevator Instead of the Stairs

Humanizing a brand can influence consumer behavior in a healthy or unhealthy direction—depending on how they envision the brand, according to a new study in the [Journal of Consumer Research](#).

“This research suggests that people’s behavior will be influenced by the brands they have been asked to think about,” write authors Pankaj Aggarwal (University of Toronto) and Ann L. McGill (University of Chicago).

The authors conducted three laboratory studies where they asked half of the participants to imagine well-known brands as coming to life as a person (anthropomorphizing). Other participants were not instructed to think about brands in human terms. Anthropomorphizing participants considered some brands to be partners (working along with the consumers to achieve benefits) and others to be servants (the brand did work on behalf of the consumer).

After thinking about Kellogg’s or Krispy Kreme, participants were asked to do a second study where they were asked about day-to-day judgments. They were asked if they would take the stairs (healthy behavior) or the elevator (less healthy behavior) in their building. “Those who had earlier been thinking about a humanized Kellogg were more likely to take the stairs, consistent with the Kellogg’s image, but those thinking about Krispy Kreme were more likely to take the elevator, consistent with the Krispy Kreme image, provided they liked the brand,” the authors write.

For a “servant brand” (like Volvo, known for safety), people behaved in opposite ways from the brand’s image. “People who thought about the humanized Volvo took on more risk [in gambling], accepting less and less advantageous gambles, behavior that is the opposite of the brand reputation.”

“Whether or not people’s behavior was affected by the brand depended on how they had been asked to envision the brand, specifically, as coming to life as a person or not,” the authors write. “Then whether they acted like the brand’s image or the opposite depended on whether the brand seemed to play a role more like a partner in their lives or a servant to them, and whether they liked it or not.”

Pankaj Aggarwal and Ann L. McGill. “When Brands Seem Human, Do Humans Act Like Brands? Automatic Behavioral Priming Effects of Brand Anthropomorphism.” *Journal of Consumer Research*: August 2012 (published online November 11, 2011).

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