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When Will a Message of Social Responsibility Backfire?



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Consumers don't react positively to all messages of corporate social responsibility, according to a new study in the [Journal of Consumer Research](#). The message needs to line up with consumers' mindsets and understanding of the brands.

"Certain brand concepts may be roadblocks for firms aiming to benefit from corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs," write authors Carlos J. Torelli (University of Minnesota), Alokparna (Sonia) Basu Monga (University of South Carolina), and Andrew M. Kaikati (University of Georgia).

The authors examined how consumers react to certain brand concepts and companies' social responsibility missions. "For instance, a luxury brand such as Rolex may be primarily associated with an abstract concept of self-enhancement (dominance over people and resources), whereas Aunt Jemima may be primarily associated with a conservation concept (tradition and protection of the status quo)," the authors explain. "Similarly, Apple iTunes may be characterized by an openness concept (exciting and free-spirited)." Even when consumers are not conscious of it, these brands activate related motivations in consumers.

The authors believe that messages of social responsibility that come from luxury brands associated with a "self-enhancement concept" cause consumers to feel that something is "not right," which means their opinion of the brand declines. On the other hand, brands associated with openness or conservation do not have the same "motivational conflict" with social responsibility.

By testing participants' reactions to real and hypothetical brands, the authors also found that people who had an abstract (vs. concrete) mindset were more likely to experience "disfluency" when brand information conflicted with social responsibility messages.

"Given that billions of dollars are being poured into CSR activities, knowing which brands are more or less likely to succeed is highly consequential," the authors write. "CSR activities can backfire for luxury brands associated with a self-enhancement concept, but not for brands associated with openness or conservation concepts, unless steps are taken to avoid these negative consequences."

Carlos J. Torelli, Alokparna (Sonia) Basu Monga, and Andrew M. Kaikati. "Doing Poorly by Doing Good: Corporate Social Responsibility and Brand Concepts." *Journal of Consumer Research*: February 2012 (published online June 3, 2011).

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