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Are Consumers More Likely to Purchase *Unintentionally* Green Products?

A Fortune 500 company is redesigning a popular product using materials that are friendlier to the environment. How will consumers respond to the newly redesigned, “greener” product? According to a new study in the [Journal of Consumer Research](#), consumers are *more* likely to purchase a product if they think helping the environment is *not* the intended purpose of a product improvement.



“When a company makes a product that is better for the environment, consumers are actually less likely to purchase it if the environmental benefit is perceived as intentional rather than the result of some other effort,” write authors George E. Newman, Margarita Gorlin, and Ravi Dhar (all Yale University). “If a company intentionally made a product better for the environment, consumers believe the product’s quality must have suffered because the company diverted resources away from product quality.”

In a series of studies, consumers learned about a company that manufactures household cleaning products and were told that the company either intended to make the product better for the environment or that the environmental gain was the result of another improvement.

Consumers thought the products were higher in quality and were more likely to purchase the cleaning products when the improvement was unintended. Even when the company’s intentions were not disclosed, consumers thought the products suffered from a quality control problem, suggesting that consumers automatically perceive green products as being lower quality even when a company does not specify its intentions.

“Companies improving a basic product feature (making something more environmentally friendly or better tasting) should either position the improvement as unintended or emphasize that the primary goal is improving the quality of the product. On the other hand, companies looking to advertise their fair trade or sustainable production practices or their donations to charity can advertise those actions without worrying that it will affect perceptions of their products,” the authors conclude.

George E. Newman, Margarita Gorlin, and Ravi Dhar. “When Going Green Backfires: How Firm Intentions Shape the Evaluation of Socially Beneficial Product Enhancements.” *Journal of Consumer Research*: October 2014. For more information, contact George Newman (george.newman@yale.edu) or visit <http://ejcr.org/>.

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