**How Ads Can Push Too Hard**

**Overly Aggressive Pitches Can Put Off Consumers**

By [MATT RICHTEL](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/r/matt_richtel/index.html)SEPT. 27, 2014

People like to associate with brands that reflect how they see themselves. That’s an axiom of advertising. And so we have slogans telling us that “Choosy Moms Choose Jif.” Or, “If you call yourself a sports fan, you gotta have DirecTV!”

But [a study](http://www.jcr-admin.org/files/pressPDFs/040414133509_676125.pdf) published in the Journal of Consumer Research says ads like these can backfire. That’s because such assertive slogans remove a sense of freedom. What if I don’t have DirecTV? Are you telling me I’m not a real sports fan?

“When identity is involved, people really want to feel like they’re making the choice themselves, that the decision is meaningful,” said [Amit Bhattacharjee](http://www.tuck.dartmouth.edu/faculty/faculty-directory/amit-bhattacharjee), a visiting assistant professor at the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth, who worked on the study with academics from New York University and the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. When marketers “push too hard, it ruins that,” he added. The message “crowds out a sense of ownership and turns consumers off.”

In the experiment, researchers gathered a group of about 120 people at the University of Pennsylvania. The subjects were encouraged to focus on their environmental interests — a directive meant to activate that part of their identity.

Photo



Credit Michael Waraksa

Then they broke into three groups, with each shown a different slogan for [Charlie’s Soap](http://www.charliesoap.com/), a real-world, biodegradable cleanser. One group got a message that didn’t include any identity reference; it just said the soap was “a good choice for consumers.” Another group’s message made a light identity reference, calling the soap “a good choice for green consumers.” The third went further: “the only choice for green consumers!”

What researchers found was that the middle option (“a good choice for green consumers”) performed best. The worst performer was the ad that called the soap the “only choice” for green consumers.

That result ran counter to the expectations of a panel of 59 marketing executives and managers who had been asked beforehand to predict which slogan would work best. Nearly half projected that the “only choice” slogan would be most effective.

The study subjects reported that the off-putting slogan — with language that was not quite bullying but certainly imperative — threatened their sense of “freedom in expressing their identity,” Mr. Bhattacharjee said.

The researchers bolstered this conclusion when they ran the experiment a second time, but without telling a new group of subjects to focus on being environmentally conscious. In other words, they weren’t primed to identify as green consumers.

In this second experiment, the subjects were equally receptive to all three messages. The result told researchers that consumers who potentially identify with a product are put off by a too-explicit brand message.

The study cited the Jif and DirecTV ads as examples that could be off-putting. But clearly, they don’t turn off all consumers. Mr. Bhattacharjee and other scholars said that what’s probably happening is that while some people may be slightly or even subconsciously irked, they still buy the product because of other attributes, or because of factors like brand loyalty or message frequency.

“At some nonconscious level, it might be a little annoying or threatening, but put in the overall context, it doesn’t necessarily cause defection,” said Mark Forehand, a professor of marketing at the Foster School of Business at the University of Washington, who added that the study’s overall results made sense.

To Mr. Bhattacharjee, the lesson for marketers is to “reference identity without being too explicit; you do want a lighter touch.”