

## CONSUMER ATTITUDES AND INTENTIONS REGARDING ENVIRONMENTAL BEHAVIORS: EFFECTS OF FIRM-STATED MOTIVES

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### ABSTRACT

As many as 90% of Fortune 500 companies have integrated explicit corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives into their marketing actions, taking visible steps to communicate their socially responsible actions to consumers (Lichtenstein, Drumwright, and Braig 2004\*). One of the most dominant recent CSR platforms is adopting environmentally friendly practices. This increasingly popular CSR initiative of “going green” has been adopted as a marketing platform by major companies such as Honda, Toyota, GE, Bank of America, Starbucks, REI, Whole Foods, and Home Depot (Frazier 2007; Makower 2008), with the obvious hope of increased patronage of consumer segments in appreciation of such behaviors.

Although research supports the notion that consumers reward socially responsible firms with firm-serving benefits of greater patronage (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore, and Hill 2006; Lichtenstein et al. 2004; Sen and Bhattacharya 2001), little is known about what the public-serving benefits are—namely, the impact of firms’ environmental efforts on consumers’ own socially responsible attitudes and intentions. While some believe that the greening of business prompts consumers to become more green (Gunther 2007), others are skeptical. Indeed, as more companies attempt to create an environmental halo over their offerings, both policy makers and environmental groups express concern that some green marketing assertions are not substantiated and misleading, resulting in greenwashing of consumers (Story 2008). We address this under-researched area by examining how a brand’s stated motive for its environmentally friendly behaviors and consumers’ brand loyalty interact to influence consumers’ own attitudes and intentions toward similar behaviors. We look at how consumers respond to claims of a brand’s public-serving motives that either do not recognize firm-serving benefits (e.g., conserving energy to help the environment) or acknowledge firm-serving benefits (e.g., conserving energy to help the environment and improve the bottom line). Building on persuasion knowledge and brand loyalty research, we explore how these stated motives and brand loyalty affect consumers’ perceptions of the brand’s sincerity and how perceived sincerity, in turn, impacts consumers’ attitudes and intentions toward energy conservation.

Our experimental results suggest that current marketing practices promoting socially responsible initiatives with purely public-serving motives may not be very effective in persuading consumers to generate positive attitudes toward participating firms (at least for less loyal customers). Although brand loyal consumers are relatively unaffected by such practices, our results suggest that consumer attitudes and intentions in general do not follow those of a firm with regard to environmentally responsible behaviors espoused by the firm. It appears that whether companies can persuade consumers to follow corporate examples of socially responsible behavior may depend on firms’ abilities to foster brand loyalty among its customers or impact consumers’ persuasion knowledge such that consumers believe that such corporate efforts are sincere. Thus, marketers may be well served by integrating more honesty and transparency with regard to socially responsible claims into their marketing practices if consumers are to model their behaviors.

References available upon request