



ASSOCIATION FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

Labovitz School of Business & Economics, University of Minnesota Duluth, 11 E. Superior Street, Suite 210, Duluth, MN 55802

Whatever People Say I Am That's What I Am: Social Labeling As a Social Marketing Tool

Gert Cornelissen, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Spain

Siegfried Dewitte, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium

Luk Warlop, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium

Vincent Yzerbyt, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium

In this paper, we present a procedure to apply the social labeling technique as a social marketing tool. With four studies, we tested its potential for the promotion of pro-environmental consumer behavior. Results indicate that communicating a social label, following an environmentally friendly behavior that was not motivated by pro-environmental concerns, leads distracted consumers to re-attribute that behavior. Subsequently, they are likely to act upon the resulting self-perception as an environmentally friendly person. Social labeling showed to be more successful when cognitive resources are distracted, either at the moment of processing the label, or at the moment of making decisions related to the content of the label.

[to cite]:

Gert Cornelissen, Siegfried Dewitte, Luk Warlop, and Vincent Yzerbyt (2008) , "Whatever People Say I Am That's What I Am: Social Labeling As a Social Marketing Tool", in NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 35, eds. Angela Y. Lee and Dilip Soman, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 837-837.

[url]:

<http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/13178/volumes/v35/NA-35>

[copyright notice]:

This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at <http://www.copyright.com/>.

Whatever People Say I Am That's What I Am: Social Labeling as a Social Marketing Tool

Gert Cornelissen, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Spain
Luk Warlop, Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium
Siegfried Dewitte, Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium
Vincent Yzerbyt, Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In this paper we studied the potential of "social labeling" for the promotion of pro-environmental consumer behavior. Social labeling is a persuasion technique that consists of providing a person with a statement about his or her personality or values (i.e., the social label) in an attempt to provoke behavior that is consistent with the label. Like a bottle of wine carries a label, describing its content, we can "label" other people, describing some aspect of their personality. For example, Miller, Brickman, and Bolen (1975) showed that telling a group of fifth-graders that they are very tidy was more efficient in making them keep their classroom free of litter than an explicit plea for tidiness. The technique is believed to rely on a self-perception process and the fact that people's (interpretation of) past behavior guides future action (Albarracín and McNatt 2005; Burger and Caldwell 2003; Ouellette and Wood 1998; Tybout and Yalch 1980).

We propose and test an adapted version that allows this technique to be applicable as a social marketing tool. In a first step of this two-step procedure, the individual is provoked to perform a certain pro-environmental act. This could be, for example, the purchase of an environmentally friendly variety of a product, like bio-products or propellant-free deodorant. In some cases this will require some type of external motivation, like a price promotion. In other cases, the consumer might simply prefer the environmentally friendly product, because of other product features than its environmental friendliness. In a second step, a social label is communicated which attributes the purchase to the consumers' environmental values. For example, one could print a message on the packaging (e.g., "[brand X]—For those who care about their environment"), which invites the consumer to (mis)-attribute the ecological purchase to their value of caring for the environment. We hypothesized that if this reattribution process is successful, the individual is likely to perceive himself as more concerned with the environment and act upon this new self-perception subsequently.

In four studies we applied such a procedure which suggests an internal attribution of an externally motivated pro-environmental choice. Participants were asked to indicate which TV-set they preferred from a list of seven TVs. These were evaluated on seven dimensions, including "Image quality", "sound quality", and "environmental aspects". One TV-set, which was most popular (chosen by 95-100% of participants) scored best on image and sound quality, but it also happened to have a maximum score on environmental aspects. Subsequently, we provided a social label describing the typical consumer who preferred this particular TV-set as "very concerned with the environment, and ecologically conscious".

Results indicated that this procedure is most successful at eliciting pro-environmental choices, if participants were distracted, either at the moment of processing the label or at the moment of making decisions. This suggests the labeling effect is an automatic one and that it works best in common, cognitively demanding circumstances. Additionally, results indicated that the label is not merely used as a guide in subsequent decisions; it also results in a re-attribution of the initial pro-environmental behavior to pro-environmental motives.

References

- Albarracín, Dolores and Penny S. McNatt (2005), "Maintenance and Decay of Past Behavior Influences: Anchoring Attitudes on Beliefs Following Inconsistent Actions," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 31 (6), 719-33.
- Burger, Jerry M. and David F. Caldwell (2003), "The Effects of Monetary Incentives and Labeling on the Foot-in-the-Door Effect: Evidence for a Self-Perception Process," *Basic and applied social psychology*, 25 (3), 235-41.
- Miller, Richard L., Philip Brickman, and Diana Bolen (1975), "Attribution Versus Persuasion as a Means for Modifying Behavior," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 31 (March), 430-41.
- Ouellette, Judith A. and Wendy Wood (1998), "Habit and Intention in Everyday Life: The Multiple Processes by Which Past Behavior Predicts Future Behavior," *Psychological Bulletin*, 124 (1), 54-74.
- Tybout, Alice M. and Richard F. Yalch (1980), "The Effect of Experience: A Matter of Salience?," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 6 (March), 406-13.