Inciting consumers to buy fairly-traded products: a field experiment

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Abstract
Purpose – Research on fairly-traded products has shown that changing consumers’ attitudes may not be the best strategy to bring consumers to purchase these products. The objective of this study is to examine a different, non-cognitive approach based on the utilization of behavioral influence strategies.

Design/methodology/approach – A field experiment was conducted involving 168 consumers. The experiment took place in the context of a commercial stand in which fairly-traded products such as coffee, sugar, chocolate, and so on, were sold. Three factors were manipulated: the concreteness of the information provided to visitors; the provision of information about the popularity of fairly-traded products among relevant others; and the possibility of receiving concrete feedback from a producer.

Findings – The paper finds that, contrary to what was expected, abstract information led to a greater amount of money spent on average by visitors. In addition, knowing that fairly-traded products were popular among relevant others had a significant impact on money spent only when feedback was not offered to the participants.

Research limitations/implications – A field experiment does not offer a high degree of control over nuisance variables. The application of the manipulations and the randomization of participants in this study were therefore not optimal.

Practical implications – Managers involved in the marketing of fairly-traded products who communicate with potential buyers using concrete messages should make sure that consumers are attentive to their messages. These messages should inform consumers that fairly-traded products are purchased by relevant others.

Originality/value – The paper provides useful information on how to influence consumers’ attitudes to purchasing fairly-traded products.

Keywords Fair trade, Consumer behaviour, Purchasing, Ethics

Paper type Research paper

An executive summary for managers and executive readers can be found at the end of this article.

Background

Although studies have reported that consumers are sympathetic to companies and organizations that use socially responsible practices, such as marketing ecologically-produced products and promoting fairly-traded products (e.g., Billock, 2004; Dawkins, 2004) and that consumers are willing to pay a price premium to buy ethical products (Blend and van Ravenswaay, 1999; De Pelsmacker et al., 2005a; Loureiro et al., 2002; Maietta, 2003), the overall market share of ethical products and brands remains fairly low (less than 2 percent) (Doane, 2001; Transfair USA, 2005). Many reasons have been put forward to explain this “attitude-behavior gap” (De Pelsmacker et al., 2005a; Vermeir and Verbeke, 2004). Thus, some authors have pointed out that social responsibility is not the sole criterion that consumers may use in making their purchase decisions (e.g., Carrigan and Attalla, 2001). Others have noted that real or perceived product availability is probably an issue (Shaw and Clarke, 1999; Vermeir and Verbeke, 2004). It has also been argued that, although attitudes toward ethical consumption may be positive, consumers may doubt that their personal actions will make a difference (De Pelsmacker et al., 2005b). Finally, there is also the possibility that consumers’ reported attitudes toward ethical consumption reflect some social desirability bias (Vermeir and Verbeke, 2004).

Until now, studies aimed at understanding the factors that explain consumers’ purchasing behavior with respect to ethical products have adopted a cognitive approach. Within this framework, consumers are seen as being the objects of various informational influences (e.g., advertising, peers). Consumers are assumed to process the information to which they are exposed and the result of this information processing is thought to impact on their beliefs, attitudes, and eventually intentions and behaviors (e.g., Chan, 2002; Vermeir and Verbeke, 2004). Fishbein and Ajzen (1975, p. 508) have nicely synthesized the cognitive approach in the following sentence: “... man is basically a rational information processor whose beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behaviors are influenced by the information available to him” (see also Ajzen and Fishbein, 2005).

One premise of the cognitive approach is that persuasive power is founded on the quality of the arguments that are deployed to change consumers’ beliefs. There is, however, an alternative perspective to persuasion that is based on a
different approach, an approach where the probability of influence does not depend on the quality of the arguments that are used to change people’s beliefs, but rather on various elements which, although being part of the influence situation, are not central to the communicated message. For instance, the attractiveness of a person who sells fairly-traded coffee in a stand located in a shopping center may play a significant role in inciting consumers to buy, although a person’s attractiveness by itself has little to do with what buying fairly-traded products means.

There may be some advantages in adopting a non-cognitive approach to examine how consumers may be persuaded to buy ethical products. The empirical evidence indicates that changing consumers’ attitudes toward ethical products may not be sufficient to motivate them to buy these products. Although consumers seem to understand and to have integrated the social and personal benefits associated with buying ethical products, these positive attitudes do not appear to make a significant difference in their individual buying behavior (De Pelsmacker et al., 2005a). Perhaps it is time to take a different look at the situation, to examine other means by which consumers may be persuaded to engage in ethical consumption behavior. It might be relevant from a research point of view to focus on the ultimate stage of the consumer ethical buying process, i.e. behavior itself. For many years, behavior modification researchers have argued that many marketing objectives can be accomplished without making reference to internal processes and states such as needs, motives, attitudes, and so on (see, e.g. Nord and Peter, 1980). By studying the different environmental factors that directly influence consumer behavior, it may be possible to identify efficient strategies that will lead to ethical purchase behavior.

The objective of this study is to examine the effectiveness of different influence strategies aimed at inciting consumers to buy ethical products. More precisely, the study focuses on fairly-traded products such as coffee, hot chocolate, chocolate bars, rice, and sugar offered in a commercial stand in a public area. Three influence strategies are considered: the use of concrete information (as opposed to abstract information), social validation, and the provision of feedback. These influence strategies are discussed in the following section.

### Strategies of influence

The rationale behind this research is that changing attitudes toward ethical products using a cognitive approach may not be the most efficient means to incite them to buy. It might be more interesting to expose them to information that will attract their attention and be more memorable, to inform them that relevant others engage in ethical purchase behavior, and to give them concrete feedback on the consequences of their ethical actions.

### Concrete information

An important stream of research in psychology concerns the properties of the informational content of a message. Some studies have shown that vivid information has more impact on judgment than information that is dreary, dull, and boring (Nisbett and Ross, 1980). Vivid information is characterized as being concrete and image-evoking (Nisbett and Ross, 1980), although these two dimensions are strongly correlated (Sparks and Carlson, 1992). Concrete information has been shown to increase the attention given to stimulus information (MacKenzie, 1986) and, more consistently, to be more memorable than abstract information (Paivio et al., 1994; Sadoski et al., 1993).

Attitudes that are based on concrete information are likely to have greater clarity and be held with greater confidence. Such attitudes should be stronger, more accessible from memory and, consequently, more predictive of behavior (see the empirical evidence reported in Eagly and Chaiken (1993)). For instance, consumers who are exposed to information regarding, say, a specific producer of coffee in Mexico (concrete information) may form a clearer mental representation of what fair trade really means than consumers who are shown information about Mexican coffee producers in general (abstract information). Therefore, their attitudes toward fairly-traded products should be stronger and more predictive of buying behavior.

### Social validation

According to Cialdini (1994, p. 199), “one means we use to determine what is correct is to find out what other people think is correct”. This statement summarizes what Cialdini (1994) calls the principle of social validation. This principle is based on people’s natural tendency to react automatically to various situations, without engaging in a great deal of thought. Thus, actions that are performed by relevant others are perceived as being correct and, consequently, the probability of engaging in similar actions is increased. For instance, Cialdini et al. (1998) have shown that students are more likely to agree to fill out a survey questionnaire if they are told that their schoolmates have agreed to do it in the past. Moreover, the higher the reported proportion of schoolmates having supposedly accepted the request, the higher the likelihood of complying. Several social psychology studies conducted in different contexts have demonstrated the power of the social validation principle (see Cialdini (2001) for a review). Applying this principle to fairly-traded products, one may surmise that people who visit a stand that offers such products will be more likely to buy if they are told that similar others have done it in the past.

### Feedback

World Vision is one of the most successful international charitable organization. Its success is based on a simple idea, i.e. to associate people’s donations to a specific child. Thus, potential contributors are not asked to donate money to some overall cause, but rather are offered the possibility of sponsoring a needing child who lives in some remote country. After having accepted the sponsorship, the contributor receives a photograph of the child accompanied with basic information (name, age, family situation, etc.). As long as the sponsorship lasts, the contributor receives periodically updated photographs and information concerning the child’s performance in school, family situation, and so on. By providing continuous feedback to donors, World Vision is in fact applying a basic behavioral modification principle, i.e. reinforcement. In this particular case, the contributor is being reminded regularly of the positive consequences of his or her donation, which is in itself rewarding, and this feedback increases the likelihood that the sponsorship will perpetuate. Cannell et al. (1977) have shown that providing feedback to survey participants (e.g., “Thanks, we appreciate your frankness”) enhances people’s motivation to provide good answers to questions that they are asked and has a significant impact on the quality of the responses that are obtained. Therefore, one may conjecture that feedback...
will have a positive effect on people’s buying behavior in a commercial stand offering various fairly-traded products.

Method

A field experiment was designed to test the effectiveness of concrete information, social validation, and feedback in inciting consumers to buy fairly-traded products. The experiment took place at a commercial stand within a French-Canadian university where these products were sold. The participants in the experiment were the people (mostly students and university employees) who stopped at the stand during the six-day period in which the study was conducted. The experiment was operationalized as a 2 (concrete versus abstract information) × 2 (social validation versus no social validation) × 2 (feedback versus no feedback) factorial design.

Manipulations

Information concreteness

Two large posters containing information about fair trade were prepared in order to manipulate the concreteness of the information (see Figure 1). The information on both posters was written in French language as most participants in the experiment were expected to speak that language. The concrete poster contained information about a coffee producer named Tomas working for the UCIRI Mexican cooperative. The poster discussed the real consequences of fair trade in his daily life using numbers and highly concrete words, sentences, and images. The second poster displayed general information about all producers of the same Mexican cooperative. Its words, sentences, and images were more abstract and it did not contain numbers. Each participant in the experiment was invited to examine the poster in order to learn more about fair trade.

Prior to conducting the experiment, the posters were pre-tested among 14 university students. The pre-test respondents rated both posters with the help of seven seven-point bipolar scales (concrete/not concrete, realistic/not realistic, precise/not precise, abstract/not abstract, image-evoking/not image-evoking, detailed/not detailed, specific/not specific). The items were averaged to create a concreteness index (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.95). The mean concreteness of the concrete poster was 4.88 whereas that of the abstract poster was 3.93, a statistically significant difference ($F = 12.33, p < 0.05$).

Social validation

The social validation manipulation consisted in asking some participants if they knew that fairly-traded products were very popular among students of the university where the experiment was held. Following this question, the experimenter showed a bar graph presenting the mean expenditures for fairly-traded products during the previous year among students of six local universities. The information contained in the graph was fictitious and it showed clearly that students of the home university spent more than twice the amount of money spent by students of the other universities. A short text below the bar graph mentioned that the mean amount spent was 1.66 CAN$ in comparison with amounts of 0.80 CAN$ (average of three universities), 0.55 CAN$, and 0.60 CAN$. No question was asked and no graph was shown in the no-social validation condition.

Feedback

The feedback manipulation was more problematic since by definition feedback may be given once a purchase is made. Therefore, the manipulation consisted in offering some participants the opportunity to receive an e-mail from a small producer from the South that would inform them of the concrete impact of fair trade in his daily life, including a photograph of him and his family. No feedback offer was made in the no-feedback experimental condition.

Data collection

The commercial stand was positioned in a highly visible location within the university. There were two experimenters at the stand at all times during data collection. When a person visited the stand, he or she was assigned randomly to one of the four experimental conditions defined by the crossing of the social validation and feedback factors. Because the information poster could not be changed easily during data collection, randomizing participants among the concrete and abstract information conditions was not possible. Therefore, a single poster was used for an entire day and the concrete and abstract versions alternated systematically each day. A total of 168 persons participated in the experiment. All participants were debriefed at the end of the experiment and were offered the possibility of being refunded for the products they had bought (if any).

Measures

Both observation and survey data were collected during the experiment. An observation grid was used for each participant. The observation data collected included the times of arrival and departure of the participant, the types and quantity of products purchased (if any), the amount of money spent, examination of the products (yes/no), discussion with the experimenter (yes/no), manipulation of the products (yes/no), and the number of persons around the stand.

Each participant was invited to complete a self-administered questionnaire following his or her visit to the stand. The questionnaire included various measures of interest for this research. Six items were used to measure the attitude toward buying fairly-traded products (e.g., “I am favorable toward buying fairly-traded product” – seven-point agree/disagree scale). These items were tailored specifically for this research. Familiarity with fairly-traded products was measured using three items (e.g., “In general, I consider myself as being very well informed about fairly-traded products”). These items were adapted from Oliver and Bearden (1985). Involvement in fairly-traded products was assessed using eight seven-point bipolar scales taken from Zaichkowsky’s (1985) involvement scale (e.g., unimportant/very important, relevant/irrelevant). Baker and Churchill’s (1977) three-item buying intention scale was adapted to measure intention to buy fairly-traded products (e.g., “In the future, I will actively seek out fairly-traded products in stores in order to purchase them”).

A series of questions served to check the effectiveness of the concrete information manipulation: “Did you notice that there was a poster at the stand presenting information on fairly-traded products?” (yes/no); “If yes, did you read the information on the poster?” (yes in detail, yes partially, no); “If you answered that you read it, can you tell us in your own words what this poster said?” (open-ended question). The last section of the questionnaire contained
standard socio-demographic items (age, status, occupation, income, education, gender).

**Results**

**Sample characteristics**

A total of 168 observation grids were completed. However, only 128 questionnaires were filled out by participants. It was difficult for the experimenters to pressure visitors to fill out the questionnaire because they also acted as salespersons at the stand. Full-time students (17.3 percent), part-time students (22.6 percent), and employees (31.0 percent) constituted the majority of participants. There were slightly more females (52.0 percent) than males (48.0 percent). The participants were aged between 18 and 80 years with a mean of 36.2 years and they were adequately distributed among the eight experimental conditions (minimum \( n = 19 \), maximum \( n = 24 \)). A total of 118 persons (70.2 percent) purchased at least one fairly-traded product during their visit to the stand.
Manipulation checks

Information concreteness

The information poster was noticed by 123 of the 128 participants who completed the questionnaire (96.1 percent). It was read by 113 (88.3 percent), and 100 participants (78.1 percent) provided an answer to the open-ended memory recall question ("can you tell us in your own words what this poster said?"). There was a statistically significant difference between the concrete and abstract information conditions as 90.3 percent could recall something in the concrete poster condition as opposed to 68.8 percent in the other condition (Chi-square = 8.95, p < 0.01).

The participants’ answers were content-analyzed by two judges who worked independently. The judges coded each comment as being general (e.g., "Fair trade is good for coffee producers") or content-based (e.g., "The poster mentioned a Mexican cooperative"). The inter-judge rate of agreement was fairly high (96.0 percent) and the judges had no difficulty in agreeing on a final coding. There were more content-based comments in the concrete information condition (87.3 percent) than in the other condition (59.5 percent) and the difference was statistically significant (Chi-square = 9.85, p < 0.01). Although these results do not show that the participants in the concrete information condition perceived the poster as being more concrete, they are consistent with the results that have been generally observed in the social psychology literature concerning the fact that concrete information is more memorable.

Social validation

One of the experimenters was responsible for implementing the social validation manipulation, i.e. mentioning that fairly-traded products were very popular among home university students and showing the bar graph – and that manipulation was systematically applied. The participants in the social validation condition spent significantly more time at the stand (mean = 3.97 minutes) than the other participants (mean = 2.89 minutes) (t = 2.25, p < 0.05), which is consistent with the fact that the application of the social validation manipulation was time consuming.

Feedback

The feedback manipulation was also under the responsibility of one of the experimenters and was implemented systematically. All participants in the feedback condition provided an answer to the feedback offer, i.e. being sent an e-mail from a small producer from the South, and 70.0 percent of them accepted the proposition.

Definition of variables

Two types of dependent variables were considered: consumption-based variables, including purchase (yes/no), quantity purchased, and amount of money spent and internal-process variables, including attitude toward buying fairly-traded products and intention to buy fairly-traded products. The attitude and intention items were subjected to a principal components analyses revealed the presence of a dominant factor explaining a high proportion of the total variance in each case (familiarity: 83.6 percent, involvement: 61.9 percent) and scale reliability was very good (Cronbach’s alpha – familiarity = 0.90, involvement = 0.91). The mean of the items was therefore used as an indicator of the concepts.

Analyses of variance

The same analysis of variance (ANOVA) model was used for each dependent variable. It included as independent variables the three manipulated factors (i.e. concrete information, social validation, and feedback) as well as their interactions, and the two covariates (i.e. familiarity with and involvement in fairly-traded products).

There was no statistically significant effect in the case of the purchase dependent variable. A statistically significant two-way interaction involving social validation and feedback was obtained with the quantity purchased (F = 3.79, p < 0.05) and amount of money spent (F = 3.93, p < 0.05) dependent variables. Because the interaction pattern is similar for both variables, the interpretation will be limited to the latter dependent variable (see below). Concrete information had a significant impact on a single dependent variable, i.e. amount of money spent (F = 7.25, p < 0.01). Contrary to what was expected, the mean amount of money spent was higher in the abstract information condition (6.31 CAN$) than in the concrete information condition (3.90 CAN$). Finally, with respect to the internal-process variables, the only significant effects were obtained with the covariates: involvement had a positive impact on attitude (F = 48.86, p < 0.001) and intention (F = 74.34, p < 0.001), and familiarity had a positive impact on intention (F = 13.17, p < 0.001).

Figure 2 displays the graph of the means that represent the social validation × feedback interaction effect on amount of money spent. As can be seen, social validation had a positive impact only when there was no feedback offered to the participant. In that situation, the mean amount of money spent by those participants who were subjected to the manipulation was 6.81 CAN$ as opposed to 4.15 CAN$ for those who were not, a statistically significant difference of 2.66 CAN$ (p < 0.05, one-tailed test). When feedback was present, the mean amount of money spent was in fact greater in the no social validation condition (5.18 CAN$ versus 4.28 CAN$), though the difference was not statistically significant.
Discussion

The results of this study are generally not consistent with the theoretical predictions that were put forward. First, for all dependent variables with the exception of one (amount of money spent), information concreteness did not have an effect. Moreover, the only statistically significant effect that was observed was in the opposite direction, i.e. on average abstract information led to a larger amount of money spent than concrete information. Some reasons can be offered to explain these surprising results. It is possible that information concreteness does not impact on people’s judgment as it is often presumed or that its effects are moderated by other variables. For instance, Frey and Eagly (1993) have shown that under some circumstances, pallid information may in fact be more persuasive than vivid information. In that study, the effect of information concreteness was moderated by the attention given to the information. When attention was high, there was no difference between pallid and vivid information as regards people’s attitudes. However, when the information provided was incidental, pallid information was more persuasive. According to the authors, vividness may reduce people’s reception of the message arguments and, consequently, lead to less favorable attitudes. In the present study, people did not spontaneously pay attention to the information poster and had to be invited to read it. Perhaps, they were not motivated enough to comply with the experimenter’s request and acted as if they were carefully reading it.

Taylor and Thompson (1982) have reviewed the literature that concerns the information vividness effect on people’s judgments and have concluded that the results are equivocal. It appears that vividness effects may be moderated by such variables as the likableness and trustworthiness of the source and, as discussed above, by the attention that people give to the information. In addition, what researchers mean by concrete information is not always clear, as the manipulations may center on different aspects of the message, such as the source, the medium, or the content of the message (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993).

It must be noted, however, that the concrete poster led to a better recall of the information than the abstract poster. In addition to confirming the effectiveness of the manipulation, this result is not inconsistent with the idea that the effects of concrete information may take place after some period of time. Because consumers who were exposed to the concrete poster had a better memory for the information promoting fairly-traded products, the likelihood that this information be activated in future situations involving this type of product is higher and this could have a positive impact on purchase. It would be interesting to test this possibility in future research given that in this study the dependent variables were measured immediately after the implementation of the manipulations.

Managers need to ensure that the content of the feedback offer is not so general (i.e. you will receive an e-mail from a small producer from the South) that it easily fits in with students of the home university. Finally, they were given and that this created some frustration. Recall that in the social validation/feedback conditions they were first invited to read the poster. Then, they were shown the data confirming the great popularity of fairly-traded products among students of the home university. Finally, they were asked if they wanted to receive an e-mail from a small producer and, upon saying yes, they had to take the time to write down their e-mail address. Obviously, these manipulations took a great deal of time and it is possible that consumers who stopped at the stand with, say, the objective of simply buying a chocolate bar may have been annoyed by the whole process. This may have had a negative effect on their purchase behavior.

In this study, feedback did not have the effects that were expected since none of the five dependent variables was affected by the experimental manipulation. As mentioned before, a true manipulation of feedback would have required that people buy the fairly-traded products first. In that case, feedback would presumably increase repeat-purchase. Offering consumers the possibility of receiving feedback before making a purchase decision may therefore not have the same effect than actually receiving feedback. Another reason for the lack of effect of feedback in this study may be that the feedback offer lacked focus. Because the experimenter did not know which type of fairly-traded product the visitors were interested in, the content of the feedback offer had to be fairly general (i.e. you will receive an e-mail from a small producer from the South) rather than specific (e.g., you will receive an e-mail from Carlos, the small coffee producer who has prepared this package that you just bought). Perhaps this had the consequence of reducing significantly the relevance of the feedback offer.

Managerial implications

The results presented in this article indicate that it is important to make sure that consumers are attentive to a concrete message concerning fairly-traded products for this message to have any impact on purchase behavior. Although in this study concrete information did not have the predicted effects on the quantity of products purchased and the amount of money spent, its impact on memory was demonstrated, which suggests that concrete information may have some impact over the long run. Therefore, managers involved in the marketing of fairly-traded products are advised to communicate with potential buyers through messages containing concrete information. If the medium chosen to communicate with consumers is a poster – which in all likelihood would be located in some busy site – the message should be short, catchy, and highly vivid. This should increase the probability that consumers will pay attention to it. In the case of other media like brochures, e-mails, or leaflets where consumers have all the time they need to read and integrate the content of the message, concrete information should have the expected effects.

The results of this field experiment suggest that the strategy which consists in informing consumers that other people with whom they are associated buy fairly-traded products is
effective. On average, consumers who were told that their peers had some interest in these products spent more money than consumers who were not. Therefore, communication strategies aimed at convincing consumers to buy fairly-traded products should put some emphasis on this type of information in stores, on product packages, in advertisements, or in information brochures. The effectiveness of this strategy should improve if the message is adapted to the target market.

Conclusion

Obviously, a field experiment does not offer the same degree of control over nuisance variables as a laboratory experiment (see Kerlinger and Lee (2002) for a general discussion) and this may have a negative impact on the results. In this study, many difficulties had to be overcome during data collection. For instance, it was difficult to apply the experimental manipulations to the regular buyers of fairly-traded products because they often rushed directly to the products that they wanted. Consequently, the manipulations that they were subjected to might have been of lesser quality than those applied to browsers who had plenty of time to spend at the stand. Managing the manipulations and the randomization of participants was generally quite challenging in this experiment as groups of people would sometimes come at the stand at the same time. In addition, some consumers came back one or two days after their visit in order to buy products. Because the observation grid and the questionnaire were anonymous, it was not possible to associate these sales to the appropriate participant/experimental condition. Finally, during the last two days of the experiment some highly popular fairly-traded products were out-of-stock. The consequences were a lower traffic at the stand, less interest in the products, and lower sales.

The fact that the behavior modification techniques explored in this study did not bring about the expected results should not be interpreted as a demonstration that these techniques are inadequate in inciting consumers to buy fairly-traded products. As mentioned above, a field experiment might not be the best research method to test the value of the behavior modification approach in this particular context. Additional research should therefore be conducted to examine further the persuasive power of these tools. For instance, it would be interesting to study the possibility of shaping the behavior of consumers with respect to the purchase of ethical products. Rothschild and Gaidis (1981) have nicely illustrated the use of behavior shaping when promoting a new product. Consumers are first offered a sample of the new product accompanied with a discount coupon applicable to their first purchase. When they make their purchase they receive another coupon with a lesser price reduction applicable to the next purchase. And so on until the purchase behavior has been learned and the coupon is no longer necessary. This successive approximation approach to bring consumers to buy a new product has not yet been applied to ethical consumption situations.

References


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Executive summary and implications for managers and executives

This summary has been provided to allow managers and executives a rapid appreciation of the content of this article. Those with a particular interest in the topic covered may then read the article in toto to take advantage of the more comprehensive description of the research undertaken and its results to get the full benefit of the material present.

Evidence exists that consumers are becoming increasingly attracted to socially responsible organizations and are willing to pay premium prices for environmentally friendly and ethical products. But there is empirical support for the idea that this changing attitude toward ethical products may alone not guarantee purchase.

Analysts point out that purchase decisions are not driven solely by a consumer’s social responsibility concerns. Indeed, there is evidence of apathy born out of the belief that personal actions will not have any effect. It is also claimed that consumer attitudes toward ethical consumption may sometimes be the product of social desirability rather than genuine commitment.

Influencing consumer behavior

Recognition accordingly exists that other factors are capable of exerting a considerable influence. There is, for instance, the common tactic of using an attractive person to man the shopping mall stand selling fair trade products. While attractiveness has no link with fair trade principles, it invariably proves an effective method of enticing customers.

Past research has largely assumed a cognitive angle, focusing on consumer processing of information obtained through advertising and peers. This information subsequently influences beliefs, attitudes, intentions and behaviors and the premise is that argument strength correlates with the amount of influence exerted.

However, addressing internal states may not provide the only means of achieving marketing goals. Many researchers believe it is possible to shape consumer behavior via strategies founded on different environmental factors.

Based on these assumptions, d’Astous and Mathieu conduct an experiment to investigate whether different influence strategies will persuade customers to purchase the fair trade products on offer at a commercial stand in a public area. The influence strategies used related to concrete information, social validation and feedback.

Concrete information

According to psychology research, information that is concrete or vivid is more memorable than abstract detail. Individuals pay more attention when stimulus material is concrete and the message is subsequently recalled easier. It has also been suggested that concrete information leads to the construction of firmer attitudes that are more assertively held. Easier recall of attitudes may also increase behavior predictability. In the present context, the aim is to generate...
Inciting consumers to buy fairly-traded products

Alain d’Astous and Suzanne Mathieu

Findings included:
- different conditions relating to the three influence strategies.
- manipulated so participants were randomly assigned to:
  - intention to purchase fair trade goods.
- Conditions were:
  - determined attitude toward, familiarity with, involvement in
  - male. A self-administered questionnaire was used to
  - participants, of which 52 percent were female and 48 percent
  - Students and staff accounted for the majority of the 168
  - Canadian university, using observation and survey data.
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  - The authors carried out the experiment within a French-
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  - determine attitude toward, familiarity with, involvement in
  - and intention to purchase fair trade goods.
  - Conditions were manipulated so participants were randomly assigned to
  - different conditions relating to the three influence strategies.
  - Findings included:
    - concrete information was more easily recalled than
    - abstract details;
    - the mean spending amount was surprisingly higher in the
    - abstract information condition;
    - involvement had a positive impact on attitude and
    - intention;
    - familiarity had a positive impact on intention; and
    - a significantly higher mean amount was spent by
    - participants in the social validation condition than those
    - not exposed to this manipulation.
  - In addition, social validation was influential but only when no
  - feedback was offered. It was unclear why these variables
  - interacted in this way, though d’Astous and Mathieu speculate
  - that the time needed to perform the different
  - manipulations might have irritated respondents.
  - Overall, findings were not consistent with prior
  - expectations. This invites the notion that concreteness is
  - less influential or that its impact is moderated by other
  - variables such as the trustworthiness of the information
  - source. Earlier work has also suggested that level of attention
  - paid to information presented can be a significant factor. In
  - the present context, people needed prompting to read one of
  - two different posters used to respectively convey concrete or
  - abstract information.
  - The higher recall levels induced by concrete information
  - were nevertheless deemed significant, supporting beliefs that
  - the impact of concreteness occurs later. Since variables were
  - measured here straight after manipulation, the authors
  - recommend further studies to investigate the effect on
  - future purchase decisions.

Marketing recommendations

In spite of study findings, d’Astous and Mathieu urge companies to use concrete information to communicate their marketing message. Media such as brochures, leaflets and e-mail should have the desired effect as consumers will normally have time to read and absorb the content. In order to make customers more attentive towards posters, they recommend including short, snappy, vivid messages.

Consumers on average spent more if informed that peers were interested in the products or had made purchases. Accentuating this type of information across various customer contact points such as stores, advertisements, brochures and product packaging is therefore advised.

The authors point out difficulties that potentially limit the findings. First, practical implications meant that the posters could only be alternated daily so random exposure to either concrete or abstract information was not possible. The systematic nature of this daily change might have had some effect. Second, feedback is normally given post purchase but here it had to be offered beforehand. Since it was not known at this stage which product the consumer was interested in, it was only possible to offer general rather than specific feedback relating to a named producer. Based on the literature, it is safe to assume that feedback without clear focus is less potent.

It was noted that some participants bought products one or two days after their initial visit but the anonymous nature of the survey prevents any assumption that experimental conditions had influenced purchase. There was also some difficulty in exposing regular fair trade buyers to the manipulations as these consumers had invariably decided their purchases beforehand.

One recommendation from d’Astous and Mathieu is for future research to investigate the “successive approximation” approach. Consumers can be offered a new product sample along with discounts vouchers for initial purchase. With this and subsequent purchases they receive vouchers for increasingly smaller reductions until they are conditioned to buy the product without the need for concessions. This method is unproven in relation to the consumption of ethical products.

(A précis of the article “Inciting consumers to buy fairly-traded products: a field experiment”. Supplied by Marketing Consultants for Emerald.)