

A Room with a Viewpoint

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With the rise of environmental conservation programs in hotels, more travelers are finding themselves encouraged to reuse towels to help conserve resources. How do marketing practitioners encourage hotel guests to participate in these environmentally and economically beneficial programs? In most cases, hotels convey messages on strategically placed cards in hotel bathrooms. Guests are almost always informed that reusing towels will conserve natural resources, and help save the environment from further depletion, disruption, and corruption.

Given previous research suggesting that the majority of Americans consider themselves to be environmentalists, it is not surprising that hotels focus their appeals on popular environmental concerns. Nevertheless, new research suggests that hotels can gain even more ground in promoting conservation by using an underappreciated motivator of positive behavior: social norms.

In the recent study “A Room with a Viewpoint: Using Social Norms to Motivate Environmental Conservation in Hotels,” University of Chicago Graduate School of Business professor Noah J. Goldstein, and coauthors Robert B. Cialdini and Vidas Griskevicius of Arizona State University conducted two field experiments to examine the effectiveness of different ways to request hotel guests’ participation in environmental conservation programs. Along with studying the standard, attitude-based form of conservation appeal, the authors explored the impact of providing consumers with “descriptive social norms”—simple descriptions of how the majority of people tend to behave.

Descriptive social norms are everywhere. When consumers discover that 7 out of 10 people choose one brand of automobile over another, or hear that teeth whitening toothpaste has become more popular than regular toothpaste, they are learning descriptive norms. While the use of these norms to promote purchases might be commonplace, Goldstein notes that descriptive norms may be an underused tool for promoting positive, community-oriented social behavior.

“People don’t think to appeal to social norms, because the power of social norms is underestimated,” says Goldstein. “Psychologists know how much people are influenced by the behavior of others, and we show that using this information not only helps the environment, but provides a financial gain for the hotel industry.”

Goldstein and colleagues found that hotel messages using “descriptive norms” (i.e. “the majority of guests reuse their towels”) were more effective than traditional messages focusing solely on popular environmental concerns. Furthermore, messages that described the participation in the conservation program by hotel guests were most effective when describing group behavior that occurred in the setting that most closely matched individuals’ immediate situational circumstances (i.e. “the majority of guests in this room reuse their towels”).

“When trying to influence others, don’t ignore the power of the situation,” says Goldstein. “You need to take into consideration the environment in which people behave.”

For Cialdini, Goldstein, and Griskevicius, a primary goal of the research was to better understand the factors that motivate consumers to engage in actions for the benefit of the environment— an understudied area of consumer research. To do this, they conducted field experiments to study how social norms operate

Behavioral Science

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on actual environmentally relevant consumption or conservation choices. These methods help quiet any skepticism marketing practitioners and consumers may have about whether social norms are potent enough in real-world settings to influence behavior.

In the first experiment, the authors assigned each of 190 hotel rooms to receive one of two towel reuse cards, testing their own cards employing descriptive norms against the industry standard. Of primary concern was the extent to which each of the two messages spurred guests (who were unaware they were part of a study) to participate in the hotel's conservation program. Data were collected over 80 days on 1,058 instances of potential towel reuse in a midsize, mid-priced hotel in the Southwest. The Standard Environmental Message reflected the industry standard approach, stressing a popular environmental concern ("Help save the environment"), but providing no explicit descriptive norm. The Descriptive Norm Message informed guests that the majority of other guests participated in the program at least once during their stay. All of the towel reuse cards listed the benefits of participating in the program: saving 72,000 gallons of water, 39 barrels of oil, and preventing nearly 480 gallons of detergent from being released into the environment per hotel, per year.

The Descriptive Norm card yielded a towel reuse rate that was 9 percentage points higher than the Standard Environmental Message. Hotel guests were more motivated to reuse their towels when they learned that the majority of previous room occupants had chosen to participate in the environmental conservation program.

In the second experiment, the authors sought to better understand where the power of descriptive norms comes from. Conformity in behavior is often based on our social identities—the groups of other people to whom we feel connected. Past research has focused heavily on the sense of connection that derives from shared personal characteristics (e.g. ethnicity, gender, or attitudes), but has neglected shared context (e.g. staying in the same hotel room) in studying how an individual is influenced by a norm describing others' behavior.

"If I'm a fraternity member and my fellow fraternity members tend to act a certain way, I may follow their behavior," says Goldstein. "But that behavior will differ whether we are in the fraternity house or the library."

The second experiment thus explored five different types of towel reuse appeal. One set of cards was printed with the Standard Environmental Message. Two sets of the new towel reuse cards provided descriptive norms describing the tendencies of fellow demographic group members (e.g., "men and women"). The last two sets of cards both provided descriptive norms for the context, but differed in one key respect: one set contained a "global" norm describing the behavior of other people who had stayed in the hotel, while the other set contained a "provincial" norm describing the behavior of those who had stayed in the individuals' own hotel room.

Based on the premise that it is generally beneficial to follow the norms that most closely match one's environment, situation, or circumstances, the authors hypothesized that the appeal conveying the descriptive norm of that particular room's previous occupants would result in a higher towel reuse rate than other descriptive norm appeals, which would in turn outperform the industry standard.

Data on 1,595 instances of potential towel reuse over 53 days confirm the authors' predictions. The four descriptive norms combined fared significantly better than the Standard Environmental Message. Furthermore, provincial norms

Executive Summary

Managers and marketers can motivate consumers to participate in environmental conservation programs by telling them how the majority of other people behaved in the same situation. Researchers specifically studied how to ask hotel guests whether or not they wanted to reuse their towels during the course of a stay. The study highlights the benefits of employing social science research and theory—rather than business communicators' hunches, lay theories, or best guesses—in crafting persuasive messages.

■ Guests given a description : "the majority guests in this hotel asked to reuse their towels," were 9% more likely to make the same decision than guests who were simply asked to "help save the environment" with no information on comparative behavior.

■ Guests were motivated even further when the description matched their social demographic even more closely. They were even more likely to reuse their towels when told the majority of people staying in their room in the past had done so.

outperformed all the other descriptive norms.

“The hotel guests who were informed that the majority of people who stayed in their room previously had participated in the towel reuse programs were more likely to participate in the program themselves than were those who were given the same information for all hotel guests,” says Goldstein.

Role models are important guides for behavior. Yet previous research has failed to identify the full range of criteria we use to identify appropriate role models. In addition to looking toward people that share our demographic background, the study shows that people take their cues from those who have shared an immediate setting, situation, or circumstance.

Goldstein notes that the implications of his research for environmental conservation programs are especially interesting from a business standpoint. Revising the towel use cards involves negligible costs, and it could help hotels save tremendous amounts of money (perhaps as much as \$1.50 per room, per night if a guest reuses the towels and bed linens).

“Considering how much money hotels could save through environmental conservation programs, they should be motivated to design appeals to maximize the number of people reusing towels,” says Goldstein. “But everywhere we looked, the messages only focused on the environmental benefits.”

The study highlights the benefits of employing social science research and theory—rather than business communicators’ hunches, lay theories, or best guesses—in crafting persuasive messages.

“It’s important for businesses to take social science research into consideration,” says Goldstein. “If the hotel industry did so, it would save millions of dollars every year.”

Society at large could benefit from the application of this research to the wide variety of programs directed at motivating positive, environmentally friendly behavior, such as recycling. If, for example, marketers in California were to run a recycling campaign, Goldstein suggests that they would want to make sure that they highlight norms for their audience’s specific location in their appeals. For example, telling Santa Barbara residents about the recycling habits of other Santa Barbara residents should be more effective than highlighting the recycling habits of California as a whole.

By adding this dimension to what is already known about appealing to people on the basis of shared personal demographic characteristics, efforts to promote positive social behavior could become more successful than before. Goldstein notes, “If marketing messages appeal to both, this will increase the likelihood of influencing behavior.” He adds: “Whenever you are trying to motivate your audience to engage in a particular behavior, especially if the norms are already in the right direction, you want to be certain that the environment in which those social norms took place matches the environment of your desired audience.”