



CO2 Compensated. Germans Do Not Understand Many Sustainability Claims

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Some sustainability claims, especially climate-related ones, are not very comprehensible for consumers and therefore do not influence their decision to buy a certain product very much. This is the finding of a representative survey conducted by the SVI-Endowed Chair of Marketing of Germany's HHL Leipzig Graduate School of Management and GfK Verein (Association for Consumer Research). The researchers examined how German consumers perceive the various sustainability claims these days and what kind of expectations they trigger.

The subjective comprehensibility generally has a positive effect on the purchasing relevance of a claim. Anja Buerke, scientific supervisor of the survey, says, "Claims, which people learned over years by being exposed to them every day, are very comprehensible and command widespread acceptance according to our survey." This category includes several claims from the areas of recycling and resources, such as 'reusable', 'refillable', 'biodegradable', '100% from renewable raw materials' or 'groundwater friendly'. Claudia Gaspar of GfK Verein, co-author of the survey, continues, "The comprehensibility of a claim is increased by simple wording - otherwise it requires strong communicative support to achieve purchasing relevance comparable to known terms from everyday life."

The survey also proves that general statements, which are not legally protected, such as 'from controlled farming' trigger positive associations with consumers and are generally not identified as negative examples. Anja Buerke and Claudia Gaspar show that subjective comprehension of sustainable claims does not always hold out against objective verification. Sometimes claims are associated with much higher expectations. "Consumers expect a 'water-efficient product' to decrease their service charges significantly, fruit and vegetables 'from controlled farming' not to contain harmful contaminants and 'climate-neutral flights' to not only even out CO2 emissions but to cut down on them," explains Claudia Gaspar. According to the authors, these examples show how manufacturers and retailers generate unrealistically high expectations within the framework of sustainability communication if the specific product promise is not comprehensible to the consumer.

The target group of 'conscious buyers', who show above average consumer acceptance and willingness to pay for environmentally sound products, assess the purchasing relevance of all claims much more positively. Nonetheless, even conscious buyers have difficulty understanding similar claims (e. g. regarding the topic of climate) and do not assess negative examples ('from controlled farming', 'ecologically sustainable') any more critically than other consumers. "Especially the target group of conscious consumers finds it difficult to assess the information content of sustainability claims correctly which shows that there is high demand for clarifying communication," says Anja Buerke.

More than 20 sustainability claims were tested in a representative survey conducted by the GfK online panel in January 2014 interviewing 999 consumers. The study forms part of a research project supported by GS1 Germany and GfK Verein. Following an initiative of GS1 Germany, a professional group of corporate representatives has been engaged in developing a sustainability glossary to standardize the definition and utilization of sustainability-related terms and product statements since early 2013.

Buerke, Anja; Gaspar, Claudia
Nachhaltigkeits-Claims auf dem Prüfstand - Eine empirische Bestandsaufnahme zur Verständlichkeit und Akzeptanz aus Verbrauchersicht
Working paper no. 221, Wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft für Marketing und Unternehmensführung, 2014

SVI-Endowed Chair of Marketing, esp. E-Commerce and Cross-Media Management at HHL Leipzig Graduate School of Management

The team surrounding Prof. Dr. Manfred Kirchgeorg at the SVI-Endowed Chair of Marketing, esp. E-Commerce and Cross-Media Management at HHL Leipzig Graduate School of Management has based its research on four fields: Sustainability Marketing, Holistic Branding, E-Commerce & Cross-Media Management. The SVI-Endowed Chair of Marketing can look back on three decades of research expertise in the fields of environment and sustainability marketing. While work in the 80s focused on answering fundamental questions of market-oriented environment management and the research agenda of the 90s was dominated by questions of market-strategic cycle management, the chair centered its survey reports of the past decade on the analysis of purchasing decision processes for sustainable product and service brands as well as their implications on sustainable branding.

The research philosophy at the chair is characterized by the mutual interconnection of these fields, which results in unique research projects with a high relevance for the business practice. <http://www.hhl.de/marketingmanagement>

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