

How Companies Can Counter Consumers' Moral Convictions

The idea: Challenge them head on

BY AVIVA PHILIPP-MULLER AND ANDREW LUTTRELL

CHANGING minds is hard. It is especially hard when moral convictions are on the line.

How do you persuade people to watch football if they believe that it's immoral due to the brain injuries the sport causes? Companies that produce lab-grown or cultured meat must work against consumers who feel ethically queasy about products they see as unnatural.

Is it even possible for such companies to make their case when consumers have already taken a moral stand against them?

Our research has found that one communication strategy that works to change morally charged opinions is appealing to the very thing these consumers care about: morals. This runs counter to what many behavioral scientists would have predicted, who for years have found that moral opinions are rigid and can't be moved easily, if at all. But that may be because they never tried to change moral opinions by challenging them head on, by directly making ethical arguments.

Morality vs. morality

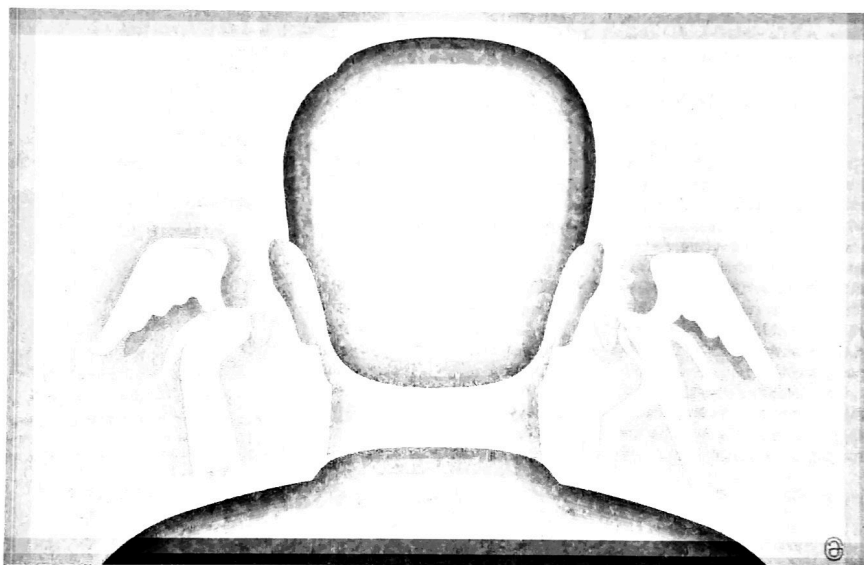
In a handful of experiments, we tested whether people with morally based opinions stick to their views no matter what, or whether they would actually change their minds after hearing arguments that their opinion is

morally misguided.

In one experiment, people who supported recycling programs for a variety of reasons read an essay arguing that recycling was flawed. We randomly determined the type of essay participants of

duced by recycling plants kill beloved pets and wild animals, among other ethical qualms. These particular claims were false and used for our research purposes, but mirror moral arguments some have made about recycling programs.

When we asked people about their opinions of recycling after they read the essays, the people who had initially supported recy-



the study would read. Half of them read an essay focused on practical concerns, which claimed recycling was unfeasible because of more trucks on the road, for instance, and more traffic in cities. The other half read an essay focused squarely on fabricated moral concerns, which claimed that recycling was harmful and immoral because the fumes pro-

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We replicated these results in another experiment with a different potentially morally loaded issue: marijuana legalization. Proponents of legalizing marijuana read an essay that argued against legalization, and the type of argument they read—moral vs. practical—was randomly determined. Again, the moral anti-legalization essay was more persuasive than the practical essay only to people who had initially supported legalization for moral reasons.

In practice

So how can organizations use these findings to overcome consumers' moral objections? By using moral language themselves to

Take the challenges that manufacturers of lab-grown meat face. They want to sell a product that at least some people oppose on moral grounds. According to our findings, claims about the cost and efficiency of their product would fall flat. But suggesting that their product promotes ethical values of animal welfare, environmental sustainability and bodily purity would speak to the these consumers' core concerns.

The tech industry is also grappling with how to overcome consumers' ethical concerns. The public, for instance, may object on privacy grounds to tech companies' use of algorithms that gather user data. But they might be more open to arguments about this technology's possible moral virtues, such as helping optimize ambulance routes that save lives or identifying and correcting racial biases or misinformation.

This isn't to say that the moral strategy is effective in every scenario. Some moral arguments may fail to resonate because they target values that the audience simply doesn't care strongly about. Organizations may also struggle to authentically communicate their ethical strengths if they have completely lost the public's trust or if they just don't have compelling moral arguments to draw from. In these cases, consumers may see moral messages as empty sales ploys.

But while no strategy is a silver bullet, our research makes it clear that when organizations face moral opposition, one overlooked tool is the moral argument. When people are making decisions based on their moral judgments, it may be time to put yourself in their shoes and make your moral case.

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