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The effect of 'green' messages on brand purchase and brand rejection

Meagan Wheeler [1], Anne Sharp [2], Magda Nenycz-Thiel *

Ehrenberg-Bass Institute for Marketing Science, University of South Australia, School of Marketing, GPO Box 2471, Adelaide, South Australia 5001, Australia

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ABSTRACT

The paper considers consumer brand rejection of 'green' and non-green brands. We find empirically that 'green' brands are not considered largely because they are unfamiliar, rather than being consciously rejected. Consumers do not think about these brands in a buying situation, suggesting that their single 'green' message is not enough to make it into the shoppers' consideration set. Additionally, not being 'green' was not a reason for rejection of non-green brands. These findings highlight the importance of brand advertising to build multiple, relevant memory structures for any brand, thereby increasing the probability of being thought of during a buying occasion.

1. Introduction

The last decade has seen a proliferation of 'green' brands appearing in almost every consumer goods category with consumer appeals ranging from environmental concerns, the sustainable sourcing of materials and organic production (Scheffer, 1991; Elkington and Hailes, 1989), through to social concerns such as fair trade and non-animal testing (Webster, 1975; Carrigan and Attalla, 2001; Vermeir and Verbeke, 2006; Winchester and Romaniuk, 2008; Tanner and Wolfing Kast, 2003; Bogomolova and Nenycz-Thiel, 2008; Young et al., 2010).

A driver for this growth in 'green' brand messages is the belief that being 'green' is a way to attract new buyers to a brand; that being 'green' is an attribute that buyers value and will show brand preference for (Vandermerwe and Oliff, 1990; Gordon, 2002). There is also the advantage that going 'green' creates news for a brand – a point of difference; and that this may help to gain the market's attention and thereby increase the likelihood of a brand being bought (Sharp and Newstead, 2010). Given that the major battle brands face is for a customer's attention, this is a convincing argument. With an average of 30,000 products in a supermarket (Sorensen, 2009), it is easy for a brand to simply not be noticed.

Yet despite these purported advantages of linking a brand to a 'green' message, most 'green' brands are small share if they were not already a big brand with an established customer base prior to being 'greened' (Bonini and Oppenheim, 2008; Vantomme et al., 2004; Roozen, 1999). One reason for this may be that historically 'green' brands have had low quality associations (Peattie, 2001; Alwitt and Berger, 1993; Vantomme et al., 2004) and a perceived high price relative to their non-green competitors (Peattie, 2001). They have also been perceived as 'niche', appealing to only a part of the category's market (Pickett-Baker and Ozaki, 2008; Vandermerwe and Oliff, 1990; D'Souza, 2004; Charter et al., 2002a,b; Gordon, 2002). It is therefore possible that a 'green' message could actually work to inhibit a brand's growth through linking it to these limiting perceptions. This raises the question of whether 'green' brands are typically small share because the mainstream buyers are rejecting them on these grounds, or whether it is just that awareness of 'green' brands remains low, despite the alleged benefits they offer, and hence are only bought by a few people.

This paper examines these questions through identifying the incidence of conscious rejection of 'green' brands on the basis of negative performance/quality, or niche perceptions. If the incidence of rejection for reasons linked to the brand's 'greenness' is low, this suggests that marketers of 'green' brands are just suffering the effects of the challenging battle for buyer attention that is faced by all brands.

As an extension to this issue, this paper also examines brands that are not linked to 'green' messages in categories where 'green' brands exist to assess whether brands run a risk by not responding to the groundswell in 'green' messaging. Not being 'green' leaves a brand potentially vulnerable to rejection on these grounds. The paper examines the incidence of rejection of non-green brands on the basis of lack of 'greenness' in categories where other brands are advertising this feature.

Through examining these two issues, this paper sheds light on the effect of 'green' brand messages on both purchasing and

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +61 (0)8 8302 9172; fax: +61 (0)8 8302 0442.
E-mail addresses: Meagan.Wheeler@MarketingScience.info (M. Wheeler), Anne.Sharp@MarketingScience.info (A. Sharp), Magda.Nenycz-Thiel@MarketingScience.info (M. Nenycz-Thiel).
[1] Tel.: +61 (0)8 8302 0013; fax: +61 (0)8 8302 0442.
[2] Tel.: +61 (0)8 8302 0637; fax: +61 (0)8 8302 0442.

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rejection behavior and on the risks of conscious brand rejection through not having a 'green' message linked to a brand.

2. Background

2.1. The rise of 'green' brand messages

The literature suggests a number of benefits derived from being a 'green' brand. Honkanen et al. (2006) identified that consumers are more willing to purchase brands that they hold positive feelings towards, such as environmentally friendly brands. Some consumers have been found to be willing to pay a price premium for 'green' brands (Shrum et al., 1995) and it has even been stated that 'green' brands potentially hold a competitive advantage over non-green brands (Vandermerwe and Oliff, 1990; Gordon, 2002). These studies suggest that some consumers do choose 'green' brands over non-green brands, and that rejection of a brand could stem from the consumer considering a brand's production inadequate in an environmental sense (1995). Studies have claimed that 'green' brands appeal to as much as half of the market (Bearse et al., 2009; Vandermerwe and Oliff, 1990; D'Souza et al., 2006; Roberts, 1996). However, this does not necessarily mean that consumers will reject non-green brands purely because they are not 'green' or that appeal will translate into buying behaviour.

Wright and Klÿn (1998) determined that the link between 'green' attitudes and future pro-environmental purchasing behaviour is only weak. This weak link has also been identified in studies assessing the attitude–behaviour relationship (i.e. Mainieri et al., 1997; Gupta and Ogden, 2006; Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002), as well as studies that have unsuccessfully attempted to predict 'green' behaviour through assessing consumer attitudes (see Leire and Thidell, 2005; Peattie, 2001; Casey Jr, 1992; Wong et al., 1996). Therefore, consumers that hold a 'green' attitude will not necessarily reject brands that do not have 'green' credentials. This is not to say that consumers do not place a great deal of importance on sustainability. Despite the best of intentions to prioritise 'green' issues and products, what is purchased is usually based on habit and unconscious processing rather than on fully evaluated decisions (Roberts and Nedungadi, 1995). Additionally, studies have identified a number of additional reasons for this lack of performance, including consumers being discouraged by the financial costs, the amount of time or physical energy involved, as well as a lack of information (Stern 1999). These could explain why, despite the many studies that show most people value 'buy local' and 'green' sentiments, these brands are still largely characterised by low market share and a poor correlation between attitudes with actual in-store pro-environmental brand buying behaviour (Wright and Klÿn, 1998; Gupta and Ogden, 2009).

2.2. How brands compete for attention

In the last four decades marketing has identified many regularities in consumer behaviour that have been found to hold across multiple markets, over time, and across countries (Sharp, 2010).

One such regularity is that consumer behaviour is highly routinized, especially in a shopping behaviour context (Rossiter and Winter, 1988; McDonald and Ehrenberg, 2002). When shopping a category, consumers habitually choose amongst a small repertoire of brands that have varying probabilities of being chosen (Ehrenberg, 1972). This reduced brand choice set saves them needing to constantly re-evaluate their choices (Ehrenberg and Uncles, 1995). Such habitual behaviour has also been noted in store choice and within price decisions (Ehrenberg and Uncles, 1995). These are all frequent behaviours characterised by low-risk, allowing the consumer to develop habits to simplify these repetitive choice decisions (Ehrenberg, 1972). This knowledge provides a valuable framework for brand managers to work within.

While consumers are habitual cognitive misers, they still buy some brands over others. The brands they buy depend on those they can think of on a buying occasion (i.e. are aware of), which shows the important role of memory in brand choice. Only brands that the consumer is aware of will be considered and thereby have a chance of being bought. Brands that are not familiar to a consumer, such as a small share brand, have little chance that they will make it into a consumer's consideration set. Brands with richer networks of associations overall are thought of more often, and hence bought by more people (Romaniuk, 2003). Advertising's role is to refresh those networks and occasionally build new associations.

When marketers attempt to link their brand to a 'green' message it is done with several potential effects in mind. Firstly, by offering a 'green' benefit, the brand is delivering additional benefit to the consumer relative to other non-green brands. If brands are near substitutes and one has an additional 'green' benefit, it is reasonable to assume that the brand would be chosen above the non-green brand. Additionally, being 'green' creates a new talking point for the brand, giving it the chance to attract additional consumer attention. Having such attention grabbing news is a constant challenge for marketers who operate in categories where the opportunities to have functional or perceptual difference between brands are limited.

2.3. Conscious rejection and its reasons

Consumers may reject brands for a number of reasons ranging from negative brand beliefs associated with past usage, extrinsic product cues or moral beliefs (Truong et al., 2011; Bogomolova and Nenycz-Thiel, 2008). Yet empirical evidence shows that the incidence of such conscious rejection is relatively low. On average, 13% of consumers of a category reject any one brand, with smaller brands suffering higher levels of rejection (18% on average) than larger brands (8% on average) (Truong et al., 2011). However, this higher rejection for smaller share brands is in-line with the marketing law of Double Jeopardy, which states that small brands suffer twice – they have fewer customers and those customers purchase the brand slightly less often (Ehrenberg et al., 2004; Ehrenberg and Goodhardt, 2002). This would then suggest that the brands are rejected not because there is something wrong with them, but simply because consumers do not know about them – they are unfamiliar.

Research on brand rejection reasons shows that, with the exception of private label brands, reasons for brand rejection appear to be influenced by usage (Bogomolova and Nenycz-Thiel, 2008; Nenycz-Thiel and Romaniuk, 2011). Bogomolova and Nenycz-Thiel (2008) assessed the key reasons for rejection of banking brands amongst two consumer groups; those who had tried the brand before rejection and those who had never tried the brand before rejection. The two groups were shown to hold differing reasons for rejection. An estimated 80% of consumers who rejected the brand despite having never tried the brand gave reasons such as a lack of need, lack of accessibility, and lack of brand knowledge; while the remaining 20% indicated an active decision not to purchase the brand. However, almost half (44%) of consumers who had previously tried the brand and had since rejected the brand had a first-hand bad experience with the brand. This is a rejection reason that would be difficult for a brand to overcome to win-back those defected customers (Bogomolova and Nenycz-Thiel, 2008).

Some potential reasons for rejection of 'green' brands have been alluded to in the literature. These reasons range from a lack of sufficient 'green' information on the product pack (D'Souza et al., 2006), to a lack of understanding of the 'green' information (Schmidt 2009), or concerns of green-washing by the brand (leading the consumer to believe the product is 'green' when in reality it is not) (Dahl 2010). However, the literature has not yet assessed the incidence and the consumers' claimed reasons for rejection of 'green' brands in comparison to non-green brands. In previous studies it has been established that national brands and private-label brands have different levels and reasons for rejection (see Nenycz-Thiel and Romaniuk, 2011), providing evidence that it is reasonable to hypothesise that 'green' brands may also have different reasons for rejection compared to non-green brands.

Based on existing empirical findings in the literature, the following hypotheses are addressed:

Level of rejection:

Hypothesis 1. As 'green' brands are small share brands, the incidence of rejection of 'green' brands will be higher than for non-green brands.

Rejection reasons:

Hypothesis 2. 'Green' brands are rejected primarily because of consumers' unfamiliarity with the brands rather than for perceived functional or quality reasons.

Hypothesis 3. The incidence of non-green brands being rejected because they are not 'green' is low.

Hypothesis 4. 'Green' brands are typically smaller share brands in a category, therefore they will receive a higher incidence of rejection due to 'unfamiliarity' compared to larger share non-green brands in the same category. This 'unfamiliarity' will be the predominant difference in cited reasons for rejection between the two.

3. Methodology

3.1. The data

In this study we draw from data collected in two countries; the US and Australia. The data from the US was collected online in Atlanta, Georgia in 2011. The data spans the two categories of fabric softener and toilet paper. The respondents were online panellists and their demographics were in line with the population statistics of Atlanta. The toilet paper category covered 15 brands and the fabric softener category 16 brands, with 280 respondents for each category. The Australian data was collected over three years (2009–2012) as part of a commercial brand-tracking project and spans four waves of data, assessing up to 30 brands. The data collection process was the same for each wave and the category of interest was chocolate, with a sample size of approximately 1000 respondents for each wave.

3.2. Choice of categories

The three product categories were chosen as they all focus on different 'green' issues and the categories are each in different stages of 'greening'. Recycled toilet paper was once novel, but there are now many such competitive offers on-shelf as well as other 'green' claims ranging from sustainable sourcing of materials to double length rolls (which can save energy in transportation). These 'green' claims compete against other product variant offerings including hypoallergenic and unscented. The 'green' claims in the fabric softener category are more recent in appearance, and include 'green' claims of natural/biodegradable ingredients, vegan products, carbon neutral, and free from dyes and synthetic fragrances. However, again these 'green' variants need to compete with other variants in the market including scented fabric softeners. Fabric softener is an interesting category to examine, as consumers who are truly concerned about the environment may not purchase from the category, perceiving it as a luxury product rather than a necessity (unlike toilet paper).

The chocolate category is a contrast to both the toilet paper and fabric softener categories in that it is food, which can also be easily avoided as a category if the consumer deems the category non-green. In recent years, two large share chocolate brands have gone through a process of 'greening' their brand in the Australian market. Therefore, this category is different in that major market share brands are linking to 'green', as well as new, small share 'green' competitors slowly entering the market and thus changing the category.

3.3. Identification of 'green' brands

An expert panel consisting of eight marketing academics was used to identify 'green' brands in the toilet paper category and another eight to identify 'green' brands in the fabric softener category. These expert panels were each given the same explanation of the meaning of 'green' and were then presented with an image displaying an example of the product packaging for all of the brands in the category. They were then presented with each brand's product packing separately and were given the option to further pursue information about the products, including links to the brand's website and relevant external validations of the claims made by the brand, where available. As the brands were from an unfamiliar market to the expert panel, this extra information helped provide the panel with context that the market would likely have gained through their experiences and encounters with each brand. The expert panels were asked to rate each brand on an 11-point scale with '0' indicating that the brand was not at all 'green' and '10' indicating that the brand was undoubtedly 'green'. The mid-point of the scale, '5', had the anchor of 'a bit 'green''. Brands that achieved a mean score of seven or above were classified as being 'green' brands in this study. In the toilet paper category three brands out of 15 were classed by the expert panel as 'green' and two out of the 16 brands in the fabric softener category were classed as 'green'.

'Green' brands in the chocolate category were identified through their use of third-party verified labels. Third-party-verified labels were introduced to brands over the period of time that the longitudinal study was conducted; therefore the identification of 'green' brands through an expert panel was inappropriate in this category. Third-party verified labels are the most reliable type of eco-label, as they are the only ones that require an independent evaluation of the product, by the third-party, before the brand is allowed to display the label on their product (Tews et al., 2003; Jordan et al., 2004; de Boer, 2003). In each wave, brands without a third-party verified label were considered a non-green brand and brands with a third-party verified label were considered 'green' brands.

The chocolate category may produce different results to the toilet paper and fabric softener categories, as data was collected on only the biggest brands in the category. Of these big brands, one of the brands that displays a third-party verified label is within the top five brands in the Australian market (holding 5.5% of the market), with a second 'green' brand in the top 30 (holding 1% of the market). The 'green' brand in the top five 'greened' their brand in the Australian market within the last four years, while the other brand originally entered the market as a 'green' brand in the 1990's. This difference in history and market share of 'green' brands will enable further investigation into the reasons and incidence rates of rejection and the link to brand size.

In order to report clear results, the levels of rejection of both 'green' brands and non-green brands in the chocolate longitudinal study are reported as an average across the four waves analysed.

3.4. Brand rejection measurement

In all data sets, consumers were prompted with a list of brands and asked whether they would consider buying the brand in the future. Those respondents who indicated that they were not likely to purchase the brand in the future, whether they had tried the brand in the past or not, were asked to explain why this was the case. The verbatims were then coded into common themes including whether a brand was rejected because it was 'green' or because it was not 'green'. This allowed analysis of the reasons for rejection of 'green' brands and non-green brands, including whether the incidence of rejection of non-green brands for not being 'green' was higher than the incidence of rejection for 'green' brands due to negative associations with 'green'.

Four data coders were used to ensure minimal bias in coding. Two different coders assessed each category and each used the same list of codes, verified in Nenycz-Thiel and Romaniuk (2011). An assigned moderator then resolved any disputes between the codes for each data set.

4. Results

4.1. Incidence of rejection

The incidence rate of rejection was investigated to determine whether 'green' brands, as small brands, have a higher incidence of rejection than non-green brands, as identified in Truong et al. (2011). From results in Table 1, it is clear that 'green' brands do have higher incidence rates of rejection, which supports Hypothesis 1 – that as 'green' brands are small share brands, the incidence of rejection of 'green' brands will be higher than for non-green brands. Significant differences in the incidence rate of rejection for 'green' brands compared to non-green brands were identified in each product category ($p < 0.05$). On average the incidence for rejection equates to 47% for 'green' brands compared to 30% for non-green brands.

Generally, the chocolate category had lower incidence levels of rejection compared to the toilet paper and fabric softener categories ($p < 0.05$). The lower incidence rate of rejection for chocolate is due to the large market share brand in the chocolate category, which received a rejection rate of only 12%. However, the incidence rate of rejection for the smaller 'green' brand in the chocolate category was in line with the rates of rejection in other categories.

4.2. Reasons for rejection of 'green' brands

The literature outlines that 'green' brands may be rejected due to perceived low quality or higher expense. In order to assess this, the reasons for rejection of each product category were coded and the mean percentages for each reported. These possible key reasons for rejection of 'green' brands were assessed along with the incidence of rejection due to unfamiliarity, in Table 2.

From Table 2 it is clear that unfamiliarity was the most cited reason for rejection of 'green' brands, out of all reasons for rejection ($p < 0.05$). In the toilet paper and fabric softener categories 'unfamiliarity' was the most common reason given for rejection across all 'green' brands. In the chocolate category there was one exception to this rule, with the large 'green' chocolate brand mainly being rejected due to 'taste' and 'bad experiences', rather than unfamiliarity.

These results empirically show that 'green' brands are more likely to be rejected due to unfamiliarity, than for any other reason, thus proving support for Hypothesis 2. The only exception to this rule being the large 'green' brand in the chocolate category, which already held high market share before being 'greened'. This finding suggests that 'green' brands are not small due to rejection for being 'green', but simply because of a lack of consumer awareness.

4.3. 'Green' rejection of non-green brands

The proportion of respondents rejecting non-green brands for not being 'green' in each category was low and consistent across all three categories (Table 3). Out of the reasons given for rejection of non-green brands, on average a brand not being 'green' attained only 1% incidence.

These percentages did differ slightly between individual non-green brands. In the toilet paper and chocolate categories the reason for rejection of a brand not being 'green' achieved a maximum of 3% for an individual non-green brand, and up to 7% in the fabric softener category. The reason for the higher percentage of rejection in the fabric softener category is due to the brand receiving a very low incidence of rejection overall. This brand received a rejection rate of only 5%, which is only 15 respondents, and one respondent gave a 'green' reason for rejection, thus achieving 7% of rejection overall for that particular brand. These results provide support that 'green' reasons for rejecting a non-green brand are low, providing support for Hypothesis 3.

4.4. Reasons for rejection of 'green' and non-green brands

In order to address Hypotheses 2 to 4, the different reasons for rejection of 'green' and non-green brands were examined. The average top five reasons for rejection of 'green' brands were compared to the average top five reasons for rejection for non-green brands (Table 4). As can be seen, 'green' brands and non-green brands generally have similar reasons for rejection within their category, however, the mean incidence of rejection for each of the reasons differs.

As expected, in all categories, 'green' brands were more likely to be rejected due to unfamiliarity than non-green brands ($p < 0.05$). Non-green brands were more likely to be rejected due to a bad experience compared to 'green' brands ($p < 0.05$). These two findings were the only significant differences between incidence rates of rejection for the two types of brands that occurred across all three categories.

In all three categories the other top reasons for rejection were equally likely to be given for 'green' brands or non-green brands ($p > 0.05$). There were only a couple of exceptions to this finding. In the fabric softener category, consumers were slightly less likely to reject 'green' fabric softener brands due to being happy with their current brand (3% for 'green' brands c.f. 9% for non-green brands, $p < 0.05$), or due to low quality (>1% for 'green' brands c.f.

Table 1
Incidence of rejection.

	Toilet paper		Fabric softener		Chocolate		Overall
	Mean%	Range%	Mean%	Range%	Mean%	Range%	Mean%
'Green' brands	46*	41–52	60*	54–65	34*	12–56	47*
Non-green brands	34	13–65	37	5–66	19	1–50	30

* $p < 0.05$.

Table 2
Incidence of rejection for ‘green’ brands.

	Toilet paper		Fabric softener		Chocolate		Overall
	Mean%	Range%	Mean%	Range%	Mean%	Range%	Mean%
Not familiar	41*	23–60	78*	76–80	23*	0–51	47*
Too expensive	12	11–13	4	1–8	>0	0–1	5
Low quality	4	3–5	>0	0–1	3	1–4	2
Brand is ‘green’	4	1–6	0	0	>0	0–>0	1

* $p < 0.05$.

Table 3
‘Green’ reasons for rejection of non-green brands.

	Toilet paper	Fabric softener	Chocolate
Mean%	1%	2%	1%
Range of rejection% for individual non-green brands	0–3%	0–7%	0–3%
Importance of rejection reason	12/17	12/17	18/23

Table 4
Top five average reasons for rejection of ‘green’ brands and non-green brands.

Category	‘Green’ brand top 5		Non-green brand top 5	
	Reason	%	Reason	%
Toilet Paper	Not familiar	41*	Bad experience	27*
	Too expensive	12	Not familiar	17*
	Bad experience	9*	Too expensive	15
	Not available where shop	9	Low quality	9
	Happy with current brand	6	Happy with current brand	9
Fabric Softener	Not familiar	78*	Not familiar	39*
	Too expensive	4	Bad experience	16*
	Bad experience	4*	Happy with current brand	9*
	Not available where shop	4	Too expensive	8
	Happy with current brand	3*	Low quality	3*
Chocolate	Not familiar	23*	Bad experience	26*
	Bad experience	18*	Don’t like taste	14*
	Too sweet	17	Not appealing	8
	Don’t like taste	10	Happy with current brand	8
	Not appealing	7	Too sweet	6

* $p < 0.05$.

3% for non-green brands, $p < 0.05$). One exception was also identified in the chocolate category with ‘green’ brands more likely to be rejected due to being too sweet (17%, c.f. 6%, $p < 0.05$). However, this is due to the large ‘green’ brand receiving a high incidence of rejection for being too sweet (17%). This large ‘green’ brand received similar reasons for rejection to the large non-green brands, with ‘bad experience’ being the most commonly mentioned reason for rejection (67%).

Therefore, Hypothesis 4 is confirmed in that small ‘green’ brands do receive a higher incidence rate of rejection due to unfamiliarity than non-green brands, while non-green brands have a higher incidence of rejection due to a bad experience. Although the large ‘green’ brand in the chocolate category also received a lower incidence of rejection and higher incidence of rejection due to a bad experience. This suggests that the biggest influence here is not the fact that the brand is ‘green’, but simply because the brand is small. This once again reiterates that consumers do not reject brands for ‘green’ reasons, but instead simply do not know about smaller brands, which typically, ‘green’ brands are because they are often new.

5. Discussion and conclusions

This paper has examined the nature and the reasons for rejection of ‘green’ brands compared to non-green brands. The findings show that ‘green’ brands, being typically small brands, are rejected at higher levels than non-green brands. Looking closely at the reasons, rejection of ‘green’ brands is primarily due to a lack of awareness rather than any particular objections to buying these brands. These findings are important as they suggest that marketers should move their focus away from trying to address the reasons not to buy ‘green’ brands, towards how best to make brands simply noticed and considered.

The implication for the marketers of ‘green’ brands is that their focus should be on making ‘green’ brands salient in as many buying situations as possible – to increase their likelihood of being considered and purchased. Indeed, the toughest marketing challenge for any brand, ‘green’ or not, is simply to be noticed and thought of in a buying context. ‘Green’ brands potentially have an advantage in that they are offering an extra benefit to consumers that their competitors are not: a ‘green’ alternative. However, focusing on just this one attribute, without building mental links in the customer’s minds to buying situations and other valued features, could potentially inhibit a brand’s growth. While being ‘green’ could potentially be a benefit, this alone is not a path to gain access into a consumer’s consideration set. Through communication and promotion, those brands should be built to be category members and link to cues which trigger buying from a category in a variety of occasions.

Further, being ‘green’ could have potentially been a detriment to brands, due to the negative price and quality perceptions historically associated with ‘green’ brands. However, the findings of this paper suggest that the majority of the market no longer associate 'green' brands with such negative perceptions. Therefore, neither positive nor negative perceptions of 'green' brands hold much weight when it comes to consciously screening out brands. This is not to say that consumers do not care about 'green' benefits at all. It is just that the average shopper purchases quickly and automatically.

In the eye of the consumer, 'green' brands are simply small brands, which face the same challenges to gain attention as every other brand. The biggest marketing challenge for any brand is still to maintain and grow mental and physical availability. 'Green' brands are no exception to this rule.

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