

Many consumers make unhealthy choices, but 'uptrend messaging' can help drive healthy behavior

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Good nutrition and regular exercise can help prevent disease, but substantial evidence shows that only a minority of consumers adequately engage in these and other recommended healthy behaviors. In fact, according to the Centers for Disease Control, only 10 percent of Americans eat enough vegetables, 13 percent get enough fruit and 24 percent exercise adequately.

As a result, many [healthy behaviors](#) are what experts would consider "descriptively non-normative," meaning most people don't follow the recommendations by engaging in them.

In an effort to help marketers design messages to encourage healthy choices, new research from the University of Notre Dame introduces "uptrend messaging." Rather than focusing on the fact that most consumers don't follow the recommendations, it instead emphasizes the positive—that the percentage engaging in healthy behaviors is increasing.

"The Uptrend Effect: Encouraging Healthy Behaviors Through Greater Inferred Normativity" is forthcoming in the *Journal of Marketing Research* from John Costello and Frank Germann, marketing professors in Notre Dame's Mendoza College of Business, along with Aaron Garvey from the University of Kentucky and James Wilkie, a senior data scientist at Fetch Rewards Inc.

The study states, "A key challenge to developing effective messages that encourage proper diet or exercise is rooted in the unpopularity of these behaviors. And when only a minority of people engage in a health-protective behavior, social marketers cannot truthfully use traditional descriptive normative messaging strategies highlighting that the majority of people engage in that behavior."

Past research has shown that directly pointing out the unpopularity of a

behavior tends to discourage engagement.

"By highlighting the positive, uptrend messaging allows consumers to infer the popularity of that behavior on their own, leading them to believe it is more popular than they otherwise would," Costello said.

"This shift in perceptions leads to greater engagement in the behavior."

Across seven experimental studies, the team aimed to address the "unhealthy behavior is in the majority" quandary and discovered that uptrend messaging leads people to choose vegetables over crackers for a snack or to take a free apple when offered.

They also test the uptrend effect against existing social norm messaging approaches available to managers and policymakers.

"In both a [controlled experiment](#) and a [field study](#) conducted using Facebook advertising, we find that uptrend messaging outperforms other norm-based approaches," Costello said. "Taken together, uptrend messaging offers a novel way to shift perceptions of descriptively non-normative behaviors and a practical tool social marketers and policymakers can use to address important societal issues."

The team observed consumption behavior on a Notre Dame Football Friday and conducted controlled experiments both online and in behavioral labs at Notre Dame and the University of Kentucky. Across all studies, they found uptrend messaging drives healthy behavior and outperforms the other messaging approaches they tested.

The study shows that social marketers can positively influence healthy behaviors without deceiving consumers or providing inaccurate information.

"Our work provides policymakers and social marketers with an

actionable and easy-to-implement messaging strategy that highlights truthful, but unexpected trend information around healthy behaviors," Costello said. "We find that uptrend [messaging](#) can be used to encourage healthy behaviors that improve consumer quality of life."

More information: John P. Costello et al, EXPRESS: The Uptrend Effect: Encouraging Healthy Behaviors Through Greater Inferred Normativity, *Journal of Marketing Research* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/00222437231167832](#)

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