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Does Sex Sell? New Study Shows How to Make Women Respond to Sexy Ads

Do sexy images sell products? It depends, says a new study in [*Journal of Consumer Research*](#). If marketers are determined to use sex in advertising, there may be ways to do it that can attract customers of both sexes.

In today's cluttered advertising space, marketers use increasingly radical images that include nudity and sexual language.

Authors Darren W. Dahl (University of British Columbia, Vancouver), Jaideep Sengupta (Hong Kong University of Science and Technology), and Kathleen D. Vohs (University of Minnesota) followed up on earlier research that has demonstrated that women exhibit negative reactions to explicit sexual content in advertising.

"Our work builds upon existing perspectives in sexual psychology, which argues for stark differences in men's and women's sexual beliefs and motivations. This literature portrays men as having positive attitudes towards casual and recreational sex, whereas women value the emotional intimacy and commitment that can surround the sexual relationship," explain the authors.

The authors proposed that women's attitudes toward sexually oriented advertising would improve if ads depicted sex in a manner consistent with women's intrinsic values—for example if the sexual behavior appeared to reflect devotion and commitment.

"Findings from our initial experiments were supportive of this hypothesis," write the authors. "Experiment 1 illustrated that commitment-related cues in the ad itself (for example, positioning the product as a gift to a woman from a man) boosted women's attitudes."

The authors urge marketers to "exercise caution" when it comes to sex in advertising, but they needn't abandon it altogether. "The present experiments also revealed that the appropriate use of positioning and relationship context can improve women's attitudes toward the ad and brand," they conclude.

Darren W. Dahl, Jaideep Sengupta, and Kathleen D. Vohs. "Sex in Advertising: Gender Differences and the Role of Relationship Commitment." *Journal of Consumer Research*: August 2009.



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