

## Rady Study Examines How to Best Persuade Consumers to Help Protect the Planet



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We've all seen those message cards in hotel rooms asking us to reuse our towels. Many of us likely wonder, do those signs actually work? It turns out that hotel-goers are more likely to hang up their towels if they voluntarily commit to it, according to a new study published in the *Journal of Consumer Research* by Ayelet Gneezy, an assistant professor at the Rady School of Management, her Ph.D. student, Elizabeth Keenan, and colleagues. Their work suggests that carefully nudging people can promote eco-minded behavior.

**Seeds of Persuasion**

Influencing sustainable behavior is an ongoing challenge in today's society and encouraging hotel towel reuse with placards or messages is just one example. Gneezy and colleagues chose this issue in part because towel reuse

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can have a significant environmental impact by saving scarce water and energy resources. It is estimated that a 10 percent reduction in energy use by the U.S. hospitality industry would cut greenhouse gas emissions by nearly 6 million tons per year. Through their work, the authors discovered an easy, cost-effective approach that hotels can use to increase compliance with their towel reuse requests.

In the study, hotel guests were allowed at check-in to either make a general commitment to be environmentally friendly or to make a specific commitment to be environmentally friendly **by reusing towels** during their stay. To reinforce the commitment, some guests who chose to commit also received a "Friend of the Earth" lapel pin. Data collected over 31 days showed guests who made a specific commitment to reuse towels *and* received the pin symbolizing that commitment were 25 percent more likely to reuse towels, and hung up more than 40 percent more used towels compared to guests who were not given the opportunity to commit.

This research suggests that hotels and other businesses may be more successful in persuading positive behaviors when they take simple steps to directly engage with consumers. In fact, these connections can carry over to other eco-friendly behaviors in unexpected ways. For example, in their study, Gneezy and colleagues found that guests who made a specific commitment and received a pin were also more likely to turn off the lights in their room when leaving it, demonstrating that the guests' commitment to reusing towels spilled over and increased the likelihood they would engage in other environmentally friendly behaviors.

"Rather than telling consumers what they should be doing, companies, nonprofits, or government agencies wishing to influence behavior change should consider an alternative option—one that creates an appealing opportunity for consumers to start with a small step—a non-binding commitment that will likely nudge their behavior in the desired direction," the authors conclude.

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