

environmental consumer behavior

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Environmental consumer behavior, or more commonly, “green” consumer behavior, refers to a general class of behaviors (and their underlying processes) involved in purchasing, using, and disposing of products and services with the intention of improving the environment. A variety of activities can be considered under this umbrella. Probably the two most prominent ones are the extent to which consumers buy products that are environmentally friendly and the extent to which they dispose of product waste in an environmentally responsible manner. From a perspective of environmental activities, these two are related in that the disposal of waste (e.g., recycling of paper) provides some of the materials for the production of environmentally friendly products. Thus, in the materials life cycle (*see* FAMILY LIFE CYCLE) (Shrum, Lowrey, and McCarty, 1996), from the manufacturing of products and their packaging through consumer use to the disposal or recycling of the products and/or packaging, these two consumer actions (green buying and recycling) are the behaviors by which consumers can have the greatest potential impact on the environment.

Although a variety of polls over the last couple of decades show that consumers desire to become more “green” and are concerned about the environment, such findings are not always consistent with what consumers do (*see* ATTITUDE-BEHAVIOR CONSISTENCY), particularly in the area of buying green. For example, a 2007 global survey by McKinsey & Company (Bonini and Oppenheim, 2008) showed that 87% of the respondents indicated that they were concerned about the environment; however, only 33% reported that they bought or would buy green products. Thus, engaging in environmentally responsible behaviors, like other behaviors, is only partially determined by individuals’ values, ATTITUDES, and intentions. There are a number of other factors that may facilitate or impede green behavior. In particular, polls typically show that consumers’ reluctance

to buy green relates to several key impediments: eco-friendly products are perceived as more expensive than other product offerings; eco-friendly products are perceived as less effective than other alternatives; and consumers are often skeptical of the claims made by environmentally friendly brands.

Besides buying green products, the other major way that consumers can act on their concern for the environment is to recycle the waste from the products they purchase. Like buying green, however, concern for the environment is but one of the factors that relate to the extent to which consumers will recycle materials such as paper, glass, and plastic. In terms of facilitating or inhibiting factors, the perceived convenience of recycling appears to facilitate the extent to which consumers recycle (McCarty and Shrum, 2001). Municipalities and organizations have caught on to this, and over the years there have been increased efforts to ease the burden on consumers to recycle. From the times when consumers had to take recyclables to special locations or bring recyclables to recycling drives at specific times, most cities now provide containers for recycling materials that are picked up at regular intervals.

Although making recycling more convenient increases recycling rates, it is still critical for consumers to believe that it is important. In fact, research has shown that consumers who feel that recycling is important tend to perceive it as less inconvenient, compared with those who do not feel it is important (McCarty and Shrum, 2001). The belief that recycling is important is driven, to some degree, by a variety of social and personality variables, such as values and attitudes; thus, these individual difference variables are critical to the success of consumer recycling.

Researchers have searched for antecedents of consumers’ beliefs about the importance of recycling and pro-environmental behavior more generally. It appears that psychographic and personality variables show a stronger relationship with recycling attitudes than do demographic variables such as age and income (Straughan and Roberts, 1999). In particular, variables that are related to recycling include materialism (the extent to which one attaches importance to possessions), collectivism (the

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extent to which one believes in the importance of the group over the individual), and locus of control (the extent to which people believe that they control their lives rather than that they are controlled by external forces). Those who are more materialistic tend to have more negative attitudes toward the environment than do those who are less materialistic (Kilbourne and Pickett, 2006). Those who are more collectivistic tend to believe that recycling is more important than do those who are less collectivistic (McCarty and Shrum, 2001). People with an internal locus of control tend to believe that recycling is more important than do those who have an external locus of control (McCarty and Shrum, 2001). Presumably, those with an internal locus believe that their environmental efforts will have an impact and thus believe that such activities can be important.

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