Marketing, Through the Eyes of the Stigmatized

Abstract

A stigma is an attribute of a person that deviates from what others consider normal and is a source of social devaluation. It can affect consumer behavior and represents a major hurdle to marketers in certain industries (e.g., healthcare). Two field experiments—manipulating the marketing communications sent to 1,453 consumers diagnosed with 88 diseases of varying stigma levels—and two laboratory studies reveal that stigmatized consumers decode aspects of marketing communications as audience cues that they use to identify observers of their potential consumption. With these cues, they infer whether an audience will devalue them due to their stigma and determine how to respond to marketing communications. Among stigmatized consumers, only cues that signal that the audience (1) possesses similar deviant attributes and (2) has benevolent intentions reduce anticipated social devaluation, which affects consumption behaviors (program enrollment, long-term engagement; e.g., 200% click-through increase). When these cues imply unfavorable audiences, stigmatized consumers are more interested in products that promise to alleviate the stigma but that might be associated with higher risk (e.g., bodily harm).