



Ew! Gross! New Research Reveals Disgust Drives Consumer Action

By [Nancy Pekala](#)

Gross is good. In fact, the more disgusting, the better when it comes to prompting consumers to take action.

This was one of the findings of a five-year study released by Arizona State University's W.P. Carey School of Business and featured in an upcoming issue of the [Journal of Marketing Research](#).

Simply scaring consumers into actions is less effective than "disgusting" consumers to take action. Perhaps that's why we're seeing an increasing number of totally gross images in advertisements and commercials.



Consider the case of the creepy, yellow rat-like creature with devilish ears and sharp claws, otherwise known as Digger, a dermatophyte of "nail infection." This spokescreature for Lamisil proceeds to attack a seemingly normal human toenail and pries it off of the owner's toe using a crowbar.

This advertisement deliberately aims to appeal to viewers' sense of disgust. While fear and disgust are normally negative emotions, Andrea C. Morales, Eugenia C. Wu and Gavan J. Fitzsimons, authors of the research, suggest that disgust, when incorporated with a fear appeal can significantly enhance message acceptance beyond that of persuasion appeals that elicit fear but not disgust.

"If you really want to get people to act, disgust is much more powerful than fear," says Andrea Morales, an associate marketing professor at Arizona State University who oversaw the study. "It may seem counterintuitive, but it works."

The research results were based on five different studies conducted between 2006 and 2011. In each case, Morales reported that ads with the highest gross-out factor elicited more cases of viewers willing to take action.

One study involved 155 undergraduate students viewing an anti-methamphetamine print ad showing a young man whose face is covered with open sores. It scored far more consumer interest than an ad with the same written copy, but which replaced the photo of the pock-marked young man with one of a coffin.

Another of the studies examined a potential moderator for the disgust effect: need for control. People differ naturally in their motivation to control the events in their lives. Whereas people high in the desire for control are described as decisive and certain, those who are low in desire for control tend to be indecisive and uncertain. The study results revealed that people who were high in desire for control were more persuaded by a disgust and fear appeal than by a fear-only appeal, and those who were low in desire for control were equally persuaded by both.

The nationally recognized and award-winning Meth Project regularly leverages the power of disgust-eliciting fear appeals in its campaign to reduce first-time meth -amphetamine use. The study authors explained that one of its earliest appeals featured the image of a blood-splattered sink with the tagline “No one thinks they’ll try to tear off their own skin. Meth will change that.” Likewise, a more recent appeal featured the image of a battered and bloodied woman sitting on the floor.

The ad copy read “My mom knows I’d never hurt her. Then she got in the way.” The success of these and other real world campaigns suggests that disgust can indeed be used to enhance fear appeal persuasiveness and, more important, to effectively alter behavior.

[Nancy Pekala](#) is the AMA’s Senior Director of Online Content and Editor of [Marketing Researchers](#). Continue the conversation about using disgust to drive consumer action in the Marketing Research group of [AMACConnect](#), the AMA’s online community exclusively for marketers. Follow us on Twitter @[marketing_power](#).