

How often will you use that treadmill?

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Why not buy that treadmill? You'll be exercising every day, right? A new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* examines why our expectations of our behavior so often don't match reality.

Authors Robin J. Tanner (University of Wisconsin-Madison) and Kurt A. Carlson (Duke University) uncovered a specific process that they believe contributes to unrealistic optimism. They also suggest a method to encourage consumers to think more realistically about their future actions.

"Consumers adopt the tentative hypothesis that they will behave in an ideal fashion when predicting their future behavior," the authors explain. "Unrealistic optimism by consumers may have negative consequences for both marketers and consumers. For example, if a consumer holds unrealistically optimistic beliefs about how often they will work out in the future, then they may overpay for home exercise equipment."

In a series of studies, the authors first had participants provide idealized estimates for particular behaviors (e.g., In an ideal world, how often would you exercise next week?) Then they asked participants to provide a second estimate (e.g. How often will you exercise next week?). They found that when people are first asked to predict what would happen in an ideal world, then asked how they actually expect to do, they are more realistic.

Interestingly, when researchers explicitly instructed participants not to be idealistic, the experiment backfired and led to even more unrealistic estimates.

Also, the authors found that more decisive people were less realistic.

"An important potential consequence of being overly optimistic about one's future behavior is that such optimistic beliefs may contribute to overbuying of products that see little use," the authors write.

Source: University of Chicago

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