

Marketing a 'spoonful of sugar'

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Your kids won't wear their seatbelts, take their vitamins or brush their teeth? A new study by Tel Aviv University offers a simple formula that will get better compliance in the kid department -- and has implications for health specialists and consumer marketers all over the world.

According to the new study "Happy Today: Healthy Tomorrow?" by Dr. Danit Ein-Gar of the Marketing Department at TAU's Recanati Graduate School of Business, providing consumers with a very small or even trivial immediate benefit encourages people to use products that may have more significant long-term advantages. Her research may offer the key to getting kids to wear their seatbelts and encourage adults to use sunscreen. Dr. Ein-Gar collaborated with colleagues Prof. Jacob Goldenberg and Prof. Lilach Sagiv from the Hebrew University, for this research.

Using the technique in field experiments on about 300 people, the researchers were able to get more subjects to use so-called "virtue products" like dental floss and sunscreen on a daily basis.

"Virtue products offer a future benefit such as protection against [skin cancer](#), but because the benefit isn't immediate, it's harder for [health](#) authorities and companies to ensure that their products will be used continuously. We all buy them, but do we actually use them as frequently as we should?" Dr. Ein-Gar also cites examples such as condoms and gym memberships.

Throwing in the towel

A gym may discover that giving a free towel to new subscribers boosts initial membership, but getting people to stay members of the gym over the long haul requires some new kind of marketing scheme. Free towels or any other free handout might work once, but they won't work forever, she says.

In the study, researchers gave volunteers samples of dental floss and facial sunscreen. In the control group, volunteers got regular run-of-the-mill dental floss and sunscreen; volunteers in the second group were given the same products with highlighted features such as a minty taste in the dental floss and a "moisturizing sensation" in the sunscreen.

Marketing for the good of our health

Over a period of about three weeks, the researchers measured how much of the products in each group were used. In the group which received the added-feature products, use increased significantly. In fact, use increased mainly among participants who identified themselves as being low in self-control.

Dr. Ein-Gar says that if companies, health authorities and parents offer an immediate benefit, no matter how small, that may have a long-term advantage and lead to more success in continued use. It shouldn't be that expensive either: in one test case, the facial sunscreen lotion, a 3% increase in manufacturing cost led to a more than 30% increase in average daily use.

While market research firms have conducted surveys to find ways to promote usage of virtue products, Dr. Ein-Gar's is the first study to quantify this promotion, and test it on ongoing consumption in a natural setting, and she says that numbers speak louder than survey recipients' words. "No consumer is going to say that they used the dental floss

because of the mint taste or the facial sunscreen lotion because of the moisturizing sensation. But this information still sits there in the back of their minds and influences their behavior," she says.

"Virtue products present a tough sell to some people, but we see that this can be over-ridden with some small and simple forms of manipulation. Kids, for example don't like putting on their seatbelts, but if parents -- or car manufacturers -- gave them an immediate benefit, like a toy attached to the belt, more kids would be willing to use them. Children don't see the future benefit of protecting themselves from car accidents, but a toy will give them short-term pleasure and will make the experience more enjoyable."

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