

# Asking 'why' instead of 'how' helps consumers achieve goals of saving money or losing weight

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People who become focused on *how* to achieve a goal may have a harder time achieving their aims than people who think abstractly about *why* they want to do something, according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

"Imagine a person who has a goal to save money. The person forms a plan to save money by purchasing fewer clothing items at the mall," write authors Julia Belyavsky Bayuk (University of Delaware), Chris Janiszewski, and Robyn LeBoeuf (both University of Florida). "We investigate how this plan influences the person's response to other money-saving opportunities. For example, would the person be more likely to order a cheaper meal at a restaurant, avoid making an impulse purchase, or combine errands to save money on gas?"

The authors found that when people focus on concrete aspects of how they want to achieve goals, they become more closed-minded and less likely to take advantage of opportunities that fall outside their plans. And, in contrast, people who focus on the why are more likely to consider out-of-plan opportunities to achieve their goals.

The authors conducted four experiments to examine [consumer behavior](#) when it came to the goal of saving money. In one study, people were asked to list a specific plan to save money, whereas others were not asked to plan. Then some people were asked to focus on why they

wanted to save money. Subsequently, all participants were given the opportunity to buy candy.

Consumers who were thinking concretely and formed a specific plan were less able to avoid the candy purchase than those who had not formed a plan. However, among the abstract thinkers, those who had formed a plan were better able to avoid the candy purchase.

"Planning is more effective when people think abstractly, keep an open mind, and remind themselves of why they want to achieve a goal," the authors write. "This strategy is especially effective when the plan turns out to be infeasible (cheaper restaurant is too far away, gym is closed today for a holiday) or when other goal-directed activities become available (walk instead of taking a cab, eat a healthier meal)."

**More information:** Julia Belyavsky Bayuk, Chris Janiszewski, and Robyn LeBoeuf. "Letting Good Opportunities Pass Us By: Examining the Role of Mindset during Goal Pursuit." *Journal of Consumer Research*: December 2010.

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