

Practice makes perfect? Consumers overestimate their ability to learn prior to purchase

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Consumers give up on using products because they underestimate their learning abilities, according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

Authors Darron Billeter (Brigham Young University), Ajay Kalra (Rice University), and George Loewenstein (Carnegie Mellon University) found that [consumers](#) are overconfident in their abilities to learn skill-based products before they try them out. But as soon as they gain experience with the product they often quit using it. "Anyone who has tried, then rapidly abandoned snowboarding, knitting, fancy new software or the calendar on their iPod can probably ruefully relate," the authors write.

The authors studied tasks new to most people, which wouldn't take long to learn in a lab setting, like typing on a keyboard with an unfamiliar layout, tracing lines while only being able to view the tracing in a mirror, and folding t-shirts in a novel way. Participants were given verbal instructions and then were asked to predict how rapidly they would be able to perform the task. Initially, participants overestimated their abilities.

Next, participants were given a short amount of experience with the task and were asked to predict how rapidly they would be able to perform the task, both in the short term and longer term. "Not only were subjects

overly pessimistic about their ability to perform the task in the short term, but they were also overly pessimistic about their ability to improve over time," the authors write. Participants began correctly predicting their performance after four rounds (20 minutes) of under-predicting.

Because of this initial discouragement, the authors discovered that consumers were willing to pay more for a keyboard before they had tried it than they were after they gained a few minutes experience with it.

"Much of parenting is about teaching children that persistence pays off—that tasks that initially seem difficult become easier with practice," the authors write. "The results of these studies suggest that, despite the lessons our parents might have sought to teach us, most of us have not fully learned the lesson."

More information: Darron Billeter, Ajay Kalra, and George Loewenstein. "Underpredicting Learning Following Initial Experience with a Product." *Journal of Consumer Research*: February 2011. A preprint of this article (to be officially published online soon) can be found at journals.uchicago.edu/jcr

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