

# Understanding consumer behavior: Make them think it was their idea or decision?

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Consumers value goals they've chosen on their own more than those that are imposed on them, according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

"When people believe they have autonomously chosen to pursue a goal themselves, they feel the goal is increasingly valuable as they put in more effort, because they experience their own effort as signaling how much they care about it," write authors Ying Zhang (University of Texas at Austin), Jing Xu, Zixi Jiang (both Peking University), and Szu-chi Huang (University of Texas at Austin).

It seems that when people believe a goal they are pursuing is imposed on them, they experience their efforts as a loss of autonomy. In other words, they value the goal less as they put in more effort.

The authors tested participants in four experiments. In the first study, they found that participants who made a free choice on the topic of an essay increased their efforts as they moved further into the task, whereas people who were assigned topics withdrew their efforts as they advanced in the task.

Next, the authors organized campaigns for two [environmental issues](#), forest conservation and [saving energy](#). They allowed half the participants to choose the campaign they would like to support, but randomly assigned a campaign to the remaining people. They then varied the amount of effort participants needed to provide to support their

campaigns. People who were given a choice of which campaign to support reported that they cared more about the issue after putting in more effort. The people who were assigned a cause cared less about the issue after investing more effort.

"Our findings have important implications for understanding consumer behaviors," the authors write. "For example if a person chooses to stay in a certain hotel, he or she is likely to experience the choice as reflecting how much he or she likes this place, which should in turn increase the likelihood that this person will stay in the same hotel again."

Finally, the authors suggest that marketers can capitalize on consumer desire for autonomous choice. They suggest that someone might switch brand loyalty if confronted with the statement: "Your parents thought that would be a good car for you...do you?"

**More information:** Ying Zhang, Jing Xu, Zixi Jiang, and Szu-chi Huang. "Been There, Done That: The Impact of Effort Investment on Goal Value and Consumer Motivation." *Journal of Consumer Research*: June 2011 (published online October 15, 2010). Further information: [ejcr.org](http://ejcr.org)

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