

Sticking to our goals: What's the best approach for success?

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Consumers have an easier time starting toward a goal than finishing it, but according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, a shift in attention can make all the difference in reaching the finish line.

"Starting toward a goal can often feel easier than following through and reaching this goal's end state, as individuals with good intentions often fail to invest the time, effort, or monetary resources required to bring their goals to completion," write authors Minjung Koo (Sungkyunkwan University) and Ayelet Fishbach (Booth School, University of Chicago). For example, many consumers sign up for rewards programs without completing the steps necessary to earn their rewards.

The authors explored what they call the "small-area [hypothesis](#)," which relates to the way people monitor their progress toward goal completion. For example, [consumers](#) in a coffee-shop rewards program can either pay attention to the number of purchases they have completed or the number of purchases they have yet to make to receive the free beverage reward. "We predict that individuals will express greater [motivation](#) to pursue actions when they focus on whichever is smaller in size—the area of their completed actions or of their remaining actions—because motivation increases with the perceived impact of each new step, and each new step will appear more impactful if compared to a smaller set of other steps toward the goal," the authors write.

The authors conducted several experiments with loyalty programs, including a coffee shop and a bagel store. They manipulated customers'

attention by making different frequent buyer cards, some of which emphasized accumulated progress and others that showed remaining progress. "For participants who were closer to getting a reward, an emphasis on remaining progress (small area) increased motivation more than on completed purchases (large area)," the authors write. Customers who were far from the rewards said they were more motivated to finish filling the cards when the cards emphasized completed (small area) versus remaining progress (large area).

"Marketers should design or structure feedback interventions that emphasize small areas and thus increase the perceived impact of the next action," the authors conclude.

More information: Minjung Koo and Ayelet Fishbach. "The Small-Area Hypothesis: Effects of Progress Monitoring on Goal Adherence." *Journal of Consumer Research*: October 2012. ejcr.org/

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