

Irony outcomes: Being specific, not flexible, helps consumers achieve their goals

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Worried you won't meet your goal? According to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, you'll be more likely to succeed if you make specific plans to implement it.

"Consumers believe that [flexibility](#) increases their chances of achieving a goal. While this is sometimes true, relatively [rigid structures](#) can simplify goal pursuit by eliminating the need to make demanding choices, ultimately making a goal less difficult to achieve," write authors Liyin Jin (Fudan University), Szu-Chi Huang, and Ying Zhang (both University of Texas, Austin).

The authors looked at what happens when [consumers](#) need to follow specific steps to reach a goal, as in many customer loyalty programs. For instance, yesmywine.com offers consumers a "Country Medal" if they purchase wine from a specific country each month, and gives customers a bonus if they collect 12 country medals in a specific order.

In one study, consumers who enrolled in a customer loyalty program at a yogurt shop had to make purchases in a particular order to earn a reward. Although people thought it would be harder to follow a specific order, the structure actually made it easier for them to reach the goal. Although consumers were less likely to join the program, they were more likely to make all the necessary purchases if they joined.

Consumers are more reluctant to pursue goals that require very specific steps because this makes them seem more difficult to reach. But even

though it can be daunting to think of sticking to a strict plan, people should keep in mind that this practice actually makes it easier to achieve goals.

"While greater flexibility is generally thought to increase [motivation](#), restrictions may, ironically, turn out be more productive. Rigidity streamlines goal pursuit by imposing a clear [roadmap](#) to reaching a goal. This simplifies the process and makes consumers more likely to achieve their goals," the authors conclude.

More information: Liyin Jin, Szu-Chi Huang, and Ying Zhang. "The Unexpected Positive Impact of Fixed Structures on Goal Completion." *Journal of Consumer Research*: December 2013.

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