

Getting things done: How does changing the way you think about deadlines help you reach your goals?

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From doing yard work to finishing up the last few classes required for a college degree, consumers struggle to get things done. According to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, the way consumers think about deadlines can determine whether or not they start tasks and accomplish their goals.

"Our research shows that the way [consumers](#) think about the future influences whether they get started on tasks. In particular, if the deadline for a [task](#) is categorized as being similar to the present, they are more likely to initiate the task," write authors Yanping Tu (University of Chicago Booth School of Business) and Dilip Soman (University of Toronto).

In one study, consumers were given an opportunity to open a [savings account](#) and told they would receive an incentive if they opened the [account](#) within the next six months. One group of consumers was approached in June and given a deadline in December of the same year. The second group was approached in July and given a deadline in January of the next year. Even though both groups had the same amount of time to open the account, more consumers chose to open their account immediately if their deadline was in December of the same year.

This occurred because consumers used the end of the calendar year to

categorize the deadlines. Consumers think of a December deadline as being in the same category as the present while a January deadline is not. Since consumers tend to treat tasks in the present with a view to getting them done, a task with a deadline this year is treated with more urgency and the task is started sooner.

This research helps us understand how consumers perceive time and offers important considerations for consumers, as well as researchers studying goal pursuit and companies that provide help to consumers in getting things done. "While time elapses continuously, it appears that consumers think of time categorically. When thinking of a deadline as being in the same category as the present, consumers are more likely to start working toward their goals sooner," the authors conclude.

More information: Yanping Tu and Dilip Soman. "The Categorization of Time and Its Impact on Task Initiation." *Journal of Consumer Research*: October 2014.

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