

Chance as a motivator? Uncertainty can make people work harder

March 4 2015

Can uncertainty motivate people to work harder? According to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, people will often put in more effort to obtain uncertain rewards.

"When comparing the time, money, and effort people invest in order to qualify for either a certain or an uncertain [reward](#), we find that the uncertain reward is more motivating than the certain reward, an effect we dubbed the motivating-[uncertainty](#) effect," write authors Luxi Shen (Chinese University of Hong Kong), Ayelet Fishbach, and Christopher K. Hsee (both University of Chicago Booth School of Business).

In one study, [consumers](#) were asked to drink a large amount of water within two minutes. Some were told they would receive a guaranteed reward of two dollars, while others were told they would receive either one or two dollars (decided by a [coin toss](#)). Even though the reward was potentially lower, more consumers completed the task when the reward was uncertain.

In another study, consumers were asked to bid against each other for a bag of Godiva chocolates. Some were told there were four chocolates in the box, while others were told there were either two or four. Consumers bid higher when they didn't know how many chocolates were in the bag.

These findings can help companies and public policy makers when designing incentive systems. Introducing a bit of uncertainty can help to motivate people and make the effort required to achieve a reward seem

more like a game and less like work.

"The idea that uncertainty can increase motivation is counterintuitive, but its underlying mechanism is not. Consider the experience of slowly unwrapping a gift. Getting closer to finding out what is in the box is exciting and this excitement motivates action. Stated formally, the motivating-uncertainty effect is based on the positive experience that revealing the unknown induces," the authors conclude.

More information: Luxi Shen, Ayelet Fishbach, and Christopher K. Hsee. "The Motivating-Uncertainty Effect: Uncertainty Increases Resource Investment in the Process of Reward Pursuit." *Journal of Consumer Research*: February 2015.

Provided by University of Chicago

Citation: Chance as a motivator? Uncertainty can make people work harder (2015, March 4) retrieved 2 May 2024 from

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