

Don't ignore the habit: A lesson in launching new products

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Is the juicer you purchased recently gathering dust in the pantry? Are you still wearing your fitness tracker?

Humans are creatures of habit, and a new USC-led study shows that this tendency influences whether we adopt [new products](#) or services.

The research team found that consumers were likely to resist products that require some change of habit, but they cottoned onto products that fit easily into existing routines.

"Marketers don't always go out in the field and see what people are doing and how they would use a new product," said author Wendy Wood, provost professor of psychology and business at the USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences and Marshall School of Business. "But this is actually a critical part of new product launch. Even if consumers like a new product and want to use it, they won't do so if it conflicts with their habits."

For the research published today in the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, Wood and her team studied "habit slips" - the lapses in product use caused by falling back on our old habits.

Take debit cards, for instance. Although those hit the market in 1977, and bank customers liked the convenience, they were accustomed to toting a checkbook. As a result, the cards were not fully embraced until many years later.

"We think habit slips are a metaphor for many of the challenges people have in changing their behavior," Wood said. "If people want to change their exercise routines, for example, or to stop spending so much, they can only control their behavior for a short time. Eventually, they slip back into old habits."

Through a series of studies, the researchers showed that habit slips are a common barrier to new product adoption. But they also showed ways to stop these slip-ups.

Falling back

In response to a paid online survey, 150 people identified a product bought in the past six months that they thought they would use regularly but ended up rarely using, if at all.

The products varied from iPhones and computers, to a DVD cleaner, waffle maker and a picnic basket.

Falling back into their old habits was a common reason that participants cited for infrequent product use. In fact, one-quarter of all such products went unused because of habit slips.

"This is remarkable," Wood said, "because habit slips eclipsed many of the better known reasons for product failures—not liking the product, expense, or difficulty using it."

In short, an otherwise perfectly good product failed due to consumers' habits, she said. "Their newly purchased exercise bike became a catch-all for clothing, the fancy new purse was forgotten for the old favorite, and who really needs a product to clean DVDs anyway?"

Encouraging use

The researchers also found a way to avoid this barrier to new product use. New products could be piggy-backed onto existing habits. Using the new product is then cued automatically along with the habit.

In a second survey, participants reported whether they spontaneously did this, integrating a new product, such as a new video game system or an e-book reader, into existing habits.

Those who used their products the most had adopted them into existing habits.

Successful examples of piggyback marketing abound. For example, PayPal, the secure payment website, gained popularity through its link to eBay. When customers bought items on the auction site, PayPal popped up as an option so that customers formed a purchase-PayPal habit.

To examine piggy-backing in detail, the researchers conducted a final study and trial in which 70 college students tried adding a new fabric refresher to already-established laundry routines.

The students received a free trial bottle of the fabric refresher and were instructed to, "for the next four weeks, try using it whenever you want to refresh clothes that you have already worn but would like to wear again."

Some students used a cognitive strategy to piggyback the refresher onto their laundry habits. They inserted the new product into their laundry routines by using a "sniff test" to determine if they were smelly, but instead of just rewearing or washing as was their habit, they followed a plan to use the refresher.

In weekly surveys, participants who made a plan to integrate it into their

routine used it the most. The cognitive strategy inhibited the habit and led them to substitute the new product, the researchers wrote. But when participants paid no mind to the product's adoption, they fell back into their old routine.

In addition to offering cognitive strategies for using a product, companies can improve product success through packaging. A new tooth whitener might be marketed as part of the handle of a toothbrush, for example. Tooth whitening can then become part of the cleaning routine.

"The broad implication of our work is not to fight against consumers' past behavior, but instead to enlist it as an ally to promote the successful adoption of new products," the researchers concluded.

Provided by University of Southern California

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