

# One-hit wonder: How awards, recognition decrease inventors' creativity

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Post-it Notes, Spanx, the iPhone, two-day Prime shipping. From unique gadgets to revolutionary business ideas, the most successful inventions have one thing in common: creativity. But sustaining creativity can be difficult.

New research from Olin Business School at Washington University in St. Louis, published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, has identified one reason why some first-time producers struggle to repeat their initial creative productions while others go on to continually produce creative works.

Markus Baer, professor of organizational behavior at Olin, and Dirk Deichmann, of the Rotterdam School of Management in the Netherlands, discovered that recognizing first-time producers of successful novel ideas with an award or recognition can significantly decrease the likelihood that they will produce future creative work.

"In our study, we found that people who develop novel ideas and receive rewards for them start to see themselves primarily as a 'creative person,'" Baer said.

"This newfound identity, which is special and rare, is then in need of protection. Essentially, once a person is in the creative limelight, stepping out of it—by producing a novel idea that disappoints or pales in comparison to earlier work—is threatening and to be avoided. One way to do so is to stop producing altogether. You cannot compromise your identity and reputation when you do not produce anything new."

In other words, fear of failure the second time around can cause producers to avoid taking risks that would threaten their creative identity.

"Harper Lee is a perfect example of this phenomenon," Baer said. "Her first book, 'To Kill a Mockingbird,' is one of the bestselling and most acclaimed American novels of all time. Yet she didn't publish again until 55 years later. And her second book, 'Go Set a Watchman,' written in the mid-1950s, is considered to be a first draft of her legendary one hit wonder."

## About the research

To study the effect receiving an award or recognition had on first-time producers, Baer and Deichmann first conducted an archival study of 224 first-time cookbook authors in the United Kingdom. According to the study authors, the cookbook market is an ideal context to examine sustained creativity because cookbooks are creative works and a labor of love. From this sample, they found only about 50% of first-time cookbook authors went on to produce a second cookbook. Interestingly, they also discovered that the more novel the initial cookbook was, the less likely the author was to produce a second cookbook.

Next, Baer and Deichmann conducted an experiment with business school students. Participants were asked to develop a concept for a potential cookbook. Half of the participants were told that their idea was "highly original and novel," while the other half were told their idea was "very solid and traditional." A subgroup of participants was also told that their ideas were "among the ideas most likely to make a big splash in the food community."

Finally, participants had the option to develop a second cookbook concept or to build upon their original idea with a marketing plan. The experiment showed that when people produce a highly novel, award-winning idea, right out of the gate, they're less likely to produce a follow-up idea.

A second experiment built upon the original and allowed the authors to more precisely pinpoint the psychological mechanisms at play. In the two experimental studies, the percentage of first-time producers who decided to develop a second idea, as opposed to exploiting the first idea, was 21 and 34, respectively.

"Participants experienced a greater threat to their creative identity when

producers of award-winning, novel work were confronted with the possibility of having to continue on their creative journey by having to produce original work yet again," the authors concluded.

## **Rethinking how managers recognize creativity**

Creativity is most likely to blossom in environments where producers are motivated primarily by the challenge and meaning of the work itself—i.e., the problem they are trying to solve—and have some creativity-specific skills, such as associating or combining ideas from different knowledge domains, Baer said.

Previous research has focused on the benefits of awards, but Baer and Deichmann found that winning an award can, paradoxically, temper the creativity of producers because it introduces an extra layer of stress to the creative environment.

"Awards are only bad for people producing novel stuff because they make the creative identity of such people salient, causing them to feel threatened by the prospect of compromising this identity with mediocre work," he said.

Baer offered the following strategies for avoiding the potential negative effects of awards and instead using them to encourage [creativity](#):

1. Make sure that rewards and recognition are not only offered for the outcome of the creative process—a new product—but also for the process of developing the outcome. For example: Have we challenged key assumptions? Have we tested our prototype properly?
2. Reward both success and learning from failure. What becomes a success is difficult to predict and often entails a fair amount of luck. Thus, success and failure often lay close together. Learning

from failure can be immensely beneficial and should be encouraged.

3. Do not glorify someone who had one creative success by offering an outsized reward. If you want to glorify people, celebrate those who can produce creative work repeatedly.

**More information:** Dirk Deichmann et al, A recipe for success? Sustaining creativity among first-time creative producers, *Journal of Applied Psychology* (2022). [DOI: 10.1037/apl0001019](https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0001019)

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