



The Bright Side of Busyness

Subtly reminding people how busy they are can nudge them to make virtuous choices.

Most people feel terribly busy every day. Work just keeps piling up, the kids need to be chauffeured to their after-school activities, inboxes are overflowing and your parents are coming over for the weekend. You wish that life would slow down, but what if there was a silver lining to all this busyness?

The truth is, there is a good reason why so few people ever tame their busy lives. In many societies, busyness is a badge of honour worn with pride. Feeling in demand makes people feel good about themselves. It boosts self-image.

The upshot of this self-esteem boost is better self-control, as we showed in a [paper](#) published in the *Journal of Consumer Research*. We found that people who perceived themselves as busy – what we called a "busy mindset" – were better able to manage their impulses when choosing between indulgent and virtuous options. This was a direct result of the boost in self-importance associated with busyness. This dovetails with the prior research finding that an enhanced self-view can facilitate choosing long-term benefits for the self over immediate hedonic temptations. An improved feeling of self-importance can also lead people to believe they simply have better self-control, which reinforces their ability to make virtuous choices.

The many virtues of a busy mindset

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Many researchers have studied busyness through the angle of time constraint and the results have been pretty consistent: When people need to make a decision under significant time pressure, mounting anxiety usually leads them to give in to their impulses, as opposed to choosing the most sensible (or healthiest, etc.) option.

Our own research, however, didn't look at time pressure. Instead, we focused on how decision making is influenced when people are reminded of their busy status, without any reference to time pressure. In some studies, we exposed participants to messaging that subtly implied they were busy individuals. In other experiments, participants were asked to list down the things that had kept them busy recently.

In such a frame of mind, participants were more likely than our controls to exercise self-control in a variety of situations. For instance, it reduced their desire to buy food from a franchise perceived as indulgent. It increased the odds they would prefer reading the news section of a newspaper vs. its entertainment section. It boosted their intention to exercise rather than relax on a late afternoon. They indicated that they would save a higher percentage of their monthly income for retirement. Students stated a preference for doing extra work to earn academic credit as opposed to taking a day off. Virtue won every time.

A boosted self-image is key

We conducted additional tests to show that self-importance was indeed the key reason behind these virtuous choices. In a particular study, we asked our busy-mindset participants to indicate how many people in their lives considered them an important person. A subset of participants were told to state a number between 1 and 5, making it easy for them to reach the top of the scale and thus feel good. The majority of this subset (65 percent) chose an apple rather than a brownie as a reward for participating in the study.

The rest of the participants were asked to indicate a number between 10 and 50. This much tougher scale, designed to dampen the participants' self-importance, resulted in the majority of them (58 percent) picking the brownie as a reward. Self-control fizzled when participants didn't feel so important after all.

The cafeteria experiment

Our last study was a three-week field experiment we conducted in the cafeteria of a large university on the West Coast of the United States. On some random days, we posted signs at the entrance to the cafeteria, as well as near the food stations, that said: "Good to go, for busy [name of the school] students!" On other random days, we used either no sign or signs that said: "Good to go, for summer [name of the school] students!"

The "busy" messaging significantly depressed sales of unhealthy foods. On average, it resulted in only 107 unhealthy food items being purchased, vs. 149 and 154 items when the "summer" signs were up or no sign was used. The busy mindset particularly affected the sales of items with a high number of calories from fat.

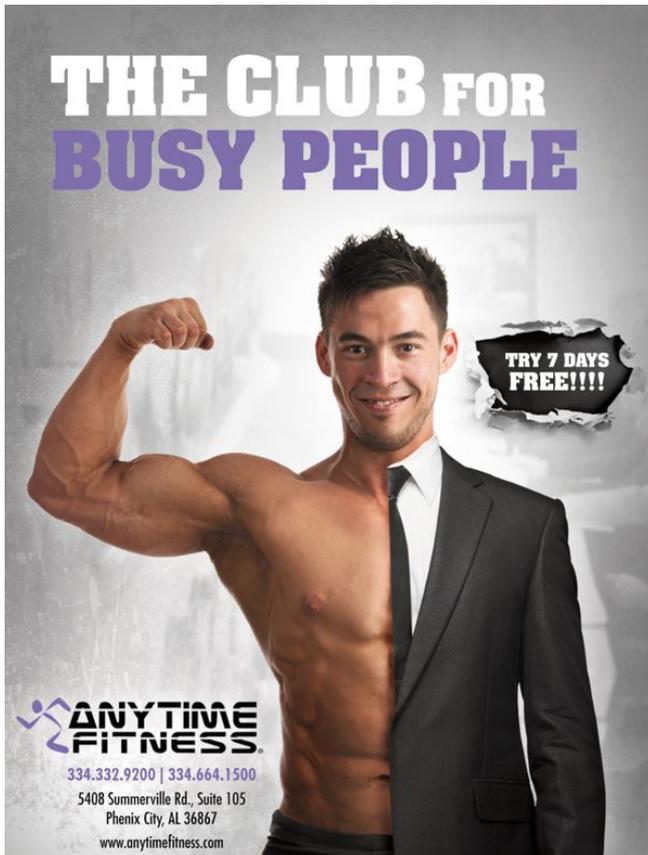
Implications for marketers, consumers and policymakers

Marketers should take note that using busyness in ad campaigns may backfire if consumers perceive the brand or product to be indulgent or unhealthy. After all, reminding people of their busy status tends to activate virtuous choices, not hedonic ones. The Dunkin Donuts ad below is an example of a potentially counterproductive campaign:



Source

However, firms whose branding is based on health – or that have otherwise everything to gain by promoting self-control – could benefit from emphasising the busyness of their potential customers. The ad below by gym chain Anytime Fitness is such an example.



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Of course, certain products can be framed as either indulgent or healthy. In such a case, it would be safest to use a healthy framing when featuring a call to busyness in ads.

Lastly, both consumers and policymakers share a great interest in finding ways to increase self-control. Overeating and food waste are just two broad areas that come to mind. Our research suggests that simply reminding people how busy they are – and who isn't these days? – in contexts actually devoid of a time crunch, may be an effective nudge towards virtue.

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