



How behaviour prediction can help to reinforce good habits but break bad ones

Human beings are creatures of habit. Many of our actions are repetitive and require little conscious thought or effort. However, according to a new study, by predicting our behavior we can actually reinforce good habits and break bad ones.

The study by INSEAD Assistant Professor of Marketing Pierre Chandon and four US-based Marketing professors is called *'When Does the Past Repeat Itself? The Role of Self-Prediction and Norms.'*

Chandon says 50 per cent of what we do is habitual or 'mindless'. That, in itself, is not necessarily bad: "If we had to think about everything we do, we'd get nothing done." He adds that their research was interested in whether people would repeat what they had done in the past and under what circumstances they would change their habits.

"What we know is that some habits are very hard to break. Anyone who has tried to lose weight or tried to change a habit knows it's very difficult. So we're interested in what can we do to make people change their habits," Chandon says. "And one very simple thing is to ask people if they're going to do it again next month. This has a very strong impact on whether people repeat what they normally do, or do what they think they should do."

The study covered "normative" activities such as exercising, and non normative ones, such as grocery shopping. "When we ask people to predict whether or not they're going to go grocery shopping, there's really no norm about how often you should go grocery shopping. Just by asking

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people that question reminds people what they have normally done in the past and, as a result, they're more likely to repeat it in the future." So where there is 'no ideal behaviour' as is the case with grocery shopping, asking people to predict their future actions increases the likelihood that they will repeat their past behaviour.

Chandon says that by asking American college students whether they intend to exercise, a normative behaviour, they found that people who don't normally exercise, exercise more. That much was to be expected. However he says "what's not expected, is that people who exercise everyday, realise they should be doing something else, like maybe study and so they exercise less."

'Everybody becomes more average'

Consequently, the researchers found that when behaviour is normative, the mere act of asking people about their future intentions regarding that behaviour "breaks the habit. So there is a kind of regression toward the norm: everybody becomes more average."

These findings could have major significance for marketing activities, as well for public policy with regard to health issues: "That's where it becomes

tricky,” Chandon says, “because often for screening purposes you ask people ‘Do you smoke, do you exercise, do you do drugs, do you do unprotected sex etc.?’ And obviously the objective of the questioning is to identify people who might be at risk, but what we don’t often realise is that this simple questioning could influence people’s behaviour and what we know is it would probably move people towards the (social) norm and in fact there’ve been some studies – not ours, but others – (where) if you ask people will you cheat in the exam, miss class, they are more likely to miss class and cheat in the exam, than if you don’t ask them.”

“These are all psychological effects which are under the radar and people don’t think it influences them, which is why it’s very interesting for us to study,” he says. “In terms of eating, we make 200 eating decisions a day and I would say 80 per cent are ‘mindless’, we never really think about that and as a result it’s important to know what’s going to increase our habits and what’s going to break them. And then you can use it differently depending on what you want to do – do you want to increase people’s habits or decrease them?”

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