
How to Frame Goals to Increase Motivation



By Amitava Chattopadhyay , INSEAD Professor of Marketing

What motivates individuals to achieve goals differs depending on their cultural background.

Most of us have set goals for ourselves before, whether it's losing weight, saving money or training for a marathon. Goals help us to focus our minds on achieving what we set out to do. We know that setting goals makes us more likely to attain what we want. But there are differences in what motivates people to achieve goals, which has implications for managers who have to use them to generate a behavioural response, either in customers or employees.

For some of us, we achieve our goals easily. We find ourselves highly motivated and we set out to achieve them, but maintaining them becomes a real challenge. Keeping to our weight or a grade average at school, for example, can seem the harder part of the journey. But for others, it's the opposite. That is, we feel motivated to tend to what we've already achieved, with the attainment of the goal being the real struggle.

These differences, in the ease with which we pursue attainment goals versus maintenance goals, depend on how the individual sees themselves in relation to others. In our recent paper [**Pursuing Attainment versus Maintenance Goals: The Interplay of Self-Construal and Goal Type on Consumer Motivation**](#), Haiyang Yang, Antonios Stamatogiannakis and I found that people from more independent cultures, such as the United States for example, find attaining goals more motivating than maintaining them and those from more interdependent cultures, such as China, were more motivated by maintenance than attainment.

What motivates you?

This is because those from independent cultures define themselves on individual lines, with more focus on one's own abilities, values and preferences. This drives them to achieve their sense of self. Those from interdependent cultures on the other hand, characterise themselves by a sense of connectedness with others and their attention is on their role in the group, to maintain social harmony.

Across a series of studies, we asked independent and interdependent individuals both across cultures and within cultures how motivated they would be to achieve certain goals, such as increasing their savings from US\$35,000 to US\$35,500 in one year or increasing their time at the gym from 30 to 35 minutes a day in the next month. We also asked how persistent they would be at maintaining the same goals, i.e., keeping savings at US\$35,000 and maintaining gym time at the current level of 30 minutes per day. In a sample comprising of Chinese and Americans, there was a significant increase in motivation for the Americans when it came to attainment. Such goals were much less motivating for the Chinese.

Carrot or the stick?

In addition, a field study we conducted showed similar results. We examined data from StickK.com, a website set up by two Yale economics professors who partnered to lose weight in 2008. The website enables users to set goals and keep track of their progress. They can choose to set both attainment and maintenance goals and put money at stake. If they fail the goals, the money at stake is forfeited, but if they reach them, they can keep it.

We measured American consumers' goal pursuit over a period of 13 months. But despite their cultural context, their relational position with others was a

major factor in their motivation for attaining or maintaining a goal. We found that those with more friends on the site, and therefore more interdependent, put less money at stake than those with fewer friends when they had an attainment goal, which in our study concerned those looking to lose weight.

This means those with a more independent sense of self were more highly motivated, throwing more money down to keep themselves honest and focused on their goal. Those in an interdependent environment tended not to want to stick out too much.

The nail that sticks out...

For managers in international marketing involved in the localisation of products and services, our findings suggest the two different types of goals can be leveraged differently across cultures to boost consumer motivation. For example, a bank can motivate its customers in the United States by nudging them to increase their savings account annually by a small amount in order to receive benefits. In contrast, the same bank can motivate its customers in China by nudging them to maintain their savings at a certain balance to retain benefits or achieve goals for the good of their family or wider social group.

Our results also suggest that marketing practitioners should consider engineering environments that fit the respective self-image of their consumers, such as in the purchase or consumption context. This will help to increase the likelihood of achieving the firms' marketing objectives.

The same logic can be applied to goals within the workplace. When defining project deliverables for employees from different socioeconomic backgrounds, managers should consider setting goals in the context of group success for interdependents and personal success for those of an independent nature.



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