Resolving Goal Conflict: the Effect of Regulatory Focus on Product Choice

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT - Considerable research has examined how a single active goal directs consumer behavior (e.g. Huffman and Houston, 1993; Garbarino and Johnson, 2001). For example, a consumer with a goal to be healthy will choose healthy food, while a consumer with a goal to use convenience products will leave the grocery store toting plastic grocery bags. Very little research, however, has examined how multiple conflicting goals interact to direct consumer behavior. Why do we select fruit salad despite the high-fat delights that catch our eye? Why do we enjoy the convenience of a non-recyclable grocery bag when this convenience conflicts with our environment values? The difficulty in coordinating multiple goals is a fundamental challenge in everyday life. This paper extends a burgeoning area of research examining the effects of self-regulatory focus on goal pursuit (e.g. Shah et al., 1998; Aaker and Lee, 2001). We propose that a consumer's regulatory focus can predict his/her choice between two different products, which satisfy different activated goals at different levels of the goal hierarchy.

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Considerable research has examined how a single active goal directs consumer behavior (e.g., Huffman and Houston, 1993; Garbarino and Johnson, 2001). For example, a consumer with a goal to be healthy will choose healthy food, while a consumer with a goal to use convenience products will leave the grocery store toting plastic grocery bags. Very little research, however, has examined how multiple conflicting goals interact to direct consumer behavior. Why do we select fruit salad despite the high-fat delights that catch our eye? Why do we enjoy the convenience of a non-recyclable grocery bag when this convenience conflicts with our environment values? The difficulty in coordinating multiple goals is a fundamental challenge in everyday life. This paper extends a burgeoning area of research examining the effects of self-regulatory focus on goal pursuit (e.g., Shah et al., 1998; Aaker and Lee, 2001). We propose that a consumer’s regulatory focus can predict his/her choice between two different products, which satisfy different activated goals at different levels of the goal hierarchy.

Consumer goals are believed to be organized in a hierarchical structure, with “high level” goals situated above “low level” goals (e.g., Carver and Scheier, 1990; Bagozzi and Deholakia, 1999; Huffman et al., 2000). High-level goals are described as goals that represent the core concept of self, such as a consumer’s life themes and life values (e.g., being healthy, being protective of life). Low-level goals, on the other hand, describe goals that are detailed and function-oriented, such as a consumer’s desired product features and benefits sought (e.g., eating flavorful food, using a convenient shopping bag). High-level goals and low-level goals can be differentiated in two important respects. First, high-level goals are abstract while low-level goals are concrete. Second, high-level goals are long-term and accessible across many situations while low-level goals are short-term and constantly shaped by situational cues. The abstractness and temporal dimension of a goal are the two most important determinants as to whether a goal is at a high-level or at a low-level in the goal hierarchy (Austin and Vancouver, 1996; Huffman et al., 2000).

Interestingly, the abstract and temporal dimensions also distinguish between two different self-regulatory styles — promotion focus and prevention focus. Individuals with a promotion focus tend to think in an abstract way while individuals with a prevention focus tend to think in a concrete way (Liberman et al., 1999; Roese et al., 1999). Moreover, individuals with a promotion focus tend to focus on long-term plans while individuals with a prevention focus tend to focus on immediate actions (Freitas et al., 2002; Pennington and Roese, 2003). So although any goal can be pursued with either a promotion focus or a prevention focus (e.g., you can pursue the goal of having a healthy lifestyle by seeking out healthy foods or by avoiding unhealthy foods), goals at different hierarchical levels may be more consistent with one or the other regulatory pattern.

Based on the parallels observed between high-level and low-level goals and promotion and prevention focus regulatory styles, we predict that a promotion-focus will be associated more with the pursuit of high-level than low-level goals, whereas a prevention-focus will be associated more with the pursuit of low-level than high-level goals. To illustrate, in the opening examples, “being healthy” and “being protective of life” are high-level goals; “eating flavorful food” and “using convenience products” are low-level goals. We predict that in these goal conflict scenarios, consumers with a promotion focus will be more likely to reject the non-recyclable bag and order fruit salad than those with a prevention focus, for whom we predict the converse will be true.

To test our predictions, we created a situation where participants have conflicting goals at different levels. To achieve this, we wanted to first identify participants with the same high-level goal and then, we placed them in a situation where they were given a conflicting low-level goal. They were asked to choose between two products. Each product would satisfy only one goal, but not the other.

Our study was conducted in two sessions. In the first session, we used a modification of the procedure designed by Ratneshwar and colleagues (2001) to identify high-level consumer goals. The procedure was modified by first spending a considerable amount of time explaining the concept of high-level goals to participants. Every day examples of high-level goals were presented and questions were encouraged. Participants were then asked to list the high-level goal that came to mind when they thought about the type of food they liked, disliked, sought and avoided and record their answers on in a set of six stapled index cards (two of the six cards were distracters and did not ask about food-related behaviors). A score reflecting the most salient high-level goal was calculated for each participant. “Being healthy” was found to be the most popular high-level goal. Participants who have this goal when they think about food were identified and invited to participate in the second session one week later.

In the second session, participants with a salient high-level goal of “being healthy” were randomly assigned to either a promotion or a prevention focus prime condition. Regulatory focus was primed using a maze task (Friedman and Forster, 2001). Participants were then asked to imagine that they had been walking in the sun for 20 minutes on a very hot summer’s day. This manipulation implicitly evoked the low-level goal of cooling off. We then pit the high-level goal to be healthy against the low-level goal to cool off by offering participants a choice between two different snacks: an apple or ice cream. A pretest revealed that ice cream was viewed as satisfying the goal of cooling off, but not satisfying the goal of being healthy. An apple, on the other hand, was good for one’s health, but did not satisfy the goal to cool off.

As expected, the results indicated that participants primed with a promotion focus were more likely to choose the apple, while participants primed with a prevention focus were more likely to choose the ice cream. An analysis of participants’ thoughts while making the choices provided further support for the predicted association between consumers’ regulatory focus and consumers’ goal orientation. As expected, participants primed with a promotion focus generated more thoughts centered on the high-level goal while those with a prevention focus generated more thoughts centered on the low-level goal. The results also indicated that there were no differences between participants primed with a promotion focus and those primed with a prevention focus in their attitudes toward both ice cream and apples. Consequently, the differences in choices were not mediated by differences in attitudes.

Our data clearly indicate that when both a high-level and a low-level goal are activated, but cannot be satisfied by a single product, consumers with a promotion focus tend to choose a product that satisfies the high-level goal whereas consumers with a prevention focus tend to choose a product that satisfies the low-
level goal. These findings suggest that a consumer’s regulatory focus can predict their product choice when two different products each satisfy a different activated goal.

This paper also extends recent developments on the Compat-ibility Principle identified in the regulatory focus research. Our findings suggest that compatibility may not just be due to the congruity between regulatory focus and information framing (Aaker and Lee, 2001; Lee et al., 2000; Lee and Aaker, 2004), but may also be related to the goal level that is most salient during the decision-making process. Specifically, a promotion focus is more compatible with high-level consumer goals whereas a prevention focus is more compatible with low-level consumer goals. Furthermore, our findings also indicate that regulatory focus can have a direct influence on consumers’ product choice, without being mediated by consistent attitude changes (Aaker and Lee, 2001).

References
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