Effects of Evaluability on Goal Fulfillment and Satisfaction

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Goal theory suggests that goal fulfillment involves evaluating an outcome against the goal’s criteria. However, goals differ in their evaluability. We propose that goals are easy to evaluate when they are specific, defined in terms of product features, or when there is a standard of comparison. And we propose that goals are difficult to evaluate when they are vague, defined in terms of benefits or lack standards. These differences in evaluability impact goal fulfillment, product satisfaction and motivation to pursue the goal. Thus, easy-to-evaluate (difficult-to-evaluate) goals create polarized (moderate) levels of satisfaction and motivation, depending on product performance.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/15210/volumes/v37/NA-37

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Goal theory suggests that goal fulfillment involves evaluating an outcome against the goal’s criteria. However, goals differ in their evaluability (Hsee 1996; Hsee et al. 1999). We propose that goals are easy to evaluate when they are specific, defined in terms of product features, or when there is a standard of comparison, but difficult to evaluate when they are vague, defined in terms of benefits or lack standards. These differences in evaluability impact goal fulfillment, product satisfaction and motivation to pursue the goal. Thus, easy-to-evaluate (difficult-to-evaluate) goals create polarized (moderate) levels of satisfaction and motivation, depending on product performance.

Of particular interest to marketing managers, goal evaluability differs for purchase goals depending on whether the goal is defined in terms of product features or benefits (Huffman, Ratneshwar, and Mick 2000). Consider, for example, two consumers who enter a store to buy a set of cookware. The first consumer’s goal is to buy a set of cookware that is easy-to-clean; while the second consumer’s goal is to buy a set of cookware made of infused anodized aluminum, which creates a nonstick, easy-clean surface. Though both may end up buying the same set of cookware, the purchased cookware was motivated by goals that were defined at different levels. The desire for easy-to-clean cookware is a benefit goal, whereas the desire for infused anodized cookware is a feature goal. Although these goals are related, the difference in conceptualization should lead to different motivation to purchase supplementary products. Feature goals are easily evaluated because the evaluation simply requires determining the presence or absence of the desired feature, leading to a high or low degree of goal fulfillment. In contrast, benefit goals lack a natural scale to provide a standard of comparison, making product evaluation difficult. Because benefit goals cannot be definitively achieved, they will lead to a moderate degree of goal fulfillment.

Therefore, if the purchased cookware is infused anodized and easy-to-clean, we expect that the consumer with the feature goal should evaluate the product more positively and be less willing to purchase supplementary products (e.g., brushes that make it easy to clean cookware) than the consumer with the benefit goal. However, when the purchased cookware is not infused anodized and is difficult-to-clean, the consumer with the feature goal should evaluate the product more negatively and be more willing to purchase supplementary products than the consumer with the benefit goal.

To test this, we conducted two studies. In our first study, participants were given a scenario of purchasing a safe car. The goal for a safe car was defined in terms of features (i.e., airbags and anti-lock brakes) or benefits (i.e., feeling safe). The purchased car was described as either having safety characteristics or not. Results suggested that viewing the goal in terms of features or benefits exhibited the predicted moderating effect on participant’s evaluations of the product. In other words, participants with a feature goal gave more polarized evaluations of the product than those with a benefit goal.

The second study plans to show that goal evaluability can be impacted by evaluability information and goal specificity. Participants will be given a goal of improving their score on a mental ability test. In order to help them achieve their goal, they will consume a ginseng-based beverage after the first test which they are told can improve mental performance on the next test. Goal specificity will be manipulated by providing participants with a specific goal (i.e., “improve your score by 5 points”) or vague goal (i.e., “improve your score substantially”) on the mental ability task. Evaluability information will be manipulated by either providing or omitting the average increase in mental ability score (i.e., “the average person’s score improves 4 points after consuming ginseng”). Scores will be manipulated such that the ginseng beverage appears to perform well (i.e., score increases 6 by points) or poorly (i.e., score decreases by 6 points). The results are expected to demonstrate that specific goals and evaluability information make the goal easier to evaluate. When the ginseng product performs well (poorly), easy-to-evaluate goals should create high (low) product satisfaction and low (high) motivation to purchase products that enhance mental performance such as omega-3 vitamins, brain teaser exercises and newsmagazines. However when the goal is difficult-to-evaluate, satisfaction and motivation should be moderate regardless of the product’s performance.

This research demonstrates that goal evaluability moderates the effect of product characteristics on goal fulfillment, satisfaction and motivation. These results have important implications for managers. Managers of high-performing products that are expected to satisfy consumer’s goals can increase customer satisfaction by increasing goal evaluability. For instance, their advertisements should emphasize specific product features or create standards to allow customers to evaluate product benefits. In contrast, managers of poorly-performing products should decrease evaluability by emphasizing product benefits and avoiding comparison standards.

References