Different Questions, Different Plans? the Impact of Planning Interventions on Consumer Goal Pursuit

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Research demonstrates plans facilitate goals but are also deleterious. When are plans helpful/harmful? Two issues help answer this question. First, seemingly interchangeable interventions prompt planners to focus on steps versus obstacles. Second, these thought differences impact the experience of goal pursuit by influencing evaluation of actions, regret, and outcome expectancies.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1020182/volumes/v43/NA-43

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Different Questions, Different Plans?
The Impact of Planning Interventions on Consumer Goal Pursuit

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research has demonstrated that implementation intentions – plans connecting situations and pre-deliberated actions – facilitate goal achievement (Gollwitzer 1999; Gollwitzer and Sheeran 2006). These interventions seem useful for consumption goals like saving, eating well, and exercising. However, recent work also shows that plans can be ineffective or harmful (e.g. Bayuk, Janiszewski, and Leboeuf 2010; Dalton and Spiller 2012; Townsend and Liu 2012). Thus, while plans represent a seemingly promising tool for consumers and marketers, further research is needed to uncover factors leading them to work successfully versus unsuccessfully.

In this paper, we examine two such factors. First, many interventions have been called “implementation intentions,” but little work has examined how they may differ. If consumers form plans in varied ways, the means they consider for reaching the goal may also differ. Second, while extensive research has examined whether planning facilitates goal achievement, a better understanding of how plans change the cognitive and affective experience of goal pursuit could help refine theory and resolve questions about their effectiveness. We present three studies that shed additional light on why plans may sometimes help or hurt goal achievement.

In Study 1, we demonstrated that two prompts often used interchangeably – “when-where-how” (WWH) plans and “if-then” (IT) plans – shift focus to different means: either steps toward the goal or ways to cope with obstacles. Without guidance, people tend to neglect obstacles (Buehler, Griffin, and Ross 1994). When-where-how plans, which ask participants to first consider an action and then elaborate on a context to execute it (e.g., “WHAT will I do: Buy David socks, WHEN will I do it: Thursday evening,” etc.), are likely to alter this natural tendency little. However, if-then plans, which prompt planners to first generate a situation to act and then consider an associated behavior (e.g., “IF the mall is busy, THEN I’ll shop online”), should stimulate more reactive thought. As goal-related obstacles frequently require reaction, we predicted that IT prompts would lead to more focus on coping plans.

In a study about holiday shopping, participants planned to finish their gift-buying with prompts structured in a WWH or IT format, with no guidance in the control condition, or with a reversed if-then format to examine the effect of thought order. As predicted, control participants considered obstacles infrequently, and WWH plans exacerbated this tendency slightly. In contrast, IT plans greatly increased the likelihood of considering obstacles, compared to control. Decreasing the reactive nature of the plan by considering the goal-consistent situation prior to the action in the if-then reversed condition reduced thoughts about obstacles, compared to the if-then condition. Thus, these results demonstrate that WWH plans maintain the natural proclivity to concentrate on steps, while the reactive nature of if-then plans shifts attention to obstacle-coping.

Studies 2 and 3 examined the effect of step and coping plans at a process level. We contrasted these interventions against a naturalistic control condition where participants were not directed to plan. Importantly, the total X-Y effect was not significant. Instead, we observed an indirect-only effect (Zhao, Lynch Jr., and Chen 2010; see also Hayes 2009, 2013) through the monitoring of past actions, regret, outcome expectancy, and future intentions/actions. This indirect effect is important because, as recent literature shows, plans can sometimes have unintended or ineffective results. Thus, unpacking intermediary links underlying how plans change the experience of goal pursuit is a step toward designing more consistent and effective interventions.

We theorized that when individuals ask themselves, “Have I done what I intended to do?” IT planners should adopt a particularly narrow answer. Planning decreases the likelihood of detecting unplanned goal-consistent situations (e.g., Parks-Stamm, Gollwitzer, and Oettingen 2007; Masica and Baumeister 2012). Further, plans may also impact judgments about action performance by influencing regulatory focus orientation (Freitas, Liberman, and Higgins 2002), leading obstacle-focused IT planners to adopt a prevention mindset and step-focused WWH and control participants to think in a promotion-focused manner. A prevention focus narrows memory and judgments (Brockner et al. 2002; Zhu and Meyers-Levy 2007; Bayuk et al. 2010); this narrow focus may leave IT planners “locked in” to planned actions and less likely to consider alternative means, leaving them more susceptible to regret and changing their expectations and actions for future goal pursuit.

Studies 2 and 3 demonstrated this indirect process using a serial mediation model (Hayes 2013) in two field contexts – a week-long study-time goal setting and a six-week exercise-time program. Compared to control, IT planners – who considered how to cope with obstacles – reported reduced performance at executing goal-related actions. This evaluation was associated with regret and changed intentions, expectations, and actions for future goal pursuit. In Study 2, where participants had much experience with the goal (studying), regret led to increased intentions for future pursuit of similar goals, but this was tempered by reduced intentions stemming from decreased outcome expectancies. Participants who formed WWH plans did not differ from control, nor did if-then planners considering inactions (e.g. “If I am tired, I won’t sleep”), which should facilitate “moving on” from poor performance more readily (e.g. Savitsky, Medvec & Gilovich 1997). Similarly, in the exercise context examined in Study 3, IT planners reported poorer performance at acting in service of the goal, prompting regret, which decreased future outcome expectancies and led to reduced performance over time. Further, experience with the goal moderated the link between regret and outcome expectancies – regret was associated with reduced outcome expectancies in novices but not for those with more experience. WWH planners – who considered steps – did not differ from control, again reflecting a close approximation to the natural tendency to neglect obstacles.

In sum, we revealed that planning using IT prompts focused participants on obstacle-coping while WWH plans mirrored what people do instinctively – considering steps. Further, IT planners who thought about actions to cope with obstacles reported reduced evaluations of action performance which influenced regret and future expectations/actions compared to control, while WWH planners did not differ from those not guided to plan. We hope these findings spur new theorizing and investigations for the benefits and drawbacks of planning for consumers.
REFERENCES


