

FORETHOUGHT MARKETING

Tap Consumers' Desire for "Shoulds"

by Katherine L. Milkman

Reprint [F0807E](#)

Tap Consumers' Desire for "Shoulds"

by Katherine L. Milkman

More and more companies today are engaged in the business of serving our "should" selves—think of gyms, natural-food stores, and other providers of the healthful, nutritious, educational, and uplifting products and services we know we should consume. But there's much these companies don't know about how best to satisfy people's high-minded desires. New research leads me to believe that one key to success may be to sell a virtuous offering as part of a bundle. In fact, I believe that many consumers would jump at the opportunity to make their future receipt of pleasurable products contingent upon their future consumption of healthful or educational products.

Research in a variety of contexts has shown that people are more likely to favor pleasurable *want* options if the consequences are immediate, and good-for-you *should* options if the consequences will occur in the future. For example, in a study of online DVD rentals, I found that when customers order a highbrow (should) film before a lowbrow (want) one—a decision made days before consumption—they return (and presumably watch) the films out of order far more often than when they rent the lowbrow film first.

As these results indicate, even if people plan to behave virtuously tomorrow, want often trumps should when tomorrow arrives. Self-aware individuals sense this about themselves. Accordingly, these "sophisticates," as they are known to researchers, have long shown a willingness to buy "commitment devices," which help them commit in the present to choosing should rather than want in the future. (Classic examples of commitment devices include piggy banks and diet treatment centers.)

The bundled offerings I have in mind would build on these two ideas: that people favor want things today and should things tomor-

row, and that sophisticates are willing to pay *now* to increase the incentives for their *future* selves to engage in should behaviors. To illustrate this concept, imagine a movie rental plan that included a free tub of popcorn with each rental of a documentary. This plan might appeal to sophisticates because it would give them an incentive to rent the highbrow films they value. And it might be more attractive than, say, a plan that offered discounts on future documentary rentals for an up-front fee, because psychological research has shown that willpower is a limited resource. Thus receiving popcorn (rather than avoiding its temptation) might make it easier for customers to exercise willpower and rent a highbrow movie.

Similarly, imagine a health club that allowed members to receive some of their magazine subscriptions at its front desk. A customer could thereby ensure that in order to enjoy the latest issue of *Vanity Fair*, she would have to head for the gym. Reading *Vanity Fair* might also make it easier to pass the time during her workout, strengthening her incentive to choose the gym over a less healthful activity. Such a club might attract new, sophisticated members by spurring them to attend often and thus increase the value of their membership. My current research is exploring the demand for bundled commitment devices like these and looking at how well they help consumers to expand the number of should behaviors they engage in.

Katherine L. Milkman (kmilkman@hbs.edu) is a PhD candidate at Harvard Business School in Boston and in the Harvard University Computer Science Department.

Reprint [F0807E](#)

To order, see the next page
or call 800-988-0886 or 617-783-7500
or go to www.hbr.org

Further Reading

The *Harvard Business Review* Paperback Series

Here are the landmark ideas—both contemporary and classic—that have established *Harvard Business Review* as required reading for businesspeople around the globe. Each paperback includes eight of the leading articles on a particular business topic. The series includes over thirty titles, including the following best-sellers:

[Harvard Business Review on Brand Management](#)

Product no. 1445

[Harvard Business Review on Change](#)

Product no. 8842

[Harvard Business Review on Leadership](#)

Product no. 8834

[Harvard Business Review on Managing People](#)

Product no. 9075

[Harvard Business Review on Measuring Corporate Performance](#)

Product no. 8826

For a complete list of the *Harvard Business Review* paperback series, go to www.hbr.org.

Harvard Business Review

To Order

For *Harvard Business Review* reprints and subscriptions, call 800-988-0886 or 617-783-7500. Go to www.hbr.org

For customized and quantity orders of *Harvard Business Review* article reprints, call 617-783-7626, or e-mail customizations@hbsp.harvard.edu