

Chapter 6: The Fresh Start Effect: Motivational Boosts Beyond New Year's Resolutions

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Over his 10 years building and molding Google's HR department (known in-house as People Operations), Lazlo Bock learned to pay attention to patterns. Google leans on innovation, and one innovative practice they're committed to is using behavioral science to understand how employees tick. When Bock left the company to start his own, he brought that mindset with him and soon noticed that his new company, Humu, was wasting a lot of money on training programs. Most of the time, employees weren't getting much out of the formal training they were offered at great expense. But there were three exceptions to this rule: new hires, people who were promoted to their first managerial role, and people who were just entering the C-suite.

What made those three groups of people particularly willing to pay attention to training and apply what they'd learned to their careers? They were motivated by what we call a fresh start.

The degree of change it's possible for most people to make to their lives, productivity, health and happiness is really, quite astounding. Within one year, most people have the capability to develop eating and exercise habits that can give them a noticeably more athletic appearance and significantly longer life expectancy. But during a typical year, most people's eating and exercise routines remain the same or get worse. Also within a year, with the unprecedented access to knowledge and technology available today, it's possible to master a new language, learn how to code, or put in enough effort at work to transform your career.

Yet, most of us don't accomplish these kinds of transformations. Behavioral science can help explain why. Most of our actions are habit or impulse driven, not directly goal driven.

We're present-focused, motivated more by our immediate temptations and distractions than our goals.

And yet, there are some moments when we are a little more willing and able to rise to our goals. In those moments, we feel the need to step up, do better, and become our ideal self.

Sometimes, those moments involve new roles and the new responsibilities that come with them. The new responsibilities of parenthood or a career-defining promotion can make us step up. We know we must grow into these roles, and often we do. These are the moments Bock noticed in Humu's training programs. Life events—a new job or new responsibilities at work—motivated people to take opportunities for growth more seriously.

But these moments are relatively rare. More common are moments without a major new role or new set of responsibilities, but that may still feel special because they mark a new beginning on your calendar. Psychologists call these “temporal landmarks”;¹ these are moments that stand out from the normal passage of time and create natural feelings of “before” and “after.” In other words, these moments tend to partition the passage of time and elicit feelings of a fresh start.

In this chapter, we will explain how temporal landmarks motivate action, and how the power of a fresh start can be harnessed to encourage change in others.

Temporal Landmarks Can Increase Goal Pursuit

When we ask people to come up with an example of a temporal landmark, most name the same one: New Year's Day. Each year on January first, millions of people make resolutions to change something about their lives. It's without a doubt one of the most famous and powerful fresh start moments in our culture. Many people initiate significant personal changes at New

Year's (e.g., starting new careers, quitting smoking, and starting weight loss programs). Gym sign ups and goal-setting – as well as online searches for virtuous terms like “diet” - spike during this time.

But it's not just at New Year's when people are motivated to change by a fresh start. Such moments are more common than you may think. There are dozens of potentially transformative days each year. Research about the “mental accounting” of time shows that people think of time as having natural breaking points.² Instead of time existing as a continuum in our minds, the timelines in our heads break at certain turning points. New Year's Day is an obvious one, but our research has shown that there are other days on the calendar that also make people feel like their previous mistakes are in the past and they can start again.

Our studies have shown that fresh starts arise not just at the New Year, but also on birthdays, at the beginning of school semesters, on the first day of the month, and even on the first day of the week.³ These are times when people are particularly motivated to take actions toward their goals because they feel like they have a new beginning and a clean slate. We coined the term “the fresh start effect” to describe this phenomenon.

In one set of studies we conducted, we looked at archived Google search data and found that searches for the term “diet” spiked not only at New Year's, but also on Mondays, the first day of the month, and the first workday after a Federal holiday (particularly after holidays that people rate as more like a fresh start).⁴ We also looked at gym attendance. In a large dataset from a university gym, we saw a big spike in gym attendance after temporal landmarks. There wasn't a large New Year's spike because students weren't usually on campus until the semester started in mid-to-late January. But there were increases in attendance at the beginning of the semester

and at the start of the week, month, after school breaks, and after people's birthdays (with the notable exception of 21st birthdays for reasons that are probably quite obvious).

Finally, we analyzed data from a goal-setting company called StickK [www.stickk.com]. StickK sells people "goal contracts" as a way to motivate goal pursuit. For example, imagine that someone has a goal of saving \$10,000, or perhaps of completing the first draft of a manuscript by a certain date. To motivate them self, this person could sign up for a goal contract on stickK and make a commitment that if they do not accomplish their goal by the deadline, they will owe a sum of money (say \$1,000) to a friend or a charity or even an anti-charity (a nonprofit whose mission they dislike). The amount someone chooses to precommit can be anything (even \$0), but the key idea is that the contract commits them to act or face a penalty.

We found evidence of the fresh start effect in stickK data. People were more likely to create goal contracts at the beginning of the year, the beginning of the month, the beginning of the week, after national holidays that feel like a fresh start, and after their birthdays.

Subsequent research from other scholars has provided more evidence that the first day of the week and the first day of the month can have motivational pull. In one study, prospective dieters were more likely to start a new diet on the first day of the week and the first day of the month.⁵ In another, whether a calendar showed Sunday or Monday as the first day of the week determined the day on which people felt more motivated to pursue a goal (whichever was labeled the start of the week was more motivating).⁶

There is power in knowing when people will feel more motivated to begin a challenge. Marketing, sales, corporate, or clinical programs could potentially all be built to leverage this natural fluctuation in motivation.

Many companies, organizations, and programs may already be harnessing the power of the New Year, with performance reviews, goal setting, sales, and promotions happening in January. But our research shows that there are many more potentially transformative days these groups may be missing. For example, in all the data we analyzed, we saw that Mondays are a powerful fresh start, and there are 52 Mondays each year. Imagine leveraging the power of even a few of those Mondays.

Given our research suggesting that fresh starts can motivate change, we were curious to explore how managers, marketers, salespeople, and others could take advantage of them. Our investigations found that messages matter.

Messages Might Boost the Fresh Start Experience

In one experiment, we randomly assigned online survey respondents to either list a few reasons why New Year's felt ordinary to them (control condition) or to list a few reasons why New Year's felt meaningful to them (fresh start condition).⁷ We then gave them an opportunity to look through some websites that could help them achieve their personal goals. These included a goal commitment website (StickK.com), four popular goal-tracking websites, and a *New York Times* website featuring an article how people can increase their chances of achieving their goals. All of the participants in our study were interested in pursuing a goal, but those in the fresh start condition looked at three times as many goal-related websites and spent 46 percent more time reading our descriptions of those websites than those in the control condition.

Even though New Year's Day is already one of the most important fresh start moments, it seems that reminding people that the New Year is a special time can make them feel more open to change.

We attempted to replicate a version of this effect in a large field experiment with the health insurer, Humana.⁸ Medication adherence is one of the leading problems in healthcare. A large percentage of people on medication don't take their prescriptions as often as they should, which leads to unnecessary hospitalizations, poor health, and even death. To help Humana address this problem, we mailed more than 13,000 customers reminders that they should be regularly taking their medication. Several thousand customers were randomly assigned to get reminders near New Year's, and half of those people got a fresh start message suggesting that the new year was an opportunity to make a fresh start and begin taking medications regularly. Unfortunately, medication adherence was no higher among people who got the reminder at New Year's than among those who got the reminder on a "random" day; and the additional fresh start framing didn't help at all.

Null results like this are common in research. Things that might work in one setting don't always work in another. While we don't have the evidence to say what exactly went wrong, we have a number of ideas. Perhaps the mailed reminders did not attract as much attention as we had hoped. Or, perhaps medication adherence wasn't a strong enough goal to be triggered at temporal landmarks. Or, perhaps our mailing and messages, largely designed by researchers, not professional marketers, just were not compelling enough. Maybe momentum was lost because people didn't get the New Year's messages until the third week of January. Or maybe it didn't work because, unlike in our previous research, we did not encourage people to reflect on the new year as a special time and have them come to the realization that the new year was an opportunity for change. More research on this kind of messaging is needed.

Messages Might Boost Fresh Start Anticipation

Another approach to fresh start messaging uses the fact that people seem to recognize the opportunity for change inherent in temporal landmarks. Messages that harness the anticipation of an upcoming temporal landmark to get people to opt into change programs that will begin on a fresh start date can be valuable.

We first showed that people are willing to commit to changing their behavior on a future fresh start date in two laboratory studies.⁹ In the first study, we surveyed people who had expressed a prior interest in getting a “goal reminder” via email. All respondents were given a list of dates on which they could get the reminder, but we randomly assigned people to either get lists that labeled March 20th as “The Third Thursday of March” (ordinary condition) or as “The First Day of Spring” (fresh start condition). When March 20 was labeled as a fresh start date, more than three times as many people chose it as the date when they’d receive a reminder to start pursuing a personal goal.

Our second study had a similar design. This time we offered to send college students at the University of Pennsylvania (Penn) email reminders to pursue their goals over the summer. When May 14th (not otherwise a temporal landmark) was labeled as “The First Day of Summer Break” people were more than three times as likely to choose it as the date for their reminder email than when it was labeled as “Penn’s Administrative Day”.

These results suggest that people find future temporal landmarks auspicious for kick-starting goal pursuit. More generally, making the landmark nature of an upcoming fresh start date salient has an effect. This suggests that a practitioner need not wait for the New Year, or a new month to harness the fresh start effect. It can be harnessed in anticipation.

A version of this theory was supported by another field experiment conducted by two of us (Dai and Milkman) with other collaborators.¹⁰ Several thousand university employees

received letters inviting them to start contributing to a savings plan either now or at a future date. People saved 20-30 percent more money in the eight months following our mailings when they were invited to start saving after a fresh start date (e.g., their next birthday, the start of spring) than when they were invited to start saving at the same time but with no explicit reference to a fresh start date.

Generally, it's good to seek commitments from people "now," but in cases when "now" is not viable, or when an alternative must be given, or when "now" has been rejected, it appears that people may be more willing to commit to start "good behavior" on future dates that are framed as temporal landmarks.

Takeaways

Habits, routines, impulses, and a general tendency to focus more on getting through the present moment than being successful in the future are among the many psychological forces that make it hard for people to achieve their goals.

The fresh start effect characterizes one set of moments when people exhibit a natural uptick in motivation to pursue their goals¹¹. Salespeople, marketers, managers, and caregivers can use this insight to help their audiences achieve more. And individuals can use it to achieve their own goals, too. Our prescriptive advice to practitioners is twofold. First, identify the most relevant fresh start opportunities. Second, tinker with different ways to capitalize on the added motivation that these fresh starts bring.

1) Identify the Most Relevant Fresh Start Opportunities

What goals does your audience have? Do they want to improve their health? Do they want to read more? Do they want to innovate more (but find it hard to start new things)? Whether your audience includes consumers, employees, a single patient, or a family member, if you feel that whatever you're offering is aligned with one of their goals, you may be able to use the fresh start effect to nudge them towards it.

The company Laszlo Bock co-founded, called Humu, works with organizations to nudge their employees towards greater job satisfaction and productivity, which (in theory) makes it easier for Humu's client companies to improve. Bock is well-acquainted with our work and has told us that some of the nudges Humu delivers take advantage of the fresh start effect. For example, Humu has sent out emails around the New Year encouraging people to reply with a goal or intention they want to act on in the coming months. Humu sent those replies back a few weeks later to either help employees track their progress or give them another boost of motivation to get started.

We also know of one healthcare service provider that sees large sign-up spikes each New Year's. But the company didn't strategically use the full strength of the pattern until our work prompted them to look deeper. New Year's is undoubtedly one of the most important temporal landmarks associated with the fresh start effect. Most businesses and employers should be able to find an opportunity here.

Practitioners can also take advantage of industry or organizational restructuring to capitalize on the fresh start effect. Whenever a client company reorganizes something about the way people work, Humu sends nudges prompting its client's employees to re-evaluate their habits and see if there are any improvements they want to make. This can also work on a more

personal level. Say someone moves into a new office or shifts to a new desk—that might be an ideal time to suggest a change.

Birthdays are also notable fresh start opportunities, and we might expect decade birthdays to be even stronger than others. The problem with birthdays as fresh start moments is that they're different for everyone, so they can be harder to leverage (though not impossible). Facebook, for example, started a “birthday fundraisers” program in 2017. Readers may have seen the prompts: Now, instead of just writing “Happy Birthday!” on a friend’s Facebook wall, you can donate a few dollars to the cause of their choice. Several days before someone’s birthday, Facebook sends a message saying “It’s almost your birthday! Create a fundraiser to support a cause you care about.” These messages wisely harness people’s motivation to become a kinder, more generous version of them self after a birthday, encouraging them to set up a fundraiser.

As more and more commerce takes place online, and people can shop anytime they're motivated, there is also more opportunity to look for things like Monday Fresh Start effects. Our research suggests that anyone hoping to spur change in others can *create* fresh start moments if they frame a day as special in the right way. Most people may not otherwise take note of the first day of spring, but if your building posts signs saying that a building-wide recycling program will start on the first day of spring, you might pay closer attention.

2) Taking Advantage of Fresh Starts With Timing and Message Content

There are many ways to capitalize on temporal landmarks. Here are a few:

1. Make it especially easy for people to sign up for new, smart defaults on fresh start dates.

For example, a dieting program can make it easy for people to commit to future healthy

eating with a program to “build a healthy cart” on Mondays. Similarly, a savings program can make it easy for people to commit to increased saving after an upcoming birthday.

2. Pay attention to the timing of annual appointments. Annual medical checkups are often scheduled around birthdays. This is good timing because if the appointment happens very near to a birthday, the patient may be particularly receptive to health advice and even to committing to wellness programs. Relatedly, gyms are always ready for a New Year’s blitz, but are health programs? With the rise of telemedicine, there may be novel wellness appointments that would be of particular interest to people at New Year’s.
3. Consider giving birthday gifts to boost motivation: Birthday gifts are meant to celebrate and generally indulge the recipient. But there may be opportunities to give separate or additional gifts that take advantage of post-birthday motivation. Some companies and schools celebrate birthdays, some salespeople give clients birthday gifts. Gifts that line up with goal pursuit may be well received, especially in professional contexts, once the dust of the birthday celebration settles (e.g., books, subscriptions, workshop enrollment, art or other mementos that symbolize personal or professional ambition, etc.).
4. Send check-in notes: Salespeople, marketers, employers, clinicians, and teachers all have reasons to check in with their audiences through direct messages by email or over LinkedIn, Facebook, etc. Rather than sending a simple “Happy Birthday” or “Happy New Year” or “Happy Monday” note, people can use temporal landmarks as opportunities to send goal-aligned messages. For example, you might write, “I saw your birthday pop up

in my LinkedIn feed, and I thought of you when I saw this article on innovation—something we've talked about many times.” That message can be personalized with a quote from the article if you have the time. A birthday wish that connects to a client's vision of their ideal entrepreneurial self may be well-received.

5. Ask for commitment on a future fresh start date: People recognize temporal landmarks as fresh start opportunities. Anticipating that, salespeople and other motivators might seek to take answers of “not now” as an opportunity to set up action on a fresh start moment in the future. Rather than saying, “okay, I'll reach out again in a few months,” try saying something like, “okay, I'll try you again on Monday, April 2, the first workday of the new quarter. And in the hope that you're seriously considering this offer, I'll send a few notes in the meantime that will make it easier for us to hit the ground running.”
6. Optimally time training programs: People may be most interested in signing up for training programs at fresh start moments. If you're planning a new training, think carefully about timing.
7. Do you want to rock the boat? In some situations, managers may not want to encourage or highlight fresh starts. For employees with recent strong performance, the introduction of a fresh start may hamper their motivation by reducing their confidence in achieving similarly strong records in a new time period.¹² And, anticipation of a fresh start may harm employees' continued goal motivation by tempting them to wait to work towards their goals after an upcoming fresh start.¹³

Before we close, we would like to re-emphasize the point that others in this book have repeatedly made. Given that the success of an intervention seeking to capitalize on the fresh start effect depends on the context, the recipient, and the implementation details, what has worked elsewhere might not have as strong an effect in a different setting. Therefore, we join the chorus of voices that recommends testing and iterating before an intervention is launched.

The fresh start effect is not a silver bullet solution to all behavioral challenges. In the grand scheme of things, people often don't change their behavior either because it's complicated to do so, or because they are simply not motivated. While many "nudge like" interventions focus on the first of these obstacles to change, the fresh start effect capitalizes on systematic temporal fluctuations in goal motivation. It's important to strike when the proverbial iron is hot. With a little tinkering and experimentation, fresh starts can be turned into an effective lever to propel positive change.

NOTES

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