

Fear is stronger than hope for worriers trying to get fit, says research

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Fear of looking unattractive can be a stronger motivation for keeping people going to the gym than the hope of looking good, a study says.

Researchers at the University of Bath, UK, interviewed 281 male and female undergraduates and got half to imagine a physically unattractive version of themselves they feared they might turn into.

They then asked this group to either imagine a scenario in which they dramatically failed to keep to a fitness programme or one in which they dramatically succeeded.

The researchers found that those who had been asked to think about a dramatic failure to keep to the programme were motivated to keep on training because they were fearful of not looking good.

Those who were asked to imagine they were succeeding in getting fit became less motivated to continue at the gym because they no longer had this fear of not looking good.

The findings reveal why marketing works or doesn't work for some products like gyms to get a better body or cosmetics to reduce wrinkles. The study shows that fear of failure motivates people more than gaining some success, which demotivates them. This fear of failure is particularly strong when people feel they can already see signs of the feared self they are striving to avoid.

“How consumers see themselves in the future has a strong effect on how motivated they are to keep using a product or service,” said Professor Brett Martin, of the University of Bath’s School of Management, who carried out the study with Dr Rana Sobh of Qatar University.

“When people dwell on a negative future, fear motivates them, yet as they move away from their feared state – a flabby body, or a wrinkled skin – they become less motivated.

“At that point, marketers should take advantage of another insight of our study - that of motivating people with a more positive outlook.”

Professor Martin found that among those who were asked to think positively about their bodies – the other half of the 281 surveyed - being successful in keeping to the fitness programme made them even keener to keep going to the gym. Failing to keep to the programme demotivated them.

“Once someone moves away from their “feared self” – in this case an unattractive body - because they are successful in the gym, they lose motivation, so highlighting thoughts of being unattractive is unlikely to work,” said Professor Martin, part of the School’s Marketing Group.

“But at that point, as they become more positive in their outlook, good marketing will build on this and suggest they can do even better. That type of motivation works for those with a positive outlook.

“However marketers should also be aware that those who are thinking positively will become discouraged if they don’t see success.”

Professor Martin and Dr Sobh have devised performance measures to ensure marketers achieve the optimal balance in their communications with consumers and keep them motivated.

The 281 undergraduates were surveyed in Bath and 62 per cent were gym users.

Professor Martin and Dr Sobh found that 85 per cent of those who wanted to avoid a feared unattractive self responded to a scenario where they were failing in the gym by wanting to press on, compared with 65 per cent who were succeeding in the gym who were motivated to continue.

They found that 91 per cent of those thinking positively about their bodies responded to a scenario where they were succeeding in the gym by wanting to press on, compared with just 57 per cent of people who were failing in the gym and wanted to go on.

Source: University of Bath

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