

Curiosity has the power to change behavior for the better

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Curiosity could be an effective tool to entice people into making smarter and sometimes healthier decisions, according to research presented at the annual convention of the American Psychological Association.

"Our research shows that piquing [people's](#) curiosity can influence their choices by steering them away from tempting desires, like unhealthy foods or taking the elevator, and toward less tempting, but healthier options, such as buying more [fresh produce](#) or taking the stairs," said Evan Polman, PhD, of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, an author of the study.

Polman and his colleagues conducted a series of four experiments designed to test how raising people's curiosity might affect their choices. In each case, arousing curiosity resulted in a noticeable behavior change.

In the first experiment, the researchers approached 200 people in a university library and gave them a choice between two fortune cookies, one plain and one dipped in chocolate and covered in sprinkles. Half the participants were given no additional information and half were told that the plain cookie contained a fortune that would tell them something personal the researchers already knew about them. Participants whose curiosity was piqued (i.e., were told the plain cookie contained a fortune specifically about them) overwhelmingly chose the plain cookie by 71 percent. In contrast, when participants were told nothing, 80 percent chose the chocolate-dipped cookie.

"By telling people if they choose the ordinary cookie they'll learn something about themselves via the fortune inside of it, it piqued their curiosity, and therefore they were more likely to pick the plain cookie over the more tempting chocolate-dipped option," said Polman.

In another experiment, Polman and his colleagues increased the proportion of participants who chose to view what was described as a high-brow, intellectual video clip by promising to reveal the secret behind a magic trick.

While the results of the experiments in the library and the lab were interesting, the results of the field studies were particularly compelling, according to Polman. In the first, researchers were able to increase the use of the stairs in a university building nearly 10 percent by posting trivia questions near the elevators and promising the answers in the stairwell. In another, they increased the purchase of fresh produce in grocery stores by 10 percent by placing placards with a joke on them and printing the punchline on bag closures.

The strategies employed in these experiments and field studies are similar to those used by websites that attempt to increase traffic with sensationalized headlines containing phrases like, "You won't believe what happened next," or, "You'll be shocked when you see this," said Polman. Called clickbait, these headlines typically aim to exploit a "curiosity gap" by providing just enough information to make a reader curious, but not enough to satisfy that curiosity without engaging in a desired behavior (i.e., clicking on a link).

While Polman and his colleagues were not surprised that curiosity could change behavior, they were surprised at the overall strength of the effect. "Evidently, people really have a need for closure when something has piqued their curiosity. They want the information that fills the curiosity gap, and they will go to great lengths to get it."

Polman believes curiosity can be used to entice people to engage in healthier behaviors, such as exercising more or eating healthier foods.

"Our results suggest that using interventions based on curiosity gaps has the potential to increase participation in desired behaviors for which people often lack motivation," said Polman. "It also provides new evidence that [curiosity](#)-based interventions come at an incredibly small cost and could help steer people toward a variety of positive actions."

More information: Session 1149: "Using Curiosity to Increase the Choice of Should Options," Paper Session, Thursday, Aug. 4, 11 - 11:50 a.m. MDT, Room 706, Level 2, Meeting Room Level, Colorado Convention Center, 700 14th Street, Denver.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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