

Study: Action-oriented goals produce higher probability of purchases under tight deadlines

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If you want sell a product or service quickly, it helps to try a busy consumer, says new research co-written by U. of I. psychology professor Dolores Albarracín. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

If you want something done, ask a busy person—or so the saying goes. According to a new paper co-written by a University of Illinois scholar who studies attitudes and persuasion psychology, if you want to sell something quickly, it helps to try a busy consumer.

People on a tight deadline have stronger intentions to enact behaviors—whether it's redeeming a coupon or following through on receiving a flu shot—immediately after moving than after sitting, says research co-written by Dolores Albarracin, a professor of psychology and marketing at Illinois and the director of the Social Action Lab.

Movement—whether it's walking or running—is associated with action-oriented concepts and goals, whereas stasis—standing or sitting, for example—is associated with inaction-oriented concepts and goals.

Across one [field experiment](#) and three lab experiments, Albarracin and co-author Duo Jiang, a [graduate student](#) at Illinois, found that prior movement was associated with a higher probability of enacting behaviors while under a tight deadline.

Consider two people—one walking, the other sitting—who each face the decision of whether to go to a pharmacy for a flu shot.

"What we found is that walking involves activating action representations that in turn promote other actions outside of the context of walking," Albarracin said. "Likewise, sitting involves activating inaction representations that may promote inaction outside of the context of sitting. These general goals of action and inaction are likely to be broad enough to guide decisions about the flu shot: The person who's in motion will get the flu shot, and the person who's inactive won't."

The reason for this is that when you're in a hurry and you're under a close deadline, "both being in a hurry and having the deadline push in the

same direction of completing the transaction as quickly as possible," Albarracin said.

"You're thinking, 'I can make this deadline,' and you can make it when you have thoughts about being active and energetic. Likewise, sitting involves rest and relaxation, which promotes more general inactivity and transfers to any behavior relevant in the moment."

The concepts and goals, whether they're action- or inaction-focused, can transfer to any task at hand, Albarracin said.

"If the task is a purchase, people are more willing to complete the purchase," she said. "But the goals elicited by movement affect decisions that need to be made immediately. So someone walking around a park is more likely to complete a deadline-driven purchase than someone sitting on a park bench contemplating life. But walking or sitting would not affect decisions about future purchases."

The research has implications for marketing and advertising, said Albarracin, also a professor of business administration with the Gies College of Business. "If there's a deadline to buy a product or service and there's someone who's more action-oriented versus someone who's more static, you want to give the action people a tight deadline, because they'll respond really quickly, whereas the more sedentary people will just say, 'Eh, whatever,'" she said.

These findings also might extend to the types of [products](#) you're trying to sell, Albarracin said.

"If you're trying to sell a product with a very short shelf life, like food or coffee, you can use movement to your advantage," she said. "You give people a really tight window to purchase the product, and the more action-oriented people—who also are perhaps users of mobile

technology—are going to snap it up. If you're selling something like athletic wear, for example, a close deadline would work better. But if you have a product that has a longer shelf life, like a car or a computer, whether your audience moves or uses mobile technology for consumer decisions may not matter."

More information: Duo Jiang et al. Acting by a deadline: The interplay between deadline distance and movement induced goals, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jesp.2019.103852](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2019.103852)

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