Incentives

To Motivate People over the Long Term, Don’t Offer Immediate Rewards

Innumerable products and services aim to help consumers meet long-term goals by providing small rewards as they progress. For example, fitness apps often award points or badges for completing workouts, as do some language-learning apps when people master successive lessons. A new study finds that such programs could enhance their effectiveness by holding off on rewards until users have completed a few goal-related activities rather than granting them right off the bat.

In their first experiment, the researchers looked at which incentive structure would work best to get people to floss for 12 straight days: paying a small amount for each daily flossing beginning on day one, or paying a slightly larger amount beginning on day four (the total possible earnings were the same). Participants whose payments began on day four flossed 15% more than those paid right away.

Seven subsequent experiments showed that the pattern held for nonmonetary rewards and across contexts including exercise, vocabulary tasks, and typing tasks. Delayed rewards got better results even when the total available reward was lower than that for participants rewarded immediately. They outperformed other incentive plans, such as lump-sum awards and simply asking people to set a goal. There was a caveat: Delaying the first reward to the point where it seemed far less attainable cut into success—but still got better results than rewarding people from the start.

Making people work to “unlock” their first award “naturally encourage[s] consumers to set an attainable goal to start earning rewards, leading them to be more motivated initially,” the
research team writes. And after that point they persist longer than people rewarded right away because with fewer rewards under their belts, they feel a greater compulsion to earn more.
