

*Using 'Why' or 'How' Claims to Promote Healthy Behaviors:
The Effects of Decision Stage on Goal Framing Effectiveness*

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Short Abstract

We examine the interactive effects of decisional status (pre- or post-decisional) and goal framing (high-level vs. low-level goal framing) on consumers’ goal pursuit and choice. We propose and subsequently find across three studies that consumers’ decisional status and the mindset associated with it have an important influence on the relative effectiveness of high-level vs. low-level goal framing, with people in the pre-decisional stage being more convinced by high-level goal framing (emphasizing why one should achieve a goal) and people in the post-decisional stage being more convinced by low-level goal framing (emphasizing how one can achieve the goal). In addition, when consumers are in the pre-decisional stage, goal involvement affects relative goal framing effectiveness, so that individuals who are more (less) involved with the focal goal are more persuaded by high-level (low-level) goal framing.

Findings from this paper have important implications for the design and promotion of products and services, and for the design of advertising campaigns that are meant to reach consumers at the different stages of their decision-making process. It seems that product- and campaign-related messages used in the media that reach consumers in their homes, where they are likely to be in a pre-decisional mindset, would be more effective if presented in terms of high-level goals, while messages in a store environment, where consumers are likely to be in an post-decisional mindset, would be more persuasive if framed in terms of low-level goals.

Keywords: goal framing, goal involvement, decision stage, deliberative and implemental mindsets

Extended Abstract

Many products in the marketplace emphasize an important goal that consumers might achieve by consuming them – e.g., nutrition, weight loss, taste. Some products, however, call attention to the reasons why one should achieve the promoted goal, while others call attention to the means how one might achieve the goal. Past research has looked at the hierarchical structure of goals, and argued that goals exist at different levels of abstraction, with high-level goals emphasizing why one should achieve the goal, and low-level goals emphasizing how one could achieve it (e.g. Carver and Scheier 1998; Huffman, Ratneshwar, and Mick 2000; Bagozzi and Dholakia 1999).

Examples of products positioned in terms of high-level versus low-level goals are abundant in the marketplace. For instance, Tropicana[®]'s orange juices all promote a goal of being healthy. However, Tropicana differentiates the level of goal abstraction across offerings by calling one variety Healthy Heart and emphasizing why one should stay healthy, while calling another variety Low Acid and stressing a means of staying healthy. Another example is Kellogg's Smart Start[®] cereal line, all of which are positioned as nutritional, but some are called Healthy Heart, emphasizing the reason for getting nutrition, while others are called Antioxidants, emphasizing the means of getting nutrition. Furthermore, many public health campaigns aim to promote a particular goal or behavior among consumers, e.g., to stop smoking, be healthy, use seatbelts, but while some campaign materials tend to emphasize the reasons why people should pursue the promoted goal or behavior, others emphasize the means how they can go about doing that. For example, a Eat well, Live well campaign by the Dietitians of Canada Association promotes healthy eating using different posters – one listing and promoting the types of foods that are part of a healthy diet using the tagline: "Healthy eating: Just one food does not make it or break it," and another promoting the reasons for keeping a healthy diet using the tagline: "Healthy Weight: Live well, eat well, feel great!"

An important question arises regarding which products consumers will be more likely to choose, and which campaigns will be more effective in promoting the advocated goal. In this paper, we examine how framing a product or a message in terms of goals at varying levels of abstraction might differentially influence consumers' goal pursuit and choice. More specifically, we look into the differential effectiveness of framing products and messages in terms of high-

level goals (e.g., be healthy) versus low-level goals (e.g., eat low-fat food) and propose that two important factors, consumers' decision stage and goal involvement, should moderate the relative effectiveness of different-level goal framing.

Across three studies in the important consumer domains of healthy eating and exercising, we examine the joint influence of mindsets, goal involvement, and different level goal framing on goal pursuit and choice. Our proposed conceptual model is presented in Figure 1 and is tested in three studies. Results from these three studies reveal that high-level goal framing, which stresses the why of behavior, and low-level goal framing, which stresses the how of behavior, are differentially effective for goal pursuit and choice, and this relative effectiveness depends on consumers' involvement with the focal goal and on their decisional status - whether consumers are still deliberating on a decision, or have already made a decision and are in the stage of implementing it.

In study 1 (n = 150, 56% female) we examine the influence of consumers' decision stage-related mindsets on their choice of products positioned in terms of high-level vs. low-level goal framing. Adopting a deliberative mindset, characterized by considering the potential pros and cons of particular courses of action should highlight the abstract, high-level value of activities, and adopting an implemental mindset, that is, planning how to carry out activities, should highlight the concrete, low-level procedures that comprise activities (Freitas et al. 2004). We expect that consumers in a deliberative mindset will find the product positioned in terms of high-level meanings related to why concerns more desirable and will be thus more likely to choose it, while consumers in an implemental mindset will exhibit preference for the product positioned in terms of low-level meanings related to how concerns.

In this study we prime deliberative and implemental mindsets (Gollwitzer 1990) and then examine consumers' choice of two *Smart Start*[®] brand cereals positioned in terms of the same focal goal – to obtain nutrition – but framed in terms of high-level goal framing (“HEALTHY HEART: For a long and healthy life”) vs. low-level goal framing (“ANTIOXIDANTS: with Antioxidants A, C, and E, and Beta Carotene”). Deliberative-mindset was primed by asking people to choose an unresolved personal problem (e.g., should I switch my academic major?) and weigh the pros and cons of pursuing or not pursuing it. They were asked to list positive and negative, short-term and long-term consequences. Implemental mind-set was primed by asking people to plan the implementation of a chosen personal project that they intend to accomplish

within the following 3 months (e.g., move from home). They were asked to list five most critical implementational steps, and commit themselves to when, where, and how to execute these steps. Results revealed a significant effect of mindset on cereal choice, with participants in a deliberative mindset (implemental mindset), being significantly more likely to choose the high-level (low-level) goal cereal ($p < .01$).

In study 2 ($n = 125$, 42% female) we again examine the relative effectiveness of high- and low-level goal framing on consumer decisions, but instead of priming a decision-stage related mindset we employ a longitudinal design and trace how the relative effectiveness of different-level goal framing changes as consumers move from the pre-decision to the post-decision stage of decision making. We employ a 2 (pre-decision stage goal framing: high vs. low) x 2 (post-decision stage goal framing: high vs. low) mixed design. Participants in this study are asked to (1) evaluate a service - a new personalized fitness program offered by their gym - and make a decision whether to enroll in the proposed program, and to (2) proceed to customizing the program by choosing exercise options to include in their weekly personalized exercise regime. We expect that consumers in the pre-decision stage, who have likely adopted a deliberative mindset, will be more persuaded by high-level goal framing, while consumers in the post-decision stage, who have likely adopted an implemental mindset will be more persuaded by low-level goal framing.

Past research has shown that involvement is a major determinant of the level at which people identify their behavior (Vallacher and Wegner 1987), with higher involvement allowing people high-level identities, while low involvement confining them to low-level identities. Therefore, in this study we also measure consumers' involvement with the focal goal and examine how it influences the effectiveness of different-level goal framing.

We find that in the pre-decision stage, consumers involved with the focal goal of being fit are more likely to enroll in the advertised personalized fitness program when the program advertisement is framed in terms of high-level goals (WHY you should exercise effectively) vs. low-level goals (HOW you can exercise effectively), while those not involved with this goal are more persuaded by low-level goal framing ($p < .05$). However, in the post-decision stage all participants (across levels of involvement), who chose to enroll in the program included significantly more exercise options in their personalized program when the options were described using low-level goal framing rather than high-level one ($p < .05$).

Results from this study provide further evidence for our hypothesis that decision stage is an important moderator of the relative effectiveness of goal framing. Further, our findings show that one's involvement with the focal goal influences the relative effectiveness of goal framing. Our findings so far suggest that when making a decision (but when a deliberative mindset is not explicitly primed), people who are more (less) involved with exercising are more likely to enroll in the high-level (low-level) goal framing condition, when there is a focus on the WHY (HOW). However, when a decision has already been made, low-level framing focusing on the HOW, which facilitates the decision's implementation, is more preferred by everyone.

Finally, in our third study ($n = 290$, 47% female) we build on these findings and examine the relative effectiveness of goal framing on intentions for effortful goal pursuit by combining the approaches used in the previous two studies. In this study we directly compare the relative goal framing effectiveness and the role of involvement when mindsets are either primed or not primed. Furthermore, we employ a different dependent variable – consumers' anticipated effortful goal pursuit. We expect that involvement will moderate the relative effectiveness of high-level vs. low-level goal framing when decision stage mindsets are not explicitly primed. We employ a 3 (mindset: deliberative, implemental or control) x 2 (goal framing: high- vs. low-level) between-subjects experimental design. We show consumers an ad run by the American Heart Association talking about the importance of losing weight to get closer to your ideal weight, which is framed in terms of high-level vs. low-level goals (i.e., emphasizing WHY one should be close to their ideal weight vs. HOW they can achieve that).

Results reveal a significant three-way interaction among goal framing, mindset, and goal involvement ($p < .05$). More specifically, in the control condition, where no mindset was primed, more involved consumers were more persuaded to pursue the goal of losing weight by high-level goal framing, while less involved consumers preferred low-level goal framing. However, the mindset priming manipulations diminished the effects of involvement. More specifically, in the deliberative (implemental) mindset condition high-level (low-level) goal framing lead to significantly more effortful anticipated goal pursuit than low-level (high-level) goal framing, across levels of involvement.

Findings from this paper have important implications for the design, presentation, and communication of consumer products, persuasive messages, and public education campaigns targeted at improving consumer decisions and behaviors. Our findings suggest that persuasive

messages and consumer campaigns should be framed differently when targeting consumers at the different stages of their decision-making process and should take into consideration consumers' level of familiarity and involvement with the advertised product or the promoted behavior.

Consumers' decisional status, i.e., how far they are from making a decision, was consistently found to affect their receptiveness to persuasive messages. Therefore, product- and campaign-related messages used in the media that reach consumers in their homes would be more effective if presented in terms of high-level goals, while messages in a store environment, where consumers are likely to be in an implementational mindset, would be more persuasive if framed in terms of low-level goals. Our findings have important implications for consumer research and marketing practice.

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Figure 1

Conceptual Model

