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Can One Simple Strategy Help Consumers Say “No” to Temptation?

When facing temptation, can a simple change of language make a difference? According to a new study in the [Journal of Consumer Research](#), consumers who respond to temptation with the words “I don’t” versus “I can’t” are more able to resist.

“Whether it’s buffalo wings at a tailgate or heaping plates of calories at the Thanksgiving day dinner table that is your downfall, help is merely a couple of words away,” write authors Vanessa M. Patrick (University of Houston) and Henrik Hagtvedt (Boston College).

In four studies the authors examined the difference between framing a refusal with the words “I don’t” vs. “I can’t.” “This insight is based on the notion that saying “I can’t” to temptation inherently signals deprivation and the loss from giving up something desirable,” the authors write. “For instance, when faced with a tempting slice of pumpkin pie, one’s spontaneous response, ‘I can’t eat pumpkin pie’ signals deprivation. Saying ‘I don’t eat pumpkin pie’ is more effective.” This approach signals to oneself (and others) a sense of determination and empowerment, which makes the refusal strategy more effective.

In one study, the authors studied 30 women for 10 days. The women were divided up into three different refusal strategies. One group was assigned the “don’t” strategy, another was given the “can’t” strategy, and a third group was given a generic “just-say-no” strategy. A daily email reminded the participants to use the strategies and to report instances when they worked and when they didn’t.

The “I don’t” strategy increased participants’ feelings of autonomy, control, and self-awareness; and it resulted in positive behavioral change. One participant reported “a renewed dedication to shedding those extra pounds...I bought a used folding bicycle this weekend that I can keep in my office and use to ride across campus.” Saying “I don’t” also led to increased longevity; participants reported using it long after the study was completed.

“What’s great about this research is that it suggests a strategy that is simple, straightforward, and easy to implement. And most importantly...it works!” the authors conclude.

Vanessa M. Patrick and Henrik Hagtvedt. “‘I Don’t’ versus ‘I Can’t’: When Empowered Refusal Motivates Goal-Directed Behavior.” *Journal of Consumer Research*: August 2012. For more information, contact Vanessa M. Patrick (vpatrik@uh.edu) or visit <http://ejcr.org/>.



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