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You Can't Always Get What You Want: Consumers Struggle With Competing Goals

Consumers change their minds often when making choices that involve conflicting goals, according to a new study in the [Journal of Consumer Research](#).

“Consumers frequently face situations where they can't get everything they want from the options available to them. As competing goals struggle for dominance, conflicts are likely and consumers tend to flip-flop en route to making a decision,” write authors Kurt A. Carlson (Georgetown University), Margaret G. Meloy (Pennsylvania State University), and Elizabeth G. Miller (University of Massachusetts Amherst).

Consumers frequently have to choose between options that satisfy very different and often competing goals. For example, you're at a restaurant and that piece of chocolate cake displayed under the counter is talking to you. But your “fit self” thinks you should grab an apple instead. Or you're out shopping and have to choose between two pairs of shoes. One pair is more stylish but the other is much more comfortable. Such situations are common and consumers who find themselves torn between two goals are the most susceptible to influence.

Goals initially ignored by consumers do not fade away, but will instead linger in the backs of our minds. During the time we ignore a particular goal, it will get stronger and eventually come to the surface. We can no longer ignore the goal and we then flip-flop between various options.

Most supermarkets force us to enter near the produce section. Even if we aren't planning to buy any fruits or vegetables, it would probably benefit us to pass through on our way to the snack aisle. Consumers watching their weight should remember that this could impact their decisions when they reach the snack aisle.

“Our study provides a glimpse into why consumers feel so much angst when they encounter choices with conflicting goals. Namely, the goal that appears to have been initially ignored finds new energy on the back burner and reasserts itself at the next earliest opportunity. In short, important goals are hard to ignore because ignoring them just makes them stronger,” the authors conclude.

Kurt A. Carlson, Margaret G. Meloy, and Elizabeth G. Miller. “Goal Reversion in Consumer Choice.” *Journal of Consumer Research*: February 2013. For more information, contact Kurt Carlson (kc377@msb.edu) or visit <http://ejcr.org/>.

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