

How to Make Change Feel Smaller: Presenting Change Within the Remaining Status Quo

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Abstract

Calls for “small” behavioral changes often ignore that such changes can still feel large for many. We propose how a change is presented relative to the status quo shapes its perceived size and willingness to adopt it. Integrating a proposed change into a remaining (unchanged) status quo shifts comparisons from a narrow before–after focus to part-to-whole assessments, making the change feel smaller. Across three studies on dietary shifts and short home workouts, presenting changes within an unchanged status quo routine reduced perceived magnitude only when the change and status quo were shown simultaneously, and more strongly when the surrounding routine contained more diagnostic information about the change. This also produced downstream effects: an ad presenting a 10-minute workout within the unchanged daily routine increased the likelihood of setting a reminder relative to an ad showing only the change. These findings reveal new ways to design more effective behavior-change messages.

Track: Consumer Behaviour