Friends with Health Benefits: A Field Experiment

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Abstract

When pursuing goals, it is common to choose between going it alone versus teaming up together, for example with a business partner, co-author, friend, or spouse. In a field experiment (N=774), we tested the benefits of rewarding individual versus tandem goal pursuit. In a standard reward condition, we experimentally offered gym members an individual cash reward each day they visited the gym over the course of four weeks. Participants in a tandem reward condition could earn the same reward, but only if they surmounted an extra hurdle – they had to visit the gym at the same time as a friend. Although this additional requirement made it more difficult for participants in the tandem reward condition to earn the same incentives, participants with this extra hurdle visited the gym about 35% more frequently than those in the standard reward condition. Survey data from our field experiment and an additional scenario experiment suggest that tandem rewards provide non-monetary incentives that change behavior, including increased accountability, social signaling, and potentially enjoyment as well. Our findings illustrate the advantages of making desired behaviors social to promote follow-through.