

Concept

Goal-gradient effect

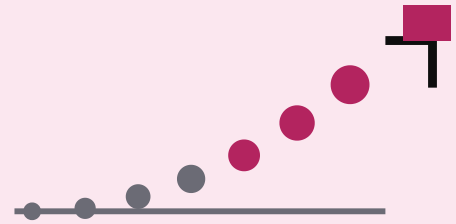
We try harder as we get closer to a goal, and it is enough for it to seem closer for us to speed up.

In Spanish

Gradiente de la meta

Origin

Hull (1932); Kivetz, Urminsky and Zheng (2006)



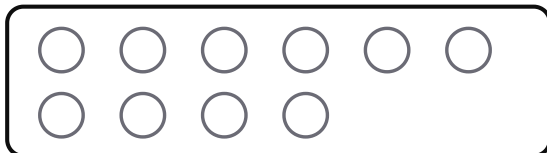
What problem it addresses

It explains why people speed up near the end of a loyalty card, a course or a progress bar.

An example

A coffee shop handed out two cards: an empty 10-stamp card and a 12-stamp card with 2 already stamped. Both required 10 coffees.

Starts at zero

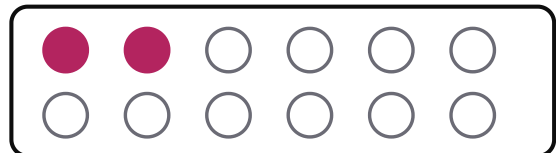


15.6 days

Average time to complete the 10 coffees

They completed it in **15.6 days on average.**

Starts with 2 stamps



12.7 days

Average time to complete the 10 coffees

They completed it in **12.7 days on average.**

The effort required was the same. Feeling they had already made progress made people finish almost three days sooner.

Why it happens

1



We measure progress as a **proportion**, not in absolute numbers.

2



The **closer the end seems**, the more the effort seems worth it.

3



That is **why we speed up** as we near the end.

Applications in design

✓ Use it like this

Show progress and start with some head start: the first step done, a bar that doesn't start at zero.

✗ Avoid

Inventing fake progress or goals that move away as you get closer.

👁 Don't fall for it

If you are speeding up to complete something, ask whether the reward is worth what you spend.

20%

What the research says

That is how much the time between purchases shrank as customers got closer to the free coffee (Kivetz, Urminsky and Zheng, 2006).

● ● ● **Solid evidence.** The idea comes from Hull (1932), who observed that rats ran faster the closer they were to the food.

Connections

Used in

■ Product design

Related to

■ Fresh start effect

■ Gamification

■ Present bias

Authors and works

1932	Clark Hull	Formulated the goal-gradient hypothesis in experiments with animals.
2006	Ran Kivetz, Oleg Urminsky and Yuhuang Zheng	Confirmed it with real customers of loyalty programs.

Sources

Original sources

- Kivetz, R., Urminsky, O., & Zheng, Y. (2006). The goal-gradient hypothesis resurrected: Purchase acceleration, illusionary goal progress, and customer retention. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 43(1), 39–58. [View source \(https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkr.43.1.39\)](https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkr.43.1.39)
- Hull, C. L. (1932). The goal-gradient hypothesis and maze learning. *Psychological Review*, 39(1), 25–43. [View source \(https://doi.org/10.1037/h0072640\)](https://doi.org/10.1037/h0072640)

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