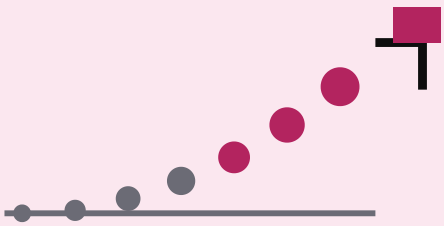
Concept

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)

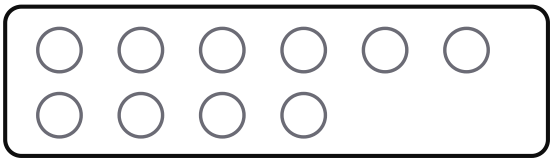
What problem it addresses

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

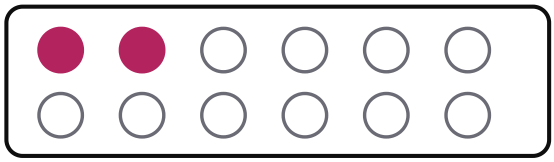




Average time to complete the 10 coffees

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

Starts with 2 stamps





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
- Zeigarnik 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)
- 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)

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