

I'll Save the World from Global Warming—Tomorrow: Using Procrastination Management to Combat Global Warming

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I need to replace both my 30 year-old energy-guzzling fridge and freezer with an energy-efficient combo. When? Ah ... tomorrow. Or maybe the day after that or the day after the day after that. People like me (which means practically everybody, including you, I'll bet) tend to procrastinate. You know how it is: I'm going to start my diet tomorrow, work out tomorrow, write that novel, and so on, tomorrow. And I'm going to stop smoking, speeding, staying up late, and watching the tube tomorrow. Am I going to help save the planet from global warming? Of course—first thing tomorrow.

We're people of good will, you and I. We sincerely *want* to do what's best for others as well as ourselves, and we're beyond rationalizing our failure to do what our hearts, our heads, and the data say we should. We know, for example, that we have an obligation to use less energy to help the environment and, for that matter, our own pocketbook. Yet we don't get around to it.

Of course, sometimes our hand is forced. If I procrastinate until my fridge dies, then I'll hustle to get a new one right away; and why not make it energy efficient while I'm at it? But that old energy-wasting appliance might be around for a long time before it gives out.

Okay, sometimes we start to feel so guilty for not doing the right thing that we actually invest the time and effort necessary to escape those

feelings of guilt. We're often more effectively motivated by feelings of guilt or fear than by the usual feel-good incentives, because we can always wait until tomorrow to feel good, whereas we're feeling guilty or fearful right now. But our feelings of guilt and fear aren't always strong enough to get us moving. So we put off what we know we should do, not because we don't care, not because we don't believe the data, but because we can always do it tomorrow; after all, one more day doesn't really matter—and, in fact, it really doesn't. The problem is that the days turn into weeks, then months, then years.

Why do we procrastinate? Because there's no significant penalty for failing to act by a particular time—no DEADLINE. Each day we fail to act isn't such a big deal; it's the accumulation of days of inaction that becomes a problem. The problem is not, as is commonly believed, as simple as saying that minor immediate consequences influence behavior more effectively than important, delayed consequences. For example, suppose I knew that if I didn't replace my fridge and freezer by next Monday (DEADLINE), five polar bears would die a year from now because they'd lost their ice flow; I'd be on it in a flash.

Even trivial consequences can be effective as long as they are attached to a deadline. For example, if I know that failing to replace my fridge with an energy-efficient model by February 20, 2011, will result in having to confess to my students what an eco-trashing loser I am, that would get

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me to the appliance store no later than February 19, guaranteed.

But sometimes those trivial consequences won't do the trick. That's when we can use penalties to make the deadline meaningful. For example, we can give a trusted friend \$100 with instructions to return it to us if and only if we replace all our incandescent bulbs with compact fluorescents by noon next Tuesday. If we don't deliver, the friend is free to do what he likes with the money.

Making yourself accountable to someone in this way is an important feature of procrastination management. I can tell myself that if I don't replace my incandescent bulbs by next Tuesday I'll donate \$100 to RePower America (an organization devoted to getting us off fossil fuels), but when the deadline passes, I may not get around to writing the check. So, in my weekly meetings with one of my grad students, the agenda includes a review of my previous week's performance. (It's called "Malott's Resource-Conservation Efforts.") If I fail to make the progress I've committed to, including purchasing an energy-saving fridge, I have to write a check for \$100 to RePower America right then and there, and give it to the student to post. And if that doesn't do the trick, then I make it \$200, or have the \$100 go to someone who's trying to take my job. Remember, gentle reader, even the best of us sometimes needs someone to hold our toes to the fire.

However, not everyone has a trusted friend willing to hold the \$100, so it would be great if someone were to set up and manage something like ProcrastinateNoMore.org. The site could help people set up their periodic goals and make a temporary procrastination-management donation of from \$1 to \$100. Of course, the client would need to send proof of meeting the obligations—a fax of the purchase receipt or a photo of the

client standing next to the environmentally cool fridge in his or her home. Each time a client failed to meet one of their environmentally friendly targets, ProcrastinateNoMore.org could deduct that amount from the client's account and send it to RePower America or another proenvironment group. If the client blew no deadlines and got the fridge or whatever, the \$100 would be returned.

Fortunately a site much like this already exists; it's called Stickk (<http://www.Stickk.com>). At Stickk, those who fail to do their self-determined green tasks are billed on their credit card for whatever amount they committed to as a penalty. And those more responsive to social penalties can provide Stickk.com with the e-mail addresses of supporters (friends and family) who will feel their shame and perhaps get on their case when they drop the green ball. For those who need even more social whipping, Stickk.com will link their performance to twitter.com and facebook.com. Stickk.com provides self-management options not only for one-shots like buying a green fridge but also for repeated activities like clients keeping their electric consumption below some maximum level. Will people really use a site like Stickk to help them meet their behavior change goals? Stickk's page reported that as of August, 2010, 52,010 people had put \$4.6 million on the line to meet 47,540 self-contracts for behavior change.

Like I said, you and I have good intentions. We want to do our part to fight global warming and restore Mother Nature's health. By understanding why we procrastinate and what we can do about it, we're halfway there. Open an account at Stickk.org or join a friend and build a site modeled on ProcrastinateNoMore. (I'll hold your coat while you do the heavy lifting.)

Don't put it off 'til tomorrow.