When it comes to success, a little bit can go a long way. A new study suggests that businesses and individuals that meet with moderate success early on are well positioned to become even more successful in the future.
The new study, by researchers at Stony Brook University, was designed to test the old adage that "success breeds success." And, as the study found, there's a reason that phrase has been recited for so long: it's absolutely true.

The study found that individuals and business owners who were successful from the start — whether in securing funding for a new business or getting early endorsements for their products — were better able to receive the support they needed to keep that success going than those who failed to hit the ground running.

Five personality traits that point to entrepreneurial success.
Credit: Entrepreneur success image via Shutterstock

The study consisted of a series of Web-based experiments that allocated "successes" to individuals in an online environment designed to mimic real-world social settings. Rather than base successes on any kind of merit system, researchers randomly chose where to bestow their virtual favors. In one scenario, the researchers provided funding for proposed business ventures; in another, they endorsed products through positive reviews.

"In each scenario, we found that early success led to more successes," said Arnout van de Rijt, an associate professor in Stony Brook University's Department of Sociology and lead author of the study.

However, van de Rijt and his team also found that increasing the initial rewards given out to an individual — providing even more funding, for example — did not proportionally increase that individual's level of later success.

"This suggests that a modest initial success may be sufficient to trigger a self-propelling cascade of success in various success-breeds-success scenarios," van de Rijt said.

Indeed, even a small head start was enough to propel some of the study's participants toward bigger and better things. Researchers found that individuals given early support were up to 31 percent more likely to receive follow-up support than those who weren't successful from the get-go.

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