

Dear Sumi,

This e-mail is to draw your attention to the fact that your husband, Dan Ariely, who is generally an upright citizen, has exceeded his spending limit on chocolate of \$50 per month by \$73.25.

With best wishes,

The self-control credit card team

Now this may sound like a pipe dream, but it isn't. Think about the potential of Smart Cards (thin, palm-size cards that carry impressive computational powers), which are beginning to fill the market. These cards offer the possibility of being customized to each individual's credit needs and helping people manage their credit wisely. Why couldn't a card, for instance, have a spending "governor" (like the governors that limit the top speed on engines) to limit monetary transactions in particular conditions? Why couldn't they have the financial equivalent of a time-release pill, so that consumers could program their cards to dispense their credit to help them behave as they hope they would?

A FEW YEARS ago I was so convinced that a "self-control" credit card was a good idea that I asked for a meeting with one of the major banks. To my delight, this venerable bank responded, and suggested that I come to its corporate headquarters in New York.

I arrived in New York a few weeks later, and after a brief delay at the reception desk, was led into a modern conference room. Peering through the plate glass from on high, I could look down on Manhattan's financial district and a stream of yellow cabs pushing through the rain. Within a few minutes