The Preference for Potential

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When people seek to impress others, they often do so by highlighting individual achievements. For instance, marketers often highlight their advertised targets’ achievements as a means of attracting new customers (e.g., “Winner of the James Beard Award!”). Despite the intuitive appeal of this strategy, we demonstrate that people often prefer potential rather than achievement when evaluating others. Indeed, compared with references to achievement (e.g., “this person has won an award for his work”), references to potential (e.g., “this person could win an award for his work”) appear to stimulate greater interest and processing, which can translate into more favorable reactions. Moreover, this effect appears to be driven by the inherent uncertainty surrounding potential (versus achievement). This tendency creates a phenomenon whereby high but uncertain potential can be preferred over equally high and more certain achievement. We document this preference for potential in laboratory and field experiments, using targets ranging from athletes to comedians to graduate school applicants. In addition, we uncover several moderators, including argument strength, tolerance for uncertainty, and future versus past focus.