

2nd Edition

'Insanely useful. Apply the lessons herein and your storytelling, marketing, and design efforts will be forever improved.'

**Rand Fishkin, Founder, Moz**



# WEBS OF INFLUENCE

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**THE PSYCHOLOGY OF  
ONLINE PERSUASION**

*The secret strategies that make us click*

**NATHALIE NAHAI**  
THE WEB PSYCHOLOGIST

# PRAISE FOR WEBS OF INFLUENCE

'At Unilever, we have worked with Nathalie for the past several years. She has enabled a step-change in our approach to communication through her amazing insight and expertise, which has allowed us to deliver stronger relationships with our consumers as well as secure stronger sales.'

**Joe Comiskey**

*eCommerce Innovation, Unilever*

'A fascinating dive into the psych-tech nexus, *Webs of Influence* combines in-depth research with practical guidance to expose the hidden techniques behind online design, marketing and sales. You may never look at the web in the same way again.'

**Geoff White**

*Channel 4 News*

'Nathalie offers unique insight and understanding to those of us grappling with the implication of an increasingly virtual existence - how we act in it and how we monetise experiences in it. This is critical reading for all of us making strides with our digital transformation.'

**Joshua Macht**

*Group Publisher and Executive Vice President,  
Harvard Business Review*

'If you liked *Nudge* and work in digital marketing, this is the book you've been looking for.'

**Stanislas Magniant**

*Online Comms Director, Western Europe, Coca-Cola*

'*Webs of Influence* is the industry's definitive guide on the art and science of digital persuasion. Once again, Nathalie Nahai synthesises the latest neuroscience research, and teaches us how to inspire audiences to connect and engage online.'

**Sarah DeRocher Moore**

*VP of Brand and Revenue Marketing, Spreadfast*

'A terrific and mind-expanding foray in the drivers of online persuasion.'

**Shane Parrish**

*founder, Farnamstreetblog.com*

'My most recommended book on persuasive design by one of my very favourite experts. Nathalie Nahai's book is a gift to our industry. It's comprehensive, accessible and jam-packed with insights.'

**Nir Eyal**

*author, Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products*

'Nathalie has a knack for making you look at the website you work on every day with a completely fresh pair of eyes. Her knowledge and enthusiasm seep through the

pages of this book, and have got the whole team “thinking like a customer”. We’ve had some great successes with ideas she suggested, but more importantly, she’s helped us to start thinking in the right way about the experience we offer our customers.’

**Susannah Ellis**

*energy website product owner, uSwitch*

‘A great summary of what we know about the psychology of web site design. Nathalie’s latest book hits the mark. It’s a must-read if you are planning or designing a website.’

**Susan Weinschenk, Ph.D**

*Chief Behavioural Scientist, The Team W, Inc., author,  
100 Things Every Designer Needs To Know About People*

‘Nathalie’s insights into the online influence of behaviour and how that should inform a brand’s authenticity, originality, and overall marketing approach are incredible; immensely practical for all companies, from small business to enterprise.’

**Toby Daniels**

*co-founder and CEO, Crowdcentric*

‘Nobody has done more to turn psychology research into practical advice for web designers than Nathalie Nahai. Every marketer needs *Webs of Influence!*’

**Roger Dooley**

*author, Brainfluence*

‘A very useful guide to applying behavioural research to the way you present your business online, full of fascinating real examples and practical tips.’

**Caroline Webb**

*CEO, Sevenshift, author, How to Have a Good Day,  
Senior Adviser, McKinsey & Company*

‘It is so rare to find a book like Nathalie’s: well-written, thoroughly-researched, never dry, and, most importantly, insanely useful. Apply the lessons herein and your storytelling, marketing and design efforts will be forever improved.’

**Rand Fishkin**

*founder, Moz*

‘Nathalie brings the psychology of online behaviour to life with tremendous insight, intellectual rigour and that rare commodity – practical advice. A thought-provoking writer whose charm, energy and enthusiasm for her subject inspires audiences and encourages debate.’

**Lindsay Spencer**

*Head of Communications, The DTG (Digital TV Group)*

‘A fabulous book that is a must-read for anyone serious about applying genuine behavioural insights to improve their digital presence.’

**Dr Joe Devlin**

*Head of Experimental Psychology, UCL*

‘Simply the best, most straightforward insights into how our psychology drives our behaviour online - and how to harness it. No one does it better!’

**Martin Eriksson**

*co-founder and curator, Mind the Product*

'A brilliantly accessible guide to help you navigate the complicated world of how and why people make the decisions they do online. Applying the latest in thinking in psychology, sociology, business, design and more, this book is essential reading for anyone who works on the web.'

**Jamie Bartlett**

*author, The Dark Net*

'Nathalie Nahai is the most intelligent contemporary writer on technology matters. The first edition of *Webs of Influence* was a game-changer for anyone interested in understanding the interface between psychology, consumer behaviour, and the digital world. This new edition is even better and will turn every reader into an expert: A phenomenal book!'

**Dr Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic**

*Professor of Business Psychology, UCL and  
Columbia University, CEO, Hogan Assessments*

'Nathalie has repeatedly challenged my assumptions about how and why people behave the way they do online. Her arguments are grounded in science and a deep understanding of people. As someone with no background in psychology, I've learned a huge amount from her writing and speaking. You should buy this book if you want to understand the reasons why people's online behaviour is the way it is.'

**Will Critchlow**

*founder and CEO, Distilled*

'A contemporary look at the technologies and techniques influencing us on a daily basis, and breaks down the principles at play with remarkable clarity and insight. *Webs of Influence* is an essential read for anyone looking for a deeper understanding of why we behave online the way that we do, and how to apply these psychological insights in practice.'

**Phil Nottingham**

*Video Strategist, Wistia*

'Required reading for online marketers. As marketing becomes more personalised, it's essential to understand what motivates your audience and drives their behaviour. *Webs of Influence* makes it easy to leverage psychological studies and process to improve your online marketing – from copy to design, functionality and pricing.'

**Stephen Pavlovich**

*founder, Conversion*

'Nathalie is hands-down one of the most articulate and observant members of the digital marketing world. She has such a thorough understanding of how people who use the web, think. Every time I read something she's produced, I learn something new.'

**Kelvin Newman**

*founder and Managing Director, Rough Agenda*

'Nathalie has a unique ability to make psychological research approachable to the masses. She is one of the most engaging speakers and writers out there.'

**Chris Savage**

*CEO and co-founder, Wistia*

'Nathalie's book is the most detailed and definitive guide to embracing the latest scientific research into clear steps to satisfy your customer's deepest needs before they realise they have them. *Webs of Influence* will help you optimise every single element of your digital communications.'

**Rich Millington**

*founder, Feverbee*

'No doubt, Nathalie Nahai is *the* web psychologist and by picking up this book, you are holding the best possible knowledge in your hands. No matter if your job is to make website users happier, to sell more, or even both, this content will catapult you to new dimensions of better UX.'

**André Morys**

*author, Co-Founder, the Global Optimization Group*

'I've seen over 100,000 landing pages, but remember very few. If you use Nathalie's approach to persuasion on your website, you'll create marketing experiences your customers will respond to, convert from, and most likely copy.'

**Oli Gardner**

*co-founder, Unbounce*

'What Nathalie has to say should change the way you think about marketing, advertising and communications online.'

**Mitch Joel**

*President, Mirum, author, Six Pixels of Separation and  
CTRL ALT Delete*

'The science behind how we think, feel and act in a single book. Get it if you want to be able to connect to your customers, and influence their actions.'

**Peep Laja**

*founder, ConversionXL*

'The ecommerce world has never been so competitive, and if you're a retailer or manufacturer who fails to listen to and understand the demands of your customers, then you're soon going to be wondering why your products are gathering dust. Nathalie explains that online persuasion is centred around three key principles: know who you're targeting, communicate persuasively, and sell with integrity.'

**Dave Howard**

*Global Marketing Director, Brandview*

'If you are hoping to make any sort of impact online, but aren't practicing what Nathalie is preaching, you'll find yourself coming up short. Practical advice, well-delivered and rooted in research. A book that's rarely far from my desk.'

**David Greenwood**

*Senior Account Director, This is Pegasus*

'Design user experiences that produce results with this excellent and practical book. One of the leading voices in applied behavioral sciences, Nathalie Nahai brings scientific insights and rigour to your work. A must-read for designers and marketers!'

**Alex Osterwalder**

*entrepreneur and author, co-founder, Strategyzer*

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Nathalie Nahai** is a web psychologist, international speaker and consultant. Having worked with Fortune 500 companies including Unilever, Google and Harvard Business Review, she helps businesses apply scientific rigour to their website design, content marketing and products.

Nathalie presents at conferences around the world on the science of online persuasion, and contributes to national publications, TV and radio on the subject. She also sits on the Social Media Week advisory board and Ogilvy Change experts' panel.

You can tweet to her @NathalieNahai and find out more at [nathalienahai.com](http://nathalienahai.com)



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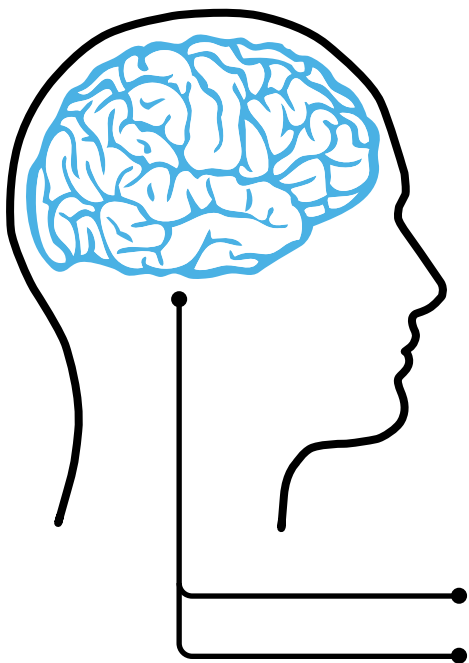


# 1 PART

## KNOW WHO YOU'RE TARGETING



# DECISION-MAKING



*Cognition by itself cannot produce action; to influence behavior, the cognitive system must operate via the affective system*

Colin Camerer, et al.



Ancient, automatic responses in the brain can  
**BIAS AND OVERRIDE**  
our conscious decision-making processes

**1 SYSTEM**  
Fast  
Emotional  
Subconscious  
Intuitive  
Automatic  
FFF



**2 SYSTEM**  
Slow  
Analytical  
Conscious  
Laborious  
Intentional  
Rational

# PERSONALITY TRAITS

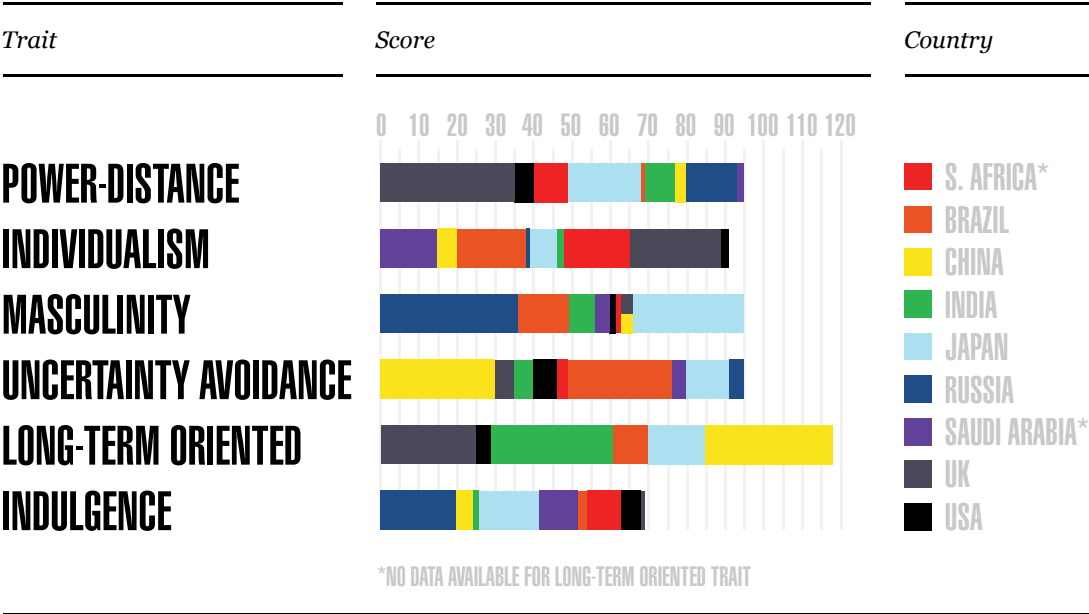
## PLASTICITY

Openness	Extraversion
	
Intellectually curious Novelty-seeking Creative Imaginative Adventurous Independent Open-minded Emotionally self-aware	Enjoys company Energetic Gregarious Optimistic Warm Assertive Ambitious Excitement-seeking

## STABILITY

Conscientiousness	Agreeableness
	
Self-disciplined Organised Dependable Tenacious Consistent Cautious Methodical Good impulse control	Compassionate Cooperative Likeable Considerate Empathetic Affectionate Humble Emotionally responsive

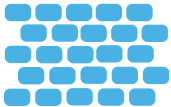
HOFSTEDE'S 6 DIMENSIONS



GENDER DIFFERENCES

BEHAVIOURS


Emotional Stability



Even-tempered  
Not easily phased  
Self-confident  
Resilient  
Calm  
Relaxed  
Unemotional  
Copes with setbacks

Women are more likely to:


Provide inaccurate personal information  
Read a site's privacy policies and change their personal settings accordingly



Blog anonymously  
Post modest photos  
Seek out health information  
Participate more actively on social media platforms

Men are more likely to:

Go online for gaming, betting, and entertainment  
Spend more time and money shopping online (UK, USA)  
Research products



Share their phone number and address with companies and on social platforms  
Download and listen to more music and videos

# 1 INTRODUCTION

“For many, Internet access is no longer a luxury, but a necessity; it has become an obligatory component for economic, political, cultural, and individual representation and empowerment.

E. B. WEISER, PSYCHOLOGIST<sup>1</sup>

Since so many of our daily activities take place online, it is now harder than ever for businesses to grab, hold and convert their customers' increasingly fragmented attention. Those that do succeed are the brands that understand their customers' needs and can deliver the solutions to their problems in a frictionless way. Whatever your business, whomever you're targeting, to succeed online there are three fundamental principles you must be able to fulfil:

## 1 KNOW WHO YOU'RE TARGETING

Understand the universal, cultural and individual factors that influence your audience's decision-making processes.

## 2 COMMUNICATE PERSUASIVELY

Know how to use language, non-verbal cues and visual design to communicate effectively with your target audience.

## 3 SELL WITH INTEGRITY

Use psychological persuasion principles to facilitate (rather than coerce) your customers towards a mutually beneficial outcome.

With this in mind, the book is divided into three parts. Within each you'll find cutting-edge insights and research from which the principles are drawn, real-world examples of how they can be applied, and how-to sections to help you implement them in your business.

# 2 THE PSYCHOLOGY OF DECISION-MAKING

“Cognition by itself cannot produce action; to influence behavior, the cognitive system must operate via the affective system.

COLIN CAMERER ET AL., *BEHAVIOURAL ECONOMISTS*<sup>1</sup>

Although it's comforting to believe that we make decisions from a rational place, in recent years mounting evidence to the contrary has disabused many of us of this notion. A considerable number of studies and theories suggest that our decision-making can in fact be significantly influenced and biased by our emotional processes.

One of the most widely cited of these is the *semantic marker hypothesis*, a mechanism proposed by neuroscientist Antonio Damasio which provides evidence that certain sub-cortical regions in the brain contribute emotional weight to the decisions we make.<sup>2,3</sup> Given that people with lesions (damage) to these brain structures can be impaired when making certain types of decisions,<sup>4</sup> many have taken these findings to mean that emotion is at the route of all decision-making – the reality is, however, much more complex.

## ONE BRAIN, TWO SYSTEMS

In his book entitled *Thinking Fast and Slow*,<sup>5</sup> Daniel Kahneman (a Nobel Prize-winning psychologist) proposed that our brains rely on a dual-core system to process information and make choices. He describes the first system as automatic (emotional) and the second as controlled (cognitive).<sup>6</sup> These two processes can be roughly distinguished by where they occur in the brain,<sup>7</sup> and together they form the backbone of our decision-making. If we understand how each system works, we can use this knowledge to make better decisions and influence those of the people around us.

According to Kahneman, System 1 (thinking fast) is intuitive, automatic and generally operates below the level of our conscious awareness.<sup>8</sup> It is in this sub-conscious setting that we undergo different affective (emotional) states, many of which motivate impulse reactions and feelings such as hunger, fear, sexual desire and pain. These states can even have a bearing on the way we perceive and remember things and can affect everything from our ability to learn to the goals we choose to pursue.<sup>9</sup>

Psychologist Zajonc<sup>10</sup> explains that these are the same processes that motivate us to approach or avoid something – decisions on which we depend to survive. It's this system that 'knows' when our partner is in a bad mood, or instinctively swerves the car when a child walks out on to the road. It's our hunch, our intuition, and it informs almost everything we do.

System 2 (thinking slow) is altogether more analytical, deliberate and rational; it is the mode that we employ to reason about the world. It's the system we use to consciously work out a maths sum or fill out a tax return and it's usually rather labour intensive. We like to think that System 2 runs the show, but it is, by its very nature, a 'lazy' system that has to cherry pick what it will and won't attend to – we can't consciously analyse everything all the time. In fact, it's this slow, controlled system that tends to kick in when our automatic processes get interrupted. This can happen when experiencing a strong visceral state (someone steals your wallet and you're furious), when we encounter an unexpected event (your mother-in-law drops by unannounced and you have to put on a smile) or when we come up against an explicit challenge (solving a cryptic crossword in the Sunday paper).

When it comes to decision-making, System 1 will continually generate feelings, intuitions and intentions, which, if endorsed by System 2, will turn into beliefs and actions. This interplay works well until we're asked to respond to something that violates our normal understanding of the world (a flying pig) or requires greater cognitive attention (the end-of-year report). At this point, it's System 2 that steps in, helping us to weigh up the facts (pigs can't fly, it must be an illusion) and respond appropriately (laugh it off).

Although we'd like to think we're rational, in reality, it's our fast, automatic system that's in charge. System 1 relies on heuristics (cognitive rules of thumb) to reduce the complexity of incoming information and speed up our decision-making which, most of the time, works just fine. For instance, employing the principle 'You get what you pay for' tends to be useful when having to make decisions in general, but in the absence of System 2's more rational approach, our automatic processes can sometimes fall prey to biases.

Take the Rational Choice Theory of economics.<sup>11</sup> This states that people are rational agents that make logical decisions, by meticulously weighing up all the information, risks and probabilities inherent in a given situation. In real life, this would mean that strategies like decoy pricing should have zero effect on the financial decisions we make, since numbers are absolute. Yet research shows that the context or framing of a situation not only influences our perception of the facts, it also significantly impacts the decisions we go on to make.

For instance, imagine that your friend asks you to go out and buy her some minced beef to make spaghetti bolognese. You go to the butcher's and you see two options: '75 per cent lean' versus '25 per cent fat'. The astute among you will have noticed that mathematically both choices are identical. However, research shows that we're significantly more likely to buy the '75 per cent lean' option, simply because of our positive association with 'leanness'.<sup>12</sup> So what's happening?

Well, information is never free from the context in which it is delivered or received, and along with our associations, there are many ways in which this context can skew our decisions. For example, we tend to pay more attention to information which comes easily to mind (the availability heuristic), and we often give greater weight to memories that are personally relevant, or emotionally vivid – which is why stories can be so powerful. We also tend to seek out information that enhances our self-esteem (self-serving bias) and reinforces our existing world view (confirmation bias), all of which can heavily influence both the marketing messages we respond to, and the subsequent purchase decisions we make.

Whether we like it or not, the reality is that our decisions are influenced by a whole host of factors, many of which lay beyond our conscious awareness and control. This means of course, that if we can understand how and why these principles work, we can also use them online to help shape the behaviours of others.

# 3 WHO ARE YOU TARGETING?

“ *Your personal core values define who you are, and a company's core values ultimately define the company's character and brand.*

TONY HSIEH, FOUNDER OF ZAPPOS<sup>1</sup>

Before you can successfully ascertain your target audience, you first need to have a clear understanding as to the values, purpose and identity of your business. If you have never developed a marketing strategy or if it has been a while since you updated an existing one, you may find it useful to complete the exercises below.

Take a few moments to carefully consider each of the following questions. The answers you provide (in particular to those regarding your target market) will directly determine how you'll implement the principles in this book to influence and successfully engage with your online audience.

## WHO ARE YOU AS A BUSINESS?

- 1 What are your core values as an individual?
- 2 What compelled you to start/join your business?
- 3 What are your company's core values?
- 4 What specific needs do you solve, and how do you solve them?
- 5 What is your primary goal for your business?
- 6 Who are your competitors?
- 7 How do you differ from your competitors?
- 8 What is unique about your service/product?
- 9 What would happen if you did not provide this service/product?
- 10 What would you like to gain from the insights within this book?  
(For example, make more money, grow your market share, become a key influencer within your field.)



# WHO IS YOUR TARGET MARKET?

- 1 What is motivating your customers to engage with you?
- 2 What is the age range of people who would want your service/product?
- 3 Which gender(s) would be most interested in this service/product?
- 4 What is the income bracket of your potential customers?
- 5 Is this a service/product they need or is it a luxury item?
- 6 How will they use this service/product?
- 7 What do your customers value most?  
*(Easy availability? Low price? Personalised attention? Special features?)*
- 8 Is this an impulse buy or something they are saving for?
- 9 Where do they get most of their decision-making information?  
*(Through word of mouth, review sites, targeted adverts, trusted experts, celebrities?)*
- 10 Where are your clients located?  
*(Locally? Globally?)*

Having identified the key elements of your identity as a business and the potential profile of your target audience, let's take a look at how this sits within the wider context of cultural and individual differences.

# 4 CULTURAL QUIRKS

“ *Those designers who better understand the preferences for their target online audience are more likely to achieve success in highly competitive online markets.*

DIANNE CYR ET AL., PSYCHOLOGISTS<sup>1</sup>

Whether you're aware of it or not, your culture forms the foundation of your behaviours, your thoughts, and even your feelings.<sup>2</sup> It informs and influences the language(s) you speak, the art you enjoy and the music you listen to. Culture shapes the social norms you adhere to, the attitudes you express and the beliefs that you hold. In short, it operates as 'a shared set of values that influence societal perceptions, attitudes, preferences, and responses'.<sup>3</sup>

Travel to any community in the world, and you will find people sharing and teaching their culture's social map to one another, shaping the values and behaviours of generations to come. It is this vital process of cultural transmission that distinguishes one society from the next,<sup>4</sup> and your insight into these cultural sensibilities will determine how much influence you may wield in any given marketplace.

## GLOCALISATION AND ADAPTATION

“ *To put it very simply, diversity sells.*

PROFESSOR ROLAND ROBERTSON, SOCIOLOGIST<sup>5</sup>

With nearly half of the earth's population now online,<sup>6</sup> the widespread adoption of services such as global ecommerce sites, online banking and live translating apps<sup>7</sup> exemplify our progress towards a world in which geographic and linguistic differences no longer serve as the barriers they once did. Although many have decried the rise of globalisation as a death knell for cultural diversity, this reality

hasn't yet come to pass (yes, you can probably grab the same soy frappuccino whether you're working in Berlin or Shanghai, but you're also more likely to find a search result for that fabulous local restaurant you'd otherwise never had heard of). In fact, in many cases it's precisely this shared access to the web that has enabled the revival of fading traditions and languages, allowing us to document and preserve cultural diversity for generations to come.<sup>8</sup>

While the internet has undoubtedly enabled cultural transmission to excel, one of the intriguing effects of such interconnectedness can be observed in communities that have successfully adapted to globalisation. Rather than allowing themselves to become assimilated into a generic online mono-culture (as some predicted might happen), many groups have, instead, co-opted foreign tools, products and services and utilised them to meet their own specific needs. Whether to accommodate particular customs, preferences or laws, it's this trend that larger businesses are starting to capitalise on, with companies such as Uber building online services that can be locally themed to each market, allowing their employees greater autonomy to tailor messages to their respective cities.<sup>9</sup>

This process of adapting products to meet the needs of a local market is one of the key factors behind globally successful brands and is generally known as *glocalisation*, a term borrowed from the Japanese business world. Founded on the concept of 'dochakuka' (which means global localisation), the principle of glocalisation was translated and popularised by sociologist Roland Robertson<sup>10</sup> in the 1990s, making its way into various marketing practices and mantras such as 'Think globally, act locally'.

It's an approach that some of the most successful companies have been taking advantage of for years, by adapting their products, services and websites to specific markets with power and precision. With regard to branding, there is research dating from as early as 1995 that documents the effectiveness of this strategy,<sup>11</sup> with subsequent studies lending further support to the idea that 'a single, universally appealing website appears infeasible given the differences between some cultures/consumers, and that a preferable strategy might be to instead create culturally and consumer specific sites'.<sup>12</sup>

Professor Dianne Cyr has conducted a wealth of research in this area, and suggests that in order to localise a product or service, it's not enough to simply translate your website and marketing. You also have to consider such details as your product or service names, the time zones you're operating in and local colour sensitivities, as well as gender roles, currency and the use of geographic examples that are relatable to the user.<sup>13</sup> Cultural context is especially important when considering certain aspects such as language, which can sometimes suffer due to the quality of translation and the accuracy of stylistic elements (hence why literal

translations can inadvertently wind up as memes). The layout of your website (which includes the placement of menu items, banners, content, calls to action, and so on) is also of vital importance, since it serves as a visual interface between your business and your visitor, and as such must appear and behave in the ways they might expect.

Symbols, which serve as metaphors that denote actions for the user,<sup>14</sup> are also culturally sensitive and must be considered carefully when designing for a specific audience. Typically these will be icons such as currency symbols, social media links and other navigational elements, and it should go without saying that if you are using symbols, you should test them to ensure your users know exactly what they mean. The content you create and how you structure it is another sensitive area, especially given that cultures vary in terms of the amount of context they need to understand a given message.<sup>15</sup> A useful model to consider here is that proposed by anthropologist Edward Hall,<sup>16</sup> who suggested that cultures can be compared based on their communication styles. According to this approach, societies that communicate predominantly through explicit statements in text and speech can be considered *low-context*, whereas those using more implicit cues such as body language and moments of silence, may be described as *high-context*.

Germany, for instance, is a low-context culture in which messages are designed to be complete, explicit and precise. Japan, on the other hand, classifies as high-context, since its culture's messages can have several meanings, many of which are implicit and dependent on the surrounding information (which may explain why Japanese websites often have a higher percentage of content than those of other nations). It's worthwhile noting that high-context cultures tend also to be more collectivist and score more highly for power distance,<sup>17</sup> two important traits we'll be exploring shortly.

One of the most high-profile companies to have successfully glocalised their brand is Coca-Cola, which supplies over 3,500 products to more than 200 countries worldwide.<sup>18</sup> Its branding and marketing has been so successful that the name Coca-Cola is recognised by 94 per cent of the world's population, making it the most widely recognised word after 'OK'. Intriguingly, in China, the characters for Coca-Cola mean 'delicious and happy' and, in Hong Kong, Coke is sometimes served hot as a remedy for colds.<sup>19</sup> While we can't all be the next Coca-Cola, the online success it has enjoyed does illustrate the importance of a strategic, reflexive marketing approach to accompany a good product.

What's interesting is that Coca-Cola not only glocalises its product packaging and websites, it even tailors its drinks to the taste preferences of the countries it's supplying. The Coke you order in London on a hot summer's day (we do get hot

summers on occasion) will be physically different from the Coke you might drink while on holiday in the Seychelles. Although the company that produces them is the same, the target market in each country is different and so, therefore, is the product.

It's a perfect example of sophisticated supply and demand and this short story demonstrates it beautifully. In Papua New Guinea, Coca-Cola had long been a popular drink, but, without much access to refrigerators, it had been served warm, off the shelf, for decades. Wanting to boost its sales, Coca-Cola decided to introduce refrigerators to all its vendors and, for the first time, Coke was served cold.

What happened? Sales plummeted. Despite the soaring popularity that ice-cold Cokes enjoyed throughout the rest of the world, in Papua New Guinea the refrigerated version of this drink simply wasn't the norm. Coca-Cola learned its lesson, removed the refrigerators from its vendors and returned the warm Coca-Cola-selling market to its natural balance, restoring sales and customer satisfaction in the process.

The lesson here is this: whether on- or offline, if you want your business to succeed, you need to develop a culture-specific, evidence-based set of guidelines as part of your design and marketing strategy. If you can do so successfully, this will empower you to establish a desirable brand image and user experience for all of all your clients, wherever they may be.

## CULTURE: 'SOFTWARE OF THE MIND'

“ Culture is defined as the collective mental programming of the human mind which distinguishes one group of people from another.

PROFESSOR GEERT HOFSTEDE, PSYCHOLOGIST<sup>20</sup>

Whatever the size of your business, if you want to attract a global customer base, you must be able adjust your offering to meet cultural sensibilities. Given that we prefer to interact with sites that match our societal preferences,<sup>21</sup> it should come as no surprise that using a culturally appropriate design can actually increase customer trust, satisfaction and loyalty.<sup>22,23,24</sup> So how do you do it?

Well, to understand what these preferences might be, we must first take a trip into the past. In the early 1990s, having researched the cultural traits of over 70 countries for more than four decades, Dutch psychologist Professor Hofstede released his magnum opus – a seminal book entitled *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*.<sup>25</sup> Originally published in 1991, this hefty work provided a

concise, evidence-based view on how national cultures differ in their tolerance of ambiguity, inequality and their preference for assertiveness versus modesty. Hofstede's work focused on the essential patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving that we express by late childhood, and it provided a unique insight into the ways in which different cultures manifest themselves through the values, symbols, rituals and narratives their members hold dear.

Over the course of his career, Hofstede identified six key psychological dimensions which appear to be hundreds, possibly even thousands of years old. Given the speed at which technology is advancing, the obvious question might be whether these traits still hold sway – yet research suggests that 'globalisation and advances in technology have not created global norms and homogenised our identities, but behavioural patterns and regional identities that are surprisingly durable'.<sup>26</sup> Although younger generations do shift and adapt to new trends, it is likely that our deeply embedded cultural characteristics will continue to act as cornerstones for our behaviours and values, even amidst our new, globally connected world.

In the following pages we'll explore each of these six dimensions in turn and identify how you can use them to improve the performance of your website and marketing within your customers' different cultural contexts.

## 1 Power distance (PDI)

The first dimension, *power distance*, deals with our cultural attitudes towards inequality. It measures the extent to which the less powerful members within a society expect and accept unequal power distribution.

Countries that have a high power distance index (PDI) tend to experience huge divides between the richest and poorest (both in salary and status), their institutions usually have tall hierarchies and political power is centralised. In general, countries with a high PDI score emphasise social and moral order, and focus on authority, experts, certifications and official stamps or logos.<sup>27</sup> Access to information is often restricted, with prominence given to leaders as opposed to citizens, customers or employees. Russia is a good example of this – it sits among the top 10 per cent of the most power distant societies in the world and its predilection for dictatorial leadership (and the societal inequality that follows) is reflected in a whopping PDI score of 93.

In contrast to their high PDI neighbours, low-scoring nations tend to place a higher value on equality, which is often expressed through flatter institutional hierarchies and smaller differences in status and salaries. These countries typically

place fewer restrictions on their citizens, their barriers to access are generally transparent and integrated, and there is an implicit expectation of freedom to roam. The UK, for instance, has a low PDI of 35, which reflects a culture that (despite having a monarchy) strives to minimise inequality with institutions such as the NHS and social housing schemes. Weirdly, this PDI score is actually lower among the higher classes, flying in the face of a historical class system and underlining what many like to think of as a very British sense of fair play. To see where different countries rank, take a look at Table 4.1 (in the interests of brevity, this selection represent a summary of a much larger inventory<sup>28</sup>).

**Table 4.1** Global PDI rankings

	PDI score	Country
High power distance	95	Saudi Arabia
	93	Russia
	81	Mexico
	80	China
	77	India
	70	Egypt
	69	Brazil
	68	Hong Kong
	68	France
	64	Africa (E) <sup>29</sup>
	63	Portugal
	57	Spain
Moderate power distance	54	Japan
	50	Italy
	49	Africa (S)
Low power distance	40	USA
	39	Canada
	38	Australia
	35	UK
	35	Germany
	31	Sweden
	31	Norway
	13	Israel
	11	Austria

Source: Hofstede, G., Hofstede, G. J. and Minkov, M., *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, McGraw-Hill 2010, © Geert Hofstede B. V.

# MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

## High power distance

What to do if the majority of your audience comes from a country with a high PDI score.

- **Order is paramount** Emphasise order within your website by clearly defining the purpose of the site (this can be conveyed in the hero image and/or strapline), marking out the user journey with explicit navigation (for instance including breadcrumbs so that the visitor knows exactly where they are), and having a crystal clear hierarchy of content (so that visitors are guided systematically through the page/site). You can also use social roles to organise information by restricting access to particular areas according to the status of your users (such as making certain content password-protected, available only to those with the relevant level of authority).
- **National pride** Use cultural and national symbols that reflect the social or moral order of your target audience, such as specific colours, metaphors and national icons (if you search for Chinese websites, for example, you'll see that many of them favour the colour red, the dominant colour in the national flag which is also believed to bring good luck).
- **Be authoritative** You can convey authority by including dominant body language and gestures in your images and videos, and by using instructive words and commands in your copy. The aim here is to help inform and guide the visitor through your website.
- **Limit the choice** Although it may sit uncomfortably with some readers, by restricting visitors' access to information and only offering a limited range of choices, you can help match cultural expectations and reduce ambiguity, resulting in a more comfortable user experience.
- **Speak as you're spoken to** If you're using social media to engage with a high PDI market, be very careful to observe the cultural mores regarding language, self-disclosure and etiquette. Breaking rank by using overly familiar language with people you don't know can be problematic, especially when it comes to business.



- **Stamp of approval** The use of endorsements from experts and authority figures can be very persuasive and, where relevant, official stamps and certifications can add a much-needed level of credibility for high-PDI consumers.
- **Make it tangible** When your customers come from a high power-distant culture that is also high-context (such as China),<sup>30</sup> they will generally prefer to physically grasp, see or touch the product before making a purchase decision. This means that you'll have to make your service or product more tangible, which you can do by emphasising any physical attributes it might have, or by using videos to demonstrate how the product looks, feels and works.

## MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

### Low power distance

What to do if the majority of your audience comes from a country with a low PDI score.

- **Keep it transparent** Your customers will expect transparency, disclosure and equal access to the content on your website. The exception to this rule is if you have walled areas or content that are for subscribers only, in which case the ability to subscribe should be made available to anyone willing to accept the value exchange (whether that's parting with an email address or a making a monthly payment).
- **Let them search** People from cultures with a low PDI are more likely to search laterally for the information they want, which may explain why non-hierarchical platforms such as YouTube, Twitter and Instagram tend to originate in such countries. Rather than overcrowd your navigation and sidebars with non-vital information, you can help people find what they're looking for by providing a search bar (usually placed towards the top of the page). The main caveat here is that users will often misspell keywords, so it's worth testing the most common search terms and their permutations in order to accommodate human error.
- **Meritocracy rules** While people from low PDI countries do respond to the heuristic of authority, they are much more likely to respect someone

whose merit is based on academic or professional credentials rather than that which has been inherited (for instance by class or caste). They are also more likely to value the opinions of their fellow citizens, which is why endorsements from experts and testimonials from happy customers (who are similar to your target audience) can add credibility to your communications.

- **Visuals** When it comes to images and videos, low PDI visitors will expect to see themselves represented in your content. You can leverage this by consensually showcasing user generated content of real customers engaging with your product or service. For instance, American fashion brand, Nasty Gal, uses a platform called Olapic to source and display images of customers wearing their clothes out in the real world.<sup>31</sup> Compared to using model-only photographs, this approach has the advantage of tapping into social proof and word of mouth, rewarding existing consumers with the possibility of fleeting celebrity, while attracting new customers into the fold.

## 2 Individualism v. Collectivism (IDV)

This dimension addresses the degree to which a culture's members are interdependent and explores whether people define their self-image in terms of 'I' (themselves) or 'we' (the group).

Cultures that score highly on *individualism* (IDV), such as the USA, UK and Australia, tend to be formed of loose-knit communities that prize autonomy, personal achievements and individual rights, and espouse the view that people should take care of themselves. Societal responsibility only extends as far as one's immediate family and friends, and people tend to have a high level of geographic mobility. In the USA, for example, where there is limited free healthcare, insurance rates are high and businesses expect their employees to be self-reliant. In fact, in the business world, transactions between strangers are the norm and hiring decisions tend to be based on a person's individual merit. Typically, people from individualist countries value freedom, personal time and challenge, and they are likely to be motivated by extrinsic factors such as the end-of-year bonus or a bigger salary.

In contrast, countries with a low IDV score such as China, tend to express a cultural preference for larger, cohesive social networks, in which the needs of the group are placed before one's own. In *collectivist* cultures like this, the emphasis is on group affiliations and loyalty, and an individual's preferences and behaviours will be heavily influenced by the opinions of his or her family, friends, peers and

wider social group. Previous research has identified ‘low emotionality’<sup>32</sup> as one of the defining characteristics of collectivist societies, with social norms and duty (as defined by the group) taking precedence over pleasure-seeking.<sup>33</sup>

For these demographics, intrinsic rewards such as mastery and the acquisition of skills will be strong motivators, with importance also placed on physical conditions. With regard to business, employers will tend to offer their employees a high level of protection in exchange for loyalty and relationships will frequently shape hiring policies.

See Table 4.2 for a selection of IDV rankings.

**Table 4.2** Global IDV rankings

	IDV score	Country
<b>Highly individualist</b>	91	USA
	90	Australia
	89	UK
	80	Canada
	76	Italy
	71	France
	71	Sweden
	69	Norway
	67	Germany
	65	Africa (S)
<b>Moderately individualist</b>	55	Austria
	54	Israel
	51	Spain
<b>Collectivist</b>	48	India
	46	Japan
	39	Russia
	38	Brazil
	30	Mexico
	27	Africa (E)
	27	Portugal
	25	Egypt
	25	Hong Kong
	25	Saudi Arabia
<b>Highly collectivist</b>	20	China

Source: Hofstede, G., Hofstede, G. J. and Minkov, M., *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, McGraw-Hill 2010, © Geert Hofstede B. V.

# MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

## Individualist

What to do if the majority of your audience comes from a country with a high IDV score.

- **Reward your users** Motivate users to take specific actions by encouraging a sense of personal achievement. This system of reward is one of the mechanisms that fuel the popularity of games such as SimCity, in which the player's success depends on his or her ability to complete specific goals within a certain timeframe. Although less exciting, LinkedIn employs a similar, personalised reward system: it prompts you to 'Improve your profile' and uses a 'Profile Strength' infographic to encourage you to reach the 'All-Star' level by adding more information to your CV.
- **You're unique** Individualist cultures tend to view difference as exciting, so focus on communicating what's new and unusual about your brand. What's your unique selling point (USP)? How are you different from your competitors? What makes you a game-changer?
- **Give them a challenge** Running competitions and challenges can help to establish a sense of rapport and generate excitement around your brand. A great example of this is one of the social media competitions designed by Fleur of England, a luxury lingerie boutique.<sup>34</sup> They invited customers to take a photo of something the same colour as their newly launched product, and to post the image on Instagram using the campaign hashtag. Everyone who took part was then entered into a prize draw to win the item, creating a buzz and attracting the attention of new potential customers in the process.
- **Causing a ruckus** In terms of the content you create, cultures with a high IDV score tend to respond well to controversial speech and extreme claims. These audiences quite like being shocked (it's practically a requisite for viral videos) and, as long as you don't overstep the mark (and can back up any legal claims), it can be a great way to provoke and engage your market.

- **In it to win it** When it comes to the images, language and videos you use, content based on material symbols of success and consumerism typically work well in individualistic cultures.<sup>35</sup> While we all want to feel loved and that we belong, one of the reasons why lifestyle adverts tend to appeal to individualist audiences is because they get us to buy into their vision of autonomous success (the fast car, big house, beautiful body, etc). Since such cultures also favour youth, you can reflect this bias by using photos of young, attractive models (or customers) to draw people's attention.
- **Sharing is caring** Individualist consumers tend to be more comfortable sharing information that differentiates them from the group, so if you wish to collect data from this cohort you can request it overtly, provided you are actually offering a fair value exchange.

## MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

### Collectivist

What to do if the majority of your audience comes from a country with a low IDV score.

- **Group dynamics** Relationships are at the heart of collectivist cultures, so if you wish to engage this audience, it can help to approach your customers as a group and provide a service or platform that they can use collectively.
- **Morality** Whereas individualist cultures tend to value truth and science over a fixed sense of morality, if your customers score highly in collectivism, it is important that you respect their established moral tenets and social sensibilities. As a rule of thumb, any communications and campaigns you produce should emphasise relationships and honour the traditions and history of your audience's culture.
- **Represent** When using images to sell your products and communicate your brand, you can increase their impact by using photos of your

product taken in the context of the group. In some collectivist cultures (such as Iran and some Arab countries), it is forbidden to show images of women, and overt expressions of happiness may be frowned upon.

- **There's no 'I' in team** When it comes to language use, collectivist cultures tend to speak in terms of 'we' and, in some cases, drop the 'I' from sentences altogether (for example in Spanish, 'I love you' is 'te quiero', as opposed to 'yo te quiero'). In fact, English is the only language in which we consider ourselves so important, that we capitalise the 'I'! So, when you're engaging with a collectivist audience, make sure you tailor your language appropriately. If in doubt, you can ask a native speaker to write your copy for you, or employ the services of a company like Oban Digital<sup>36</sup> to localise your website and marketing content.
- **Respecting elders** Collectivist cultures tend to favour the wisdom and experience that comes with age, so if you wish to be perceived as authoritative, knowledgeable and credible, you can include images and testimonials of older citizens as well as established industry leaders.
- **Privacy please** With regard to personal information, customers with a low IDV score tend to protect and conceal that which differentiates them from the wider group. When requesting such information on websites, it's worth asking only for the bare minimum and providing clear cues as to the security of the interaction. As a rule of thumb, the best way to assure people that their information is safe, is to frame the message positively, avoiding halt words (such as 'spam') as these can cause alarm and lower conversions. A standard phrase that works well is 'We guarantee 100% privacy, your information will not be shared'.

### 3 Masculinity v. Femininity (MAS)

If you come from a culture that Hofstede defines as *masculine*, you may find this next section a little politically incorrect.

Based on traditional gender roles, Hofstede describes masculine cultures as those in which people express distinct (stereotypical) gender roles – that is, women are tender, modest and focused on quality of life and men are tough, assertive and concerned with material success. Masculine societies like Japan tend to favour assertiveness, heroism and achievement and measure success

through material rewards. In terms of business, these countries can be highly competitive and enjoy a good challenge, and they typically value earnings, career advancement, and recognition.

In comparison, *feminine* cultures such as those found in Norway and Sweden, favour a much more blurred, pick-and-mix attitude towards gender roles, preferring a society in which quality of life and tenderness towards others is encouraged in everyone. With a much stronger focus on relationships and consensus, feminine societies orientate towards the home, social cohesion and a good standard of life for all involved. They value cooperation and employment security, and tend to provide more willingly for the vulnerable.

Where would you expect your country to rank on this scale? See Table 4.3 to find out.

**Table 4.3** Global MAS rankings

	MAS score	Country
Highly masculine	95	Japan
	79	Austria
	70	Italy
	69	Mexico
	66	UK
	66	Germany
	66	China
	63	Africa (S)
	62	USA
	61	Australia
	60	Saudi Arabia
Moderately masculine	57	Hong Kong
	56	India
	52	Canada
Neither masculine nor feminine	49	Brazil
	47	Israel
Moderately feminine	45	Egypt
	43	France
	42	Spain
	41	Africa (E)
	36	Russia
	31	Portugal
Highly feminine	8	Norway
	5	Sweden

Source: Hofstede, G., Hofstede, G. J. and Minkov, M., *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, McGraw-Hill 2010, © Geert Hofstede B. V.

# MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

## Masculine

What to do if the majority of your audience comes from a country with a high MAS score.

- **Free the inner explorer** When designing your website's navigation, give your users greater control and the ability to explore. If needs be, you can create multiple levels of sub-pages and, as long as your content is engaging, this can encourage visitors to spend longer on your site.
- **Rich media** Masculine cultures respond well to exciting, active user experiences, so give these audiences more interactive features such as live polls (so they can see how they score against their peers), responsive infographics, or videos that challenge them to engage with you. When using motion (whether an animated gif or full-screen video) make sure to test that it's having the desired effect (e.g. an increase in sign-ups) as motion can often distract people away from the call to action, resulting in lower conversion rates.
- **Role-play** Masculine societies typically prefer clearly defined roles, so make sure your audience can understand quickly and explicitly whom you are targeting (this will include basic demographic information such as gender, age and status). For instance, if you were selling pharmaceutical products to China, where the medical profession is dominated by women, you might decide to use images of female doctors. If, on the other hand, you were selling the same products in the USA, images that include both genders might better reflect your audience.
- **Playing games** We've come a long way since the good old days of punch-card loyalty programmes, and in the last few years many gamification elements have made their way into website and app design – from the ubiquitous progress bar at checkout, to the use of badges in community forums and social media. Masculine cultures are competitive and tend to enjoy goal-oriented challenges, so running limited-time offers and competitions can work well (especially if you keep a leaderboard and display the standings, or promote the winners publicly across your official social channels).



# MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

## Feminine

What to do if the majority of your audience comes from a country with a low MAS score.

- **Quality of life** When you're targeting a culturally feminine audience (remember, this doesn't necessarily mean a female one), emphasise the core qualities of your offering in terms of how it can benefit the wider group. By focusing on relationships and how you can improve people's quality of life, you will be able to connect more deeply with your customers, boosting your credibility in the process.
- **Don't project** If you come from a traditionally masculine culture, be careful not to project your concepts of gender roles on to any characters or images you might use in your branding or content. To avoid any costly mistakes (both financial and reputational), it's worth conducting some market research and exploring what your target demographic associates with each gender before building these traits into your messaging.
- **Keep it collaborative** Mutual cooperation can go a long way within feminine cultures, which is why asking your customers to for their valuable feedback in return for information or a free trial can provide a great way to engage them and improve your products or services. You can also leverage this quality by building a forum (whether private or on a social media platform) through which customers can share tips, experiences and advice with one another. Not only will this demonstrate that you care about the community, it will also show that you're committed to providing a collective space for support.
- **Pretty social** Make your website visually appealing by reflecting your audience's aesthetic preferences. Uncluttered sites tend to work well here, and the images you use should emphasise relationships, collaboration and the wider community.

## 4 Uncertainty avoidance (UAI)

The *uncertainty avoidance* index measures how uncomfortable we are with ambiguity. The truth is that none of us can predict the future, but when it comes to accepting this reality, some cultures seem to find it easier than others.

Curiously, our ability to deal with ambiguity has even been related to specific structures in the brain. During a study commissioned by Colin Firth (yes, *that* Colin Firth), a group of neuroscientists from UCL discovered that Conservatives had more grey matter in the amygdala, whereas Liberals had more in the anterior cingulate cortex (part of the brain responsible for cognitive flexibility).<sup>37</sup> Based on these findings, the researchers proposed that individuals with a large amygdala would be more sensitive to fear and disgust and would therefore be more inclined to hold Conservative beliefs. Although it is tricky to establish which might come first, the brain structure or the belief, it is fair to say that people vary greatly in their ability to deal with the unknown, and the culture(s) to which they belong can play an important role in their overall perspective.

For instance, in countries with high UAI scores, such as Portugal and Russia, people may feel threatened by uncertainty and deal with this discomfort by erecting rigid codes of conduct and adopting strict beliefs. With a tendency to fear the unusual and perceive unorthodox ideas or behaviours as dangerous, these cultures also tend to have higher rates of suicide, incarceration and alcoholism.

People from such cultures often expect organisations and relationships to be clearly predictable and easy to interpret. They tend to be emotionally expressive and ‘talk with their hands’<sup>38</sup> and aggressive displays of emotion are not uncommon. Formality and punctuality are important and strict rules and rituals are *de rigueur*.

In contrast, cultures that are *uncertainty accepting* tend to be adaptable and entrepreneurial, often disliking the kinds of uncompromising institutions and laws favoured by uncertainty avoidant nations. It is in these cultures that you can expect to find a great amount of innovation and liberalism, coupled with a high caffeine intake, a higher rate of heart disease and the belief that emotions should be understated.

Although I am, of course, biased, to my mind it is no coincidence that Sir Timothy Berners-Lee, inventor of the World Wide Web and the first truly universal language of HTML, hailed from one of the most uncertainty-accepting countries in the world – the UK. Well known for their ‘stiff upper lip’ and an unrelenting ability to ‘muddle through’, the British are typically quite comfortable with ambiguous situations. Perhaps this is why the UK is home to one of the most multicultural and secular societies in the world (which, if you score high on UAI, you may not see as such a good thing).

When it comes to relating to your customers online, their (in)tolerance of uncertainty can have a large bearing on the way in which they respond to your website and content. The key here is to understand their sensitivities so that you can make

it easier for them to relate to you – after all, good rapport and affinity are the foundations of influential relationships. See Table 4.4 to find out where your country sits in the global UAI rankings.

**Table 4.4** Global UAI rankings

	UAI score	Country
High uncertainty avoidant	104	Portugal
	95	Russia
	92	Japan
	86	France
	86	Spain
	82	Mexico
	81	Israel
	80	Egypt
	80	Saudi Arabia
	76	Brazil
	75	Italy
	70	Austria
Uncertainty avoidant	65	Germany
	52	Africa (E)
	51	Australia
	50	Norway
	49	Africa (S)
	48	Canada
Uncertainty accepting	46	USA
	40	India
	35	UK
	30	China
	29	Hong Kong
	29	Sweden

Source: Hofstede, G., Hofstede, G. J. and Minkov, M., *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, McGraw-Hill 2010, © Geert Hofstede B. V.

# MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

## Uncertainty avoidant

What to do if the majority of your audience comes from a country with a high UAI score.

- **Less is more** Navigation should be clearly structured and labelled, and the user journey predictable and assuring, so as to help your customers feel more in control. Popup adverts and links that open up in new windows should be avoided and it is wise to limit your users' choices to the essentials. Any non-vital information is likely to be seen as redundant and misleading, so try to keep your website uncluttered and formal. Cultures with lower tolerance for ambiguity typically prefer the certainty of text to the ambiguity of symbols, so if in doubt, spell it out.<sup>39</sup>
- **Pleasure** When it comes to the most influential emotion for this group, some research suggests that the feeling of pleasure may win out, especially for Middle Eastern customers<sup>40</sup> (this may be because people in uncertainty avoidant cultures can experience higher levels of stress and exhibit 'less internalized emotional control'<sup>41</sup>). So, when designing for high uncertainty avoidant customers, focus on ways in which to increase their experience of pleasure and delight.
- **Clarity is key** Any images you use should explicitly communicate who you are as a business, and what solutions you offer. When showcasing your products or services, use precise descriptions and details of any specific features, as this will help to create more positive customer attitudes, especially if your prospective customers come from service economies. Again, avoid ambiguous imagery and, if you are using photos of people, make sure that their roles or status are clearly visible and that these reflect the expectations and norms of your intended audience.
- **Careful communication** As a rule of thumb, it's best to keep your communications nice and simple by using clear language, and avoiding ambiguous terms. Carefully selected metaphors can be a great way of clarifying your message, however your content and tone should always remain fairly formal. It's worth noting that in high UAI cultures the very use of social media can be a source of contention, so before you engage in any witty banter, make sure that it's appropriate (the last thing you want to do is fire off an ill-judged tweet that decimates your reputation).
- **Plan ahead** Some uncertainty avoidant cultures (such as Germany) have a strong preference for deductive rather than inductive reasoning, which means that you may need to give these users a systematic overview of the task at hand, in order for them to feel they can proceed. If

you want your customers to follow a particular path of action, give them a summary of what they can expect to reduce any ambiguity. Providing a clear sitemap can be a welcome addition, as can FAQ sections and tips to help reduce any user errors.

- **Paint by numbers** You can also reduce ambiguity by using colour, font sizes and typography as identifying markers on your website. For example, if you sell a wide range of food products, you could make the information easier to chunk by using blue headlines for dairy, and green text for fruit and veg. This makes each category easier to scan and identify, resulting in a lower cognitive load (the mental effort being used in your working memory) and a more frictionless experience.

## MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

### Uncertainty accepting

What to do if the majority of your audience comes from a country with a low UAI score.

- **Tell it to me straight** Uncertainty accepting cultures tend to enjoy open-ended dialogue and prefer to communicate in plain language. If this is the audience you're targeting, use social media to connect informally with your customers but avoid expressing yourself in overly emotional terms. The flexibility and intimacy offered by platforms such as Snapchat, Twitter and Facebook can work well with this market, often making a dramatic difference to levels of customer engagement.
- **Risk-takers** Cultures with a low UAI score tend to frown on overprotection, preferring instead to roam free and take greater risks when browsing. You can see this trait is reflected in the aptly named platform StumbleUpon,<sup>42</sup> an American app whose raison d'être is to help members discover new, exciting content from around the web.
- **It's complicated** With regard to content, uncertainty accepting societies don't mind a bit of complexity. A wide variety of actions and choices will appeal to this audience's sense of adventure, though when it comes

to getting users to pursue one particular course of action, the best results can typically be achieved by being more directive.

- **Layer your information** In low UAI cultures, navigation tends to be structured into dropdown menus, allowing for easy chunking of information and a larger number of sublevel pages. Providing a search box on your website can give these customers the freedom they need to find what they're looking for, and providing links to external content and pages is common practice.

## 5 Long-term orientation (LTO)

Based on Confucian dynamism, this fifth dimension explores our human quest for virtue, and was added in 1991, having been developed from the combined works of Geert Hofstede and Michael Bond.

Cultures that score highly on *long-term orientation* (such as China and Hong Kong) tend to base their values around Confucianism and consider truth to be relative and context-dependent. These societies usually believe that acquiring skills, getting an education, working hard and being frugal are the cornerstones of a virtuous life. Achievement comes from being patient, and persevering and saving for the future is considered a worthwhile investment. The family is seen as the blueprint for all social organisations, meaning that the older and more male you are, the greater your authority. Unlike Western philosophy's golden rule, 'Do unto others as you would have others do unto you', long-term-orientated cultures opt for the more pacifist precept of *not* treating others as you would *not* like to be treated.

In contrast, *short-term orientated* (typically Western) cultures, such as Spain, enjoy living in the moment and like to achieve quick results without too much concern for the future. Keeping up with the Joneses is an important motivator, as is the search for 'absolute truth', and these societies tend to have a great respect for traditions. Here, the golden rule does apply and people are encouraged to find personal fulfilment through creativity and self-actualisation. Check out Table 4.5 to see where your country sits in the global LTO rankings.

**Table 4.5** Global LTO rankings

	LTO score	Country
Long-term orientated	118	China
	96	Hong Kong
	80	Japan
	65	Brazil
	61	India
Short-term orientated	44	Norway
	39	France
	34	Italy
	31	Australia
	31	Austria
	31	Germany
	30	Portugal
	29	USA
	25	Africa (E)
	25	UK
	23	Canada
	20	Sweden
	19	Spain
No data available	n/a	Africa (S)
	n/a	Saudi Arabia
	n/a	Egypt
	n/a	Israel
	n/a	Mexico
	n/a	Russia

Source: Hofstede, G., Hofstede, G. J. and Minkov, M., *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, McGraw-Hill 2010, © Geert Hofstede B. V.

# MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

## Long-term orientated

What to do if the majority of your audience comes from a country with a high LTO score.

- **Practicality** Your market is likely to be pragmatic and adaptable, with a preference for websites and content that offer practical value.
- **Be flexible** Since punctuality may not be a strong point here, any AMA (ask me anything) sessions, live streams or webinars that you provide

should be made available afterwards so that those who missed the beginning (or the entire thing) can still access your content.

- **Relationships are important** High LTO customers will assess your credibility based on your connections and reputation. By establishing and nurturing good relationships with your audience, you can help to create brand advocates and boost your reputation via word of mouth. Choose your associations wisely.
- **Education** Long-term orientated cultures tend to value the acquisition of skills, so an effective way to promote your business can be to offer free training and materials that your market will find useful. Relying on the principle of reciprocity, this approach shows your visitors that you value them, which in turn can boost conversions.
- **It's in the stars** Since high LTO societies typically express a natural ease with 'discovering the fated path',<sup>43</sup> you can afford to be less structured with your website navigation and use outbound links that open up in new windows.
- **Long-term benefits** If you are looking to persuade people to try or buy your products or services, underline their practical use and long-term benefits. Since high LTO cultures tend to save more, offering solutions in which you take smaller recurring payments can be a good way to reduce the pain of outright purchases.

## MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

### Short-term orientated

What to do if the majority of your audience comes from a country with a low LTO score.

- **Give us some stats** This audience prefers the certainty of facts over subjective, unsubstantiated claims. If you are selling a product or service that will save people money, effort and time, provide the evidence.
- **Five stars** Rating systems have become fairly standard practice; however, it is worth noting that for low LTO customers facts and figures



will be more persuasive than anecdotes alone. So, if you are including testimonials on your website, give them a quantitative edge by providing a five-star rating system. You can even go one step further and encourage customers to indicate whether the reviews themselves are useful ('Was this review helpful to you?' Yes/ No), which adds an additional layer of qualification to the process, resulting in a more accurate system overall.

- **Instant download** Immediate gratification is a strong motivator for low LTO customers, so reward them with content they can access at the swipe of a finger. If your product can be provided virtually (for instance a physical book that also be downloaded as a PDF), allow users to purchase the item for immediate download, in addition to receiving a hard copy later.
- **Trendsetters** Short-term orientated cultures tend to follow social trends and rituals, whether it's spending a month's salary on those new Louboutins or heading down the pub on a Friday night with some mates. Where appropriate, you can capitalise on this by reflecting the relevant trends in your content and marketing, for instance by shooting a product video in which the people doing the demonstrations are wearing that season's fashion. The types of trends most relevant to your customers will of course depend on factors such as their age, gender, interests and income level, so make sure you do your research before mirroring these elements in your messaging.
- **Listen in** Low LTO scorers tend to expect instant results and, with social media now a common fixture in everyday life, this applies to customer service, too. If you don't know what your customers are saying about you, it's time to start listening. Services such as Brandwatch<sup>44</sup> can help you monitor social media channels for client chatter and enable you to gauge sentiment, nipping any negative feedback in the bud. Managing people's concerns in a swift manner will help ensure happy customers and a resilient reputation.

## 6 Indulgence v. Restraint (IVR)

This final dimension does what it says on the tin: it measures the extent to which our society allows us to have fun and enjoy life through the free gratification of our natural drives.

People from *highly indulgent* cultures, such as Mexico and Sweden, tend to feel that they have personal control over their own lives, which may explain why they are generally happier, more optimistic and extrovert than their restrained counterparts.

While indulgent societies tend to be loose knit, the people within it place a high value on friendships and leisure time and the percentage of people who feel healthy is generally high. Unsurprisingly, there's a positive relationship between indulgence and national wealth and those of us who come from indulgent cultures are less likely to value moderation or the concept of moral discipline.

In contrast, *restrained* societies tend to believe that gratification should be regulated and suppressed, a standard which is usually achieved by the enforcement of strict social norms. While these communities tend to be tightly knit, there's a lower percentage of people who feel very happy or healthy, and there can be a general perception of helplessness due to lack of autonomy. People tend to be more pessimistic, neurotic and cynical and death rates from heart disease are higher.

It stands to reason that restraint is more likely to be the norm under conditions of poverty, and in restrained societies people tend to value frugality and moral discipline over leisure and friendships. According to Hofstede, 'social restriction not only makes people less happy but also seems to foster various forms of negativism'.<sup>45</sup>

Take a look at Table 4.6 to see where countries rank in the global IVR rankings.

**Table 4.6** Global IVR rankings

	Score	Country
Indulgent	97	Mexico
	78	Sweden
	71	Australia
	69	UK
	68	USA
	68	Canada
	63	Austria
	63	Africa (S)
	59	Brazil
	55	Norway
	52	Saudi Arabia
	48	France
	44	Spain
	42	Japan
	40	Germany

	Score	Country
Restrained	33	Portugal
	30	Italy
	26	India
	24	China
	20	Russia
	17	Hong Kong
	4	Egypt
No data available	n/a	Africa (E)
	n/a	Israel

Source: Hofstede, G., Hofstede, G. J. and Minkov, M., *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, McGraw-Hill 2010, © Geert Hofstede B. V.

## MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

### Indulgent

What to do if the majority of your audience comes from a country with a high IVR score.

- **Friends with benefits** Indulgent cultures tend to use the internet for private socialising and personal use, and they generally have greater contact with people of other nationalities. If you want to engage with this group, make your interactions fun and rewarding by giving away entertaining freebies that people can share with their friends (a lovely example of this is Carling's *iPint*, a cheeky beer-drinking app that became popular among British pub-goers).<sup>46</sup>
- **Free as a bird** Debate and freedom of expression are important, so if you are making claims about your product or service, be prepared to back them up. People from indulgent cultures typically expect frank and honest discussion, so any customer service you offer should reflect this.
- **Gender blender** Whether on a billboard, website or video, successful adverts usually work because they get their audiences to identify with the characters in the story. When you're pitching to an indulgent culture, gender roles tend to be more loosely prescribed, so it's wise to steer clear of stereotypes. Instead, have some fun and give your audience a range of models to identify with.


- **Give us a smile** Indulgent cultures tend to be more optimistic and perceive smiling as friendly, so use joyful, emotionally expressive people in your images and videos. Humour and comedy can also work well, especially when it comes to promoting your business through word of mouth.
- **Spicing it up** As you might expect, sexual norms in indulgent societies tend to be less strict, so if it's appropriate to your brand, you can play with this to add some spark to your marketing. Although the exact date ranges are under debate, recent studies of Millennials (those born between 1982 and 2004)<sup>47</sup> and Gen Z (born 1996–2003)<sup>48</sup> have shown that societal concepts of gender and sexuality are actually very fluid, especially when those polled are women. So if you're thinking of targeting a younger demographic from a high IVR culture, you probably have greater leeway to experiment with sexual cues and identity.
- **If the price is right** Highly indulgent cultures tend to be wealthier, which may be worth taking into account when pricing your products and services.

## MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

### Restrained

What to do if the majority of your audience comes from a country with a low IVR score.

- **For the common good** If your customers are rather restrained, selling products or services on the promise of personal gratification is a bad idea. Instead, focus on how your offering can work within the norms of their culture to benefit the community. For example, if you're a SaaS (software as a service) business, highlight your service's security features and practical applications, and adapt the way you pitch it to reflect the needs and expectations of your audience.
- **Keep it lean** Low IVR cultures tend to be frugal, so discount codes, sales and limited offers can be great ways of attracting attention and generating new business. You can also consider how your product or service will save people money and make this one of your key messages.

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- **Proceed with caution** Gender roles tend to be strict, so when it comes to engaging prospective customers be careful who you target and how. As I mentioned earlier, in some restrained societies it is completely unacceptable to show images of women at all, so if your target audience is female you may have to think of creative ways in which to reach out and attract their attention.
  - **Shiny happy people** Smiling can be seen as suspect, so, again, be careful with the images that you use. If you are a global brand, globalise your website and content by toning down any extrovert claims, images or features and, when in doubt, err on the side of formality.
  - **Be disciplined** Similar to uncertainty avoidant cultures, restrained societies favour structure and discipline. Reflect this in your website by providing clear, structured navigation and a user experience that is predictable and consistent. If you are taking online payments, highlight the security of the transaction and don't request additional information unless absolutely necessary.
  - **Formality** Customer support should follow a formal process, whether through traditional channels (such as phone or email) or Live Chat services. If you wish to use social media to engage low IVR customers, I would advise following clear, culturally appropriate guidelines, especially since informal modes of communication may be perceived as improper and intrusive if managed poorly.

# 5 INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

“ Always remember that you’re unique. Just like everyone else.

ALISON BOULTER

## PERSONALISATION

When it comes to persuasion (especially on a larger scale), one of the key problems businesses face is the sheer size and heterogeneity of their target audience. If your customers have a wide variety of needs, goals and preferences, it can make a one-size-fits-all approach pretty tricky,<sup>1,2</sup> which is why so many companies personalise their marketing materials by addressing their customers by name, or serving content relevant to past behaviours.<sup>3</sup>

Although behaviourally targeted ads often have a positive effect on purchase intention, there can be a hidden cost to this approach, particularly when it comes to more invasive practices. This cost is called *psychological reactance*, and it refers to the aversive emotional state we experience in response to perceived threats to our freedom and autonomy.<sup>4,5</sup>

It’s this phenomenon that kicks in when we receive an ill-judged advert from a brand we don’t know, don’t trust or have never bought from. I recently experienced it first hand when I went to watch a tv programme online, and a pre-roll advert for Mr Burberry came on. An image flashed onto the screen accompanied by a message which read, ‘Your personalised advert will begin in 5 seconds’. Without any warning, or option to skip it, the video started playing, revealing a dark screen and the text ‘Monogrammed for N’. It then proceeded to show me a young couple in the throes of passion, the woman having clearly been seduced by a few wafts of the ‘New fragrance for men’ that her hairless lover had generously doused himself with. The final scene closed with an image of said fragrance, displaying a poorly judged ‘NN’ at its base (the signature I use to sign off personal emails). Not only did this seem extraordinarily presumptuous, but because I have never, not once, interacted with this brand, it also felt like an unwarranted invasion of my privacy.

Suffice it to say that if I didn't care much for Burberry in the first place, I certainly won't be buying from them now.

As unappealing as this experience was, it provides a classic illustration of reactance in response to a 'creepiness factor' – the feeling that your every move, both public and private, is being watched, tracked, followed, analysed and capitalised on<sup>6</sup> by ill-advised marketers trying to boost their bottom line. The frustrating thing is that personalisation doesn't have to be this way. If you can provide a good reason (such as a transparent value exchange) for consensually acquiring your customers' information *once they already know and like you*, then you can quite comfortably use a personalised approach to help foster a more intimate bond. The takeaway point here is not to jump the gun.

When deployed intelligently, personalised adverts, services and recommendations can actively enhance customers' positive emotions, which can lead them to spend more money, more often.<sup>7</sup> It's therefore useful to look at some of the basic things you can do to personalise your communications. For instance, if you're sending information via email, app or by text, test which medium drives the most return on investment. While marketing ROI may be different from one business to the next, for meaningful results, you should look at a multi-touch attribution model that takes into account every stage of the customer's journey to purchase.

You can also optimise for the best time and frequency at which to deliver your content, so as to ensure the greatest open- and click-through rates (most email marketing providers and app analytics tools can help you split test this). All of these hacks will give you greater insight into the schedules and preferences of your customers, but if you want to take a more psychological approach to personalisation, we need to dive into the quirky and fascinating world of individual differences, starting with gender.

## GENDER

Despite increasing internet penetration rates, men still have greater access to the internet than women in many nations,<sup>8</sup> a disparity which also translates into different usage patterns. From seeking health advice to shopping, gender is often one of the most accurate predictors of our online behaviours. Although various studies have found that women are more likely than men to seek out health information online<sup>9,10</sup> (other factors such as socioeconomic status also influence this<sup>11</sup>), when it comes to ecommerce, British and American men now spend both more time *and* money than women,<sup>12,13</sup> which says a lot when you consider the additional 'gender tax', the inflated prices for comparable products (e.g. women's

shampoo being more expensive than men's), that women have to pay whether online or instore.<sup>14</sup>

Since the internet's inception, our online behaviours have increasingly come to reflect historical social, cultural and economic trends, including many of the inequalities apparent in everyday life.<sup>15,16,17</sup> For instance, some research shows that people with lower education and income levels also tend to watch more TV and read fewer books, a behaviour mirrored online by greater time spent gaming and interacting on social platforms, versus reading articles and social comment.<sup>18</sup>

An increasingly hot topic, privacy, also yields gendered responses. In general, women typically express greater concern about third-party access to personal information, protecting their privacy more proactively now than they would have a decade ago.<sup>19</sup> Within certain demographics, they are also more likely to post modest photos,<sup>20</sup> provide inaccurate personal information<sup>21</sup> and blog anonymously<sup>22</sup> – a behaviour likely exacerbated by the various misogynistic threats many women have had to endure over the past few years (Gamergate being one of the most memorable). It may come as no surprise then, that men are more likely to share their phone number<sup>23</sup> and address<sup>24</sup> with companies and on social platforms, whereas women are more likely to actually read the site's privacy policies and change their settings accordingly.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the fact that women express a greater concern for their online privacy, they are still as likely to join a social network, and once they do, participate more actively,<sup>26</sup> opening their profiles to a larger number of friends<sup>27</sup> than their male counterparts. This may relate to the finding that women appear to have more of an interdependent construct of self (more focused on one's relationships with others), whereas men's self-construct seems to be more independent (more focused on the self, excluding the influence of others).<sup>28,29,30</sup> Although gender differences can and do exist, it is important to understand that you're much more likely to find a greater differences *between individuals of the same gender* (for instance between one woman and the next) than between genders (between men and women in general).<sup>31</sup>

As research goes, the magnitude of gender differences varies dramatically across cultures and tends to be most pronounced in European and American cohorts.<sup>32</sup> However, since most of these studies don't make explicit comparisons of gender differences within different occupational and generational groups,<sup>33</sup> it makes the findings tricky to generalise.

If you look at some of the younger generations coming through, you'll discover other behavioural differences falling along gendered lines. In 2015, Pew Research Centre found that while 57 per cent of teens reported making friends online, 78 per cent of girls did so through social media, compared to only 52 per cent of boys.



What's more, only a fraction of girls (13 per cent) made friends through online gaming, versus a whopping 57 per cent of their male peers.<sup>34</sup> While games seem to play a critical role in the development and maintenance of boys' friendships, girls are more likely to resort to texting, and they're also more likely to unfriend, unfollow and block former friends when things go wrong.<sup>35</sup> What's curious is that in virtual community games, such as Second Life, people still seem to conform to traditional gender roles, with more women engaging in meeting people and shopping, and men owning property and building things.<sup>36</sup>

In terms of why we use the internet, there is evidence to suggest that men go online for a wider variety of reasons than women, with gaming, betting and entertainment (including pornography) topping the list. Women on the other hand are more likely to go online to communicate, make travel reservations and interact on social media. Men tend to be the heaviest users of video and music, both listening to and downloading more media than women. They also go online to research products in greater numbers, and are more likely to use newsgroups.<sup>37</sup>

## PERSONALITY

It's not just our gender that can shape what we do online. In the last few years, a growing body of research has found that many of our behaviours – including social media interactions, emotional responses to adverts and susceptibility to persuasion techniques – can be profoundly influenced by personality.

If you've ever taken a personality test, you may have already guessed that some are more reliable than others. Despite the weed-like prevalence of popular (yet unscientific) assessments such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI),<sup>38</sup> if you're serious about gaining meaningful, evidence-based insights, the test you use should have a track record for being reliable, valid, independent and comprehensive. This means that it must produce consistent results over different times, contexts and cohorts, and it must also provide comprehensive information on the categories it is sampling. Sadly, many tests upon which businesses base significant financial and structural decisions fail abysmally on all four of these crucial standards.

Although no method is perfect, the *Big Five* is one of the most established and widely used personality tests within the behavioural sciences. Tracing back to the research of D. W. Fiske,<sup>39</sup> it was expanded upon and codified by Costa and McCrae,<sup>40</sup> and originally included 4,500 traits. These were later reduced to 35, and further analysed until they could be classified under five main categories, hence the name. These are: *openness*, *conscientiousness*, *extraversion*,

*agreeableness* and *emotional stability*. Some researchers have since classified an additional sixth trait, *honesty-humility*, and have proposed an evolved HEXACO model of personality.<sup>41</sup>

Tests such as the Big Five are useful because they enable us to predict a person's emotional, behavioural and cognitive patterns,<sup>42</sup> as well as important aspects of their lives such as psychological health, political leanings, career choices and the quality of their relationships.<sup>43</sup> From a business perspective, understanding your customers' psychographics (their personalities, attitudes and values) can give you a significant advantage over basic demographic and persona-based approaches.

With the technological advances that have been made across various research methods in recent years, we've reached the stage at which a computer's assessment of your personality (based on your digital footprint) can yield more accurate and valid results than many of the judgements made by your friends, family or even your spouse.<sup>44</sup> We've crossed a threshold and entered a world in which our personalities can be predicted automatically, without the need for other humans to interpret the data for us. Coupled with the fact that consumers are increasingly expecting a personalised experience, this goes a long way to explaining why so many businesses are turning to personality-based profiling to design and serve up more relevant, engaging and trait-based content.

What's interesting is that your personality not only influences the language you use and respond to, it can also shape many of the behaviours you express online. For instance, when going online to shop, people with higher levels of agreeableness and conscientiousness will tend to take a more utilitarian, direct and central route through a website, whereas those with higher levels of emotional stability, openness and extraversion will often take a more experiential, hedonic (and thus peripheral) path.<sup>45</sup> As a business, if you can understand your customers' behaviours, mirror their linguistic preferences and adapt your message to match their traits, you will be much more successful in attracting, engaging and converting them.

In the following pages, we'll look at each of the Big Five personality traits in turn. We'll explore what they are, the key characteristics that define them, and how you can frame your message to psychologically optimise your content accordingly. You'll then be able to use this information to design trait-specific tests to help you assess and segment your audience.

For instance, you could run a Google AdWords campaign testing three variants of a display advert, one using words for openness, the second for extraversion and the third for emotional stability, making sure that each landing page uses language consistent with its advert. You'll be able to see how each condition

performs in terms of impressions, click-through rates and on-page conversions, which should give you an indication of the most prevalent personality traits of your audience, and the kinds of messages most likely to engage them. You can also run this kind of test using promoted tweets, newsletter headlines, Facebook adverts and video headlines on YouTube. At the end of this chapter, you'll find a list of tools you can use for larger-scale testing.

When running these experiments, it's worth noting that the Big Five traits are inter-correlated, so you may find that your audience segments into two higher-order factors: *plasticity* (comprising extraversion and openness) and *stability* (comprising emotional stability, agreeableness and conscientiousness).<sup>46, 47</sup> Plasticity refers to our tendency towards exploring and engaging flexibly with novelty, both in our behaviour and cognition,<sup>48</sup> and it relates to dopamine, a neurochemical associated with exploration, risk-taking and reward-seeking (known as approach behaviours). The second meta-trait, stability, concerns our need for maintaining a stable physical and psychological condition in order to achieve our goals, and it relates to the serotonin system which is associated with satiety and restraint.

If your customers are high in plasticity, they will tend to be more sociable and are likely to occupy positions of leadership, displaying finely honed social skills and expressivity.<sup>49</sup> They will usually be non-conformist<sup>50</sup> and are more likely to engage in sexual behaviours,<sup>51</sup> typically observing and regulating the impression they make on others in order to cultivate their status (this is known as acquisitive self-monitoring<sup>52, 53</sup>). Whether on- or offline, they will generally do this by being assertive, self-enhancing and by helping others, which is useful to know if you're designing a message, campaign or competition specifically targeting this group.

In contrast, customers high in stability will have a tendency towards maintaining the status quo in order to avoid emotional, social and motivational disruption.<sup>54</sup> As a trait, stability appears to reflect our ability to inhibit or regulate negative emotions, aggression and distraction,<sup>55</sup> and high-scorers are generally more conformist and self-controlled than their low-scoring peers. Curiously, people high in stability are often 'morning people',<sup>56</sup> and they also tend to be more responsive to others (sometimes with anxious attention) so as to avoid social rejection (known as protective self-monitoring).

## Openness

Do you have a high degree of intellectual curiosity, creativity and a preference for novelty? If the answer is yes, you probably score high for *openness*. Open people enjoy variety and actively seek out (and examine) new knowledge and experiences. They tend to be imaginative, insightful and adventurous, and some research shows that openness is the trait least susceptible to persuasion strategies.<sup>57</sup>

Typically flexible, independent and emotionally self-aware,<sup>58</sup> open people are usually good at monitoring their feelings and are often broad-minded, original and intelligent.

In comparison, people with low scores are more closed to experience, tending towards traditional, conventional outlooks, and preferring familiar routines to new experiences. They may struggle with abstract thinking and be more susceptible to fundamentalist religious beliefs,<sup>59</sup> expressing a narrower range of interests, and an inclination towards more authoritarian, conservative (and sometimes ethnocentric and prejudiced) views.<sup>60, 61</sup> What's fascinating is that if you want to boost your levels of openness, psilocybin (the psychoactive compound in magic mushrooms) has been found to increase this trait even 14 months after use.<sup>62</sup>

## MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

### High openness

- **Characteristics** Characterised by their creativity, curiosity, imagination and insight, open people tend to be original, unconventional, and with wide ranging interests. High scorers are more susceptible to fantasies, aesthetics and feelings, and are interested in novel actions, ideas and values. They typically prefer new, intense, diverse and complex experiences.
- **Online behaviours** Open people tend to change their profile picture more frequently on Facebook,<sup>63</sup> they are more likely to enjoy online shopping,<sup>64</sup> blogging,<sup>65</sup> entertainment,<sup>66</sup> and visit sites for arts and animation. They tend to like business marketing, business services, arts and photography, and have many likes, statuses and groups (i.e. interests) on Facebook,<sup>67</sup> often posting about intellectual topics.<sup>68</sup>
- **Frame your message** People who score highly for this trait enjoy creativity and intellectual stimulation, so use words such as innovation, intelligence, sophistication, imagination and creative.<sup>69</sup> Typically more intellectual, this group tends to use more articles (the) and fewer pronouns (I, it), and generally avoids the first person singular and plural (I, we), and second person (you). Open people are also more abstract, referring to things in the real world less, so avoid appeals to leisure, family and the home, as well as space and time. Where possible try not to use

negations (such as 'don't') and use prepositions such as 'on' and 'after', being thoughtful of the link between objects. In general, you can afford to be more unemotional in your message, and should avoid appealing to perceptual and biological processes.<sup>70</sup> You can frame your message around greater risk-taking,<sup>71</sup> appealing to people's cognition by using language which is 'thoughtful' and examining the relationship between different things (e.g. causation, discrepancy).<sup>72</sup> Open people tend to embrace uncertainty<sup>73</sup> and respond positively to art and aesthetics,<sup>74</sup> so use implicit rather than explicit messages, drawing on curiosity, mystery or puzzles so that the reader has to think about the meaning.<sup>75</sup>

- **Persuasion principles** You can use reciprocity,<sup>76</sup> social pressure (for instance, stating that others will find out if they violated a social norm), focus on hopes/gains rather than duties/losses,<sup>77</sup> and highlight instrumental benefits (what they will get out of a particular action).<sup>78</sup>

## Low openness

- **Characteristics** Practical, sensible, and straightforward, people low in openness tend to be down-to-earth, concrete thinkers and conservative, conventional and traditional in their outlook.<sup>79</sup> Often inflexible, they prefer to keep things simple,<sup>80</sup> focusing on the details and getting things done rather than diving deep into abstract thought.
- **Online behaviours** People who score low for openness are more likely to share information online about their favourite entertainment content<sup>81</sup> and visit sites for reference and education, television, sports and children's shopping.<sup>82</sup> Intriguingly, they're also more likely to be an editor of Wikipedia.<sup>83</sup>
- **Frame your message** Since low-scorers prefer not to read at all,<sup>84</sup> find a way to communicate more visually through images, memes and videos. You can make use of numbers, frame your message around the past and present tense, and use more pronouns (I, it), first person singular and plural (I, we), and second person (you). Contrary to their more open peers, this group will respond better to words about space and time, as well as concrete messages about things in the real world. Negations (such as 'don't') tend to be effective, as this group is literally less open, and emotional, positive appeals that focus on social processes,

particularly family, will also work well. People who score low for openness are also more interested in leisure and home, respond well to assent (such as 'yes'), tend to be more perceptual, biological<sup>85</sup> and less cognitive.<sup>86</sup> Where possible, avoid uncertainty,<sup>87</sup> make the conclusion of your message explicit, and don't force the reader to think too hard.<sup>88</sup>

- **Persuasion principles** You can use authority,<sup>89</sup> regret messages (for example, 'You will suffer if X behaviour causes you pain'), reciprocity,<sup>90</sup> and incentive messages (such as, 'You will get a gift card if you do X').<sup>91</sup> Your message should focus on duties and losses rather than hopes and gains.<sup>92</sup>

## Conscientiousness

Are you organised, dependable, self-disciplined and dutiful? Do you prefer to plan and aim for achievement? If so, chances are you're high in *conscientiousness*. Conscientious people tend to think, feel and behave in a fairly consistent way, they are generally tenacious, dependable, organised, cautious (as opposed to careless) and decisive.<sup>93</sup> People high in conscientiousness are also better at delaying gratification, and have a propensity to follow norms and rules.<sup>94</sup>

In fact, this trait is one of the most reliable predictors of positive life outcomes, in everything from job performance<sup>95</sup> and long-term career success,<sup>96</sup> to marital stability,<sup>97</sup> longevity,<sup>98</sup> healthy lifestyle behaviours<sup>99</sup> and even eating habits.<sup>100</sup> People who score low for this trait are generally less responsible, act more condescendingly, are less able to hold back hurtful comments, and are less responsive to their partners.<sup>101, 102, 103</sup>

## MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

### High conscientiousness

- **Characteristics** Conscientious people tend to be competent, methodical, disciplined and dutiful, displaying good impulse control and a preference for order and structure. Motivated to achieve their goals, high scorers are deliberate, considered, industrious, reliable and decisive.

- **Online behaviours** People who score high in conscientiousness tend to go online for school or work,<sup>104</sup> to write reviews<sup>105</sup> and to visit sites for education, dictionaries, electronics and children's shopping.<sup>106</sup> Intriguingly, they're also more likely to quit Facebook.<sup>107</sup>
- **Frame your message** Conscientious people value efficiency, goal pursuit, achievement and order,<sup>108</sup> so create content around these motivations and avoid framing your message as a risk.<sup>109</sup> Messages that use guilt (the affective core of conscientiousness)<sup>110</sup> and embarrassment are typically quite motivating for high scorers,<sup>111</sup> as are appeals to their helpful nature and sense of duty.<sup>112</sup> Your language should be formal and 'proper' (so no swearing), use articles (such as 'the'), and focus less on humans. Framing messages in terms of time can be useful, and you should avoid talking about causations or discrepancies. Try not to communicate in either a very tentative or a dogmatically certain way, as it's best to avoid these extremities with this group.<sup>113</sup>
- **Persuasion principles** Commitment and consistency<sup>114</sup> work well, as does reciprocity.<sup>115</sup>

## Low conscientiousness

- **Characteristics** People with low scores tend to be disorganised, messy, creative, unambitious, forgetful and often late. Unlikely to follow rules, they prefer chaos over order, they don't adhere to traditions, and they're seldom conservative. Other characteristics include carelessness, irresponsibility, disorderliness, frivolousness,<sup>116</sup> and impulsivity.<sup>117</sup>
- **Online behaviours** People who score low for conscientiousness tend to use Facebook more,<sup>118</sup> and exhibit a higher frequency of browsing pages including their own,<sup>119</sup> with many likes and groups.<sup>120</sup> They use the platform for acceptance-seeking behaviours (such as posting to feel included or to make others feel closer to themselves), connection and caring behaviours (showing care and support to others) and attention-seeking (which includes showing off).<sup>121</sup> More broadly, low scorers often display problematic internet use,<sup>122</sup> such as pathological gambling,<sup>123</sup> procrastination<sup>124</sup> and cyberloafing<sup>125</sup> and they are more likely to be an editor of Wikipedia.<sup>126</sup> These individuals tend to visit sites for mental health, music, animation and literature,<sup>127</sup> and do not like to reveal their true selves, preferring instead to present an idealised persona.<sup>128</sup>

- **Frame your message** To reach low-scorers, you can use swearing, agreeing, negation and negative emotions, especially anger and sadness. Focusing on the human element of your message can also be effective, and you can even include content around death. Anything that seems socially exclusive will also engage this group,<sup>129</sup> as will framing your message as a risk.<sup>130</sup>
- **Persuasion principles** Loss aversion,<sup>131</sup> reciprocity<sup>132</sup> and framing benefits in the present rather than the future<sup>133</sup> all work well here.

## Extraversion v. Introversion

Are you energetic, positive, assertive and sociable? Do you tend to seek stimulation in the company of others? If you answered yes, you probably score highly for *extraversion* and are likely to be gregarious, talkative and ambitious.<sup>134</sup> Typically more expressive and adept at decoding non-verbal information than their introverted peers,<sup>135</sup> high scorers may make friends easily, but they also have a tendency to be dominant.<sup>136</sup>

Although people high in extraversion may generally be happier<sup>137</sup> and have a greater number of sexual partners, they're also more likely to die sooner and land themselves in hospital due to accident or illness.<sup>138</sup> It may come as no surprise then, that your level of extraversion can reliably predict things like your alcohol consumption, popularity and the variety in your dating life.<sup>139</sup> At the other end of the scale are *introverts*, who are typically more reserved, shy and inward-focused, with a tendency to get easily absorbed in tasks. People who are introverted tend to be thoughtful and good at rationalising, but may also have a propensity for overthinking things.

## MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

### High extraversion

- **Characteristics** Extroverts are gregarious, assertive, warm, positive, and active. As well as being outgoing and optimistic, high scorers love excitement, and are often sensation- and thrill-seeking.



- **Online behaviours** As you might expect, extroverts talk more about social events,<sup>140</sup> and are typically more motivated to create user generated content, vent negative feelings and be self-enhancing.<sup>141</sup> Classic cyberloafers,<sup>142</sup> they will often visit sites about education, environmental science and music. High scorers love to socialise and talk about themselves, their family and friends,<sup>143</sup> and share information about their favourite entertainment content.<sup>144</sup> They use Facebook primarily for communication (writing on other people's walls and commenting on posts), emotional disclosure (such as posting about 'drama' and venting frustrations), and presenting their true selves.<sup>145</sup> They tend to exhibit higher Facebook use and have more friends, showing a greater propensity for viewing their own page, adding photos of other people, and changing their profile picture more frequently.<sup>146</sup>
- **Frame your message** To engage extroverts, use shorter, less formal language and exclamation marks,<sup>147</sup> and include words such as strong, outgoing, active, exciting, attention, amazing, party.<sup>148</sup> High scorers tend to use a lot of first person plurals (we, ours) and second person (you, yours), often talking about family, friends, the body, and sex or sexuality.<sup>149</sup> Their language is usually disinhibited, social and inclusive, and your message should be straightforward, certain and simple, using positive emotional content. Extroverts tend to be more sensual and prefer greater stimulation (including louder radio messages),<sup>150</sup> and are motivated by excitement, rewards and social attention.<sup>151</sup>
- **Persuasion principles** Reciprocity,<sup>152</sup> social comparison,<sup>153</sup> scarcity,<sup>154</sup> liking, social proof<sup>155</sup> and future discounting such as 'buy now, pay later' (extroverts value things more in the present)<sup>156</sup> all tend to work well for this group.

## High introversion

- **Characteristics** People who are introverted tend to be more reserved, quiet, shy and silent.<sup>157</sup> Prone to fantasies with the ability to get absorbed in tasks, they are typically thoughtful and may become easily tired or worn-out. Having fewer friends, introverts often prefer to be alone.
- **Online behaviours** High scorers tend to enjoy introspective, computer-based activities such as Photoshop and programming, often talking online about fantasy hobbies such as anime, and watching television

series.<sup>158</sup> Interested in self-exploration,<sup>159</sup> introverts visit sites for movies, literature, comics and children's shopping,<sup>160</sup> and can be at greater risk of pathological gambling.<sup>161</sup>

- **Frame your message** Introverts are more likely to use text-based emoticons (such as O.O,>.<, q:;:\_3,>\_<^.^, etc.), use longer, more formal language (they're slightly more likely to use articles, adverbs and propositions) and express negative emotions such as anger and anxiety.<sup>162</sup> Framing your message numerically can be persuasive for this group, and since introverts are usually more inhibited, thoughtful, tentative and quiet, it can help to reflect this in your communications. Your message should talk about causation (go into depth about the reasons behind your communication), and also focus on work and achievement.<sup>163</sup>
- **Persuasion principles** Social pressure<sup>164</sup> and reciprocity<sup>165</sup> tend to work well here.

## Agreeableness

Do you have the tendency to be compassionate and cooperative, rather than challenging, suspicious or antagonistic towards others? If so, you may score highly for *agreeableness*. This trait describes how pleasant, likeable and harmonious we are in relation to other people, and high scorers are typically described as considerate, warm and kind. Although highly agreeable people are usually popular and well liked, this is often because they project positivity onto others and have a tendency to make excuses for other people's shortcomings.<sup>166</sup> Because they are emotionally responsive, high scorers are more open to influence by strong, persuasive arguments than their low-scoring peers,<sup>167</sup> and some research shows that this trait is the most susceptible to persuasion strategies.<sup>168</sup>

When faced with conflict, agreeable people usually take a more constructive approach, often transforming competitive situations into cooperative ones. They're typically more empathetic, find it easier to see other people's perspectives, and are more likely to help a wider range of people, whether a friend or a stranger.<sup>169</sup> When they experience difficult emotions or frustrating interactions, neuroscientific research shows that high scorers will automatically engage in emotion regulation<sup>170</sup> (one study even found this difference in young kids responding to a 'disappointing gift').<sup>171</sup>

# MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

## High agreeableness

- **Characteristics** High scorers are altruistic, cooperative and trusting. They communicate in a straightforward and honest way, and are generally modest, humble, sympathetic, appreciative and affectionate.
- **Online behaviours** Individuals who score high in agreeableness tend to be avid users of Facebook, with a greater frequency of browsing pages in general, both others' and their own.<sup>172</sup> They generally present their true self and use the site to communicate, connect with, care for and support others, as well as seeking acceptance for who they are.<sup>173</sup> In terms of the websites they frequent, agreeable people tend to seek out sites for education, diseases and business logistics.<sup>174</sup>
- **Frame your message** To engage people in this group, your message should emphasise connection with family and community, as well as communal goals and interpersonal harmony.<sup>175</sup> Your language can be more inclusive (we, our), friendly, and positive in emotional content, focusing on what people see and feel. You can also mirror high scorers' tendency to use numbers and write in the past tense, and include content around the body and sex (though to a lesser extent than you would with extroverts). Content that touches on leisure and home life will also be well received,<sup>176</sup> and ideally you should avoid framing your message around risk.<sup>177</sup>
- **Persuasion principles** Reciprocity,<sup>178</sup> social comparison<sup>179</sup> and deterrence messages (such as stating that a behaviour is associated with criminal punishment) can work well here, as can morality messages ('X behaviour is the right thing to do') and regret messages, ('You will suffer if X behaviour causes you pain').<sup>180</sup> Agreeable people are also more sensitive to social validation and liking,<sup>181</sup> as well as loss aversion.<sup>182</sup>

## Low agreeableness

- **Characteristics** Low scorers are typically selfish, competitive, individualistic and ruthless, and can be thoughtless, rude, harsh, and disagreeable. Likely to be a rebel, a person who is low in agreeableness can be unfriendly, cold, hard-headed,<sup>183</sup> aggressive and antagonistic, as well as untrusting, sardonic, cynical and uncaring.

- **Online behaviours** People who score low in agreeableness are more likely to develop problematic multiplayer online gaming,<sup>184</sup> use Facebook for attention seeking<sup>185</sup> and visit sites for kids and teens, society, mental health, physics and pets.<sup>186</sup> They're also partial to a bit of online shopping,<sup>187</sup> and are more likely to be an editor of Wikipedia.<sup>188</sup>
- **Frame your message** Low scorers are more likely to swear, express negative emotions (especially anger) and talk about death than their high-scoring peers,<sup>189</sup> and you can mirror this in the tone of your content. Talking about causation, money,<sup>190</sup> and framing your message as a risk<sup>191</sup> can also work well for this group.
- **Persuasion principles** Reciprocity.<sup>192</sup>

## Emotional stability

Originally labelled neuroticism (the inverse of its new name), the trait of *emotional stability* refers to how well or poorly we respond to environmental stressors. People who score highly in this trait are less reactive to stress, and are usually even-tempered, calm and less likely to feel tense. They tend to be more emotionally stable and resilient, and are better able to cope with failures, setbacks and difficulties.

Low scorers, on the other hand, can be more pessimistic, insecure, self-conscious and vulnerable. They tend to experience greater levels of anxiety, depression and hostility, are more likely to act impulsively, and find it harder to deal with aversive events than their high-scoring peers.<sup>193</sup>

## MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

### High emotional stability

- **Characteristics** Emotionally stable people are generally cool and collected, and not easily phased or perturbed. Stable, calm, unemotional and content,<sup>194</sup> high scorers tend to be relaxed and self-confident.<sup>195</sup>
- **Online behaviours** People high in emotional stability often talk about social plans and sports,<sup>196</sup> visit websites on photography, maths, marketing and business logistics,<sup>197</sup> and enjoy online shopping.<sup>198</sup>

- **Frame your message** This group tends to talk a lot about the second person (you, yours), their friends and the space around them, displaying a general sense of confidence.<sup>199</sup>
- **Persuasion principles** As with the other traits, reciprocity<sup>200</sup> works well here, and fear-based appeals are generally more effective than non-fear based ones.<sup>201</sup>

## Low emotional stability

- **Characteristics** People who score low for emotional stability can be anxious, depressed, hostile, tense and moody, with a propensity for acting impulsively. They may feel self-conscious, vulnerable, and unable to accommodate aversive events, and can be irrational, dysphoric and easily overwhelmed.
- **Online behaviours** Low scorers are more likely to go online to write reviews,<sup>202</sup> blog,<sup>203</sup> watch pornography<sup>204</sup> and cyberloaf,<sup>205</sup> as well as share information about their favourite entertainment content.<sup>206</sup> They often turn to the internet for a sense of belonging,<sup>207</sup> and use Facebook not only to communicate with others and look at people's profiles, but also to express themselves emotionally (which often means venting)<sup>208</sup> and to present their ideal or false self.<sup>209</sup> They are more susceptible to pathological gambling<sup>210</sup> and will visit sites for pets, scouting, sports and physics.<sup>211</sup>
- **Frame your message** Low scorers are generally more sensitive to threats and uncertainty, so any messages framed around safety and security will be more engaging.<sup>212</sup> This group also responds better to content that relates to them personally, and phrases such as 'don't do this' and 'never do that' will be more persuasive. Discrepancies will also grab their attention, so avoid making any mistakes unless you are using this strategy deliberately. Low scorers tend to focus more on themselves (I, me, mine) than others (you, yours), and are prone to swearing and using negations (such as 'no') more often.<sup>213</sup> Although they typically express a full range of negative emotions online (such as anxiety, anger and sadness), low scorers can be tentative and inhibited, so it's best to avoid fear appeals.<sup>214</sup> Instead, focus on social exclusivity, physical feelings, causation and certainty.<sup>215</sup>

- **Persuasion principles** Reciprocity,<sup>216</sup> social comparison,<sup>217</sup> scarcity,<sup>218</sup> authority and social proof<sup>219</sup> can work well, as can anchoring, due to this group's high external locus of control.<sup>220</sup>

## USEFUL TOOLS

If you want to segment your audience according to their personality traits, there are several academia-grade tools you can use for the job. I have included a list of resources here, however it's worth noting that the links may be subject to change.

To take the Big Five test yourself, visit: [outofservice.com/bigfive](http://outofservice.com/bigfive). If you're interested in personality in general, there's a fascinating range of tests you can explore at Cambridge University's website, [discovermyprofile.com](http://discovermyprofile.com).

For commercial use, I recommend Cambridge University's personalisation engine, [applymagicsauce.com](http://applymagicsauce.com), a white-label product that predicts psychological traits from the digital footprint of Facebook users. You can also try [Hogan-x.com](http://Hogan-x.com), which works in a similar way by drawing on user activity across a wide variety of social media profiles. For computerised text analysis, you can try [liwc.wpengine.com](http://liwc.wpengine.com), a research tool that analyses text for its emotional and motivational content, as well as personality traits.



# 2 PART

# COMMUNICATE PERSUASIVELY



# COMMUNICATION

## When you talk

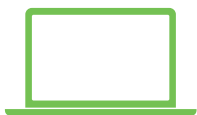
**1 MIND** the brains of  
communicator  
and listener  
are trying to be coupled  
**merging as one**



## CONTENT AND MEDIA

### WEBSITE

*Target and test*



Have a clear purpose  
Ensure visual fluency  
Simplify complex acts  
Clear calls to action  
Use high-res images  
Direct users' attention  
Use motion carefully  
Glocalise your content

### IMAGES

*Direct attention*



Include smiling faces  
Reflect users' traits  
Leverage symmetry  
Eyegaze to direct users  
Use body language  
Perceptual grouping  
Mystery is alluring  
Use emotional triggers

### VIDEOS

*Elicit emotion*



Have a clear goal  
Focus on the individual  
Use a narrative arc  
Elicit emotional change  
Use the peak end rule  
Design your thumbnails  
Disrupt expectations  
Consider aspect ratio

### SOCIAL MEDIA

*Be responsive*



Be warm and personal  
Emotional contagion  
Mirror your customers  
Use trigger words  
Frame for personality  
Respond in real time  
Set expectations  
Admit your mistakes



## The mind meld

**2** PEOPLE

engaged in  
a story - both  
brains fire in

**similar patterns  
of neurological activity**

## WEBSITES

### THE PSYCHOLOGY OF COLOUR



Arousing, danger, sexual, attraction,  
emotional, hot, active, vibrant



Calming, reassuring, relaxing,  
sadness, trust, security, wealth



Active, exciting, arousing, warm,  
wariness, happiness, danger



Relaxing, status, wealth, gentle,  
peaceful, calming, beautiful



Wealth, prosperity, death, formality,  
sophistication, seriousness

**Your website's appeal  
can be measured in two ways:**

**AESTHETIC**

culture-specific

**attractive**

visually appropriate

**harmonious**

**and elegant**

**DYNAMIC**

**universal**

attention-grabbing

**colourful**

fun to use and

**interactive**

# 6 BASIC PRINCIPLES

“*Persuasive communication is ‘any message that is intended to shape, reinforce or change the responses of another’.*

GERARD MILLER, SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGIST<sup>1</sup>

As a process, persuasion allows us to influence and be influenced by human attitudes, beliefs, motivations, intentions and behaviours.<sup>2</sup> From asking for that pay rise and negotiating with our kids to eat their broccoli, to brokering peace deals among warring nations, at its best persuasion is the delicate dance that enables us to shorten the distance between differing points of view, helping us to work towards a mutually beneficial outcome.

## PERSUASION: SYSTEMATIC v. HEURISTIC

Broadly speaking, there are two main persuasion processes you can use: *systematic* persuasion (when you appeal to someone’s logic and reason) and *heuristic* persuasion (when you leverage cognitive rules of thumb).<sup>3</sup> Say, for example, you were trying to convince your customers to buy an electric toothbrush using a systematic approach. In this instance, you might list its specifications, highlight its superior quality, and convey all the qualitative and quantitative advantages it has over competing products. If you were using a heuristic approach, however, you might say ‘This toothbrush is so popular, we have nearly run out of stock’ (scarcity), or ‘It’s the number one toothbrush used by dentists’ (authority).

Since we have a limited cognitive capacity and the systematic approach is more effortful, most persuasion tactics typically rely on heuristics to influence our decision-making (for a fantastic exploration of the two systems that underpin these persuasion processes, I highly recommend reading Kahneman’s *Thinking, Fast and Slow*<sup>4</sup>). Whichever approach you decide to take, you have to start from a place of trust. Cited as the single most important ingredient for the development and

maintenance of happy, well-functioning relationships,<sup>5</sup> trust (or lack thereof) can be the make-or-break of a successful partnership, whether between lovers, friends, or between a brand and its customers.

## MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

### Persuasion processes

- **Systematic** If your prospective customers have a high need for cognition (they engage in and enjoy thinking), then taking a systematic approach to persuasion can work well. List your product or service's specifications, its qualitative and quantitative advantages over competing products, and any USPs. Make it easy for your customers to access the information in a structured, fluent way, and allow them to drill down into the details if they want to. A great way to do this is to use tabbed or drop-down menus to visually chunk the information, which lowers the cognitive load while still allowing all the relevant information to remain accessible.
- **Heuristic** If your audience is time- and attention-poor (which is most of us) with a low need for cognition, then taking a less effortful route can work better. This means designing experiences, messages and interactions that leverage cognitive rules of thumb such as scarcity, social proof and liking (among many others), which we will be exploring in greater detail in part 3 of this book.

## TRUST AND HOMOPHILY

So how do you establish a secure base of trust from which to communicate persuasively? A great place to start is to anchor yourself in your values, and then express them business-wide. Although cooperative and Fairtrade businesses have been on the public radar for a while, in more recent years we've seen a rapid proliferation of high-profile enterprises whose business models focus not only on turning a profit, but also on making a positive social and environmental impact, such as TOMS Shoes, Patagonia and Etsy, to name a few.

With increasing swathes of customers (especially Millennials) expecting companies to make a public commitment to good corporate citizenship,<sup>6</sup> businesses are facing

mounting pressure to become more transparent about what drives them. Movements such as the B Corp<sup>7</sup> (which provides a framework and certification for companies wishing to benefit society as well as their shareholders) have brought this battle to the fore. If you're in any doubt as to the financial impact, in 2015 alone, Nielsen reported a growth of 4 per cent in global sales of consumer goods from brands with a demonstrated commitment to sustainability, compared to just 1 per cent for brands without.<sup>8</sup> Whatever your motivations, suffice it to say that it pays to do good.

Whether through shared values or other perceived commonalities, when it comes to being persuaded by sources of information (such as people or brands), we tend to respond most positively to those we perceive as likeable, credible and similar to ourselves – a principle known as *homophily* (love of the same).<sup>9,10</sup> Given that we also rate homophilous sources as more trustworthy and reliable,<sup>11</sup> if you can design your message to match your customers' psychography (their unique values, motivations and needs), it is likely to engage them more deeply.

As deceptive as it may be, it's not uncommon for big businesses to meticulously engineer characters in a bid to get us to buy into their products. You'll have no doubt come across this in adverts: the friendly, well-dressed 'lawyer' who tells you you're entitled to compensation or the attractive 'doctor' who informs you this particular brand of diet pills is safe. 'It's just an actor', I hear you say. Well yes, it is, but even if that actor has never set foot in a legal practice or medical college, the fact that he or she *looks* the part is often enough to persuade our subconscious that we can trust the information they're conveying.

These kinds of adverts work because they exploit the brain's uncanny ability to pick up 'appearance cues', which, when combined with a person's level of attractiveness, can dramatically influence the degree to which we consider someone credible.<sup>12</sup> In fact, this curious foible was highlighted in an ingenious study conducted back in 1979, when a group of undercover researchers asked some students to sign a petition. Quite unsurprisingly, it turned out that the most successful petitioners were also the ones who were rated the most attractive.<sup>13</sup>

## MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

- **Do you trust me?** We tend to trust people who are likeable, credible and similar to ourselves, and judge homophilous sources of information as more trustworthy and reliable. To leverage this in your communications, you need to research your audience's values, motivations and needs, and

reflect these back in the linguistic and visual content you create. Your customers' personality, age, gender and culture will inform the preferences they have, so whether you are using an employee or an actor to communicate your brand's values and message, make sure they share significant commonalities. A great example of this in action, is Moz's *Whiteboard Friday*, a Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) video series presented by Rand Fishkin and other community members, all of whom tend to be smart, quirky, approachable and diverse, just like their audience.

- **Appearances matter** While I personally think that using fake doctors and lawyers in adverts is a bit of a cheap shot, if you can leverage appearance cues honestly (by using actual doctors, lawyers, businesswomen or whomever else), it can be a quick and easy way to visually communicate credibility and authority.
- **Doing good** We're all quick to sniff out self-serving promotion, so when you're marketing the good deeds of your business, it should go without saying that credibility and authenticity are essential. For the best results, demonstrate your deeds through multiple channels such as third-party validation (for instance independent research or news coverage), affiliation with a respected non-profit, annual reports or employee volunteerism. You can also amplify and socialise the work you've undertaken in your community by sharing your stories on relevant social platforms, such as Instagram and YouTube (visual content tends to work best as it is easier to process, elicits a faster emotional response, and can be rapidly shared).

## FLUENCY

When it comes to persuasive messages, it's those we find easiest to process (high in *cognitive fluency*) that tend to be the most effective. Whatever the content, if you can present information in a way that is visually clear (perceptually fluent), phonologically simple (linguistically fluent) and semantically primed (conceptually fluent), it is likely to be perceived as more trustworthy than its less fluent counterparts.<sup>14</sup> Whether on- or offline, this will result in a smoother, more frictionless experience, thus generating a positive emotional association with your brand.

If you want to increase the fluency of your message, website or content, there are various ways you can go about it. One approach, is to use *repetition* – when

people see or hear a statement repeatedly, they tend to rate it as more likely to be true (regardless of whether they remember having seen it before) than new, unfamiliar statements.<sup>15</sup> This is why repetitive calls to action, phrases and jingles (such as McDonalds 'I'm lovin' it') tend to be more memorable and effective in encouraging people to buy.

Another way to increase fluency is to use a message whose *structure* your customers will implicitly learn, so that when they see something similar, it will feel familiar and therefore easier to process. A great example of this is Nike's famous three-word hallmark. If you recognise their strapline, 'Just Do It', chances are you'll also implicitly recognise their 'Find Your Greatness' campaign, since it follows the same three-word structure.

You can also boost fluency by making it easier for people to process *perceptual (design) features*. Research suggests that when a website is visually easy to understand (high in perceptual fluency), we experience a sense of pleasure, which in turn increases our purchase intent and the likelihood that we'll return. You can measure if your website or marketing content has high perceptual fluency by running user tests to assess the ease with which visitors can identify the content without making mistakes. The aim here is to simplify and order your visual content in order to minimise your visitors' cognitive load.

When creating written content, you can maximise *linguistic fluency* by increasing the contrast between the text and its background, and by using a sans-serif font that is easy to read (such as Arial or Helvetica). Not only do high-quality fonts such as these boost processing fluency, they have also been found to induce a positive mood,<sup>16</sup> which in turn can increase one's desire to buy.

Big brands such as The North Face, Jeep and American Apparel all use this approach in their logos, a strategy that makes information easier to process and instructions simpler to follow.<sup>17</sup> This results in a positive net effect that customers generally misattribute to the quality of the related object, in this case the product or service that's being sold. Many of the best landing pages use these principles of linguistic and perceptual fluency in their design, and a great example is OKCupid's homepage.<sup>18</sup> With a simple layout, a strong USP ('Join the best free dating site on Earth') and one call to action, the simplicity of the page lends itself to rapid, fluent processing, thus increasing the likelihood that new visitors will convert.

If you're using new or unfamiliar words, names or concepts, it's worth noting that the simpler the word is to pronounce (and the simpler the sentence structure you use), the less risky your message will feel.<sup>19</sup> Of course there are times when you may in fact want your words to convey a sense of risk, especially if you're writing an ad for a blood-curdling roller-coaster ride and you want to proactively attract thrill-seeking customers. Similarly, while *disfluency* and cognitive strain can

reduce the attractiveness of everyday products by making them appear unfamiliar, when it comes to luxury or special-occasion items (where we're more likely to value exclusivity), the reverse can in fact be true, with hard-to-decipher products appearing more unique or uncommon.<sup>20</sup>

Although many studies suggest that the key to successful communication rests on meeting the expectations and desires of your users,<sup>21</sup> as with most things psychological, the reality is more complex than it might at first appear. For instance, when text is harder to read, we take more time to process the information, which can lead not only to better recall, but also to thinking that the product is better value for money.<sup>22</sup> What's more, although we might prefer fluent fonts, when presented with monetarily similar offers, it's often the prices promoted in harder-to-read typography that will actually increase sales.<sup>23</sup> Of course both of these scenarios hinge on our ability to successfully process disfluent fonts, which, in turn, depends on our ability to process information more deeply (systematic persuasion).

One final note I'd like to make on disfluency is around its role in trust-building and corporate social responsibility (CSR). While the majority of consumers and executives agree that CSR is good for a company's reputation and long-term shareholder value,<sup>24</sup> several studies have found that communicating the CSR actions of a luxury brand can actually damage that brand's image if the associations don't line up. For instance, if customers associate a luxury brand such as Rolex with the concept of self-enhancement (dominance over resources and other people), then a CSR strategy that focuses on prosocial impact will conflict with this image, creating cognitive dissonance and potentially eroding credibility. On the other hand, the same CSR strategy might work magnificently for a brand such as TOMS shoes, whose core values focus on self-transcendence. This is because a brand concept automatically and sub-consciously activates related motivations and goals,<sup>25</sup> and if there is a conflict between the motivations triggered by the brand and those activated by their CSR actions, it can negatively impact that brand's reputation.

When it comes to advertising, however, ads featuring moderately incongruent brand information can actually result in deeper processing, better recall and recognition, and more positive attitudes towards both the advert and the brand itself.<sup>26</sup> The trick here is to find the sweet spot somewhere between congruent and extremely incongruent – a point at which people have enough cognitive resources to make sense of the novel information without feeling confused and frustrated. If they can't resolve these discrepancies, it can actually dilute the brand image and customers may end up ignoring the ad altogether. Whatever your approach, it pays to remember that no single strategy will work across all personalities and all contexts, so if you want to deploy these principles effectively, you'll have to split test them.



# MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

## Fluency

- **Repeat and rewind** Whether on your website or in your marketing materials, if you want to draw attention to a message or call to action, you have to repeat it enough times that it increases fluency, but not so much that it becomes annoying. This of course means split testing various treatments until you get the desired results, which you can do with services such as Optimizely<sup>27</sup> (for site-wide A/B testing) or Unbounce<sup>28</sup> (for landing pages).
- **Structure** Although this principle is harder to implement, if you have a recognisable strapline, you can increase the fluency of associated messages by replicating the strapline's structure or rhythm, or by using words with a similar meaning.
- **Perceptual fluency** Make it easy for people to process your visual content (marketing, videos, website) by keeping information simple, using a clear visual hierarchy, reducing visual clutter, using high colour or contrast between foreground and background, and leveraging symmetry where appropriate.
- **Linguistic fluency** If you want people to perceive your brand as familiar, follow instructions, or read your content more quickly, use text that is clear and high in contrast, in a sans-serif font that is easy to process. Try to use words and sentence structures that are simple and easy to pronounce.
- **When to use disfluency** When you want customers to engage more deeply with your message, perceive a luxury item as more unique, or you want to increase sales for a promotional product (for instance by designing a banner advert), use a font that is harder to read, such as Mistral or Monotype Corsiva.

# 7 OPTIMISING YOUR WEBSITE

“ *The problem is there are no simple ‘right’ answers for most web design questions (at least not for the important ones). What works is good, integrated design that fills a need – carefully thought out, well executed, and tested.*

STEVE KRUG, AUTHOR <sup>1</sup>

When it comes to designing your website, there are many variables that can influence your visitors’ actions and behaviours. Since people use all kinds of different devices, resolutions and browsers, it should go without saying that your website must use a responsive design so as to provide a good user experience across all devices. This is especially important given that a site’s aesthetics and ease-of-use can significantly impact the overall click-through rate.<sup>2</sup>

Although there are myriad factors that contribute to persuasive design, the success of a website will often boil down to just two things:

- *who* will be using your website (demographics and psychographics)
- and *why* (their goals)

According to psychologist Marcel Gommans and his colleagues, a good website ‘has to be designed for a targeted customer segment’,<sup>3</sup> which means that a thorough analysis of your target market should be at the foundations of your website and marketing strategy. Yet it is precisely this foundation that so many businesses overlook, and it is one of the biggest reasons why they fail.

With regards to ecommerce, one of the trickiest challenges you can face is a lack of trust. From the moment someone arrives at your site, you only have a few critical seconds in which to make a positive impression – if you fail to engage them, they will move on, taking their precious business with them.<sup>4</sup> Given that your level of credibility can make your message more (or less) persuasive, it’s worth spending a few moments here exploring how to boost yours.

In a study<sup>5</sup> investigating the impact of content versus overall design on a website’s credibility, researchers found that visitors whose primary goal was to seek

out information or products, were more likely to pay attention to the content than to the way in which it was presented. In this scenario, the accuracy, usefulness, clarity and focus of a website's information was reported as most important, along with the writing tone, privacy and customer service. In contrast, regular visitors who spent more time on the site were more likely to notice elements such as the design, readability, functionality and perceived security than their information-seeking peers.

Beyond product descriptions and customer reviews, when it comes to e-commerce much of our interaction remains non-verbal, and we'll often rely on the look and feel (the aesthetics or design) of a website to form our opinions about whether or not to stay.<sup>6</sup> What's interesting is that certain design features, including branding and the ability to provide user feedback, have been found to increase trust,<sup>7</sup> and it should come as no surprise that we're more likely to return to a website if we like its appearance and functionality.<sup>8</sup> Whether you're trading as an individual or a company, traits such as dynamism and expertise are strong predictors of online trust, as is consistent design throughout your website and brand.<sup>9</sup> So what are some of the psychological principles you can employ to boost the aesthetic, non-verbal appeal of your website?

## AESTHETICS

If you traced your ancestors back through history, you'd find that their perceptions of beauty would differ depending on where and when they lived. From the first, voluptuous Paleolithic statuette of Venus to today's size-zero models, at first glance, one might assume that aesthetics are inherently dynamic in nature. Yet, while trends may shape popular perceptions of beauty, if you dig a little deeper you'll find that many of the underpinning principles of attraction have remained consistent throughout the ages.

From meticulously staged selfies to glossy high-end adverts, our Photoshopped world reveals an unsettling obsession with beauty, and it is this drive for perfection and sexual idealism that lies behind some of the most influential communication techniques known to humankind. As clichéd as it may be, we all know that sex sells.

Freud was only half-right when he said that man is motivated by his biological drives for self-preservation and a bit of 'how's your father' – woman is too, and while it may not be appropriate to use overt sexual cues to attract the attention of prospective customers, the use of symmetry (especially in faces) can be a persuasive sign of sexual and genetic fitness, triggering an attraction response in the viewer, whatever their gender.<sup>10</sup> (Curiously, the personality traits of extraversion

and openness have also been strongly associated with symmetry of the face,<sup>11</sup> which is good news if you're high in both, since people have been shown to seek out symmetry when choosing a mate.<sup>12</sup>)

While we may find symmetrical faces more attractive (think Beyoncé and George Clooney), what's curious is that this preference for symmetry also extends to other visual media, from simple black-and-white geometric shapes<sup>13</sup> to websites themselves. In fact, in a recent fMRI study, psychologists discovered that the specific areas of our brains that become active when we're making an aesthetic judgement about beauty, also light up when we're judging something for symmetry.<sup>14</sup>

This may not sound particularly exciting, but it shows that there is a neural relationship between symmetry and beauty – which means that using symmetry in the design of a website can be a great way of making it more universally attractive. For clarification, I don't mean that if you split a website down the middle you should find a perfect mirror image on each side; rather, the visual components within the right and left halves of the page should be well balanced.

Although the reflectional symmetry described above can be a great way to increase the attractiveness of the faces that represent your brand, there are other visual hacks you can use to communicate your message more persuasively. For instance, researchers at Princeton University's Neuroscience Institute found that when presented with a cluttered visual field (such as the Mail Online website<sup>15</sup>), the sheer chaos restricts your brain's ability to focus on, and process, information.<sup>16</sup> If instead, you strip out unnecessary visual clutter from your website, this will enable you to consciously direct your visitors' finite attention to the important messages or calls to action (again, by increasing cognitive fluency).

Colours are another strikingly influential design component, especially since they evoke particular emotions and associations.<sup>17</sup> For instance, if I asked you to picture a colour that is fresh, what would spring to mind? What about a colour that is aggressive? Or calming? If you're from a Western culture, you'll have probably thought of green, red and blue, in that order, without deploying too much mental effort. We use emotive words to describe colours all the time, and yet because we rarely give them much thought, it's easy to forget that our experiences, associations and meaning-making may vary wildly from those of our customers (we'll be exploring this in greater detail in Chapter 9).

For instance, your preference for the level of visual complexity and colourfulness of a website will vary depending on your gender (women tend to prefer more colour), educational level (the higher your education, the less colour you may want), and culture (if you're Macedonian, you'll probably prefer more colourful designs, and if you're Russian, lower visual complexity).<sup>18</sup>

## Gender differences

Although I'm not a big fan of dividing preferences and behaviour by gender, I do think it's valuable to acknowledge differences where they exist, including within online environments. Along with cultural and trait-based differences, gender can play a significant role in our perceptions of a website's attractiveness and usability,<sup>19</sup> especially in more individualistic cultures such as North America and the UK.<sup>20</sup> For instance, some research suggests that men prefer websites that are more flashy, interactive and animated, whereas designs that are cleaner and uncluttered tend to be more popular among women.<sup>21</sup>

Whether due to the design of a site or the greater perceived risk women experience while shopping online,<sup>22</sup> there is evidence to suggest that women view websites more negatively than men,<sup>23</sup> with many judging the online environment as 'masculine' (which some propose may contribute to a sense of disempowerment among women).<sup>24</sup> Other research suggests that men tend to report 'a more satisfying online shopping experience than women',<sup>25</sup> which, combined with the fact that (in the US at least) men's online shopping now outstrips women's both in frequency<sup>26</sup> and spend,<sup>27</sup> might tell us that there are gains to be made in hiring more female designers to engage female customers in a more persuasive way.

## Cultural differences

Do our perceptions of beauty stem from nature or nurture? Well, it depends how you look at it. As we have seen, certain aspects of our aesthetic preferences are indeed subjective, open to the influences of culture, gender, age and social context. Yet, given our common ancestry, we might (correctly) assume that the brain's hard-wired responses to movement and bright colours, for example, are perhaps more universal.<sup>28</sup> Whichever the school of thought to which you belong, once we begin to examine the underlying dynamics, eventually a layered, nuanced picture emerges, in which both universal and individual preferences weave together to form a complex tapestry.

So let's explore one of these crucial influences a little further. In 2010, a group of psychologists carried out a study to investigate how culture might shape users' responses to a website's aesthetics.<sup>29</sup> They tested a range of websites and found two main dimensions that underpinned a site's overall attractiveness:

- *aesthetic* appeal
- *dynamic* appeal

The first measured a website's visual allure – whether it was visually appropriate, harmonious and elegant. The second measured a website's ability to arouse the

users' attention – whether it was colourful, interactive, fun to use, and created an impact.

The researchers found that while a website's aesthetic appeal could be influenced by cultural differences, its dynamic appeal remained universal. In practical terms, this means that if you can design your website to be both culturally appropriate in its aesthetics, and universally attention-grabbing, you will be more likely to engage your intended audience and trigger a positive emotional response.

## A COMMON LANGUAGE?

Having just explored the advantages of culture-specific website design, at the time of writing, English remains the dominant language used online, with over 870 million English speaking users (with Chinese following closely behind at just over 700 million).<sup>30</sup> Since its humble beginnings using a text format (ASCII) that could only accommodate the Roman alphabet, the technological infrastructure of the internet has changed beyond recognition. In 1998, it was estimated that around 75 per cent of all websites were in English;<sup>31</sup> by 2016, this number had contracted to a much smaller 53 per cent.<sup>32</sup> Although the exact numbers are difficult to ascertain, they point towards a more diverse web, one in which people of all nations are collaborating, connecting and trading, across geographic and linguistic borders.

The availability of increasingly accurate translation tools (such as the Bing translation tool for Twitter), has made it easier than ever before to access a truly global web, and countries that embraced the internet early on now routinely offer their website content in both their national language and in English. If you want to make the most of this global audience, rather than going for the quick fix of automated translation, you'll achieve the best results if you employ a professional native speaker to translate your copy in all its nuance. Not only will this allow you to take advantage of the idioms and turns of phrase specific to your target market, it will also save you the embarrassment of literal translations that simply don't make sense.

## MOTION

When it comes to effective interface design, motion (whether in video, animation or any moving element) is one of the key components that can either elevate or undermine your viewers' overall experience. Although several millennia separate

us from our hunter-gatherer ancestors, their experiences still influence our lives today. While we may no longer hunt, we remain evolutionarily primed to respond to movement, both focal and peripheral. Online, when used carelessly motion can detract attention from its intended focal point,<sup>33</sup> making the difference between a high conversion rate and a poor one.

Given the brain's limited attentional capacity, the fact that we now live in a multi-screen world means that our finite reserves are often spread thinly across various concurrent activities, all competing for our focus. This makes it all the more important that you streamline and declutter the user experience, and anything you can do to minimise the demands on your customers' attention will help create a more frictionless journey. The aim here is to reduce the likelihood of users performing conflicting parallel tasks. Bombarding your prospects with distracting or ill-conceived content will decrease their ability to process the information on your website, therefore lowering engagement and, ultimately, conversions.<sup>34</sup>

When deployed carefully and deliberately, motion can be leveraged in websites, ads and content to direct the viewer's attention to a specific point or call to action (CTA). A great example here is Airbnb's website, which at one stage used a full-width, gently moving video in the hero section of the homepage to attract the gaze of the visitor. The video would play automatically, with the subtle motion allowing the viewer's eyes to first rest on the CTA at the centre of the page, before moving towards peripheral areas of motion. From a psychological perspective, this kind of approach has the combined effect of drawing the eye in, directing attention to the CTA, and eliciting an emotional response to the content of the film. Compare this to a website that uses fast-moving, full-screen videos that steal your attention away from the CTA, and you'll quickly get a sense for which kind of motion converts best.

In terms of standalone content, if you're creating auto-playing videos or animated gifs for use in social media feeds or on landing pages, you can capitalise on your viewer's sensitivity to motion by designing compelling pieces that provoke them into watching more. Anything that elicits a strong emotional response or sense of curiosity will work well here, as the brain doesn't like to leave things unresolved and will therefore want to stick around to discover the full story.

## INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE

Information architecture essentially refers to the way in which you organise the content on your site. Since the majority of us go online in order to seek out specific information,<sup>35</sup> if you can understand how to structure your site in order to provide

information in an effortless and rewarding way, your visitors will be much more inclined to return.

As you may guess, when information is presented well it can reduce the cognitive load and overall effort, resulting in a much smoother experience for the end user. One of the simplest ways to achieve this is by signposting the most important information so that visitors can navigate to their area of interest as quickly and easily as possible. Websites that do this well are more likely to reduce their bounce rates and retain customers for longer, effectively securing a greater amount of time with which to influence users towards a desired outcome.

In general, an internally standardised approach to web design can be useful, however, there are exceptions to the rule and in some cases a break in the expected flow or design of a website can actually be quite useful. By interrupting someone's expectations and natural behaviours, you can draw immediate attention to particular information, sometimes boosting the effectiveness of otherwise standard calls to action. This tactic should be approached with caution, however, and I wouldn't recommend it unless you have a really good reason for doing so and an experienced design team that can help you pull it off.

## USABILITY

In terms of where to place your content, different devices will have different folds (where the screen ends), and its location can make a big impact on usability. As a rule of thumb, you should distil and display the most vital information above the fold, so that your customers can capture it in one go without having to scroll, whatever the device.<sup>36</sup> Although functionality is, of course, important, first impressions (especially aesthetic ones) can also influence a user's *perception* of your website's usability.<sup>37</sup> Since initial impressions are surprisingly consistent,<sup>38</sup> it pays to make sure you get it right.

On the whole, despite the ebb and flow of various trends, most websites follow similar conventions with regard to general appearance and structure. For instance, you'll usually find the navigation bar across the top of a page, the logo in the centre or top-left corner, and the contact information in the footer. I grant you this may feel a bit basic, but it's worth mentioning here if only to highlight that by meeting your customers' expectations and creating a space that feels familiar, you are freeing up their attention so they can focus on the important elements of your website, such as the content and CTAs. By making your site easy to use, you are, in effect, giving your customers more mental space to take in the information that really matters.



It's not just standardisation that can improve the comprehensibility of your website. When it comes to web design, a picture really is worth a thousand words, and with retina displays now so commonplace it's more important than ever that you optimise your images for maximum impact. For instance, if you sell physical products on any social ecommerce platforms (such as Amazon), it's worth knowing that customers generally prefer product photos that are high in contrast, high depth of field, warm in colour, and that display a larger key object (for instance a pair of trainers that take up three-quarters of the photo area).<sup>39</sup>

If you use auction sites such as eBay, larger pictures will generally increase sales, as will the use of actual (rather than stock) photos, and the higher the quantity and quality of your images, the more likely you are to grab the attention of your customers, increase trust and drive purchases.<sup>40</sup> If you are using this kind of platform to sell your goods, you can upload additional photos that are simply cropped, zoomed-in areas of existing photos, as this will provide extra detail of the products you are selling, thus increasing your chances of a successful sale. Assuming that you're selling high-quality merchandise, the easier it is for your customers to inspect and interact with the items (whether through videos, testimonials, or high-res photos), the more likely they are to buy.

All humans, whether driven by utilitarian or emotional motives, are fundamentally hard-wired to seek out personal satisfaction and gratification.<sup>41</sup> When we're searching for, selecting or using a product, or when we're interacting with a service provider, we're likely to experience a whole range of different moods and emotional states,<sup>42,43</sup> and the way a product is presented can actually influence these.<sup>44,45</sup> Since positive moods generally make us more optimistic, confident and unconstrained,<sup>46</sup> it stands to reason that customers who are feeling good are more likely to browse online, experience a lower perceived risk throughout the shopping experience, and display higher purchase intentions.<sup>47</sup>

While we all know that creating experiences of delight will encourage new visitors to return, repeat customers can prove a little trickier to engage. Since they already know you, they'll be wiser in evaluating the information and attributes of your online store,<sup>48</sup> which means that their motivations will be different to those who are shopping with you for the first time. When it comes to sales, new customers will usually be influenced by your website's layout,<sup>49</sup> ease of use<sup>50</sup> and the size and reputation of your business,<sup>51</sup> whereas returning customers will be more sensitive to convenience,<sup>52</sup> the breadth and depth of your product offering,<sup>53</sup> and the playfulness of the overall experience.<sup>54</sup>

Tapping into a sense of emotion and play can be an effective way to drive sales, a great example of which can be found on the landing page for Bellroy's 'slim your wallet' challenge. Purveyors of luxury wallets, they use the contrast principle to



Source: bellroy.com

compare a standard wallet to their own brand, inviting you to drag a slider across the page to see how much slimmer your wallet could be if you bought their product. When you scroll down the page, a simple stop-frame video grabs your attention to show you how the wallet is made, and by doing so, this charming micro-story elicits a greater sense of intimacy and connection with the product.

## ADS AND DEVICE-SPECIFIC BEHAVIOURS

Of all the questions I am asked when at conferences, one of the most common is this: do customers exhibit different behaviours depending on the device they're using? The short answer is, yes.

Given that more than half of all online traffic now comes from smartphones and tablets alone,<sup>55</sup> it probably won't surprise you that they also generate around half of all ecommerce transactions. Yet despite their small screens, tiny touchpads and unreliable bandwidths, we still insist on conducting all manner of tasks on our tablets and phones, when a much smarter approach might be to use our desktops.

According to reports from Google,<sup>56</sup> at least 30 per cent of our smartphone searches are related to locations, with top queries including 'where to buy/find/get', 'stores now open', and 'food now open'. What's more, around 28 per cent of these searches actually result in a purchase, which means that if you're not optimising your website for local search (whether through SEO or social content), you could be missing out on an increasingly large piece of the pie. Given that most of our social media consumption now happens via smartphone apps (accounting for 61 per cent of all time spent on social media in the US alone<sup>57</sup>), if you want to boost your reach and engage a wider audience, you can start by creating high-value content that can be shared within your customers' primary platform(s).

From a logistical perspective, when we interact with Google search results on our mobiles, the paid ads and knowledge panel are usually displayed first, which means it can take longer to find the first organic listing than it might on a desktop. Since phones also have a smaller screen, we're generally less likely to scroll below the fourth organic listing,<sup>58</sup> which means that if you're not ranking within these top four spots, you could be losing precious traffic. On the flip side, ads delivered on mobile platforms tend to perform significantly better than on desktops, especially at the bottom of the funnel for aided awareness and favourability (mobile ads also perform better for likelihood to recommend and purchase intent)<sup>59</sup>. This may be because mobile ads have greater proximity to the point of purchase and tend to contain less clutter, thus placing a lower cognitive load on its viewers.

Of course, the rising adoption of adblockers by people all over the world now means that some ads will never reach certain users, and it's no longer just those with desktops who are at it. Of the world's 1.9 billion smartphone owners, it is estimated that around 22 per cent (419 million people) are now blocking adverts on the mobile web – twice as many as on desktop – and even content and in-app ads are not safe.<sup>60</sup> As more of us download ad-blocking browsers, apps and

plugins, with emerging markets such as China, India, Indonesia and Pakistan leading the way, if the advertising industry is to survive it must find a way to make its ads more secure, fair and respectful towards its intended recipients. Given that online adverts can gobble up the majority of your monthly data allowance,<sup>61</sup> with many harbouring trackers and malware even when found on respectable sites,<sup>62</sup> the industry is set for a huge shake-up. So what can you do about it?

Well, the Interactive Advertising Bureau's tech lab suggests that publishers take the D.E.A.L. approach, which means *detecting* ad blocking in order to spark a conversation, *explaining* the value exchange that advertising can enable, *asking* for a change in user behaviour to maintain an equitable exchange, and then *lifting* restrictions or *limiting* access in response to the consumer's choice.<sup>63</sup> Given that the use of ad blockers is so pervasive, it may be a while before we see positive results from such a barter. In the meantime, maintaining a healthy respect for your visitors in terms of the content you post, the data you track and the social interactions you engage in, can help promote a more trusting, mutually beneficial relationship between you and your customers.

In terms of businesses and websites that are most at risk, those aimed at younger, technically savvy, or more male audiences appear to be significantly worse affected,<sup>64</sup> so if this is your target audience, you may have to find creative ways in which to reach out and establish a fair exchange.

## CALLS TO ACTION

Whether you're asking people to join your newsletter, sign up for a free trial or buy your product, to elicit the desired response you need a persuasive call to action.

Typically displayed as flat buttons, CTAs often use imperative verbs to issue customers a polite command, such as 'Call now', 'Visit a store today' or 'Sign up free'. If the action is primarily utilitarian in nature, such as adding an item to a cart or going to check out, then the CTA should generally be as simple and direct as possible. By providing a clear goal, this will direct the user's attention towards a singular outcome, thus lowering the cognitive load and increasing the conversion rate.

However, CTAs needn't be stripped back and functional in order to be effective. Depending on your brand voice, you can also make the action more descriptive, so instead of the word 'Submit', you could try 'Get a free quote'; if you're running an offer, instead of 'Buy now', try 'Add to cart – save 15%'; and instead of 'Download', you could try 'Get your free report'. Now, whether it is best to use the word 'my' or 'your' in the CTA (for instance 'Get my free report' versus 'Get your free

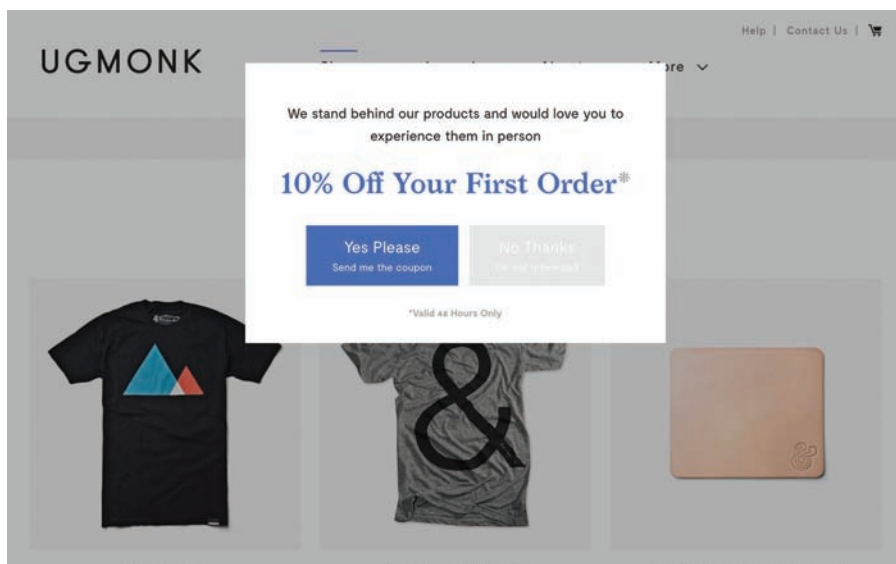
report'), will depend on factors such as how familiar the visitor is with your brand, what action it is they are being asked to take, and how personally relevant it might be to them. While both words can be effective in different contexts, you will need to test each in order to ascertain which is the right option to use.

As a rule of thumb, users tend not to like ambiguity, so it's worth testing CTAs specifically designed to reduce your visitors' sense of uncertainty (such as Netflix's 'Join free for a month', or Prezi's 'Give Prezi a try'). That being said, there are instances in which outright provocation can work, and many marketers have had success with taunts such as 'Do not press this button', or 'Are you doing your SEO wrong? Enter your URL to find out'. While these tactics may be successful in some cases, they can quickly grow old and damage your reputation if used poorly.

When deciding on the placement and design of your CTA, it's important to consider the background colour, any surrounding images, video and text, and how it will work within the overall design of your website. Effective CTAs are typically those that stand out due to high contrast, high saturation and prominence on the page – the easier and more inviting the action, the more likely people are to take it.

Now, I can't write about CTAs without mentioning the dreaded popup. I've never been a big fan of these, yet I must concede that when executed well (and sometimes even poorly), they can significantly increase conversions. Based on a technique called the pattern interrupt, popups are thought to work by creating an unexpected break in our rhythm, causing us to sit up and pay attention. They're not necessarily bad in and of themselves, however I do object to the more irritating, unscrupulous varieties, the likes of which might offer a free ebook or gift, only to provide the option of selecting 'Yes, I'm smart so I'll take the book' or 'No thanks, I'd rather stay ignorant'. It's condescending and probably won't reflect well on your business in the long term.

However, not all popups have to be annoying. Those that gently slide into view at the bottom of a page, without obscuring content or completely disrupting the visitor's experience, can provide a good balance between attracting attention and minimising irritation. Another good example is the use of exit popups that appear when a visitor is about to leave the page, activated by their mouse movements. This can be an effective way of giving users an extra incentive to buy from you, such as offering a limited-time offer or a discount. A nice example of this is the Ugmonk<sup>65</sup> popup below, which also highlights a common practice of providing two options – one, the desired response in a bold, brightly coloured box; and two, the alternative response in a dull, minimal box (some websites simply use greyed-out text):



Source: ugmonk.com

## RISK, TRUST AND PRIVACY

With regard to customer acquisition, many businesses now encourage users to sign up to their products or services using their preferred social account (as opposed to with their email address). By providing customers with what appears to be a convenient, one-click way to log in, companies of all sizes are gaining access to unprecedented amounts of user data, at increasing levels of granularity. While this may seem like great news for the businesses involved, such an approach may come at a hidden cost. Many users may feel uncomfortable using a social network rather than an email address, due to a lack of trust in the companies behind these networking platforms, and a reticence to give them even more personal data without clarity as to how it will be used.

This was illustrated to dramatic effect in a large-scale survey conducted in 2016,<sup>66</sup> where consumers were asked to rank the world's most relevant brands in descending order. Despite their popularity and size, of all the brands that were listed, Google and Facebook barely even made the top 100. Perhaps more strikingly, when respondents were asked to rank these two platforms as 'a brand I can trust', Google's position dropped to 130, and Facebook plummeted to 200. Despite attracting billions of active users every single day, and bringing pleasure, connection and utility to people the world over, both brands suffered results indicative of

a wider, deeper issue – a concern that these companies aren't necessarily on the side of their users.

It's not just big businesses that are at risk. In another study investigating consumer behaviours around mobile purchases and app downloads,<sup>67</sup> researchers found that a lack of trust remained the single biggest barrier to growth. 36 per cent of respondents said that the reason they didn't download or use more mobile apps, was because they didn't trust the security, they didn't want to give up their private information, they'd had bad personal experiences, or had heard negative stories in the news. An even greater number (41 per cent, a sharp increase on previous years) reported that in many instances they didn't want to share their personal information, but knew that they had to if they wanted to use an app.

Whether people choose to share their data or not, it's clear that a growing number of consumers are becoming concerned about their privacy. There's a reason why so many messaging platforms are now offering end to end encryption, and it's probably not just for the PR. It is my belief that when faced with an ultimatum (share all this data or you can't use the app), users may well concede in the moment, but it will likely only be a matter of time before another, smarter platform comes along requesting less data and promising greater privacy, thus sweeping aside or forcing change in the competition. Of course this seachange may take a while, but if you can find a way to balance your need for customer data with users' needs for privacy, you will be much better placed for longer-term success.

## MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

### Design a killer website

- **Purpose** Whatever the purpose of your website, this should be clearly communicated by its design.<sup>68</sup> Whether you provide personal, commercial or recreational services, you can create a more meaningful and emotionally rewarding interaction by employing an aesthetic that reflects your business' vision and values.
- **Design for trust** Websites that provide visitors with a good user experience regardless of their familiarity with the site, tend to be perceived as more trustworthy. To get this right, it's worth running user tests to assess your site for content (is it useful, accurate, clear and focused,

and is the writing tone attractive or off-putting?), overall design (how do users rate the aesthetics, readability and functionality?), and the service (does your site give customers a sense of privacy and a reliable, friendly customer service?).

- **Meet their needs** We all want to feel connected, valued and understood, so if you want to create a good customer experience, you have to research your audience and tailor your website to their needs and beliefs.<sup>69</sup> Getting to know your visitors in this way will enable you to design a site with their primary goals in mind. The easier it is for consumers to achieve their goals, the more likely they are to trust you, buy from you, and recommend you to their friends. Researching your customers can also help you to create a greater sense of rapport, which in turn can engender feelings of safety, empowerment and a greater willingness to purchase.
- **Clear messaging** Present your key messages clearly and concisely. Simplify the amount of information your users have to process by reducing clutter, structuring your pages clearly, and making use of case studies to communicate your services. Your headlines should be succinct, specific, and reflect your visitors' expectations, and should focus on one desirable outcome that your customers care about (i.e. the solution you provide).
- **User experience** The more comfortable, easy and enjoyable it is for people to use your website, the more satisfied they will be. Since credibility is crucial for any business, your site should be internally consistent and congruent with your brand, as this will help boost perceived trustworthiness. The goal on any given page should be clearly defined and easy to accomplish, and you can check how well you're achieving this either by running user tests yourself, or by using a remote service such as UsabilityHub.com.
- **Intrinsic information** A good website will provide accurate information that is updated as and when necessary. This applies not only to blogs and content, but to any page that delivers information about a service, product, contact details, and so on.
- **Accessibility** We all want access to good services and products, which is why it is important that your website be accessible to people of all abilities. You can do this by using alternative text for images, making sure all



functionality can be accessed through a keyboard (so it works with assistive technologies), and including transcripts for audio and video content. For a practical guide on how to make your website more accessible, check out the WC3's Introduction to Web Accessibility.<sup>70</sup>

- **Representational information** Unless you run a very niche online business or forum, you should make the content on your website friendly and easy to understand. This can mean including explanations for any jargon you use, and providing concise descriptions of your products and services. You can also add clarity by using examples, images and footnotes. To render your content accessible, ensure that it is correctly labelled for users who may have visual impairments.
- **Search engine optimisation (SEO)** We all know that a website's content should be well organised, accessible and search engine friendly. In practical terms, this means labelling all your pages, headings, and content appropriately, making sure to include the correct metadata (title and description) and H1 tags for each page. You should include the relevant keywords in your titles, headers, subheaders and in the introduction and conclusion paragraphs of your written content. You can also optimise your site by using relevant terms to provide a more holistic context to your keywords. For instance, relevant terms for the keywords 'web psychology', might be 'conversions', 'UX' and 'marketing', which you would then include in the copy. If you want to find popular keywords and phrases that aren't hyper-competitive, you can use tools such as Google's Keyword Planner<sup>71</sup> or Moz's Keyword Explorer.<sup>72</sup> For practical tips on high-quality SEO, check out the fantastic beginner's guide by Moz.<sup>73</sup>
- **Contextual information** If you provide customer support directly through your website (through instant messaging or Live Chat services), make sure you know when your clients are likely to contact you so that you can be on hand to respond swiftly. For example, if you are a company specialising in hand-piped chocolates (a product close to my heart) and you're based on the West Coast USA, you may have customers from the East Coast coming online requesting support hours before you've even woken up. In this case, it can help to hire someone in the right timezone to respond to such customers in a timely manner. For websites that cater to a global audience, contextual information can

include subsites that represent different countries, which will make it easier for new visitors to find the portal that's right for them.

- **Coherent design** When it comes to web design, different countries will have different norms around best practice. By researching and complying with local conventions you can make it easier for users to cognitively 'map' your site and find what they're looking for. As mentioned earlier, if you need help with cultural conversion for your content, social media or search, services such as Oban Digital can be worth exploring.
- **Interactivity** Many of the most successful websites are interactive. Where relevant, encourage users to engage with you either through comment sections, product ratings, social media or user-generated content (more about this when we explore social media in Chapter 10).
- **Video** One of the quickest, most emotionally engaging ways to convey a message is through video. We're evolutionarily primed to respond to faces and movement, so if you want to use an auto-playing video as the background of a landing page (behind or alongside a call to action), make sure that the motion is driving your viewers' attention to the right place. Too much movement and you'll distract them, lowering retention and click-through rates.
- **Keep your content updated** Keeping your visitors in the loop with relevant news and updates will communicate that you're active and entice people to return to your site. Maintaining an interesting blog that delivers value will also encourage other businesses to cite your work and link back to your domain. Longform thought-leadership pieces can also work well, and many brands now contribute to third-party websites such as Medium<sup>74</sup> for more sporadic contributions. A few words of caution here: posting your content on third-party sites alone, can be risky; firstly, because the owners have the right to edit and remove content they do not approve of, often without notice; and secondly, because you will be driving visitors to a website which is not part of your acquisition funnel. Additionally, placing all your best content on third party platforms will mean that the majority of the links you acquire will point to websites you do not own or control, which can hinder your SEO.

- **Call to action** Whatever your goal, make sure your CTA uses succinct, compelling language, and try to include imperative words to create a polite command. From a visual standpoint, make sure that your CTA stands out on the page both in terms of colour (hue and saturation) and location (it should be in a prominent position above the fold). A good CTA should be easy to read, compelling to click and respectful towards the user.
- **Popups** If you must use these, select popups that don't disrupt the visitor's experience completely. Try the less invasive slide-in, or an exit popup that offers time-sensitive discounts (e.g. '10% off for new customers, valid 12 hours only').
- **Go local** If you sell products or services from a physical store, you can optimise your website for local search by claiming directory listings, encouraging customers to write Google reviews, featuring your physical address on your homepage, taking out adverts that target people by location (you can do this on Google, Facebook and Twitter), and adding a local extension to your Google ads if you have them.
- **Test, test, test** All of the recommendations I've outlined above are only as useful as your ability to implement, test and improve upon them. Different contexts and customers require different approaches, so if you want make the most of these insights, please do apply them and see which combination works best for you.
- **Respecting customer privacy** There are several things you can do to make your customers feel more secure. These include using an https certificate (which encrypts all communications between your website and your customers' browsers), only asking for the minimum personal information you require, and being transparent about how you are using this data. You can also employ tools such as Ghostery<sup>75</sup> to manage any third-party technologies and trackers you might be using, and to ensure compliance with AdChoices programs, cookie laws and other programs.

## PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE: EYETRACKING

If you want to understand how the design of your website is influencing your visitors' attention and behaviours, eye-tracking tools can provide clear and useful insights about where your customers are looking, in what sequence and for how long.

Although this approach typically only measures the focus of your visitors' foveal vision (as opposed to their peripheral awareness), when used correctly, eye-tracking can help you predict where people will look when they hit your landing page. In terms of accuracy, live trials carried out on members of your target demographic will tend to provide the most insightful information, but these can be time-consuming and often take a vast amount of preparation and investment to run well.

While we all want to improve our websites' usability and conversion rates, many of us may not have the resources necessary for these kinds of trials. That's why, in the next few paragraphs we'll explore what the largest studies can tell us about how and where users look, where to place certain elements for maximum impact, and how to format your content so as to get the best head start.

Back in 2006, the Nielsen Norman Group released what is now regarded as a classic eye-tracking study, in which they showed that we typically scan websites and search results roughly in an F-shaped pattern, starting at the top left-hand corner of the page. From there, we skim across the navigation (the top bar of the F), then move down the page a bit to read across in a second, shorter horizontal scan (the lower bar of the F), before finally sweeping down the left-hand side of the page in search of relevant content.<sup>76</sup>

Nielsen concluded from these findings that most users don't read text thoroughly, so if you want to get any important information across, you have to include it in the most prominent parts of the page (usually a heading, CTA, or the first few lines of a paragraph). These days, websites are much more image heavy, which means that you have even less textual real estate to play with. No matter how condensed your copy, it's generally best to include the most information-rich words in places where people will notice them during a quick scan, which usually means at the start of your headings, paragraphs, and in any bullet points you may have.

As a rule of thumb, any headlines you use should be large, bold and easy to read when you're squinting at the page, and you can use these to break your copy into smaller, bite-size chunks that include short paragraphs, bullet points and numbered lists. If you're writing a long-form piece, different principles will apply and you may not want to interrupt your readers with too much chunking.

Another element to consider is the amount of white space around your content. If you increase the white space, you'll effectively enable your visitors to focus on what's important without the sense of being overwhelmed or depleted. Given that we've all become accustomed to a fairly standardised website structure, with the navigation across the top of the page and any content such as text, headlines and images justified to the left, it makes sense to follow these conventions so you're working alongside your visitors' expectations and natural flow, not against them.

If you're interested in advertising, you'll have no doubt come across banner blindness, our propensity to automatically ignore any element on a page or news-feed that vaguely resembles an ad. Banner blindness has become such a big concern that most businesses now opt for a more integrated approach to digital advertising, which means investing in value-rich content such as articles, interviews, videos and reports, as well as paid media.

When it comes to the images displayed on a site, further research by Nielsen<sup>77</sup> has found that we're actually quite discerning, paying greater attention to visuals that contain contextually relevant information, such as product images in an online shop, or images of real people on social websites. We're also quick to identify and discount images that are either terribly staged (it turns out we all hate stock photos) or that are just decorative in nature.

While we may filter out much of the content we see online, there is one kind of image we find particularly irresistible: the human face. It's long been known that we exhibit a preference for faces above other stimuli, whatever our age, and this may go some way to explain why on Instagram, pictures with human faces are 32 per cent more likely to attract comments and 38 per cent more likely to receive likes than photos with none.<sup>78</sup> Our penchant for faces has also been linked with our emoticon obsession,<sup>79</sup> but the bottom line is that if you do use images of faces, you should do so carefully as they will steal the spotlight and, as we'll see in the next section, that's not always a good thing.

## MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

### Keep it simple

- **The F pattern** Remember that when people visit your website, they'll typically follow the F pattern, which means that your most important information should sit within this natural line of sight. Keep vital content above the fold, and make sure the first few words of your headings and paragraphs are information-rich.
- **Attention is a scarce resource** Your users' attention is a finite and should be spent wisely. Every bit of information on your website will demand a certain amount of attention, so the more design elements you include, the more competition there will be. In order to minimise the cognitive load, stick to a clear attentional hierarchy by ensuring that your

headlines are easy to spot (for instance by using a bold, large font), and your content is chunked into scannable sections.

- **Advertising** Since most of us frequently ignore banner ads, it's worth considering which forms of content you can create that will both deliver value to your prospective customers and help drive sales. If you're going down the route of native advertising, make sure your content is rich, insightful and valuable so that those reading it will associate your brand with expertise.
- **Images** We process images more quickly than words, and can spot a stock photo a mile away. Make sure any images you use are contextually and emotionally relevant, and if you use faces, high-res images that are naturally expressive tend to work best.
- **Rules are silver, testing is golden** If you want to improve the performance of your website, it's vital that you undertake robust multi-variate testing. Additionally, if you have the budget live eye-tracking trials can be an avenue worth investigating.

# 8 SELECTING THE RIGHT IMAGES

“ *A picture is worth a thousand words.*

FREDERICK R. BARNARD, MARKETER<sup>1</sup>

In the absence of being able to interact physically with a person or product, when it comes to ecommerce we rely primarily on visual cues to establish the quality and value of an item before we buy. This means that the way in which a business presents its goods and services online can significantly impact sales.<sup>2</sup>

Although one's personality, culture and prevailing social norms can influence perceptions of beauty, a growing body of research, such as that conducted by neuroscientist Professor Ramachandran and philosopher Hirstein<sup>3</sup>, suggests that there may be certain universal principles that underpin our overall sense of aesthetics.

If, as these studies suggest, a significant portion of our visual preferences are hard-wired, then they may also be predictable. This means that if you understand which triggers elicit a particular response, you can use them deliberately to influence and guide your visitors' experience.

## THE UNIVERSAL APPEAL OF BEAUTY

Artists have long understood and exploited the appeal of the golden ratio (found in natural objects such as the Nautilus shell), and the power of the prototypical (things that represent an archetype or ideal, such as Michelangelo's David).<sup>4</sup> Relating back to the principle of perceptual fluency, visuals that possess these properties are perceived as predictable and familiar, which means that they are much easier for us to recognise and process (this holds true whether we're talking about images, objects or even products).<sup>5</sup>

Professor Zeki, considered by many to be the founding father of neuroaesthetics, proposes to have found a formula for beauty. In a study using fMRI scans, he discovered that a specific part of the brain, the medial orbitofrontal cortex,

becomes active when we see or hear something beautiful, in contrast to heightened activity in the amygdala in reaction to something ugly.<sup>6</sup>

In another study, researchers Komar and Melamid set out to explore whether any global aesthetic preferences might exist with regard to paintings.<sup>7</sup> They canvassed millions of people worldwide, and found that most of us show a preference for blue landscapes that include national icons, such as a country's flag. They also discovered that we universally prefer paintings that depict children playing, with the exception of one country – France – whose participants overwhelmingly expressed a proclivity for naked women. While I'm not advocating the use of nudity to attract any French customers you might have (although I imagine this would be effective), these results do imply that we find certain subjects and elements more visually attractive than others. The fact that we'd rather look at natural environments than those influenced by humans,<sup>8</sup> and that we tend to be irresistibly drawn towards images with an air of mystery about them (such as a partially obstructed view),<sup>9</sup> can help inform the decisions we make when selecting visuals to represent us online.

## PERCEPTUAL PROBLEM-SOLVING

Our primitive ancestors depended on their keen senses of sight and smell to keep them alive, identifying potential predators, prey, mates and sources of food and water. Their ability to perceptually group together those slow-moving yellow dots amid the green foliage of the trees, so that they recognised the outline of a stalking lion, could mean the difference between life and a rather grisly death.

Although we are unlikely to face such situations now, the fact that our visual system developed this ability to recognise salient features in our environment, can help to explain why so many of us enjoy engaging with images that challenge and puzzle us today.

A great example of this is the classic Dalmatian illusion,<sup>10</sup> a picture that initially appears to show an abstract array of black dots against a white background. Although the eyes will scan the image in an attempt to discern any visible pattern, it's not uncommon for it to take a while before you suddenly see that the dots in fact represent a Dalmatian walking in the dappled shade of trees.

In this tiny 'aha' moment, most of us will get a tingly, gratifying sense of satisfaction. This reinforcing jolt of excitement is thought to highlight the connection between the visual system and the limbic, emotional part of the brain, so that once you've spotted the dog, it becomes impossible to un-see it. Now that you have successfully made sense of the picture, there's no way your brain will want to return to its previous, uncomfortable state of ambiguity.



It's primarily for this reason that we find mysterious images so appealing. The less obvious the puzzle, the more it piques our interest, and the greater our satisfaction in solving it. With attention spans thought to be diminishing, this technique can be a great way to engage people and entice them towards action. You can use this approach in any of your visuals to lure people in, and it even works in emails, as illustrated in this newsletter image I received from MOO:



Source: courtesy of MOO.

## NOT JUST A PRETTY FACE

Over the years, there has been no shortage of studies investigating the effects of beauty on our decision-making, from the use of models in TV ads to drive sales,<sup>11</sup> to seeing an attractive customer touch a product that you are then more likely to buy.<sup>12</sup> Yet despite conventional wisdom that hiring more attractive salespeople will result in higher sales, a recent study from the Chinese University of Hong Kong found that when it comes to embarrassing products (think haemorrhoid cream), the mere presence of a goodlooking salesperson can be enough to dissuade shoppers from buying.<sup>13</sup>

What's more, research has found that simple faces (without any distinguishing features) are often viewed as more attractive than complex ones, probably because our brains prefer to look at things which are easier to process.<sup>14</sup> So when it comes to choosing the right models for your content, it's worth remembering that

'a century of research in empirical aesthetics has revealed preferences for certain forms and patterns that appear universal', and that 'the best documented of these preferences are for symmetrical, averaged and prototypical forms, curved contours and scale-invariant patterns'.<sup>15</sup>

This inclination towards images which are easy to process may also play a part in other phenomena such as the *peak shift effect*, a principle in animal discrimination learning that appears to influence our visual preferences online. Imagine for a moment that you're teaching a rat to distinguish a rectangle from a square (with an aspect ratio of 2:3) by rewarding it for every correct response. Over time, the rat will learn to respond more frequently to the rectangle. What's curious is that it will react more strongly to a rectangle that is longer and thinner (with, for instance, an aspect ratio 4:1) than to the original with which it was trained, which implies that the rat has in fact learned the rule of rectangularity, as opposed to the simple discrimination between two items.<sup>16</sup>

In the world of human aesthetics and art, our predilection for amplified versions of a subject can be traced throughout history. From ancient cave paintings and the works of great artists to the caricatures we find in Disney films today, whatever the medium, we have always sought to depict life in various symbolic, hyperbolic forms. This preference for supernormal stimuli is likely to arise from the fact that we have limited attentional resources, which we generally try to conserve. If we extract only the key, defining features of a subject (such as the slim waist, full breasts and round hips of a reclining nude) our brains can ignore any superfluous information and instead focus on the salient features. This may explain why caricatured faces are often easier to process and identify than photos of their original subjects,<sup>17</sup> and why a sketch or outline drawing elicits greater brain activity than a fully coloured photograph.<sup>18</sup>

## PERCEPTUAL GROUPING

Besides this penchant for distortion, our brains are also hard-wired to identify and link related features into one single object (such as the yellow dots of the lion moving among the trees). The idea that something is greater than (or somehow different from) the sum of its parts (as explored in Gestalt theory), translates online to the visual patterns we sometimes see among separate visual elements. For instance, all else being equal, we tend to group together items that are similar in colour, size, proximity, orientation, luminance and saturation, which can have significant implications for user behaviour.

As we explored in the last chapter, our ability to chunk information according to its visual properties can impact how easily we scan and process it for relevance. Combine this with our desire to make sense of things in a holistic manner and you begin to see the useful applications of perceptual grouping in design. For instance, if you have a page for hair care products and you want your customers to visually group together similar items, you could display them within the same closed region or section of the page, or group them by colour and orientation. This will help visitors to identify the product category (such as conditioners) as a single unified group, making it easier for them to process, recognise and buy the item.

## EMOTIONS, EYE GAZE AND BODY LANGUAGE

Since decision-making is inherently emotional, it can be useful to know how your images are influencing your visitors' feelings and behaviours. Whereas moods refer to longer-lasting states, and attitudes have a more cognitive component, emotions usually arise in reaction to an event. Because they have strong physiological correlates such as facial expressions and gestures, we can actually detect and measure them to a high degree of accuracy. This is incredibly useful if you want to assess the emotional impact of your content on potential customers, and there are now a number of facial coding technologies that you can use to consensually track people's real-time responses as they interact with your products, website and videos.

Different scenarios often call for different approaches, and you may wish to elicit a variety of emotions depending on the product or service you're selling, its context and the psychography of your target audience. Of the emotional states that you can work with, at least seven have been found to be largely universal: joy, anger, surprise, fear, sadness, contempt and disgust.<sup>19</sup>

When you're using photos of people to communicate these emotions, it's worth noting that expressions and physical gestures can often be culture-specific (imagine an Italian and a Brit in conversation), and so they will need to reflect the norms of your intended audience. When using images of faces, humans are quite adept at correctly identifying certain emotions no matter to whom the face belongs, and although we might not spot a false smile in a photo, when it comes to videos we're much more likely to notice when someone's putting it on.

If you want to use images to move people towards action, you have to identify which of the seven emotions will work best at that particular stage of the customer journey. You can do this by producing a selection of authentic,

culture-specific images each of which expresses a dominant emotion and split testing these until you get the desired result. As a general rule of thumb, natural, high-resolution photos featuring people with Duchenne smiles,<sup>20</sup> where the mouth turns up and the eyes crinkle, will elicit the most positive response. Whatever the emotion you wish to convey, expressions that match the sentiment of your message will typically work best, unless you are intentionally seeking to disrupt expectations by creating dissonance through the use of mis-matching images and copy.

While the emotional content of a face is important, it's not the only element to which we attend – the direction in which someone is looking (or pointing) can also have a profound impact on our behaviour. In a classic eyetracking study conducted by ObjectiveDigital.com,<sup>21</sup> participants were presented with one of two variants of an advert for Baby.com. The first included a photo of a baby gazing directly at the viewer, with a headline and copy to the right of the page. The second advert was identical, bar the fact that the baby was now depicted looking towards the copy. By measuring the direction and duration of participants' eye movements, it soon became clear that those in the first condition were fixating on the baby's face, barely paying any attention to the copy at all. In contrast, participants who were presented the second version appeared to engage more deeply with the text. Why? Because they were subconsciously following the baby's gaze.

Evolutionarily speaking, it makes perfect sense. Our survival as a species has always depended on our ability to read and respond to social cues. Whether it's the tilt of someone's head, the direction of their gaze or their pointed finger, we're primed to subconsciously pick up these signals and respond to them accordingly.<sup>22</sup> This same sense extends to body language, too, and while gestures may differ depending on the culture, there are certain universal principles that are useful to be aware of.

In the best-selling book *What Every BODY is Saying: An Ex-FBI Agent's Guide to Speed-Reading People*,<sup>23</sup> former FBI counterintelligence officer Joe Navarro reveals some fascinating ways in which to decode a range of non-verbal behaviours. From observing the angle of someone's torso (facing towards the things they like, and away from those they don't), to noticing the direction in which their feet are pointing (if it's the door, they may be looking for a hasty exit), it's a comprehensive and practical guide to reading body language and deciphering possible underlying emotional states.

Since we process images more quickly than text, if you can load these with emotional meaning, your message will hit home faster. For instance, a person

whose body language is open (with arms outstretched, hands visible, torso facing the object of focus, and the face offering a smile), will give a consistent non-verbal signal of trust, openness and positivity towards the person or object to which they are attending. On the other hand, a closed or diminutive posture (hands hidden, arms crossed, with the torso turning away), will give a very different impression indeed. Either may be effective depending on the context, the key is to understand which emotional message will elicit the desired response so that you can orchestrate your images accordingly.

When working with emotional content, the most critical mistake you can make is to overlook congruence, which in this instance means considering whether the non-verbal cues match your intended message. Online, we tend to rapidly scan content to assess its purpose and meaning, and if we come across an image that doesn't match the message (for instance a picture of someone looking furious alongside a happy heading), we can experience dissonance and a sense of unease. There are times when this kind of mismatch can be useful in arousing humour (think memes of cute cats saying horrendous things); however, if you want to optimise your images for maximum impact, you have to make sure that the non-verbals you use are in fact communicating the emotional message you wish to convey.


## MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

### Picture perfect

- **Directing attention** If you're using images to attract and direct people's attention, make sure you split test them to ensure they're having the desired effect. While pictures can add a great deal of richness to an otherwise plain design, they do place a demand on your viewers' attentional resources and if used incorrectly, can end up competing against other important elements within your site. When you're optimising the design of your website then, it's important to bear in mind that the contrast, colour, luminance, typography and location of your content and images will all influence the visitor's experience and actions.
- **Mystery** Our brains like to solve problems, so if you want to entice people towards an action (for instance encourage them to claim a discount,

visit your website or make a purchase), you can use an image that will provoke their curiosity.

- **Smiles are beautiful** If you are including photos of your staff, models or customers, try to select those that are the most emotionally expressive. While we can't all be America's next top model, smiles are almost always attractive. Of course, if you're selling embarrassing products, it may pay to be more discrete by avoiding photos of faces completely.
- **Hyperbole** We get a kick out of exaggerated images, so if you're using any illustrations, try representing the subject using only its key defining features and measure the response.
- **Birds of a feather** The visual system perceptually groups similar items together, so if you want your visitors to chunk specific products or website elements, try grouping them by colour, luminance, saturation, size, proximity and orientation.
- **Black and white** Areas of highest contrast will usually attract attention, so if you want your visitors to focus on a specific image or element of your website (such as an image, CTA, headline or form), try increasing the contrast.
- **Emotional triggers** Emotions arise in reaction to events and they can significantly influence the decisions we make. There are seven that appear to be universal: joy, anger, surprise, fear, sadness, contempt and disgust. Online, the type of emotion you should trigger will depend on contextual factors, such as the product category, the psychography of your customer and the stage at which they sit within the customer journey.
- **Facial expressions** When transmitting an emotional message, you can increase the impact by using high-resolution, natural images of faces expressing one of the seven universal emotions.
- **Non-verbal cues** If you're using photos of people, you can use non-verbal cues to communicate your message more rapidly. To generate feelings of warmth, trust and friendliness, use open body language – arms and palms open, torso blading towards the object of focus, smiling face, legs uncrossed. For feelings of uncertainty and unease, use



closed body language – hunched or diminutive postures, crossed arms and legs, eye gaze lowered, palms hidden. When pairing an image with text, decide whether you want them to be congruent (matching) or incongruent (mis-matching).

- **Made you look** If you want to direct people's attention towards a specific CTA or area of the page, use an image of someone looking or pointing towards that location.

# 9 THE PSYCHOLOGY OF COLOUR

“Colours alter the meanings of the objects or situations with which they are associated and colour preferences can predict consumers’ behaviour.

DR. MUBEEN ASLAM, MARKETING<sup>1</sup>

What does the colour orange signify to you? If you’re reading this book in Europe or the USA, roadworks and traffic delays might spring to mind, but if you live in Asia you’ll most likely associate this colour with spirituality and celebration. If you’re Zambian, you may not even consider orange to be a separate colour at all.<sup>2</sup>

A single colour can have a multitude of different and often contradictory meanings, which, to a large extent, depend on their cultural context. Popular media can often portray colour meanings in rather simplified terms, preferring ubiquitous, general principles to the altogether more nuanced, complex reality.

As we shall see in a moment, the colour red is an excellent example of this. Commonly thought to represent sexuality, its meaning (and our psychological and physiological responses to it) can vary dramatically from one situation to the next, signifying sexual availability and attraction in one context and danger in another.

The ways in which we interpret and respond to colours depend on a range of variables, including our cultural norms (in China, red is seen as lucky), learned associations (‘Coca-Cola red’ and ‘IBM blue’)<sup>3</sup> and universally innate responses (the four Fs: freeze, fight, flight and the f-word). While some researchers have argued that our emotional responses to colour have an evolutionary origin,<sup>4</sup> even when we do find biological tendencies these can sometimes clash against acquired societal norms,<sup>5</sup> resulting in cultural differences and a bunch of rules that simply can’t be generalised to everyone.

Suffice it to say that colour psychology is a tricky field and one that is peppered with conflicting evidence. While I have endeavoured to collate and distil the best of the research here, you should take the information in the following pages with a pinch of salt. Allow this chapter to broaden your understanding of colour and culture, and to inform the design decisions you make. As you read, however, bear in mind that our tastes and preferences change, and if you want to select colours for a specific purpose (whether to represent your brand, use in your website or include in your content), it’s best to split test a few variations to assess their psychological impact.



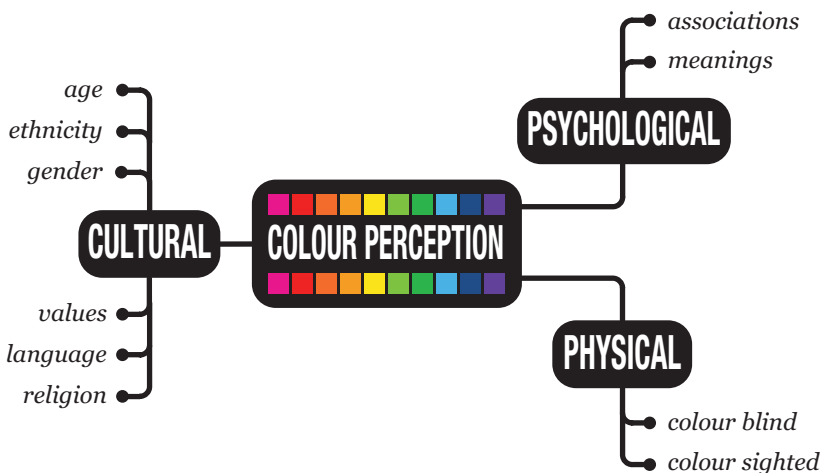
Throughout history, colour has served as a potent and instantaneous form of non-verbal communication between people. From signalling social status or nobility with the hue of one's clothes, to expressing a particular emotion through the tone of a painting, it can offer a nuanced, varied palette of meaning where words might otherwise fail. Online, the appropriate use of colour can influence people towards particular outcomes, such as perceiving your brand as more trustworthy, valuable or even authoritative.

The ways in which we respond to colour can be strongly influenced by our cultural background.<sup>6</sup> For instance, the colour that one nation considers sacred may have an entirely different connotation elsewhere and as such, a colour's meaning and hence, persuasiveness, will depend greatly on its historical context.

To give you an example, in Western Judeo-Christian cultures, the palette of gold, red, white and blue/purple traditionally denoted opulence, power and authority.<sup>7</sup> Why? Paints and dyes in these particular colours were originally derived from rare and precious pigments, so were expensive to acquire. Hence, over time, they came to signify wealth and high standing.

Beyond specific colours, a culture's overall preferences for particular combinations can also vary dramatically. If we compare for a moment India's love of bright, highly saturated and varied colour palettes against the more muted tones favoured by Nordic countries, a veritable jigsaw of cultural colour preferences begins to emerge.

Whatever our backgrounds, we tend to assume that our experiences, beliefs and societal constructs are 'normal'. As such, we often forget that we live in a tiny microcosm in which culturally relative rules apply. Beyond our bubble lies an entirely different world, filled with people whose perceptions of colour, like ours, are influenced by their physiology, psychology and culture. If we are to succeed in communicating with one another, we must first take a broader look at the various differences that exist between us (as depicted below), and from here, weave a tapestry of meaning.



## COLOUR AND VALUE

Beyond symbolic meaning, colour has also been found to influence our perceptions of a product's price and quality.<sup>8</sup> For instance, in the UK, products that use the colour pink tend to be perceived as average-priced and young-looking, whereas neutral colours may be considered more expensive, 'boring and dull' and 'for a mature person'.<sup>9</sup>

While our tastes can change with prevailing trends, dark colours seem to enjoy a continuing association with value and richness, which is why they are so often used to denote sophistication and quality in more expensive products.<sup>10</sup>

Online, colour may subconsciously prime and influence people's behaviours and motivations,<sup>11</sup> which can come in handy if applied deliberately to design. As we shall see throughout this chapter, choosing the right colour for your brand, website, products and marketing materials will depend not only on the message you wish to convey but also on the people you're trying to reach.

Over the years, many advertisers have claimed that a brand's colour can influence purchasing behaviours and even increase sales, so when psychologist Carlton Wagner decided to put this theory to the test, you can imagine the interest it generated. Wagner advised the American hot dog restaurant Wienerschnitzel to include a little orange in the colour of their buildings. He believed that adding orange to the brand's image would convey that the chain represented good value for money, thereby attracting more customers and boosting hot dog sales – he was right. After this tiny tweak in colour, Wienerschnitzel reported a 7 per cent increase in sales, validating the colour-sales hypothesis and earning the company a healthy profit in the process.<sup>12</sup>

Consultant James Mandle enjoyed a similar success when he advised Ty-D-Bol to change the colours on its toilet cleanser packaging from light blue and green, to bright white letters on a dark background. Believing that the new, bold colour scheme would convey cleanliness and strength, as opposed to the original 'wimpy' bottle design, Mandle's decision was vindicated when, over the next 18 months, the sales of Ty-D-Bol jumped a whopping 40 per cent.<sup>13</sup>

## PHYSIOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF COLOUR

“ *Colour influences both human behaviour and human physiology. Even though differences remain, there are values that transcend national frontiers.*

THOMAS MADDEN, KELLY HEWITT AND MARTIN  
ROTH, MARKETING<sup>14</sup>

Colours can carry specific meanings that have important, real-world implications for psychological functioning. In fact, research has shown that when we look at certain colours that hold a specific meaning for us (for instance, I associate azure blue with holidays in southern Spain), the mere perception of that colour can elicit thoughts, emotions and behaviours consistent with that meaning (I feel a surge of warmth as I think of Mum's home cooking and cocktails with Dad on the terrace).

Beyond your brand and identity, colours can also possess strong associations with particular product categories. For instance, in the USA, silver is evocative of dairy foods, pink is associated with Barbie dolls and cosmetics, and blue relates to a range of categories, from financial services to health foods and desserts.<sup>15</sup> While it is possible to launch mould-breaking products by bucking the trend, these successes tend to be few and far between. Instead, research suggests that when it comes to buying high-involvement products, we tend to follow subjective norms.<sup>16</sup> That's why, if you are selling products directly through your website, you'll find that you can usually boost both its perceived aesthetic quality, and your customers' intention to purchase, simply by reflecting their social norms around colour.<sup>17</sup>

With regard to branding, colour can communicate your identity as an organisation. For instance, in the USA, blue branding identifies a company as responsible and solid, and it is the colour of choice for financial services<sup>18</sup> – you need only flick through the websites of Fortune 100 companies to see a distinctive preference for muted, grey-blue colour schemes.

As well as conveying particular meanings, colours can also determine the way in which people interact with a website, and can even influence the amount and type of information they later recall.<sup>19</sup> Since one of the first things we notice about a site is its colour, it is crucial that you identify and use those likely to elicit the most positive response from your visitors. While brighter, more saturated colours generally make us feel happier and more excited,<sup>20</sup> these may not be the colours or responses that lead to increased sales online, as we shall see in a moment.

Given that certain colours (and combinations of colours) affect us on a physiological level, it may come as no surprise that fast-food chains have traditionally used red and yellow in their branding and restaurant interiors (increasing arousal levels) to stimulate appetite and speed up customer turnaround. Financial institutions, on the other hand, often use the colour blue to promote a sense of security and calm and, indeed, research shows that websites with a blue colour scheme tend to be perceived as more credible and trustworthy.<sup>21, 22</sup>

Certain colours can even increase our attention to detail, and simply looking at colours that make us feel energetic, active and lively can increase our subjective feelings of trust.<sup>23</sup> It's interesting to note, however, that ecommerce sites with yellow colour schemes tend to be disliked by the majority of us, possibly because they

evoke a sense of distrust regardless of our cultural backgrounds.<sup>24</sup> As a basic rule of thumb, when it comes to design, the higher a colour's saturation, the higher the level of excitement (whether good or bad) it elicits.

## BRIGHTNESS, SATURATION AND HUE

Psychologist Hans Eysenck identified a global hierarchy of preferences that humans tend to express when it comes to colours, and this is:

- blue
- red
- green
- violet
- orange
- yellow

In the last 70 years this ranking has remained pretty stable,<sup>25</sup> and as such can serve as a helpful yardstick when designing content or websites. However, our responses to colour are influenced not only by their hue, but also by their saturation. Psychologists Valdez and Mehrabian found evidence for 'strong and highly predictable relationships' between a colour's brightness and saturation and its effects on people's emotional responses.<sup>26</sup> They discovered that we experience the greatest pleasure from seeing bright, saturated colours, and the stronger a colour's saturation, the greater the response in terms of physiological arousal.

If I asked you to think of a Coca-Cola advert, old or new, the first thing you'd probably recall is the vibrant colour red, followed by any narrative or associations you might have with the product. This bright, highly saturated colour is one of the reasons Coke's branding is so successful and widely known today. Yet, it was only after the brand had become established in the USA (where red is associated with passion, excitement and sex, among other things),<sup>27</sup> that Coca-Cola was able to cross borders and forge new associations in cultures where red had traditionally held different meanings. Thinking back to the concept of glocalisation, it's important to note that, while people around the world may now recognise 'Coca-Cola red' as its own distinct colour, the peripheral branding (such as its websites, promotional materials and merchandise) have nonetheless been adapted to suit the cultural needs and preferences of its different markets.

Valdez and Mehrabian's findings also provide support for the different colour groupings traditionally used by designers to elicit particular responses – that is,

warmer colours (red, orange, pink) induce greater levels of activity than cooler colours. In terms of general preferences, they found that people's favourite hues were in the blue spectrum (blue, blue-green, green, red-purple, purple and purple-blue) and the least-liked hues were yellow and green-yellow, with the colour red being rated in between. Curiously, people said that they experienced submissive feelings in response to red-purple colours, and felt more dominant in response to yellow and green-yellow. They also found that women were more sensitive to saturation and brightness than men, possibly due to the fact that some women are tetrachromats (they have four types of colour-perceiving cones in their retinas instead of three), meaning that they can perceive up to 100 million colours.

With regard to websites, French researcher Jean-Eric Pelet discovered that higher levels of brightness and saturation can increase our intention to buy, as well as improve our memory of a website's information.<sup>28</sup> Although we must be cautious about generalising culture-specific findings to other demographics, such research highlights that beyond serving a purely aesthetic role, colour can in fact influence our attitudes, behaviours, memories and emotions.

In the world of products, common sense might dictate that bright, colourful packaging would attract more attention than a muted palette. Although there is certainly evidence to support this,<sup>29</sup> psychologists have also found that a society's preference for colours and packaging can depend on its level of masculinity and femininity (as defined by Hofstede – see Chapter 4). For instance, in one study, researchers found that women's deodorants were better received in masculine cultures when they were packaged with soft, low-contrast, harmonious colours, whereas women from feminine societies preferred packaging that used brighter, more contrasting colours.<sup>31</sup>

## ECOMMERCE SITES AND COLOUR

“ *Colour sells . . . and the right colours sell better.*

COLOR MARKETING GROUP<sup>32</sup>

Think of your favourite kind of chewing gum. What springs to mind first? Its name or its colour? Research shows that our brains store objects according to their colour<sup>33</sup> and, when it comes to brands, it's no different. Colours are the first thing we remember about an item, followed by any graphics, numbers and eventually, words.<sup>34</sup> This means that if you want to be memorable online, making the right colour choice for your brand is absolutely crucial.

While certain sectors do follow trends (for instance, ecological products are usually green), in a crowded marketplace it's sometimes the brand that goes against the grain that will stand out from the crowd (for instance, in the USA's mobile phone market, Sprint owns yellow, AT&T blue and T-Mobile pink). In fact, colour is one of the most prominent marketing tools used worldwide to create, maintain and evolve brand images in the minds of customers.<sup>35</sup> Our emotional and psychological responses to colour are so significant<sup>36</sup> that in some countries it is even reflected in the law. In the USA for instance, the Lanham Act legislates against 'colorable imitation' and actively protects product colours as trademarks.<sup>37</sup>

As we have seen, trust is one of the most important factors that contributes to ecommerce success<sup>38</sup> and, since our first impressions tend to be rapid and long-lasting,<sup>39</sup> it is vital that you make those first few seconds count.

If you want to build trust online, there are certain colour-based cues you can use to effortlessly boost the perceived trustworthiness of your brand, website and marketing. For example, ecommerce sites that use pale, unsaturated colours (such as light blue, cream and grey) tend to be perceived as more trust-worthy, benevolent, competent and predictable<sup>40</sup> than their more colourful counterparts, as they create a soothing, relaxing environment for the customer. Depending on the context, the use of vivid, highly saturated colours can actually be seen as promotional and aggressive, thus lowering the perceived trustworthiness of the vendor.

As well as influencing our recall of a website's information, colour has been found to influence ease of navigation and readability<sup>41</sup> and it should go without saying that any information you do present should be clearly legible, both in terms of the font you use and the level of contrast between the text and its background (you get the best readability by using colours with a greater luminance contrast ratio<sup>42</sup>). For instance, although the following colour pairings may not be to everyone's taste, blue text on a yellow background tends to perform best for readability, whereas purple letters on a red background perform the worst.<sup>43</sup> As a rule of thumb, black or dark grey text against a white (or off-white) background is a safe bet, since the easier it is for your customers to understand you, the more likely they are to generalise this sense of clarity and transparency to your brand as a whole.

While you can use colour for your text and backgrounds, in my experience, most people prefer to read dark text on a light, neutral page, probably since it is the format to which we are most accustomed. In fact, some research has even found that, for the Times New Roman font, black text on a white background is actually

less legible than green on yellow, but switch the font to Arial and this green and yellow combination is much worse.<sup>44</sup>

Whether your business operates locally or internationally, it's worth researching your audience before you launch your website. By identifying the design and content preferences of your target market and reflecting these in your site, you can actually boost your website's 'stickiness' and increase customer loyalty,<sup>45</sup> giving you the competitive advantage.

This is especially important given that the colours you consider normal and appropriate in certain contexts may well be perceived as distasteful and even offensive by members of other cultures. When the concierges at United Airlines mistakenly wore white carnations on their Pacific flight routes,<sup>46</sup> they had no idea that these seemingly innocuous flowers would cause such a stir. Had they done their research, they would have learned that the colour symbolised death and mourning in certain Pacific cultures, and they might have chosen to wear something a little different instead!

## INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

Have you ever wondered why senior citizens tend to wear light-coloured clothes? There is a reason, and it's not just cultural – as we get older, colours start to appear darker, which can make lighter colours look more appealing.<sup>47</sup> As children, we are much more open and experimental in our preferences, favouring secondary colours<sup>48</sup> and special effects, such as glitter and metallics,<sup>49</sup> over muted tones. In fact, research indicates that many of our adult preferences may be learned (which may account for the vast cultural differences that exist),<sup>50</sup> since babies consistently stare longer at long-wavelength colours, such as red and yellow, rather than those of short-wavelengths.<sup>51</sup>

Even the colour blue, a universal favourite, is subject to age differences, with 13-34 year-olds preferring darker shades and those over 35 preferring a lighter, sky blue.<sup>52</sup> So, if your demographic falls within a particular age group, make sure that their colour preferences inform your design choices, as the hue and brightness of the colours you use may influence how well you'll be perceived.

Age isn't the only individual variable that affects our tastes. Personality can also make a big difference, with extroverts preferring bright colours to the lighter, more subdued tones favoured by their introverted peers.<sup>53</sup> Even one's social status can influence colour choice and, when it comes to advertising, primary colours will

often appeal to blue-collar audiences, while wealthier demographics may gravitate more towards pastel shades.<sup>54</sup>

## THE MEANING OF COLOUR

“ *Assuming a narrow Western perspective of colours as ‘universal’ and applying it to alien markets has often led to cultural faux pas.*

DR. MUBEEN ASLAM, MARKETING<sup>55</sup>

Although there are many pop-psychology blogs that claim to offer a definitive guide to the subject, when I came to research the meaning of colour I was surprised by the lack of well-referenced, evidence-based resources that were publicly available. This was one of the most complex, time-consuming chapters to write, and it is my hope that the following pages will provide you with a more scientific roadmap to colours and their meanings, and how best to use them.

One of the factors that can have the biggest impact on a colour's meaning is its context. While certain colours have a universal appeal (most probably due to their evolutionary importance to our species), countries and cultures differ greatly in terms of the meanings they assign to particular shades. For instance, if you attended a funeral in the UK or Thailand wearing only black, you would be considered appropriately dressed. Yet if you were to do the same at a Hindu funeral, you might find yourself a lonely figure in a sea of white.

In the following pages we'll explore psychological research pertaining to each of the primary colours, as well as green and black (this selection of colours is governed by the research available). Although this list is by no means exhaustive, it should give you a good, evidence-based grounding in the psychological and physiological effects of colour, which you can then use to inform your design choices online.

### Red

“ *That woman is red hot . . .*

Red has long been associated universally with sexuality, lust and appetite and there is a wealth of research that shows we are biologically primed to respond to red in a powerful, visceral way.

This colour can raise your heart rate and hunger levels<sup>56</sup> and, if you're in a sports team (all things being equal), wearing red can even help you win<sup>57</sup> (sorry,



Manchester United, your secret's out). In fact, in competitive situations we naturally perceive red to mean danger<sup>58</sup> and simply viewing this colour in an achievement context, such as taking an IQ test, can elicit avoidance behaviours in the viewer – we'll dodge the hard questions!<sup>59</sup> Strangely, red can also make time pass more slowly and we tend to perceive objects of equal weight as heavier when they are red, than when they are another colour.<sup>60</sup>

When it comes to sex, studies have found that red leads men to view women as more attractive and more sexually desirable,<sup>61</sup> and I'm sure we can all recall a story or two about the mysterious lady in red. This seductive, enigmatic figure crops up time and again in our films and novels: the Grimms' *Little Red Riding Hood*,<sup>62</sup> a tale of bestiality and repressed sexual urges; Number Six, the dangerously seductive Cylon at the centre of TV cult classic *Battlestar Galactica*;<sup>63</sup> and the elusive woman in red who distracts Neo in that famous scene in *The Matrix*,<sup>64</sup> to name a few.

While these characters are set in very different times, each carries with her the same undercurrents of sexuality and danger, reflecting an archetype that has long been emblazoned on the Western psyche.

Historically speaking, women across the globe have been beautifying themselves with various shades of rouge for nearly 12,000 years and now, every Valentine's Day, we send millions of red and pink cards and flowers to the objects of our affection. There are, of course, exceptions to this rule that include places like Saudi Arabia, where, every year, red is banned from florists and gift shops ahead of the holiday, in the belief that Valentine's Day 'encourages immoral relations between unmarried men and women'.<sup>65</sup>

Whatever our cultural response to the colour, red does appear to signify sexual availability and it is often used intentionally to encourage physical attraction (think Amsterdam's famous red light district). In fact, in one study, psychologists found that men who were shown images of women wearing a red T-shirt were much more likely to perceive them as attractive and open to sexual advances,<sup>66</sup> and in our primate cousins, females often display redness during oestrus, signalling to the males that they are ready to mate.<sup>67</sup>

Although red is undeniably an arousing colour, some psychologists believe it may actually be the saturation of intense reds that makes them responsible for these effects, as opposed to the hue itself.<sup>68</sup> The fact that we find vivid reds so provocative may explain their ubiquitous use for warning signals such as stop signs and traffic lights and, although every colour is subject to cultural nuances, red is considered by most to mean 'hot', 'active', 'vibrant' and 'emotional'.<sup>69</sup> In fact, in China, the combination of red with black has such positive emotional

connotations that it is the most common colour scheme used for wedding invitations.

Just how much of the red effect comes down to nature or nurture remains to be seen, but there is one thing of which we can be certain: red provides a powerful, arousing, visceral cue that can exert great influence not only in humans, but across other species. If you wish to use it online, do so carefully.

## Blue

“ *I’m feeling so blue . . .*

If you’ve heard it before, you’ll know that when someone says they’re feeling blue they don’t mean they’ve got light bouncing off them at a wavelength of 450 nanometres. The ways in which we use colour to express our emotions reveal a deep psychological connection between the two, and research is now discovering that factors such as a colour’s saturation and brightness can have strong and consistent effects on the way we feel.<sup>70</sup>

One of those rare colours that seems to have universal appeal, blue is generally viewed as calming, reassuring, pleasant and relaxing.<sup>71</sup> It is also the colour most often associated with trust, security and wealth,<sup>72</sup> which, as we saw earlier, may explain its ubiquitous popularity among corporate entities such as banks and law firms, especially in the USA.

Its popularity may also explain why three of the most established social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn) all have blue logos, yet however popular, our perceptions of this colour are not immune to demographic factors such as ethnicity, gender and age. For instance, research suggests that in some countries such as East Asia, blue can actually be perceived as cold and evil!<sup>73</sup>

So where does its popularity originate? The idea that blue might be more or less universally attractive stems back to some fascinating research conducted in the 1970s, when two American psychologists set out to discover the colour and number preferences of a group of young students.<sup>74</sup>

Their method was simple: they asked the participants to name their favourite colour and pick their preferred number from 0 to 9. Intriguingly, the group showed a general preference now known as the ‘blue-7’ effect, the results of which suggest a psychological bias towards the colour blue and the number 7.

In terms of cultural differences, blue can represent a variety of things, including purity in India, death in Iran and warmth in the Netherlands.<sup>75</sup> Research comparing the effects of red versus blue on our perception and decision-making

has found that we evaluate products more favourably when they are presented on a blue background.<sup>76</sup>

Surprisingly, we're also more likely to buy products when they are displayed in a blue environment as opposed to a red one.<sup>77</sup> In fact, blue is anathema to red in many regards, stimulating our creativity,<sup>78</sup> suppressing our appetite,<sup>79</sup> and even lowering our blood pressure.<sup>80</sup> That is, unless you're a Western woman of a certain milieu, for whom the robin's egg blue of Tiffany's famous little boxes will actually *increase* your heart rate by a good 20 per cent!<sup>81</sup>

Blue can influence our sense of time and, when used as the main colour on a website, it can even create the illusion of increased connection speeds simply by inducing a state of relaxation in its users.<sup>82</sup> It is also the standard colour for hyperlinks, which became a subject of great debate when Google decided to test 40 different shades of blue (from greenish blue to blueish blue) on its users, to see which would attract more click-throughs. It turned out that blueish blue was the clear winner (who knew?!). In the physical world, blue can even make an object seem lighter (it has the opposite effect to red), and it is the most popular colour choice when it comes to clothes (think jeans).<sup>83</sup> Intriguingly, blue also appears to be a firm favourite for other species, including bumblebees, moths and robins.<sup>84</sup> Although no one can say for sure, it may be that our tendency to favour blue comes from our physical environment and its association with expanses of sea and sky. This pancultural preference does have its limits, though. For instance, while blue might be your preferred colour for a lake, you'd be hard-pressed to want this colour in an apple.

More recently, blue wavelength light (the kind emitted by our laptops and smart-phones) has been found to suppress melatonin production in the brain<sup>85</sup> and boost alpha wavelengths which create alertness<sup>86</sup>, which is why too much screen time at night can leave you feeling wired and unable to sleep. On the flip side, it can also improve cognitive performance,<sup>87</sup> boost attention, reaction times and mood,<sup>88</sup> and the discovery of a new, blue-sensitive photoreceptor that projects to the emotional centres of the brain supports what great artists have intuited for years: that blue is an evocative, emotionally resonant colour.

## Yellow

“ *Sunshine yellow . . . Yellow-bellied . . .*

Unlike blue, yellow is universally active and exciting and, like red, can have an arousing, stimulating effect on the viewer. It is generally considered to be a

warm, happy hue <sup>89</sup> and shares a pleasant association with brightness and the sun.<sup>90</sup> However, it is a fickle colour and can also elicit a sense of wariness,<sup>91</sup> possibly because it so often signifies danger in nature (think wasps and snakes).

It may be for this reason that yellow is the least liked primary colour, despite its positive associations with spirituality in East Asian cultures. To the human eye, yellow often appears brighter than white,<sup>92</sup> which explains why we tend to use it to attract attention, whether on road signs, in car headlights or online.

## Green

“ *Green with envy . . . She has green fingers . . . He gave me the green light . . .*

One of the more mutable colours, green can have a diverse range of meanings. Although primarily associated with nature (and therefore considered quite relaxing),<sup>93</sup> in the USA darker greens also represent status and wealth,<sup>94</sup> while pea green tends to have a rather unpleasant association with nausea.<sup>95</sup> When it comes to universal meanings, green is often clustered together with white and blue as ‘gentle’, ‘peaceful’ and ‘calming’ – and, in some places (such as the USA, Hong Kong and Brazil), consumers also associate green with ‘beautiful’.<sup>96</sup>

## Black

“ *As black as night . . .*

To state the obvious, black is commonly associated with darkness, but it can also represent sophistication and death in the West, and denote wealth and prosperity as illustrated by phrases such as ‘in the black’ and ‘black tie event’.

In terms of design, black is often used to convey formality and seriousness for Western, white-collar demographics,<sup>97</sup> and it is closely related to the colour brown which carries the meaning of ‘stale’ and ‘sad’ across certain cultures.<sup>98</sup>

Peculiarly, research has discovered a link between malevolence and black uniforms in sports, with teams that wear black in competitions being more prone to displaying aggressive behaviours than those dressed in white.<sup>99</sup>

# 10 SOCIAL MEDIA AND CUSTOMER SERVICE

“ *As marketing converges with customer service and sales, marketing today is more about helping and less about hyping.*

JOEL BOOK, SALESFORCE

## WHO, WHAT, HOW AND WHY?

From news and social commentary, to staying in touch with loved ones and having a rant, social media has become our primary method of communication in the modern age. Whether we like it or not, the myriad platforms that make up our social landscape now play a central role in all of our lives, be that at a personal or commercial level. Although most of us may use social media to maintain relationships, seek out information and garner a sense of belonging, brands are increasingly taking to these platforms as a means of engaging directly with their audience, with more forward-thinking organisations adopting this as another valuable asset in their customer service repertoire.

Despite coming under fire for fragmenting our attention, heightening our levels of narcissism<sup>1</sup> and lowering the quality of real-life in-person social interactions,<sup>2</sup> in recent years social media has enabled us to understand all kinds of real-world dynamics. From the ways in which personality shapes our online behaviours,<sup>3</sup> to the spread of diseases<sup>4</sup> and the movement of stock markets,<sup>5</sup> with the right tools, social media can provide us with access to insights we never before thought possible.

To understand how best to harness social media for business, we must first explore the psychological dynamics that underpin its users' behaviours. Some of the richest and most revealing insights can be found by investigating the kind of content we choose to share. From videos and memes to comments and articles, social content serves a crucial function – it reflects not only who we are, but also who our friends are, and what they will (or won't) tolerate.

In our desire to feel loved and accepted, many of us take to these platforms to seek out validation, becoming increasingly reliant on the feedback we receive

to prop up our self-esteem in the process. While evidence suggests that some of us get a boost when using social networks to focus on strong social ties,<sup>6</sup> studies also show that for many, the opposite may in fact be true. A growing body of research points towards the risks that social media can pose to our mental health, sleep<sup>7</sup> and our sense of self-worth,<sup>8</sup> with our desire for attention driving many of the more narcissistic, self-aggrandising behaviours we see today.<sup>9</sup>

What we choose to share online arises not only from our own system of values, preferences and beliefs, but also from those of others. For every post, status update or piece of content we send out into the world, we receive a social echo back, in the form of a like, re-tweet, upvote, share, comment or dreaded silence. These responses (or lack thereof) then serve as a form of reinforcement, encouraging certain kinds of behaviours (such as sharing more content that people find funny, interesting or appropriate) and discouraging others (retracting or self-censoring unpopular opinions and messages). It is for this reason that so many people have taken to editing their own feeds, deleting posts that haven't attracted enough attention and promoting content that has.

## WHAT MAKES CONTENT SOCIAL?

If you've ever watched, shared or inadvertently created content that's gone viral, you'll know that there's something special about such memes that sets them apart from all the rest. Content that spreads virally often does so because it acts as a carrier for *emotional contagion*, a process by which the sharer (or content) influences the emotions of others, either through the conscious or subconscious induction of emotional states and attitudes.<sup>10</sup> In fact, social psychologist Elaine Hatfield and her colleagues proposed that we can actually induce emotions in others by synchronising our expressions, postures, vocalisations and gestures with those of our intended audience.<sup>11</sup> This means that if you know who you're targeting and can mirror their preferences accordingly, you will be more likely to produce content that induces the desired emotional response.

Whether you're feeling down, in need of a quick pick-me-up, or you're browsing a newsfeed in the hope of welcome distraction, research shows that the emotional content of a post (both positive and negative) can be highly infectious.<sup>12</sup> Although emotional content in general is more shareable, large-scale studies exploring this effect have found that positive tweets<sup>13</sup> and Facebook posts<sup>14</sup> are in fact more contagious than their negative counterparts, which may explain why the bulk of memes that go viral tend to be those that are funny.

This sense of humour can often emerge during times of crisis as a welcome release, enabling us to connect with others to reduce feelings of stress. Known as the *tend and befriend* response,<sup>15</sup> in particularly stressful or frightening situations, it is this biobehavioural need for affiliation that can drive many of us to congregate around hashtags, in the hope of finding sympathetic others with whom to bond. What's interesting is that we have now started adopting online protocols (such as the hashtag) in offline environments (protests and demonstrations) in a bid to facilitate social connections at scale across a multitude of situations.

However you're using social media, if you want people to engage with your content, you need to be able to grab their attention. While you can psychologically optimise your content using personality-based keywords and framing techniques, there are also more universal principles you can use to ensure it reaches a wider audience. From the headlines of the earliest papers, to the algorithmically generated titles we see online today, it is those that provoke the greatest curiosity that we pay most attention to. Although our technology may have changed, modern copywriters still use many of the same tricks and trigger words to lure us in. These approaches are de rigueur in the world of clickbait, yet if you can create content that provides value and delivers on its promises, these same psychological hooks can be used to render otherwise boring interactions more psychologically rewarding.

## MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

### Create clickable headlines

Let's say you want to write an article for an online lifestyle magazine about frying eggs. You could write a piece entitled 'How to fry an egg', or 'Why I love frying eggs', or you could make it more engaging by applying a few psychological principles. While there are hundreds of different approaches you could take and adapt to meet your specific needs, I've outlined one below that you can use immediately to start optimising your copy.

### *Trigger words*

In order to make your headlines more compelling, there are various adjectives you can draw from, such as weird, surprising, secret, mystery, strange, outrageous, odd, amazing, bizarre, essential, incredible – and my personal favourite, the phrase, 'It's not what you think'.

## The formula

Once you've identified the core message of your content, you can optimise your headline using the following formula:

*Number + trigger word + adjective + keyword + promise*  
*= Clickable headline*

When you apply the formula to the original headline, 'How to fry an egg', it becomes: '13 unbelievable ways you can fry a small egg with a sock'.

## NEUROCHEMICAL HIJACKING

Whether we use social media to facilitate social commentary, create a shared cultural experience or change the moods of others, there is also a darker, more addictive aspect to our habitual patterns of behaviour. Whether scrolling through a newsfeed, social profile or the endless notifications on our devices, many of the user interfaces we interact with on a daily basis are deliberately designed to hijack our neurochemical processes. How? By triggering dopamine loops.

First identified in the 1950s by Swedish researchers Carlsson and Hillarp,<sup>16</sup> dopamine is often described as the reward chemical in the brain, boosting our arousal levels and driving us to seek out pleasure. Beyond these hedonistic pursuits, dopamine also plays a critical role in all kinds of things, from our mood, attention and motivation, to thinking, moving and sleeping. When it comes to pleasure, it's the D2 receptors in the mesolimbic pathway (a tract of the brain connecting the nucleus accumbens to the ventral tegmental area) that seem to be most critical to our *wanting* behaviours, which when things go wrong, can result in addiction.<sup>17</sup>

While specific dopamine systems may drive us to seek new experiences, it's actually the complementary opioid system that enables us to *like* or enjoy them.<sup>18, 19</sup> The problem is that from an evolutionary perspective, our ancestors had a greater chance of survival if they were seeking more than they were satisfied, which means that we have inherited a brain hard-wired to exist in a state of wanting.

Online, where gratification is instant, unsatisfying and, most crucially, unpredictable (known as variable-ratio reinforcement<sup>20</sup>), our dopamine systems can run riot, seeking out new information at such a rate that the opioid system doesn't get the chance to kick in. The very act of seeking becomes a reward in itself, and so before we know it we get caught in a dopamine loop, making it harder and harder to extricate ourselves from our devices. Since most of the platforms we use have



notifications switched on by default, these auditory, haptic and visual alerts all act as external cues to trigger our reward-seeking behaviours.

Over time we become conditioned to expect a possible reward following such cues, which only exacerbates our habitual checking behaviours further. This anticipation has become so bad in fact, that we are increasingly self-interrupting, even when the cost is explicit and substantial<sup>21,22</sup> – a trend that is particularly worrying when one considers that it can take around 23 minutes to regain the same level of focus as prior to the interruption.<sup>23</sup> With all of this attention and time being poured unthinkingly into our devices and social platforms, how can you hack this phenomenon to contribute both value and a feeling of satiety to your audience? Well, it all comes down to the quality of your interaction.

## CONVERSING WITH CUSTOMERS

With technology now an integral part of our everyday lives, customers have come to expect the brands they interact with to be accessible at the swipe of a finger. Although preferred channels may vary depending on age (with those under 25 preferring social media, 25-34 year-olds opting for email, and mobile apps a top three choice for everyone under 55),<sup>24</sup> customers are increasingly using social media to reach out to brands, and they're doing so in two crucial ways: proactively and reactively.

Online, customers will *proactively* seek out a brand when there's been a customer service issue, usually when they're angry or upset because something's gone wrong, or when they can't get a response elsewhere. With Forrester reporting that 55 per cent of adults in the US will abandon their online purchase if they can't find a quick answer to their question and 77 per cent citing that the most important thing a company can do is value their time,<sup>25</sup> it's clear that social media presents a unique opportunity for providing powerful, rapid customer service that can really impact both word of mouth and the bottom line.

Brands that use platforms such as Twitter to respond to queries not only have more satisfied customers,<sup>26</sup> they may also boost loyalty, which in turn can drive sales. In fact, a recent study found that the more rapidly an airline could respond to its customers on Twitter, the greater the revenue they were able to generate as a result. Customers who received a response to their message or complaint were willing to pay up to \$9 more on average on their next purchase from that brand. Not only that, if they received a response within six minutes, they were more likely to spend up to \$20 more with that airline in the future.<sup>27</sup>

While customers will often take this more proactive approach when things go wrong, they may also use social media *reactively*, to respond to branded content or

campaigns, either when you've delighted them, or when they don't like what you've done. One of my favourite examples of a brand taking advantage of this, is a Valentine's Day campaign that was run by Tesco (a value grocery chain in the UK), in which they satirised their much maligned self-checkout by posting an image of the counter alongside text that read 'You're the unexpected item in my bagging area #LoveIsAllAround'.

Beyond hashtags, brands have also been taking their efforts offline. Back in 2011, an author named Peter Shankman was waiting in Tampa, Florida for a flight to New York, when he sent out a tweet to his local steakhouse, 'Hey@Mortons – can you meet me at Newark airport with a porterhouse when I land in two hours? K, thanks:}'. By the time Peter had landed, the steakhouse had picked up his tweet, figured out his landing time and dispatched a waiter to greet him at arrivals with a 24oz Porterhouse steak and all the trimmings, *for free*.<sup>28</sup> Of course Peter posted his experience online, where the charming stunt got picked up by writers and authors, and went on to become an example of best practice.

So how can you bring this approach into your customer service strategy? Given that customers want an immediate, easy and frictionless journey on the channel(s) of their choice,<sup>29</sup> to deliver an effective service you have to research where they're most active, which of these platforms to focus on, and what content will be most appropriate for each channel. There are many social listening tools you can use to achieve this, and several principles you can employ to make the most of your customer relationships on social media.

The first principle is to *reply in real time*, and where possible, within the hour. Statistics published by Twitter<sup>30</sup> show that customer response times can vary widely from 4 seconds to 221 hours, with the average landing at 1 hour and 24 minutes. Given that around 60 per cent of customers expect a response within 60 minutes, it should go without saying that the quicker you can reply, the happier your customers will be, even if this means sending out an initial tweet to acknowledge you've received their message, with a promise to follow up later.

It's also important to minimise frustration and uncertainty by setting customer expectations, and a brand that does this really well is KLM Royal Dutch Airlines (@KLM). With a header picture that states 'We expect to reply within 11 min. Updated every 5 minutes',<sup>31</sup> and a dedicated team of 150 staff members offering 24/7 support in 13 different languages, KLM's Twitter account is a great example of how to set customer expectations and use social media to serve customers efficiently.

The personal, one-to-one quality of interaction afforded by many social platforms means that people now expect to speak to a real person, which brings us to the second principle. Research shows that when customers receive a *personalised response* on Twitter (a message which includes the brand representative's

name and that of the user), 77 per cent are likely to go and recommend that brand to others. Compare this to the 66 per cent of people who would not recommend a brand following an impersonal interaction, and you have a compelling argument for humanising your business' communications.

Where possible, be personal and friendly, use real names and sign every reply. You can also make your content more relevant by taking a similar approach to that of Spotify, a music-streaming service that is deliberately quirky in its interactions. Spotify's tweets can be quite mischievous, with replies to customers often including a cleverly chosen song or playlist designed to transform a moment of frustration into one of delight, resolving any issues in the process.<sup>32</sup>

The third principle relates to homophily, our tendency to seek out and bond with people similar to ourselves. As we have briefly explored, when it comes to communication and word of mouth, not only are we more likely to perceive a homophilous source as more credible, trustworthy and reliable than its non-homophilous counterparts, but the effectiveness of that message is likely to be much greater.<sup>33</sup> This is a principle that can easily be leveraged online, simply by *mirroring the tone and style* of your customers where appropriate.

I found a wonderful example of this in a Twitter conversation that took place between Sainsbury's (a British grocery store) and one of their customers. Having received the following complaint: 'Dear Sainsbury's. The chicken in my sandwich tastes like it was beaten to death by Hulk Hogan. Was it?', the brand replied with an equally mischievous response, '@(name) really sorry it wasn't up to scratch. We will replace Mr. Hogan with Ultimate Warrior on our production line immediately.' Not only did this micro interaction tickle its intended recipient, it also delighted all the other Twitter users who picked it up and re-tweeted it to their followers.

The fourth and final principle of maintaining good customer relationships through social media, is to maintain *honesty and integrity*. We all make mistakes, and whether it's an ill-judged status update, a misfired tweet or an inappropriate comment, the degree of the fallout will depend on how you handle the situation as it unfolds. In such instances, the outcome can depend as much on what you don't do, as the proactive steps you do take. The worst culprits to be avoided include: responding to individual complaints with a generic set of pre-written responses; denying a genuine mistake when it happens, or shirking responsibility; replying in anger or responding abusively; and not reacting swiftly enough, or worse, not responding at all.

When things go wrong, often brands don't realise the potential opportunity this affords them to engage with those customers who are already emotionally invested. When you are at the receiving end of emotionally charged interactions, if you can jump in and help resolve the issue by connecting with your customers in a


meaningful, personal way, you're much more likely to reach a positive outcome for all involved. Not only will you be solving the problem at hand, but customers who feel listened to and cared for may go on to become advocates for your brand, helping you build a more resilient brand image and a reputation for good customer service.

My favourite example of a social media faux pas that was handled gracefully goes all the way back to 2011, when Gloria Huang (social media specialist at American Red Cross) accidentally sent out this late-night tweet from the organisation's official account: 'Ryan found two more 4 bottle packs of Dogfish Head's Midas Touch beer . . . when we drink we do it right #gettnngslizzerd'.<sup>34</sup> The tweet stayed up for about an hour before the social media director, Wendy Harman, received a call about it and took it down. The next morning, they issued this charming, official tweet, 'We've deleted the rogue tweet but rest assured the Red Cross is sober and we've confiscated the keys', avoiding a PR disaster and putting a smile on many of their followers' faces. Their handling of the situation even resulted in Dogfish Head (the microbrewery mentioned in the original tweet) sending out a call asking their fans to donate to the charity, resulting in a PR win for all involved.

## MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

### Social media as customer service

- **Actively engage your customers** Customers reach out to brands proactively (a negative response when things go wrong) and reactively (this can be positive or negative). If they are contacting you with a complaint, it can help to take the conversation into a more private domain such as a direct message, email or phone call, making sure to follow up at a later date to ensure their issue has been successfully resolved. To boost positive, reactive engagement, find unique ways to surprise and delight your customers. You can do this by poking fun at your own brand, contributing unique insights or humour to a trending topic, or deploying a stunt (either on- or offline) that will generate its own word of mouth.
- **Rapid response** When customers reach out to brands on social media, they expect a rapid reply. So as to minimise the risk of negative messages being amplified, it's best if you can act in real time (or at the very least within the hour) and set expectations by stating the anticipated response time on your official social channels.

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- **Keep it personal** Whatever industry you're in, when replying to customers ensure your response is personalised. Address the receiver by name or social handle, and include the name of your own official representative to establish a greater sense of rapport. Your tone should be friendly and, if appropriate to your brand, can be playful and informal.
  - **Similarity** We tend to like and trust those who are similar to ourselves, so if you can mirror the tone and language of your customers, your message is likely to be more effective and well-received.
  - **Be honest** When you make a mistake, the best approach is usually to own up to it, quickly and directly. If you can give the authentic reason(s) for your error and communicate the steps you are taking to resolve it, customers are likely to be more forgiving.

## TROLLING

No precis on the psychological dynamics of social media would be complete without touching on its darker side. In recent years, a wealth of research has begun to explore the negative effects of computer-mediated communication on our behaviours. From the role of anonymity in unleashing more impulsive reactions,<sup>35</sup> to the feeling of disinhibition that can lead some of us to self-disclose and act out more frequently or intensely than we might in person,<sup>36</sup> there are a whole host of factors that can influence our social interactions for the worse.

The effects of feeling as though we are part of a wider, de-individuated group (the likes of which can occur when people congregate around a specific hashtag) has historically been linked to outcomes such as heightened suggestibility, reduced empathy, a faulty interpretation of social situations and heightened aggression,<sup>37</sup> many aspects of which we can see reflected in social dynamics online today. Although we may all be susceptible to these effects to a greater or lesser extent, when individuals deliberately provoke others with the intention of causing maximum disruption, we step into murkier waters altogether.

Colloquially known as *trolls*, people who habitually engage in these kinds of disruptive behaviours actually exhibit a remarkably consistent set of personality traits. In a pair of studies exploring the online commenting behaviours of over 1,200 people, psychologists found that those who said trolling was their favourite

internet activity scored highest across four traits in particular.<sup>38</sup> Known as the Dark Tetrad, these traits are: *narcissism* (excessive interest in oneself), *machiavellianism* (being impulsive, charming and manipulative), *psychopathy* (being cold, fearless and antisocial) and *sadism* (enjoying hurting others). In fact, the researchers found that associations between sadism and GAIT (Global Assessment of Internet Trolling) scores were so strong, that they could be considered 'prototypical everyday sadists'. So how can you deal with them?

## MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

### Don't feed the trolls

- **Be vigilant** If you're receiving angry, emotionally volatile or abusive comments on any of your social platforms, the first thing to do is qualify whether these are genuine grievances or just trolls seeking to cause trouble. The simplest way to do this is to check the account(s) in question for similar interactions sent to other people or brands. If you find a pattern (i.e. lots of similarly abusive comments directed at others) then the best approach is simply not to engage.
- **Have a code of conduct** We can all get heated online, so it can help to establish customer expectations by having a code of conduct both on your website and across your social profiles. A great example here is Moz's TAGFEE code,<sup>39</sup> a set of community and employee guidelines set up to reflect the brand's core values and encourage a safe, respectful environment of collaboration.
- **Block them** Most social platforms now allow you to block and report abusive behaviour, and there are many brands and celebrities who no longer enable comments so as to avoid site-specific trolling altogether. Depending on your strategy you may or may not wish to completely block all customer interactions, and in most instances you will need to decide which approach to take on a platform-by-platform basis.

# 11 DESIGNING PERSUASIVE VIDEOS

“ *A film, a piece of theatre, a piece of music, or a book can make a difference. It can change the world.*

ALAN RICKMAN, ACTOR<sup>1</sup>

## WHAT MAKES VIDEO SPECIAL?

Compared to other media types on the web, video is unique in the immediacy with which it can convey a vast amount of emotional and informational content to its viewers. By virtue of the fact that video is an instantaneous form of communication, it has the advantage of being able to create a shared experience, in which people can watch the same thing at the same time, wherever in the world they might be. As with all social content, enabling people to participate in such a way can create a profound sense of connection and community, which can help generate word of mouth and amplify the reach of your message.

Unlike images or copy, video (and audio) set the pace at which a story or message is delivered. Although it is true that people can stop watching whenever they choose, the analytics tools built into video hosting platforms are making it easier than ever before to assess when people are bouncing away. This means that you can track exactly how far individuals get through a piece of content before they stop consuming it, which may help infer why the video isn't engaging its viewers as expected. This can then inform the process by which you optimise your media, making video one of the most trackable forms of web content, as well as one of the most emotive.

When used onsite, videos can also help boost conversion rates, both in general and when used to showcase specific products or services. A private study exploring customer behaviours on electrical goods website [ao.com](http://ao.com), found that those who watched a product video were 100 per cent more likely to convert, spending an average of 9.1 per cent more than those who didn't.<sup>2</sup> In another study, customers

who watched videos (of all kinds, not just those of products) on wistia.com were found to be 63 per cent more likely on average to convert.<sup>2</sup>

## WHY WE WATCH

From a psychological standpoint, there are various reasons why we watch videos. The first, while it may not sound particularly scientific, is just because. The internet is replete with bizarre videos that go viral for no apparent reason (remember *Damn, Daniel?*<sup>3</sup>), and in such cases the magic dust that contributes to their success is ephemeral, hard to articulate and therefore rarely replicable after the fact.

Perhaps more tangibly, we also watch videos because they provoke curiosity by providing a pattern interrupt, a sequence or narrative in which our expectations are flouted. A great example of this is Geico's 15-second *Going Up: Fast Forward* advert,<sup>4</sup> a pre-roll ad on YouTube that starts in an elevator, in which a woman is telling her friend how switching to Geico saved her money on her car insurance, while a bald man with a comb-over watches on. Before we can see any more, the video cuts short as an image fills the screen displaying the message, 'Geico. We now fast forward to the end of this ad' with an accompanying voiceover. We rejoin the video a few seconds later to find all three are now bald, as the women scurry out of the lift complaining 'Next time, let's take the stairs'. The video ends with a link inviting people to 'Click to see what happened', and I won't spoil the surprise by giving the end away here.

The reason this is compelling is because it disrupts our expectations around the format and content of a pre-roll ad, which we have come to expect to be linear in narrative, last 30 seconds, and be salesy and self-serving in tone. By challenging our assumptions and provoking an emotional response, our attention is piqued and we feel the pull to actively attend to the message.

This leads us to the very heart of why we watch videos – we engage with content to change our emotional state. Because video includes so many of the real life cues we rely on to communicate with and understand one another (from facial expressions and gestures, to linguistic content and tone of voice) it is one of the most effective content types for transmitting emotional contagion. This is a phenomenon which can be leveraged at both ends of the emotional spectrum, from the delightfully cute to the painfully sad, and we need only witness the ubiquity of cat videos to see this in action. Believe it or not, scientists have actually conducted research to examine why we spend so much time watching videos of our feline friends. As it turns out, even a short clip can be enough deliver an emotional



payoff, with participants reporting that they felt more energetic and positive (and less anxious, annoyed or sad) after only a few minutes spent watching cats.<sup>5</sup>

## PERSUASIVE STORYTELLING

While we tend to enjoy and share content that has a positive emotional valence, videos that move us towards sadness and anger can also be persuasive and powerful. A great example of this is one of Amnesty's video campaigns, contrasting the morning ritual of a girl living in Australia, to that of her counterpart living in war-torn Syria.<sup>6</sup> By presenting the narrative as a split-screen story, the left side of the screen showing the young Australian, and the right, the Syrian, Amnesty communicates not only the nominal similarities of each situation, but also the contrasting realities confronting each child.

The reason stories such as these are so compelling can be found at neurological and psychological levels. In an fMRI study conducted at Princeton University, neuroscience Professor Dr. Uri Hasson and his team set out to investigate exactly what goes on in our brains when we tell, and listen to, a story.<sup>7</sup> They discovered that when two people are engaged in such an exchange, both display similar response patterns across a remarkable number of regions in the brain, an act they describe as *neural coupling*. Far from being a passive process, they proposed that storytelling is in fact an experience which, when successful, results in the teller and receiver literally getting on the same wavelength.

Achieving this, however, requires a skilful, nuanced approach. Whether you're trying to move people to buy your product or donate towards a cause, feelings such as sympathy, sadness and compassion have been found to play a central role in motivating us to engage with and help others.<sup>8</sup> From a psychological perspective, finding a way to tell your story through the narrative of one person, as opposed to that of many, can also have a profound impact on the way in which your message is received. Charities have long known the effectiveness of this approach, and subsequent research supports their strategy.

Given that our attention actually magnifies our response to emotionally charged situations, and that the larger the group, the more our attention and ability to focus diminishes,<sup>9</sup> it makes sense that a story would be most compelling when conveying the plight of a single individual. For instance, battle scenes in films tend to be most engaging when they focus on the protagonists rather than just a mass of fighting people. Since we are more likely to view a single person as a

psychologically coherent unit than a group,<sup>10,11</sup> this may explain why we tend to feel greater compassion and distress towards the former.<sup>12</sup>

Described in academic literature as *psychophysical numbing*, it is this phenomenon that is thought to be at the root of many behavioural asymmetries we see today. The discrepancy in emotional reaction towards minor stories (such as the plight of Pale Male, a hawk evicted from his nest in Manhattan), compared to those of much greater magnitude (the desperate condition of two million homeless Sudanese),<sup>13</sup> points towards a profound difference in the ways we process events. That's why, if you're trying to engage your audience with videos that compel them to take an action, focusing on a specific, emotional, discrete story around one individual will tend to be more effective than speaking about an abstract, homogeneous group.

## EMOTION AND AROUSAL

Whether the stories we tell are large or small, complex or simple, they all serve to take us on a journey from one emotional state to another, often with many transitions in between. Depending on the length and purpose of your video, and the profile of the audience for whom it has been created, there are various different models you can use to help structure your narrative. A good place to start is by reading *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*,<sup>14</sup> a seminal book that explores the journey of the archetypal hero, written by American mythologist Joseph Campbell.

Used the world over to craft compelling tales, one of Campbell's most famous narrative arcs is *The Hero's Journey*, a 12-step sequence that appears in everything from drama and myth, to religious ritual and psychological development. This pattern has been used in many of the stories we know and love today, and was even acknowledged by George Lucas for its influence on the *Star Wars* films.<sup>15</sup>

Whether you're using *The Hero's Journey* or another of Campbell's models, two adverts that are worth watching for their use of this approach are John Lewis' Christmas advert, *The Journey* (2012), and MetLife's insurance advert *My Dad's Story: Dream for My Child* (2015). Both videos carefully orchestrate the ebb and flow of emotion to hold the viewer's attention until the very end, at which point they leave the audience with a heightened, positive emotional climax. The importance of a powerful ending cannot be overstated, and in behavioural economic circles, there is even a phrase used to describe this heuristic. Known as the *peak end rule*, this term refers to our tendency to judge experiences based on how we feel at

their peak (their most intense points) and at their end, rather than taking an average or sum of every moment.<sup>16</sup> If you want to create persuasive videos, you can leverage this dynamic to craft emotional highs and lows.

In addition to the arc of a story, we can also be heavily swayed by exposure to more visceral stimuli such as pupil dilation. Although fMRI studies suggest that we may not notice this at a conscious level,<sup>17</sup> the fact that both men and women's pupils dilate when sexually aroused<sup>18</sup> may explain our preferences for photos of faces with large pupils.<sup>19</sup> While pupillary responses can indicate a variety of things, from changes in mental states, attention and the intensity of mental activity,<sup>20</sup> to the dopamine rush we experience when looking at photos of people we love,<sup>21</sup> in general dilated pupils tend to convey a message of (positive) arousal.

These insights have not escaped the attention of the advertising industry, and in 2015 creative agency BBH decided to apply these findings to the production of a 60-second advert for Audi's new R8 V10 plus sports car.<sup>22</sup> Having gathered biometric data from the body of a driver during a racetrack lap, they then used this data to create a video which featured a close-up shot of a pupil dilating in real time in reaction to the ride. By communicating the visceral thrill of the experience in this way, they were able to transmit a powerful, physiological message of arousal from the advert to the viewer.


It's not just physiological cues that can boost our arousal levels. Music can also elicit such responses, from boosting our motivation,<sup>23</sup> feelings of pleasure,<sup>24</sup> and relaxation,<sup>25</sup> to reducing levels of pain and anxiety.<sup>26</sup> Music can even increase or decrease our breathing and heart rate, depending on how upbeat or meditative the tempo, respectively.<sup>27</sup> This is why, when choosing the score for your video, you should ensure that it elicits the level of arousal that matches both your content and the call to action.

Not only is music influential in grabbing people's attention, if you're narrating an advert or piece of video content, research has found that lowering the pitch of your voice can signal status, which can be perceived by others as dominant, prestigious and admirable, traits positively correlated with behavioural influence.<sup>28</sup> However, when a person's voice goes down in pitch, they can also be judged as wanting to be more intimidating and domineering, so it's a balance that must be struck with care. Of course if you're working with video, you can also make use of non-verbal cues such as body language, gestures and clothing, so as to mirror your audience's preferences and expectations (for a great example of this, check out Burger King's anti pre-roll ads<sup>29</sup>).

# MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

## Videos by platform

- **Facebook, Instagram, Twitter** All of these platforms enable auto-playing videos, which means that to get the best response your content has to be visually compelling even without any sound (emotive visuals and/or the use of captions can work well here). As these channels are primarily accessed through mobile devices, your video format can be vertical, i.e. non-16×9. Since browsing behaviours will typically be ‘in feed’, whatever the content of your video, it has to be visually attention-grabbing within the first few seconds in order to capture the fleeting attention of fast scrollers.
- **YouTube** Despite its reputation as the primary video hosting platform, YouTube’s most popular content has historically been audio (music).<sup>30</sup> In terms of branded ads, those that are most successful tend to be videos that disrupt our expectations, change our emotional state, and make us laugh (such as the Geico and Burger King adverts mentioned earlier).
- **Vimeo** Another popular hosting platform, this channel typically attracts a smaller, more creative community, and can be a good place to share work for which you wish to receive more constructive feedback.
- **Your website** The videos you create for your website will naturally be designed to achieve a different outcome than those created for your social channels. Onsite videos should be goal-oriented and work within the context of a page, never sitting in isolation. If you want to increase play rate, you should match the visual branding of your video (the thumbnail and video player) with your brand and website. The video’s prominence on the page will also impact engagement, and as a rule of thumb, the higher up the page it is, the more views it will accrue. Whatever content you create, a beautiful, purposefully designed thumbnail (especially those including human faces) will be more likely to trigger plays.

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- **Video hosting for business** If you're designing videos specifically for use on your website, there are several platforms you can use that have been developed specifically for this use-case (such as Wistia, Brightcove and Vidyard). Offering more detailed analytics, tools and functionality for personalisation than social video platforms, these services can provide a great way to manage your content and gather vital data that can help you optimise your approach.

**3**  
**PART**

# **SELL WITH INTEGRITY**

# INFLUENCE

Professor Robert Cialdini's

## 6 principles of influence

and how to use them online

In our increasingly complex, fast-paced world, we often rely on heuristics (cognitive shortcuts) to help us make decisions and navigate our environments more efficiently. If you understand how these work, you can use them to influence behaviour online.

### RECIPROCITY

*Give and take*



An obligation to give  
An obligation to receive  
An obligation to repay

Start the exchange:

- be proactive
- give something away
- make concessions

### CONSISTENCY

*Commitment*



We act in a way that is consistent with our values and identity

Get a commitment:

- identify users' traits
- activate self-concept
- make your request

# PRICING AND VALUE

Did you know...

prices ending in  
are called  
charm prices  
because they

NUMBER 9

sell more?

SUBCONSCIOUSLY

When visitors arrive at your website they will **scan for cues** on what it's about, **if it's secure** and whether or not they **can trust you**

# PRINCIPLES OF ONLINE PERSUASION

## SOCIAL PROOF

*Herd instinct*



We naturally look to other people for cues on how to behave

We conform when:

- the group is strong
- physically close to us
- has many members

## LIKING

*Similarities*



We prefer to comply with people whom we actually like

Boost your likeability:

- highlight similarities
- genuine compliments
- be trustworthy

## AUTHORITY

*Expert appeal*



We are rewarded for behaving in accordance with authority figures

Make this work for you:

- show you're the expert
- back up with evidence
- be inspiring

## SCARCITY

*In short supply*



We tend to value that which is in scarce supply

Use it online:

- have flash sales
- include a countdown
- show limited stock

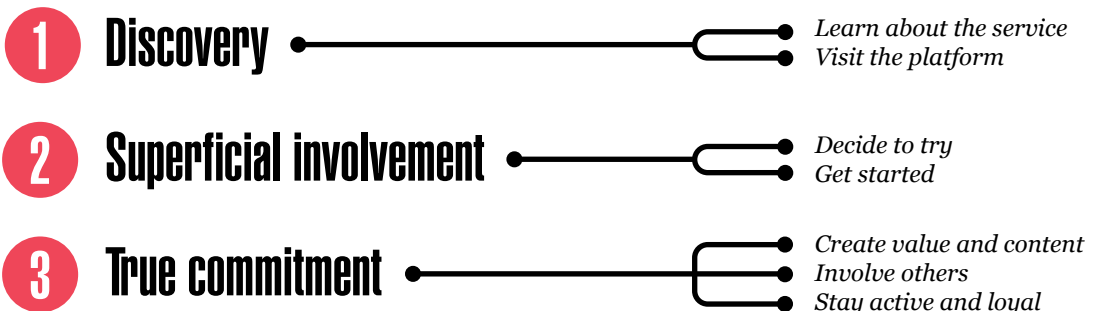
## THE BEHAVIOUR CHAIN



*The success of many online services today depends on the company's ability to persuade users to take specific actions*

B. J. Fogg & D. Eckles

This model can help explain how persuasion is structured over time so as to **achieve target behaviours**





# 12 INFLUENCE: AN INTRODUCTION

“ *To be persuasive we must be believable; to be believable we must be credible; to be credible we must be truthful.*

EDWARD R. MURROW, AMERICAN JOURNALIST<sup>1</sup>

If you've been reading this book in chronological order, you'll already have a good grasp of the psychological factors that shape your audience's behaviours, and the strategies you can employ to communicate more persuasively. It's a great foundation on which to build more meaningful interactions, but if you really want to see results, you have to understand the psychology of direct, automatic influence.

As with any kind of persuasion, the aim here should be to use these principles towards mutual benefit. If you can align the goals of your business with those of your customers, not only will you create a much more enjoyable, frictionless experience for all involved, you'll also be better placed to build advocacy, earn trust and gain a forgiving ear for when you hit inevitable bumps further down the road. In the following pages we'll take a look at the theory behind some of the most fundamental persuasion principles, how and why they work, and when to use which ones.

## THE ART OF PERSUASION

Persuasion is generally defined by psychologists as 'the process through which the attitudes and behaviours of an agent are intentionally conveyed in a certain direction by another agent without coercion'.<sup>2</sup> Online, this means shaping people's behaviours towards a particular outcome, both through the relationship you forge, and the environment you design.

Persuasion techniques can be used to shape all manner of symbolic and physical actions, from encouraging people to purchase or rate your products, to successfully onboarding visitors to your newsletter or app. Whatever your goal, and

however they find you, at some point your prospective customers will inevitably arrive at your website, and use what they find there to inform their next step.

The first thing they'll do when they land is subconsciously scan the page for cues as to what your website is about, and how they should interact with it.<sup>3</sup> By engineering the landing page so that only certain predetermined actions are possible (remember our section on CTAs), you'll create a more fluent, intuitive and ultimately more profitable experience.

## COMPLIANCE

Unlike obedience (a response to authority) or conformity (behaving in accordance with social norms), in social psychology, *compliance* refers to the act of acquiescing to a request. Whether that request is explicit (stated directly) or implicit (subtly implied), there are many ways in which compliance can be used to influence people's behaviours.

### Disrupt then reframe

One of the most intriguing, effective and questionable compliance techniques is known as *disrupt then reframe*. This process works by deliberately reframing a request so as to confuse the intended recipient, thus lowering their resistance to influence.

Allow me to give you an example. In one study, two psychologists named Davis and Knowles<sup>4</sup> went from door to door trying to sell holiday cards for three dollars apiece. In order to test which elements (or combination of elements) were the most persuasive, they introduced a disruptive component to their sales pitch, telling people that the cards were worth '300 pennies' as opposed to three dollars. Alongside this simple disrupt condition, they also tested a second variant, in which they included that the cards were 'a bargain'.

The experiment yielded fascinating results. The process worked, but only when people were approached with the disrupt then reframe sales pitch. By using uncommon wording to make their request, '300 pennies . . . that's three dollars. It's a bargain', the psychologists disrupted their subjects' natural thought process of 'I am being solicited', thus lowering their resistance to the persuasion attempt. By catching them off guard, this simple technique ultimately resulted in a significant increase in compliance levels and therefore sales. Of course, in real life scenarios, this technique only works long-term if the quirkiness of the message fits your brand, and if the customer is satisfied with their purchase after a cooling-off period.

## Door in the face

When it comes to favours, salespeople know only too well that the key to success often lies in the delivery and content of the initial ask. Introduced by Cialdini and his colleagues in 1975, the *door in the face* technique involves making a request that is so objectionable that the recipient is bound to refuse.<sup>5</sup>

While it may seem counter-intuitive, when the salesperson follows this initial request with a much smaller, more appealing one, the customer is much more likely to comply. Whether it's because they feel guilty for refusing twice, because they feel they have to make a reciprocal concession in response to the salesperson's smaller request, or because they are worried they will be judged badly if they refuse too many times (self-presentation theory),<sup>6</sup> this is a potent technique that can be very effective when used in the right context. However, it can also leave a bad taste in the mouth, and if you get it wrong and ask for something completely ridiculous, you risk being dismissed out of hand.<sup>7</sup>

## Ingratiation

Whether to secure a parent's approval, ask a favour of a friend, or seduce a new lover, at some point in our lives we have all tried to make ourselves more attractive or likeable in order to gain someone's compliance. From flattery and eyelash batting to presenting ourselves in a way that will please our intended target, *ingratiation* is one of the first persuasion techniques we learn when growing up.

It may not sound like much, but one of the most subtle and effective ways to ingratiate yourself to someone is to remember their name.<sup>8</sup> In conversation or email, a simple touch such as remembering a personal interest (their favourite food or hobby) can make the receiver feel special, and the more attentive you are, the greater the effect.

Typically, the person being flattered (your customer) will view the flatterer (you or your brand) with a more positive regard than other onlookers,<sup>9</sup> most probably because we all secretly like an ego boost and will therefore interpret such flattery as genuine. The net result is that your customer will be more likely to comply with any subsequent requests you might make, by virtue of the fact that they feel complimented.

Whether this effect is due to a sense of indebtedness (the flattered recipient feels duty bound to reciprocate), or to a greater sense of affinity with the flatterer, is unclear, but the bottom line is that it tends to yield results. I've seen variations of this strategy work incredibly well online, especially when the request (or offer) is obviously tongue-in-cheek, for example a popup that reads 'Only the smartest people buy from us . . . Here's 10% off to lord over your mates'.

## Innate interestingness

Whatever the context, as a species we are generally driven to achieve our goals in the most rewarding, effective way possible, which is why our response to a request will usually stem from the way we *feel* about it.<sup>10</sup> For example, one group of psychologists found that when it comes to complying with a public request (such as being asked to donate a prize for the school raffle), we tend to act from the need to avoid feelings of fear and shame. When responding to a favour in private, however, we might instead act from the need to alleviate feelings of guilt or pity.<sup>11</sup>

In terms of positive motivations, we are more inclined to comply with requests that we find interesting in and of themselves. The kick we get from performing an exciting or stimulating task (such as a game, competition or immersive experience) can often be rewarding enough to increase compliance.<sup>12</sup>

A great example of this in action is Nike's *We Own The Night*,<sup>13</sup> an all-female, festival-style 10k race that was designed to encourage women to run together and reclaim the streets after dark. By creating an event that was highly social, intrinsically rewarding and culturally empowering, Nike were able to engage (and sell to) a vast, previously untapped audience of new customers, generating a social buzz and a positive emotional association with their brand in the process.

## Hedonic value

Related to innate interestingness, the principle of *hedonic motivation* is one of my favourites. Derived from the Greek term for sweet, we tend to think of hedonism as the unbridled pursuit of pleasure and sensual self-indulgence. In psychological terms, however, hedonic experiences are associated with the classic motivational principle that we tend to approach pleasure, and avoid pain.

Online, it is this deeply motivating drive that can thrust a customer into the sweet spot that encompasses both their desire to buy, and a business's desire to sell. When these two desires are matched, compliance heaven ensues. The hedonic value of a shopping experience will depend on the emotional and multi-sensory value you get from it,<sup>14</sup> which means that the more delightful, exciting and sensually pleasing an experience is, the more likely a customer is to convert. From an ecommerce perspective, this means that a website should be designed to deliberately increase participation, interaction and fun, from the functional level all the way through to its aesthetics.<sup>15</sup> So how can you increase the hedonic value of your website?

Well, when we shop online, we are broadly motivated by two types of benefits: *utilitarian* (cognitive), and *emotional* (affective). Utilitarian benefits are things such as monetary savings, convenience, rich product information and broad product

offerings. Emotional benefits, on the other hand, comprise the six key dimensions of hedonic shopping motivations: *gratification*, *role*, *social*, *value*, *idea*, and *adventure*.<sup>16</sup>

*Gratification* is when we go shopping to relieve stress, alleviate a bad mood or to simply to treat ourselves. *Role* is the enjoyment we experience when shopping for someone else, and the influence this has on our emotions (the excitement you feel when you find that perfect gift). The *social* motivation refers to the enjoyment of a shared shopping with friends or family. *Value* relates to finding a great deal, and the thrill of stumbling across that sale item you simply can't live without. *Idea* is about keeping up with new trends, innovations and products. The sixth and final motivation, *adventure*, refers to shopping for stimulation and excitement, and the feeling of being transported into another world.

One of my favourite websites that ticks all of these motivational boxes is Etsy.com. Beautifully designed, with recently viewed items and a selection of personalised suggestions waiting for me every time I log in, it always brightens my mood (gratification). The diverse range of products makes it a fun and unique place to buy gifts for other people (role), and the product images are easy to pin, tweet and share socially (social). It's one of the first places I go if I want to see what's new in a specific niche of products (idea), and it's my guilty pleasure when I want to be transported into a fantasy world of antique jewellery and unusual clothes (adventure).

## MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

### The art of persuasion

- **Fair exchange** Use the principle of reciprocity to ensure a fair sense of value exchange. Requesting a visitor's name and email address in return for access to valuable content, free shipping or discounts, is usually seen as a fair trade.
- **Disrupt then reframe** How can you disrupt your visitors' expectations, and reframe common requests so that they're more quirky, engaging and disarming? Take a look at your website and those of your competitors, and identify the common sales pitch (e.g. 'Try it now for only £4.99 a month!'), then write down a few ways to reframe it and split test these.

- **Door in the face** It's not for everyone, but if you feel like this technique could work for you, find a way to ask your visitors for something so objectionable that the second request feels like a concession in comparison (e.g. 'Give us your house, car and immortal soul! No? OK then, maybe just your email . . .').
- **A little flattery** This one's great if you have a more light-hearted, playful tone to your brand. Draw up a list of the qualities you think your target customer will find the most desirable (for example, a high IQ), and use these to craft alternative CTAs which you can then split test to find the most effective (e.g. 'You're so smart you should be in Mensa. Join our newsletter for brilliant minds.').
- **Interestingness** How can you make every customer touchpoint intrinsically rewarding? Whether you're focusing on your social channels, marketing content, user experience or a physical event, if you can make these interactions more stimulating, exiting and emotionally rewarding, you'll see an increase in engagement and compliance.
- **Hedonism** Tap into your visitors' propensity for pleasure by designing a shopping experience that satisfies the six hedonic shopping motivations. The experience you offer should: make them feel good, help them choose great gifts, provide a means for social sharing, offer the thrill of a great deal, bring them the latest trends, and provide an exciting experience that transports them to another world.

# 13 PRINCIPLES OF ONLINE PERSUASION

“ *The ever accelerating pace and information crush of modern life will make this particular form of unthinking compliance more and more prevalent in the future.*

ROBERT CIALDINI, SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGIST<sup>1</sup>

## COGNITIVE SHORTCUTS

As sophisticated mammals, we have evolved to streamline our attention so that at any given moment, we can focus on the information that is most important to us. Right now, as you read this paragraph, you'll probably be vaguely aware of your surroundings, conscious of these words in front of you and alert to the fact that you're reading this text in a book or on a screen. It's unlikely, however, that you'll have given a second thought to the pace of your breath or the movement of your eyes as you read. This is because most of our behaviours are automatic – we tune out the majority of the sensory input we receive and run on autopilot, to the point that we don't even realise we're doing it.

In our increasingly complex, fast-paced world, we often rely on heuristics (cognitive shortcuts) to help us make decisions and navigate our environments more efficiently, but there are situations in which this approach can get us into trouble.

Take behavioural stereotyping, for example. A child only has to learn how to open one door before she can stereotype that action across all doors. By learning a single, standardised action, she is subsequently equipped for most door-opening situations, and will only encounter a problem when faced with unexpected variables (a door that only slides open). We also use such rules of thumb for financial decisions to help us discern value (a principle known as the price-value heuristic), which is neatly captured by the popular adage 'You get what you pay for'. Over time, whatever the domain, we build up a general set of rules about the world based on our previous experiences, until eventually these become automatic.

Allow me to give you an example. A friend of mine once told me a story about an artist she knew, who couldn't seem to shift many pieces of her work. Her paintings were visually compelling, skilfully executed and attracted a lot of attention from the people who passed her shop, but no one was buying them and she couldn't understand why. Exasperated, she enlisted the help of a successful marketing consultant who advised her to add an extra couple of zeros to the sale price of her pieces for one week, to see if it would make a difference. The artist reluctantly agreed and her paintings started selling, fast.

What happened? By selling her work at what she thought was a fair price, the artist had inadvertently been putting customers off – they considered the prices to be impossibly cheap and therefore indicative of poor quality. At this new, higher price point however, prospective customers automatically interpreted the cost as a reflection of superior value, for which they were quite willing to pay double or triple the original price.

This is a great example of the price-value heuristic in action, but what's interesting is that the product or service doesn't have to be of extremely high quality in order for this approach to work. Rather, the problem often lies in the fact that the value of the product is not reflected in its existing market price. People do sometimes price items extortionately in the hope of making a sale, but in the long term, this strategy will almost always backfire if you use it to overvalue products of poor quality.

For many businesses, the prospect of raising (or lowering) one's prices to find the right market fit can be a daunting one. This is especially true when it comes to software as a service products (SaaS), where it can be harder for potential clients to measure value for money. One way in which to resolve this is to offer a free trial so that people can experience the value of the service before they commit. But with so many competitors out there all fighting for customers' time and attention, how do you get people to actually use your product early enough that they can see the value before the trial ends?

One company that deals with this challenge well, is Freshbooks,<sup>2</sup> an automated invoicing service that offers a free 30-day trial of their premium product. Once a prospective customer has signed up for a trial, Freshbooks engages in a charm offensive that is so effective (friendly reminder emails, helpful tips, live support) that the new customer has no choice but to actively engage with the product at the very start of this period. This means of course that they have longer to fully experience all the benefits, so that when the trial is up, they are more likely to have understood the value of the service. Now, if the customer wants to retain all the features they've come to rely on, they have to upgrade to a paid account to avoid losing all the benefits (excellent use of loss aversion, which we'll cover shortly).



## MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

### If the price is right

- **Don't undersell yourself** If you are offering a good-quality product or service, consider your pricing structure carefully as this will influence customers' perception of its value. If you're not sure what your pricing should be, check how your competitors are pricing comparable products. Alternatively, give yourself discreet timeframes in which to experiment sequentially with your price for one particular product so that you can directly monitor the effect of pricing on the number of items sold.
- **Stand out from the crowd** People often think that by slashing their prices they'll attract the lion's share of customers and will out-sell their competitors. This does not always work. A smart solution is to add real value to your products or services (offer something your competitors don't) and reflect this in the price.
- **Try before you buy** If you think you're under-valuing your service but feel uncomfortable raising your prices off the bat, try offering a 30-day free trial at a higher price point, including all the bells and whistles so that people can experience the full service for themselves. If you have onboarded them successfully and they've enjoyed using your product, by the time the trial period is up, you can simply offer the option to 'continue' or 'upgrade' and the sunk cost of having invested time and effort (and having received something valuable back) will help increase your conversions.

## RECIPROCITY

“ *We are human because our ancestors learned to share their food and their skills in an honored network of obligation.*

RICHARD LEAKEY, PALEOANTHROPOLOGIST<sup>3</sup>

A form of cooperation in which we feel an obligation to give, receive and repay,<sup>4</sup> *reciprocity* is a social exchange of something valued by all parties involved, whether that's material goods, assistance and services, advice, contacts, help or opportunities.<sup>5</sup> Essentially, we are hard-wired to repay in kind what another person has given to us, which is why reciprocity can be such an effective influencing strategy, more powerful than those based on simple rewards alone.

So where does reciprocity come from? Psychologists have theorised that this principle relies on a universally shared and strongly held feeling of future obligation, where the success of the exchange depends on your confidence that what you are giving away will be repaid to you in the future by something of equal or greater value. It is, if you like, a form of indebtedness that humans will almost always strive to repay, even when the expectation of repayment is tacit, vague or undefined.

You don't even have to be altruistic for reciprocity to work – in fact, reciprocal systems can thrive even when everyone involved is looking out for their own best interests. You need only look as far as gift-giving to see reciprocity in action: when we receive a gift, no matter how small, we will usually respond in kind without even being asked (or feel horrendously guilty if we don't). Why? Because we somehow feel compelled to do so. Even if the feeling is subtle or absent, we know that it's simply not good form to be seen to break this unspoken rule, so fundamental is it to our social success.

If you consider reciprocity in the context of our ancestors, by sharing their knowledge, tools and assistance in this way, each individual increased his or her chances of survival. From an evolutionary perspective, it has been argued that this rule provided the very foundation for the success and proliferation of human culture and society.<sup>6</sup>


## How it works

Given that society tends to shun and ostracise people who violate this rule, it's fair to say that in most situations, you can expect reciprocity to work. It's easy to implement and simply involves giving the intended recipient a gift. While it is possible to set this principle in motion even with a low-grade offering, of course we all know that integrity matters which is why this invocation works best when your clients receive something they actually value.

## MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

### Give and take

- **Surprise your clients** This approach often works best when face-to-face with a client, or online during a live webinar or meeting. If you can surprise your clients by offering them a free gift and then making a request, the fact that they aren't expecting it (and are momentarily disarmed by your offer) can increase their compliance.

- 
- **Offer high-value content** By offering prospective customers free, valuable content (such as how-to videos, expert interviews, well-researched articles or useful information), you can initiate a high-value reciprocal exchange. Even though these exchanges can take a while to cement, your actions will nevertheless establish you as a credible, generous authority in your field, bringing you front-of-mind when your customers are in need of that specific expertise.
  - **Run a free webinar** By inviting people to interact with you in this more personal setting, you can create the opportunity to up-sell your products or services to a warm audience. This kind of approach usually works best when you make the offer of a discount towards the end of a webinar, but before the climax (i.e. 'Before we reveal how to do X, we'd like to offer you the chance to buy Y at a one-time only special discount').
  - **Give away a free ebook or whitepaper** Since I wrote the first edition of this book, it seems that every man and his dog now offers a free ebook or whitepaper. This approach can still work (which is why so many people are doing it), however, it's worth remembering that the most downloaded, shared and cited content is that which offers significant, well-researched insights that people can't get elsewhere (such as PageFair's annual Ad Blocking Report). If you can find a unique angle, piece of research, or original content to offer your clients, this approach may be worth investigating.
  - **Offer special benefits to subscribers** If you want to up the ante, you can reserve some of your content for dedicated subscribers. By establishing a tiered reciprocity system, you can differentiate between distinct levels of value. Giving a free teaser to those who aren't subscribers will encourage them to sign up (reciprocal action) and, once they have, the fact that this grants them access to more resources will help reinforce the dynamic, encouraging an ongoing relationship.
  - **Compromise** Mutual compromise can provide a powerful means with which to create a system of reciprocity. By showing your customers that you are willing to accommodate them, they are more likely to return the favour so that a mutually beneficial outcome can be reached (this is especially useful in negotiations).
  - **Make concessions** Following on from the previous point, when we are seen to make a concession, the other party will feel indebted and

obliged to reciprocate in kind. If you want to sell an item at a particular price, come in above your asking price (known as anchoring) and allow yourself to concede at an acceptable level (concession). More often than not, your financial concession will be reciprocated by a purchase.

- **Reject and retreat** Also based on the principle of concession, we touched on this particular tactic in the last chapter (the door in the face technique). When used in conversation, this approach can work well when you are asking a client to take an action they consider costly, such as providing customer feedback or donating time or money to a cause you support. To leverage this principle, you must first make a large request of someone that they will likely decline, such as ‘Could you volunteer to write ten articles for our guest editorial post?’ Then, once this request has been rejected, retreat from it and ask for the action that you actually want – ‘OK, maybe you could just write one post for our website?’ By positioning the second request as a compromise, you are more likely to get a positive response to it.

## CONSISTENCY

Psychologists have long understood that humans are motivated to boost their self perception, and numerous studies have documented our need for *consistency*, the desire to act in a way that is congruent with our past actions, commitments, beliefs and self-image.<sup>7</sup>

What’s extraordinary are the lengths to which we’ll go in order to remain self-consistent. In a curious study conducted by Professor Petter Johansson of Lund University,<sup>8</sup> participants were shown various pairs of photographs of women, and instructed to select the most attractive in each pair. They were then asked to describe why they had made that choice, not realising that in some instances, the researchers had covertly swapped their preferred image with the one they had discarded. Yet when asked to describe why they had selected that image, not only did the majority of participants not notice the swap (change blindness), but they went on to give reasons for having chosen the image they had not, in fact, selected (choice blindness).

This counter-intuitive and somewhat disturbing study points towards an uncomfortable truth: when confronted with a choice, whether manipulated or real, we’ll construct stories and select facts that fit with our decisions, in order to justify and post-rationalise our actions. Known as *confirmation bias*, this kind of selective

fact-seeking is especially pronounced in the realm of the abstract (such as our opinions, perspectives and beliefs), which is why it can be so much more effective to persuade people through emotional rather than rational appeals.

While we all vary in our preference for consistency, the above should demonstrate how effectively this principle can be leveraged when it comes to compliance, especially when an individual is highly motivated to be self-consistent (a quality which varies from person to person).<sup>9</sup>

## Foot in the door

If you have a background in marketing, this technique will no doubt be familiar to you, since it is one of the oldest tricks in the book. The *foot in the door* technique begins by asking someone to comply with a small request that they're unlikely to refuse (such as donating £2 a month to a children's charity). Once the individual has said yes to this initial request, you can ask them to comply with a second, larger request that is related to the first (in this case, asking them to increase their donation to £5 a month).

The remarkable efficacy of this technique stems from the fact that it exploits our deep-seated desire to maintain a consistent, positive self-concept as explored above. When we make a decision to act charitably, we subconsciously, internally ascribe this trait to our own sense of identity so that, later, if we refuse to increase our donation, we feel as though we are somehow acting against our core sense of who we are.

This is one of the reasons why getting people to provide customer feedback, comments or responses to social content can be so effective – once they have taken an action that identifies them as active members of your community, they are more likely to take future actions consistent with this identity.

## MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

### Keep it consistent

- **Identify useful customer traits** Identify a few key actions that you would like your visitors to take (for example, recommending you to their friends or providing customer feedback), and consider which traits would be conducive to eliciting these actions (getting your customers to see themselves as trend-setters or product experts, for instance).

- **Design a two-step strategy** Once you have identified these key traits, you can design a two-step foot in the door strategy to activate the appropriate self-concept in your customers. For example, if you are a micro-brewery selling fabulous local ale and you think your business could use some word of mouth marketing, the desirable action could be to get customers to contribute high-quality testimonials, reviews or user generated content. If the appropriate trait you wish your customers to internalise is ‘expert’, your two-step strategy might look something like this:

- 1 Ask your customers to complete a quick poll using their expert opinion (the way you phrase this request is crucial – in this case, the target word is ‘expert’). Send them an email thanking them for their invaluable feedback.
- 2 One week later, ask these same customers to contribute a more detailed testimonial or expert review by first thanking them for their previous, expert contribution.

It may seem repetitious, but by instilling and reinforcing in your customers the sense that they are experts in microbrewed beer, they are more likely to use this trait to subconsciously inform their future actions, including telling their friends about their expert find.

## Commitment

Not only do we strive to be internally consistent, we are also motivated to behave in accordance with our past *commitments*, especially when those commitments were made actively.<sup>10</sup> This was illustrated beautifully in the following study, where psychologists asked two groups of undergraduates whether they would participate in an AIDS awareness project.<sup>11</sup> To show their support, the first group were asked to proactively opt in by ticking two boxes, whereas the second group could simply leave the boxes unchecked to back the cause. Of the students who participated, those who had actively opted in were not only more likely to show up and volunteer (even six weeks after the survey had taken place), they were also more likely to attribute their decisions to internal traits and attitudes than their passive peers.

## Going public

There is also evidence to suggest that the commitments we make *publicly* are more enduring and effective in securing compliance than those we make in private.<sup>12</sup> Allow me to give you an example.

Imagine that you are standing in an electrical appliances store during the sales and you want to buy a fridge. A brand representative approaches you and asks if she can be of any assistance. Noticing your sense of indecision, she offers you an unbelievably good price on one of the top fridges in the range. Keen to grab a deal, you talk with her a while longer before deciding that this really is a great purchase and you'd be foolish to miss out. The assistant goes to fetch all the relevant forms for you to sign, leaving you to think about your decision. As you stand there contemplating all the amazing features and the fantastically low price, you conclude that yes, you really have found a deal worth snapping up.

When she finally returns with the papers ready for you to sign, the assistant informs you that the internal trays and smart thermostat are extra components you'll have to pay for separately. Oh, and if you also want the de-icing function in the freezer, that will cost extra, too. Standing there on the shop floor, pen in hand and having publicly made the commitment to buy, you feel too uncomfortable to walk away and so reluctantly you sign on the dotted line – paying a whopping surcharge for the privilege.

Also known as the *low-ball* technique, the secret to this strategy's success is the public nature of the commitment made.<sup>13</sup> However, it's worth noting that in collectivist cultures where citizens tend to prize interdependence more highly than individual self-concept (and the pursuit of related goals), people are much less likely to be receptive to such techniques than their individualist neighbours. This is why, whatever principles you decide to use, you must always test their effectiveness in the context of each discrete target demographic (what works with your French customers may well backfire with those based in India).

## MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

### Ask for commitment

- **Go public** If you are selling a product or service and you're releasing it in beta or offering a free trial period, get your customers to commit to you publicly on social media, either by liking, sharing or tweeting about it.

- **Healthy peer pressure** If your product is an app, you can also motivate users to complete a range of tasks by encouraging them to compare their activity to other users within their peer group. A great example of this is the 'Buddies' section of the meditation app, Headspace, in which you can invite your friends to participate, track and encourage each other's progress, unlocking badges as you go.<sup>14</sup>
- **Reward active participation** You can take it one step further and encourage people to post user generated content, by running competitions that showcase and publicly reward the best entries on your brand's official channels (for more information on this, check out Chapter 10 on social media).

## SOCIAL PROOF AND CONFORMITY

Colloquially known as the herd instinct, *social proof* refers to the phenomenon whereby we change our own behaviour to conform to the norms of the group. It can be a powerful way to influence large swathes of people, which is why you'll find this dynamic at the heart of many of the most successful cults and religious organisations around the world.

Back in the 1950s, two psychologists, Deutsch and Gerard, theorised that conformity arises from two very different types of motivations.<sup>15</sup> The first, *informational conformity*, is our human desire to behave 'correctly' according to an accurate perception of reality. The second type of motivation, *normative conformity*, is our desire to gain social acceptance and approval from those around us. Both of these goals serve a third, deeper drive: the impulse to protect our self-esteem and maintain our self-concept.<sup>16</sup>

It is this sense of self-concept that can also motivate us to consciously select the groups (and resulting social norms) to which we would like to belong. In this instance, conforming to group norms can be the result of a rational process connected to your sense of identity.<sup>17</sup> For instance, if you consider yourself particularly curious about nature and you happen to be an avid reader of National Geographic, you will likely enjoy both the sense of connection you may feel with other readers whose values reflect your own, and also the intellectual association that this in-group membership affords you.



In terms of day-to-day life, we often look to other people for cues on how to behave,<sup>18</sup> which can result in automatically deferring to experts or authority figures (known as judgemental heuristics). This effect is especially pronounced when we encounter a crisis or ambiguous situation, but its effectiveness stops short for situations in which we happen to be emotionally involved. Under these circumstances, we will tend to pay closer attention to the actual content of the information being given, thus overriding the judgemental heuristic with a controlled response.

Beyond looking to figures of authority for cues on how to behave, we also rely on social norms within our peer groups and culture to inform our understanding of, and responses to, social situations.<sup>19</sup> For instance, the way in which we respond to other people's beliefs will often depend on our perception of how widely held those beliefs actually are.<sup>20</sup> You may have seen this principle at play on social media, where an individual within a wider group expresses a view that strongly contradicts the opinion of the collective. In this scenario, as long as the dissident's self-concept is not immediately under threat, he or she will minimise their opposing message so as to avoid being ostracised by the group.<sup>21</sup>

If they don't manage to rein it in sufficiently, the rest of the group (no matter how large or small, intimate or otherwise) may engage in public shaming to bring that individual to heel. The result can be catastrophic for the person in question, and may lead not only to feelings of alienation and shame, but also to self-censorship. If, however, the dissident's opinions are based on a fundamental, identity-level belief that goes against the grain of the group, he or she may decide that the social cost of speaking out is a price worth paying.

It is important to note that, while conformity may exert enough pressure to coerce members into publicly adopting the group's social norms, these may not reflect the individual's own, privately held views (which may remain dissident). The reality is that in most cases, the majority of us would rather be accepted into a group than go it alone and it is this fundamental need to belong that can render peer pressure so effective.

Back in the 1980s, psychologist Bibb Latané<sup>22</sup> developed the *Social Impact Theory* to explore and explain this phenomenon in greater detail. He proposed that our likelihood to conform to a group's norms can be influenced by three main factors:

- the group's strength
- its physical proximity to us
- the number of members within it

Strong, immediate, large groups tend to exert a much more powerful influence on our individual level of conformity, than groups that are weak, physically absent

(far away) and small. Since its original publication, Latané's framework has evolved into the *Dynamic Social Impact Theory* (DSIT), which explains that our tendency 'to be more influenced by nearby rather than far away people gives rise to local patterns of consensus in attitudes, values, practices, identities, and meanings that can be interpreted as subcultures'.<sup>23</sup>

While our geographic proximity to others can influence our beliefs and attitudes in the physical world, you'll also find this kind of pattern across all corners of the social web. All the more reason, then, to identify the norms that bind and drive specific customer segments, and to find out which groups cluster around which social channels.

## Cultural differences

As we've already established, the need to belong is a powerful one and aligning ourselves to the social norms of our wider group can be an effective way of meeting this need. Yet when it comes to conformity, not all cultures are created equal.

As we touched on earlier, when asked to comply with a request, people from collectivist cultures tend to rely more on the actions of their peers to inform their decisions, than those from more individualistic countries, for whom this effect is much reduced.<sup>24,25</sup> These contrasting behaviours may result from differing cultural perspectives, each of which affect how we attach meaning to the concepts of conformity and non-conformity.<sup>26</sup>

For example, in individualist cultures we tend to see *non-conformity* as a good thing, and often associate uniqueness with positive traits such as originality, independence and freedom. In East Asian cultures, however, *conformity* is admired as a positive trait, as it connotes harmony and a sense of connectedness. In fact, there is a tendency for East Asian communities to perceive anything that strays from the social norm as deviant, which can result in people going to extreme lengths in order to fit in.

It is this impulse to conform that may well be contributing to the rapidly growing demand for luxury goods in more collectivist countries such as China and Japan.<sup>27</sup> While there are, of course, other factors at play (such as the rise of the super-rich<sup>28</sup> and the middle classes), if your prevailing social imperative is to fit in, chances are you will scrimp and save to keep up with the Joneses.

This fascinating difference in motivation was demonstrated beautifully in a simple experiment in which East Asian (collectivist) and American (individualist) participants were asked to choose either a green or an orange pen from an assortment of five pens to take home as a gift. The selection was always a mix of two colours and, because there were five pens in total, there was always one colour that was more common than the other.

In keeping with theories of cultural conformity, the researchers found that East Asian participants consistently preferred pens of the 'common' majority colour, whereas Americans favoured the 'uncommon' minority.<sup>29</sup> This divergence of attitudes towards commonality has significant implications online, especially if you're selling items to a diverse, global audience. It provides further support to the necessity of glocalised websites, strategies and content, and highlights the pivotal role that accurate cultural knowledge can play in the success of your business.

## Conversion

The ability to convert someone from one viewpoint to another is a covetable skill. Luckily for us, it is one that can be learned. Research has found that people who hold moderately opposing attitudes to that of the group are susceptible to adopting the consensus position. What's more, they will tend to interpret the numerical size of the group as evidence for an objective consensus. This means that when we change an initial, moderately opposing position to conform to that of the wider group, we believe we are doing so due to rational, reasonable evidence.<sup>30</sup>

A nice example of conformity at work can be found in the ubiquitous five-star rating system. Despite everything being available to us at the swipe of a finger, when it comes to buying goods online (especially the expensive, electrical kind) many of us will spend hours just trawling through review sites to find the definitive answer on what to buy, from where.

Although some people actually enjoy this type of gathering behaviour, many find it to be a painful experience. That's why, when offered a solution that can do the hard work for us, we are so easily seduced. Take Amazon's rating and review system, for example. Not only do the customer testimonials solve many of our research needs (providing a one-stop shop for qualitative and quantitative feedback), they also increase our feelings of satisfaction when we finally decide to buy the reviewed item.<sup>31</sup> If testimonials such as these can influence how we feel about our purchases, what impact might they have on sales?

Well, this is precisely the question that a client of mine, Unilever, recently put to the test when they conducted a study to track the impact of reviews on product sales. Customers who had bought a particular item in the past six weeks were sent an email asking if they might consider reviewing it. They either received an incentivising email ('Win £50 off your next online shop'), a simple product-branded email, or a store-branded email (the control). The results were illuminating: not only were customers much more likely to open the incentive email and click through to the review page, but a whopping 44 per cent of those who did click through actually wrote a review. In terms of impact, one of the products that had previously only had four reviews and an average rating of 3 stars before the

campaign, ended up amassing 25 reviews with an average 4.5 stars, which went on to increase the base-rate of sales of this product by a staggering 87 per cent over a four-month period.

## Priming

If you've read around the topic of influence, you may well have come across the intriguing psychological principle of *priming*. A phenomenon that occurs largely beneath our conscious awareness, priming is an implicit memory effect in which the exposure to one stimulus can influence our subsequent response to a different stimulus. For instance, if you were to watch a particularly gruesome horror movie late at night, you'd be more likely to get freaked out by any creaks or unexpected sounds you might than hear than if you'd watched a romcom.

Although this effect is generally quite subtle, there have been some interesting studies exploring its impact on purchasing behaviours. For instance, in one experiment, researchers played stereotypically French and German music from an in-store supermarket display on alternate days, over the course of two weeks.<sup>32</sup> During this period, they found that when French music was playing, the supermarket sold more French wines than German ones, and vice versa. Yet when they issued the customers questionnaires to enquire about their wine selection, the results indicated that they had been entirely unaware of the music's effect on their choice.

Online, the use of particular interface elements (such as an 'Enter promotional code' field on a checkout page) can unintentionally prime users with an expectation ('There must be a discount code out there somewhere'), that subsequently leads to a predictable behaviour ('I must trawl the internet for an hour until I find said code').<sup>33</sup> Despite arriving at the checkout with no code, nor any expectation that one might be available, by being exposed to this visual prime, customers will now be much more likely to abandon the checkout process in search of a discount.

Despite a wealth of research dedicated to the effects of priming, in recent years many of the original studies have come under scrutiny for their lack of replicability, with eminent psychologists such as Professor Daniel Kahneman (himself a 'general believer') questioning the robustness of priming results and calling for much-needed reforms in order to ensure credibility.<sup>34</sup> Although there is still work to be done, priming is nonetheless a fascinating psychological effect which, when researched reliably, can yield useful and tangible results.

Whether you want to use priming to elicit behaviours and expectations that match your customers' needs with yours, or you want to eliminate any biases (confounding variables) from the websites you design, it's worth knowing how priming works so that you can use it to support your goals, not undermine them.


# MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

## Conform and convert

- **Cultural conformity** Why is this important online? Well, if your target customers are based in a collectivist culture and you wish to influence them towards a particular action, your strategy will have to take into account current trends and the propensity of your audience to follow the lead of their peers. In short, it is a question of getting enough key people to behave in a certain way so as to activate the principle of social proof. Reach critical mass and the converts will come.
- **Star ratings** Encourage your customers to rate your products by sending them a friendly, personalised, product-specific email for a recent purchase that includes an incentive for participation ('Review X for a chance to win a case of champagne'). Make the most of this interaction by thanking those who do leave a review, with some unexpected positive reinforcement, such as a 15 per cent discount on their next purchase.
- **Steer the group** The principle of social proof highlights the power of the group over the individual. If you run any kind of community brand page (for instance on Facebook) or customer-facing social channel (such as a company account on Twitter or Instagram), you will probably have witnessed this principle in action: people who post on a regular basis will tend to respond to deviant comments from outgroup members with surprising ferocity. Within most groups there tend to be a few key members who exert more influence over their peers than others, and you can use this to your advantage by interacting more actively with these key people in order to influence the perception and behaviours of the wider community.
- **Influence by diffusion** As well as focusing on key, visible influencers, you can also spread your message by seeding it across a wider net of smaller, relevant conversations. You can do this by searching for specific keywords that relate to your core proposition, and by selecting the less frequently used terms to include in your social content. For instance, if you're working on a campaign around #climate, you may wish to join conversations on popular, associated topics such as

#appsforearth or #sustainability. However, since such terms will often occur in echo-chambers of established communities, it can leave you preaching to the choir. Instead, if you can join diffuse conversations that use less central terms (such as #beekeeping or #permaculture), you'll likely acquire a greater reach and your message will seed across a wider territory of potential customers.

- **Get to know your customers** Given that we are motivated to maintain a positive self-concept, you can take advantage of this by learning to see your customers the way that they see themselves. You can find out more about your customer's drives, preferences and motivations by using Cambridge University's Preference Tool,<sup>35</sup> or any of the other psychometric services I mentioned in Chapter 5.
- **Convert the fence-sitters** If you have an existing base of loyal customers, you can encourage them to invite fence-sitters into the fold. By providing incentives such as member benefits and recommend-a-friend discounts (that reward both the giver and receiver), you can set the ball in motion and let the principles of normative conformity work their magic. Potential customers who are within the group but have not quite yet bought into your products or services are more likely to be converted by the attitudes of fellow group members. So, by cultivating positive attitudes towards your brand in existing customers, whether through great customer service, a delightful user experience or emotionally warm social interactions, you'll generate a halo of positive brand associations, word of mouth recommendations and a magnetic reputation that will help attract new customers to your business.
- **Prime time** While brainwashing people through their device is thankfully not yet possible, you can prime your website visitors to experience certain pleasurable states so as to boost the likelihood that they will remember you in a positive light. Write down a list of positive words that you wish to be associated with, such as: happy, good, expert, positive, smile, relationship, support, friendly, etc. You can then include these words in your headings, copy, product descriptions, images or videos, to help set the emotional tone for your brand.
- **Avoid interface accidents** Following on from the previous points, it's worth running a quick website and content audit to check that you aren't



accidentally priming visitors towards unintentional outcomes (such as cart abandonment due to searches for promo codes). To avoid this, identify any potential trouble spots, then split test the effect of their presence and absence on user behaviours to ascertain any negative impact. A neat solution for discount boxes is to provide a simple text link ('Promo code') that only expands into a form field when you click on it. By hiding the form field at checkout, it will reduce its salience (and hence reduce the priming effect), while still enabling people who do have a code to successfully use it (as they will be consciously seeking this out).

## Mirroring

Have you ever seen a couple flirting with one another on a first date? If you have, chances are you'll have witnessed some *behavioural mimicry* in action. When two people are in rapport, they tend to subconsciously mirror each other's body language, gestures, facial expressions and even vocal characteristics.<sup>36</sup> While this is a natural phenomenon that happens automatically, it can also be used to artificially engineer a sense of connection with someone you've only just met. In fact, studies have shown that interacting with someone who gently mimics our behaviour will increase our sense of affinity for that person,<sup>37</sup> which is why it probably won't surprise you to learn that good salespeople are particularly proficient in this skill.

Whether or not we are consciously aware of it, this kind of mirroring is at its strongest when we are in a social mindset or situation. This has interesting implications for the use of behavioural mimicry in social media, and may help explain why screen-mediated face-to-face interactions are often so much more powerful and persuasive than their less interactive, text-based counterparts.

In fact, research carried out by Professor Dunbar and his colleagues at Oxford University<sup>38</sup> found that media channels actually follow a satisfaction hierarchy. Unsurprisingly, real world face-to-face conversations trump Skype, which, in turn, is considered more satisfying than interactions via phone, text, email and social media platforms.

Given our long-standing proclivity for social connection, it makes perfect sense that we would prefer any form of interaction that places us in the same physical space as the person with whom we're engaging. Until holodecks become a reality (I've been keeping my fingers crossed since I was nine), there simply isn't a substitute for being able to see, respond to and laugh with someone in real time.

Incidentally, Dunbar and his colleagues also found that emails that included symbols for laughter (such as emoticons or the shorthand LOL), were viewed more favourably than those that didn't. This may explain why the internet is now awash with animated gifs and emoticons – it seems we simply can't resist emotive means of connection.

## MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

### Establish rapport

- **Use humour** When you're interacting with potential customers, a little humour can go a long way. Depending on the context, you can create a greater sense of rapport by showing some emotion through the use of language, emoticons or a poignant gif. As always, be aware of cultural norms and personal sensitivities here.
- **Mirror your audience** If you're interacting with someone through video chat, you can experiment with subtly mirroring their gestures, the pace and tone of their speech and any salient facial expressions they may exhibit. If you feel uncomfortable mirroring in this way, it can help to practice with your friends until you find the right balance. The last thing you want to do is offend clients because they think you're mocking them.
- **Matching** If you're using a one-way communication medium in which your customers can only see you (such as a pre-recorded video or webinar), do your research first and match any major characteristics that they might express. For example, if you're presenting to a group of executives, you may wish to mirror their formal dress sense and use appropriate jargon to establish a greater sense of rapport.

## LIKING

At some point or other, we've all experienced a situation in which we've been asked to do someone a favour. Although we may not wish to admit it, the truth is that we're much more likely to help another person if we actually *like* them,<sup>39</sup> so if you can establish a sense of warmth, trust and connection with your customers, they'll be more likely to want to engage with and help you.



While this may sound like a simple observation, before we dive into the principle of *liking*, let's first take a look at where this impulse originates. Having evolved to be social, our desire to be liked stems from a deep-seated motivation to create meaningful relationships with those around us. It is also this desire that drives so many of the behaviours we see online today. Liking is one of the most significant psychological principles to which social platforms owe their success (we all want to feel connected). It also provides the allure behind the aptly named 'like' button (the most powerful proxy to real-world validation) and it's one of the key reasons that video content goes viral (if we discover and share something valuable, funny or exciting, our peers will like us more and we'll gain social status). Most of the time, these behaviours, which seem so natural to us, are triggered below the level of conscious awareness, which goes to show why harnessing the power of liking can be so powerful.

When it comes to getting people to warm to you, physical attractiveness can play an important role. This quality has been found to influence all sorts of things, from the probability of being asked to prove one's age at a bar (people who are more attractive are less likely to get carded),<sup>40</sup> to the amount of tips you can earn in a shift (attractive people will frequently earn more).<sup>41</sup>

Online, however, a pretty face isn't enough. Since we typically connect with those we consider to represent our best selves, if you can use your content to convey a genuine, personal and emotive sense of who you are, you'll be much more likely to elicit a liking response from your visitors.

## Strangers and the law of attraction

Given that the success of most businesses depends on their ability not only to retain existing customers, but also to attract new ones (many of whom will be unfamiliar with the brand), how can we use these psychological principles to effectively attract *strangers*?

As we've already seen, in order to make sense of our world quickly and effortlessly, we rely on cognitive shortcuts to help us make decisions. As a rule of thumb, when it comes to existing relationships, the more we like someone, the more likely we are to want to help them out or comply with their requests. This heuristic works well in existing relationships, but what's interesting is that we can also use this approach when faced with a stranger's request.<sup>42</sup>

When we interact with someone we've never met before, our subconscious will pick up on situational cues, activating heuristics that inform our response to that

stranger (treating them as a threat, an acquaintance or more intimately, as a friend).<sup>43</sup>

Of these cues, one of the most important is the style in which we communicate. Think back to the last conversation you had with a friend – did you talk about a common topic, taking it in turns to speak, or was the interaction altogether more one-directional? Typically what you'll find is that a conversation between friends tends to be a two-way affair. Meet with a stranger, however, and you're more likely to encounter a monologue.

What's fascinating is that the simple act of engaging a stranger in trivial conversation (such as 'Hi, how are you today?'), can create enough rapport to increase their compliance with any future requests you might make.<sup>44</sup> Even in the absence of any verbal communication, you can significantly increase a person's level of compliance simply by exposing yourself to them for a short amount of time. To be clear, I'm not suggesting that you remove any clothes, but rather that you find a way for your customers to familiarise themselves with you, so that they develop greater positivity towards your brand. Known as the *mere exposure effect* (our tendency to acquire a preference for things merely because we are familiar with them), this principle extends to human relationships and can be leveraged to increase your own likeability.

This effect also explains why the appropriate use of videos and personalised content can boost conversion rates onsite. If mere exposure to someone (or something) can increase their likeability, it makes sense to expand your social reach so that you can get yourself in front of as many relevant eyeballs as possible.

The ways in which you can do this are multitudinous but, regardless of the social platforms you decide to use, the best results will come from promoting yourself as genuinely as possible. This doesn't necessarily mean talking to your audience the way you would to your friends, but it does mean presenting yourself in a way that is approachable, genuine and that lets your personality shine through (the same applies whether you're representing an individual or a brand).

This is of course antithetical to some of the more traditional approaches favoured by highly regulated businesses, including those in the financial, medical and legal industries. However, the fact that consumers have come to expect a ubiquitous level of personalised (and personal) service from the brands they interact with, regardless of sector, means that the more flexible your business can be in the way it communicates with its customers, the more positively (and forgivingly) they are likely to perceive you.

## Similarity

Another factor that can improve compliance is perceived *similarity*. As with physical attractiveness, we tend to use this heuristic as a subconscious proxy for safety. The more similar to ourselves we perceive someone to be, the more likely we are to comply with their request. The intriguing thing here is that such similarities don't need to be particularly deep in order to work – something as cosmetic as a shared fingerprint type or birthday can be sufficient to elicit greater compliance.

If you're thinking of applying this online, however, it's worth noting that most of the participants who take part in 'liking' and 'similarity' studies actually tend to be female. So, if, as some research suggests, women are more relationship-orientated than men,<sup>45</sup> you could reasonably expect to elicit stronger compliance levels with these techniques if you are working with a predominantly female audience.

## MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

### Trust me, I'm like you

- **The power of small-talk** A stranger is more likely to comply with your request if you enter into light dialogue first. Online, this is usually accomplished by having an active social media presence and responding personally when people interact with you. By including personal touches in your communication (for instance, I will always try to address someone by name in a Twitter exchange), you'll show that you're interested in that person, and that the nature of your relationship is two-way. Your customers will pick up on these cues, which will trigger the same heuristic programme as that used with their friends, thus increasing the likelihood they will want to comply with your requests.
- **Trust + value + likeability = conversions** If people already trust you and want what you're selling, it's worth honing your likeability so as to help boost positive brand associations and fuel desire. You can do this by helping people feel good about themselves (rewarding user generated content that advertises your brand, or re-tweeting a kind comment), and finding unexpected opportunities to delight existing customers (hand-written thank you notes in the parcels you ship) so that they share these experiences with their friends.

- **Similarity** Whatever your product, you can use the principle of similarity to help establish rapport and a greater sense of trust between you and your customers. For instance, if you know that your demographic mainly comprises young, plaid-wearing, DIY-loving dads, you can reflect this in the tone and content of your website by mirroring any distinctive physical characteristics and traits they might have in the photos and videos you use.

## AUTHORITY

“ *Individuals are frequently rewarded for behaving in accordance with the opinions, advice, and directives of authority figures.*

ROBERT CIALDINI AND NOAH GOLDSTEIN,  
SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGISTS<sup>46</sup>

As we've already seen, commanding a sense of *authority* (or even just the illusion of authority) can be a powerful way of making your message more persuasive. I don't know about you, but if I'm visiting a gynaecologist for the first time (or, if you're a man, a urologist for a prostate check), he or she had better have all the relevant certificates on the wall, or else I'm not taking a single step into that examination room. It's not just delicate situations like these in which we look for reassurance. In everyday life, whether it's a trip to the new grocers, or we're deciding which car to buy, we automatically seek clues as to other people's (and by extension, other business') levels of authority. Whatever the context, when we're interacting with an unknown brand for the first time, we'll use whatever information we can to ascertain their legitimacy.

## Soft tactics v. Hard tactics

When it comes to using one's authority to influence others, the strategies people use tend to fall into one of two main categories: soft tactics and hard tactics.

*Soft* tactics are those that are either *inspirational* or *consultative* in nature.<sup>47</sup> Here, the power lies in the traits and characteristics of the influencer him/herself (such as integrity, credibility and charisma).<sup>48</sup> If someone's ever appealed to your values, ideals and aspirations in a bid to get you to do something, they were using soft tactics to try and persuade you.<sup>49</sup>

*Inspirational* tactics include the use of rational persuasion and personal or inspirational appeals to elicit compliance. In this scenario, the receiver of the

request is often given leeway when deciding whether or not to comply. This is one of the most popular persuasion techniques used online, from charity websites that appeal to your sense of fairness to encourage donations (playing to your values), to brands selling luxury cars with the promise to fulfil your lifelong dreams (aspirations).

*Consultative* tactics call for the active participation of all members involved in a particular task, which can include planning an activity, strategy or a change in which one needs the support and assistance of the group.<sup>50</sup> It works by instilling a sense of shared ownership in the people involved, and can be an effective means of encouraging collaboration and boosting performance on a collective and individual level.

This sense of shared ownership is one of the greatest upsides to using soft tactics, especially since the people being asked to comply tend to feel valued for their contributions. In fact, it is this approach on which every major social media platform relies – they can only succeed if their members are willing to create, share and interact with the content in a socially collaborative way.

*Hard* tactics are an altogether different kettle of fish. Comprising what psychologists call *pressure* or *legitimizing* tactics, this approach secures compliance through assertiveness and force, which can sometimes lead to strained or damaged relationships. Hard tactics work due to social structures that exist external to the influencer (such as your job title within your organisation).<sup>51</sup>

Typical *pressure* tactics can involve things like demands, threats, frequent checking or persistent reminders.<sup>52</sup> Online, this is the approach most favoured by trolls and by people who get swept up in the herd mentality of public shaming. It's also the default behaviour (if you can call it that) of the notification settings on most devices. Ping persistently enough, and you'll feel compelled to comply and check your phone.

*Legitimizing* tactics, however, are slightly different as they depend on the hierarchical structure of a social group in order to work. In this scenario, if the person making the request is in a position of authority (the vice president of an organisation), their rank will give them legitimate power to get what they want (they give you an order, and you have to follow it). While this approach relies on status differentials to work, the technique need not be explicit to generate results. It is worth noting that although this strategy can be effective in management situations, its success rarely translates online, the reasons for which (I suspect) are related to flatter hierarchies and an expectation of greater social parity.

Whether on- or offline, brands use all kinds of authority figures to compel us to take action – from women in white lab coats trying to sell us 'scientifically proven' beauty products, to athletes endorsing miracle weight-loss pills. While these approaches may vary in their execution, authenticity and tone, as a principle, authority can be a very effective means of persuading potential customers to buy.

# MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

## Expert appeal

- **Reveal your expertise** The internet is flooded with low-grade content, driven in part by the belief that quantity trumps quality. If you have a niche expertise or unique perspective through which to express more general knowledge, find a medium or two (videos, podcasts, long-form articles) that you can comfortably use to communicate your ideas. By showcasing your knowledge through considered, valuable and genuine content, you'll give yourself the best chance of becoming established as a distinctive voice, attracting the right people to your business in the process.
- **Soft tactics** With regard to driving certain actions on your website, a soft tactic could involve using rational persuasion to show visitors the benefits of using your product or service over those of your competitors. In this case, including compelling facts, statistics and credible third-party endorsements can help encourage prospective customers to buy.
- **Inspire people** If you are regarded as a thought leader within your industry, you can use your inspirational appeal to influence the behaviours of others. Do this by personally asking people to take action, whether by reaching out through social channels, via personalised out-reach emails, or even at conferences (both onstage and in person during networking drinks). You can also try this approach on any landing pages you might have, by including a headshot and a personal signature alongside the CTA.
- **Boost your personal appeal** To increase your personal appeal, I would recommend delivering highly visible, highly valuable content that people will consider inspiring and authoritative. One of the most obvious examples here would be to give a TED talk, but you can also write a book, feature as a guest on well-known podcasts or radio shows, or appear on popular TV channels to grow your reach (there are media agents that can help you secure this kind of thing). Not only will this help showcase your personality and expertise, it will also boost your authority owing to the halo effect of being affiliated with a prestigious brand.

# SCARCITY

The rising success and proliferation of websites that gamify the shopping experience (from bulk discounts to flash sales) not only reflects a broader shift in consumer behaviours, it also points towards our increasing appetite for the exciting, the unpredictable and the new.

The effectiveness of *scarcity* as a strategy was most delightfully demonstrated by a trio of psychologists with cookie jars, back in the seventies.<sup>53</sup> Pretending that they were running a consumer products survey, the researchers offered students chocolate chip cookies from one of two jars. The first jar was full to the brim, whereas the second contained only a miserly few. Even though the cookies were absolutely identical, the students who had selected theirs from the second, emptier jar, reported them as more desirable, delicious and expensive than the cookies taken from the jar that was full. If a device as simple as this can have such a marked effect on our subjective experience of a product, it's no wonder that so many businesses are using scarcity to boost their sales.

In fact, of all the various techniques that can be used to whip us into a frenzy, scarcity is among the most popular. A long-time staple of the advertising world, scarcity has historically been used to fuel our desires, inflate product value and, ultimately, drive sales.<sup>54</sup> When it comes to technology and the early adoption of new products, scarcity is often the magic ingredient that tips the heady cocktail of excitement and anticipation over the edge, especially to consumers who consider themselves 'unique'<sup>55</sup> (you need only look as far as Apple devotees to see this strategy in action).

Whether you're applying this principle to products ('Limited edition', 'While stocks last', 'Only 5 items per customer') or time ('Sale ends today'), the use of scarcity can be a powerful way to elicit a sense of urgency, drive demand and increase sales in almost any context. One of the best places to witness this first-hand is eBay. If you look closely, you'll tend to find that the fiercest bidding wars take place on individual products (low stock) with the highest number of 'watchers' (high demand) and a rapidly approaching deadline (scarcity of time). On other websites, such as luxury fashion outlet Net-a-porter.com, scarcity is actively manufactured by virtue of the fact that the company only orders in a certain amount of stock, and when it's gone, it's gone.

# MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

## In short supply

- **Use a countdown** If you're promoting a product, tickets to an event or a special discount on a service, you can embed a simple countdown timer on your website to activate your visitors' sense of urgency. For best results, limit the offer to a short amount of time (between 24 hours and a week) and increase the impact of this principle by making it clear that the stock is finite. If you are selling tickets to an event, you can use a tiered system (such as 'Super early bird', 'Early bird', and 'Regular') linked to a countdown for each stage, in order to create a sense of urgency with every approaching deadline. You can also run unexpected flash sales and send email campaigns to existing customers, informing them that this offer is '24 hours only'.
- **Limit your stock** While I do not advocate lying to your customers or deliberately mismanaging stock, flagging up items that are in low supply ('Hurry! Only 3 left') can be a good way to encourage people to buy an item before they miss out. If you're selling limited edition prints or other such products, keep track of how many items you have left and include 'Sold' signs over items that have sold out, so as to communicate their high demand.



# 14 INCREASE YOUR SALES

“ *Best way to sell something – don’t sell anything. Earn the awareness, respect, and trust of those who might buy.*

RAND FISHKIN, FOUNDER, MOZ<sup>1</sup>

## AUTHENTICITY

Far from being just a buzz word, the rise of *authenticity* as a USP reflects a significant shift in the underlying motivations driving consumer behaviours. Rather than being led by price alone, we are increasingly making purchase decisions based on a brand’s authenticity<sup>2</sup> and sustainability. While we might consider this to be an option afforded only to the rich, in reality the figures suggest that this trend goes much deeper. A global report by Nielsen found that consumers from all markets (both developed and emerging) are increasingly favouring sustainable products over their cheaper, less environmentally sound counterparts, regardless of their income levels or an item’s product category.<sup>3</sup>

Of all the sustainability factors listed in the survey, brand trust was rated the most important, with 62 per cent of consumers citing this as the leading factor in their purchase decisions. When interviewed about the finding, Carol Gstalder (Senior VP, Reputation & Public Relations Solutions at Nielsen) suggested that this presented businesses of all sizes an ‘opportunity to build trust with the predominantly young, socially conscious consumer looking for products that align with their values’. Furthermore, 66 per cent of those surveyed said that they would be willing to pay a premium for sustainable goods, with 73 per cent of Millennials (in this instance, 20-34 year-olds) and 72 per cent of Generation Z (respondents under 20) most willing to pay extra.

These figures have increased across the board, year on year; however, mounting evidence suggests that a firm’s CSR strategy will only influence customer behaviour if they perceive the strategy to be authentic.<sup>4</sup> It’s safe to say that whether your

interest in sustainability is ideological or commercial, now is the time to consider how your business is stacking up, and what you can do to perform better.

Authenticity also plays a significant role in high-value purchases. From diamonds to cars, we can now buy all manner of high-end goods online. But the luxury market is particularly susceptible to fake goods, and so it stands to reason that we might be more risk-averse in such transactions. There are several simple, but effective ways in which you can minimise your customers' perceived sense of risk. Cues such as recognised authenticity seals, third-party awards, money-back guarantees and testimonials can all serve to convey trustworthiness, and product reviews can also provide some much-needed assurance.

## PRODUCT REVIEWS

When it comes to the quality of reviews, however, not all are created equal. In situations where information-overload is high (basically any ecommerce site you care to think of), we tend to fall back on heuristics to make sense of the information.<sup>5</sup> For instance on eBay, when the price of a product is high, we will tend to select a vendor that has numerous (but mixed) reviews, most probably due to the fact that we take the number of reviews as a proxy for legitimacy.<sup>6</sup> For cheaper items, on the other hand, our sense of risk tends to be lower, so we don't feel the same need to rely on reviews to make a choice.<sup>7</sup>

One large-scale study<sup>8</sup> found a similar pattern on Amazon, confirming a positive relationship between increased sales and the overall number of reviews, regardless of the content or how favourable they were (i.e. an item with hundreds of reviews was perceived more favourably than the same item with only 10). However, when it came to positive star ratings, the rating alone did not appear to increase sales. Rather, in this instance, it was the content of the reviews that influenced conversion rates. This may be because we all have differing ideas about what constitutes a five-star rating, whereas the written, qualitative content of a review may provide richer information than any quantitative measure alone.

Furthermore, while the ratings themselves appeared not to have a significant impact, the variability in star ratings did, which means that the value of star ratings is in fact relative, not absolute. Given that negative reviews tend to have a stronger impact on sales than positive ones, we might find this insight rather befuddling, but it all comes back to authenticity and trust – if we see that a product has received nothing but five stars, we're likely to get suspicious.

So what's the optimum rating that conveys both the value of an item, and its authenticity? Well, in another study conducted by Unilever, this time testing star

ratings, they found that only a score of 3.9 or above had a positive impact on sales. In fact, any scores of 3.8 or below produced lower conversion rates than not having any ratings at all, so if your ratings fall below this number, you might benefit from removing the scores for those particular items.

As if this wasn't complicated enough, when browsing products, the characteristics of the reviewer have also been found to influence consumer behaviours, often-times effecting purchase intent more than the content of the review itself. Personal information including the reviewer's name, photo, gender, location and interests may help guide customer decisions, and as you might expect, the more they identify with the reviewer, the more likely they are to purchase the product.<sup>9</sup> This means that if you were to split test a page with a single product and the same reviews, in which variant one included profiles of people similar to your customers, and variant two, dissimilar, you could reasonably expect to drive more sales through the first.

Not only that, but the linguistic properties of a review (such as tone and use of slang) can actually boost conversion rates if the review is positive and the linguistic style matches a customer's expectations for that product category.<sup>10</sup> For example, someone's review of a psychology book might be taken more seriously if it includes words such as 'cognitive bias', 'Kahneman' and 'psychometrics'.

What's fascinating is that an individual's intention to write a review can also be influenced by his or her personality. People who are high in conscientiousness tend to be more cooperative,<sup>11</sup> self-motivated and achievement-oriented,<sup>12</sup> and are therefore more likely to actively contribute. On the other hand, those who score low for emotional stability are more likely to opt out, especially if the system is complex. Given that product reviews generally tend to increase sales, if you want customers to leave their feedback, it may help to frame the message in terms of collaboration, so as to encourage conscientious individuals to contribute.

## IF THE PRICE IS RIGHT

Whether you want to buy an antique guitar, order a takeaway or send some flowers to your mum, you're likely to turn to the internet to meet your needs. Ecommerce platforms such as Amazon have raised our expectations around convenience, ease of use and customer service, and although such levels of service may come at the expense of profit, we nevertheless expect other businesses to follow suit and adhere to the same high standards. When the stakes are this high, how can you compete to increase your sales without stretching yourself too thin?

There are two approaches that businesses typically take when trying to increase profits. The first is to slash costs, and the second is to add value to the product either

through additional functionality or improved quality. If you're already operating within a tight margin, neither of these options will provide a viable solution. There are, however, other strategies you can use to help your business thrive.

While you might think that lowering prices will increase the number of sales, in some cases taking the opposite approach can be more effective. For instance, in an fMRI study conducted by Stanford and Caltech,<sup>13</sup> participants were told that they were tasting two different wines (one that cost \$5 and the other \$45) when in fact they were drinking the same wine in both conditions. The researchers found that there was greater activity in the part of the brain that experiences pleasure when participants believed they were drinking the more expensive vintage. If an item's price can alter both one's perception of its value and the subjective experience of satisfaction, then you might reasonably expect customers to derive greater pleasure from products with higher prices – a strategy which, if deployed appropriately, could boost sales in the long run.

Since price is a fairly abstract proxy for value, the way you frame it can also have an impact on sales. For instance, let's say you're selling a yoga membership for unlimited classes, at £60 a month. As a standalone figure, this may seem rather expensive. However, if you were to reframe your message and say 'Unlimited yoga classes for the price of three pizzas', not only would you be giving your customers a concrete comparison by which to measure value for money, you'd also be triggering their schemas around healthy versus unhealthy behaviours, thus encouraging them to offset their indulgences with a bit of downward dog.

You can also shift people's perceptions of value by reframing a price as an offer. For instance, if you normally sell single packs of biscuits for £1 each, you could run an advert that reads '10 for £10'. Not only would this sound like a better deal (customers may feel like they're getting more value for money), it would also anchor them at a higher price point, encouraging them to buy more than they might otherwise purchase. Another way to reframe the price (and anchor low) is to mention its daily equivalence, a strategy known as *pennies-a-day pricing*.<sup>14</sup> This means that instead of selling health insurance for £361.35/year, you could instead sell better health for only £0.99/day. You could even take it one step further by comparing your price to an everyday expense such as a cup of coffee to generate a similar effect.<sup>15</sup>

## ANCHORING

Having mentioned this principle a couple of times, let's explore the dynamic of *anchoring* in a bit more detail. I'd like you to imagine for a moment that we're

playing a game with a wheel of fortune. I spin it and it comes to rest on the number 65. Now, I'd like you to guess the percentage of African countries in the United Nations. Do you have a figure in mind?

Chances are that in this scenario, your guess would fall around the 45 per cent mark. Yet, had the wheel of fortune stopped at the number 10, your answer would most likely have been much lower, around 25 per cent.<sup>16</sup> Why? Because in the absence of verifiable information, we rely on our best guess to inform our decisions. In this case, the first number you're exposed to is determined by the wheel's resting place, which (depending on its value) will influence your guess either higher or lower than the correct answer (which is 28 per cent). Estimates of value such as these can be heavily swayed by the first piece of information we're exposed to (the anchor), even when that reference is chosen arbitrarily.<sup>17</sup> A high anchor will influence you to pick a higher number, and a low anchor, the reverse, with people who score high in the trait of openness especially susceptible to this dynamic.<sup>18</sup>

Online, the amount we are willing to pay for something can also be influenced by this principle, especially if the first item we see on a product page anchors us at a high price. If you want to leverage this effect, you have to select the best rule for filtering your products so that the higher priced items are displayed first. For instance, one of my clients wanted to increase their sales on a range of haircare products, but when we looked at the product page the items were listed alphabetically, which in this case meant that customers were being anchored at a low price. After testing several variants, we found that sorting products by popularity yielded a higher anchor, and over the course of the next few months the sales of these more expensive products (as well as overall revenue from this category) did indeed go up.

This same principle also works well on auction sites. When selling items on eBay, vendors that list a high reserve price (high anchor) will receive final bids of greater value than those that list a minimum bid (low anchor).<sup>19</sup> What's interesting is that when vendors offer both a high reserve and a low minimum bid, it is the reserve price that most influences the final outcome, driving up the value of the winning bid. It's worth noting that in the absence of either of these anchors, early bidders may interpret the lack of a seller-supplied reference price as a cue to a product's low value.

This effect can also take hold when the anchor price has little (or nothing) to do with the item in question, as demonstrated in the following study. Back in 2004 on a stall at West Palm Beach, Florida, two researchers set about selling CDs to passersby, on a name-your-own-price basis. Every 30 minutes or so, they had the vendor next to them alternate the price of a sweatshirt on display, to either \$80 or \$10. What they found was remarkable: when the sweatshirt was priced at \$80, people were happy to pay more for the CDs. By having a high anchor simply

adjacent to their stand, the researchers had managed to increase their sale prices significantly.<sup>20</sup> A similar effect has also been observed in salary negotiations – the higher the initial figure, the higher the final amount is likely to be, which is why it can pay to be the first to name your price.<sup>21</sup>

In a retail context, customers are more likely to believe that an item's true value is accurately reflected in the price, when that number is specific. This was neatly demonstrated in a study in which participants were asked to estimate the value of a TV at an RRP of either \$4,998, \$5,000 or \$5,012. Depending on which price they were shown, participants typically guessed the TV's true value to be closer either to \$4,998 or \$5,012. When offered the rounded price tag of \$5,000, however, they were more likely to suspect the value of the TV to be much lower (more on this in the next chapter).<sup>22</sup>

Anchoring has even been found to influence our decisions when we're only subliminally exposed to a number. In one particular experiment, participants were asked to assess the expensiveness of a camera selling for \$69.99. Before viewing the price, they were exposed for 15 milliseconds to either a high range of prices (\$85 to \$99), or a low range (\$15 to \$29). Although these numbers were flashed too quickly for anyone to be consciously aware of them, participants that had been primed with the low price range judged the camera as being more expensive (relative to the anchor) than those in the high price group.<sup>23</sup>

As you can see, we have an extraordinary sensitivity to anchors, which is why so many businesses go to great lengths to make use of them. One way in which vendors do this is by breaking up the total cost of a purchase into multiple parts, a technique known as *partitioned pricing*. By doing this, they can anchor customers to the lower base price as opposed to the true cost, which means that when a visitor compares the price against those of competitors, it appears more favourable.<sup>24</sup> Of course this tends only to work in the short term, or in environments in which it's common practice for shipping, customs and handling costs to be dealt with separately.

Platforms such as Amazon leverage this principle elegantly by listing products at their basic cost, and then providing a range of shipping options at various prices to make you feel as though you have agency, even though (in many instances) this means paying over and above the original price. Of course they also use our aversion to hidden fees to encourage customers to sign up to Prime membership, which offers unlimited 'free' shipping for a discrete annual fee.

Some sneakier businesses will anchor customers high, not by using a price per say, but simply by including a large arbitrary number somewhere near the product so as to influence the purchasing decision. This could be anything from a banner stating '12,586 items shipped this week!' to a popup inviting you to 'Join over 83,486 happy customers'. More commonly, however, (especially when it comes to

displaying SaaS products and conference tickets), businesses will display the options linearly across a page, starting with the most expensive item on the left. During sales, you can use this anchoring effect alongside the subtraction principle by positioning the original, struck-through price on the left, and the sale price after it (e.g. ‘£50 £39’).<sup>25</sup> This approach works by anchoring the customer high and by making it easier to subtract the sale price from the original, thus increasing the perceived discount and boosting sales in the process.

## DECOYS

No chapter on pricing would be complete without mentioning the *decoy* (or asymmetric dominance) effect. Defined as ‘an alternative that is added to a choice set in order to alter the relative attractiveness of the other alternatives in the set’,<sup>26</sup> a decoy is a third item deliberately added to an existing set of two, in order to alter the customer’s preferences.

This principle was illustrated in a compelling experiment described by Professor Dan Ariely, in his book *Predictably Irrational*.<sup>27</sup> While browsing the Economist magazine’s website, Ariely stumbled across a set of bizarre subscription options (see Table 14.1, Option A). He was curious as to why they would offer what seemed to be a redundant Print subscription for \$125, when it obviously made sense to buy the Print + Web subscription for the same price.

**Table 14.1** The decoy effect

OPTION A			OPTION B		
Subscription	Price	Sales	Subscription	Price	Sales
Web	\$ 59	16%	Web	\$ 59	68%
Print	\$125	0%			
Print + Web	\$125	84%	Print + Web	\$125	32%

Source: Adapted from D. Ariely (2008) *Predictably Irrational*. New York: HarperCollins.

Intrigued as to what could be going on, Ariely designed a survey to see which options his students would prefer when offered the subscriptions in the conditions shown above. He split the students into two groups, the first of which was offered all three subscriptions (Option A), and the second, only two (Option B). As you might expect, when offered all three, 84 per cent of students in group A opted for ‘Print + Web’, 16 per cent chose ‘Web’ alone, and no one went for the middle

option of 'Print'. In group B, however, where there were two options to choose from, only 32 per cent selected 'Print + Web', and the other 68 per cent chose 'Web' alone. Through this extraordinary reversal of preferences, Ariely demonstrated that by adding a third, irrelevant (and inferior) option to the list, the hypothetical revenue generated from such a switch would have been significant (\$11,444 for three options, versus \$8,012 for two).

This goes to show that if you want to influence your customers' comparison processes, simply adding a third, inferior or irrelevant option to an existing set can go a long way to boosting the sales of a particular product or service.

## ALL WORK AND NO PLAY

With many of us going online to shop just for the fun of it, our purchasing behaviours are becoming increasingly influenced by the playfulness of the sites that we visit, with factors such as security and usefulness following behind.<sup>28</sup> Research from the field of business economics shows that not only do we prefer fun websites, but those of us who visit these sites are also much more likely to make a purchase.<sup>29</sup> So how does fun actually influence our purchasing behaviours?

It may come down to the neurochemistry of reward. As we explored earlier, the dopaminergic system in the brain is one of the primary forces behind risk-taking and reward-seeking behaviours. It can be activated by a whole range of things, from drugs<sup>30</sup> and money<sup>31</sup> to beautiful faces<sup>32</sup> and sports cars.<sup>33</sup> Even something as simple as a funny cartoon can give us a dopamine hit,<sup>34</sup> which may explain why the content that makes us laugh also tends to be the content that goes viral.

It's this same, reward-seeking drive that has contributed to the extraordinary popularity of social gaming, giving rise to new revenue streams for those brands with pockets deep enough to get involved. Back in the summer of 2011, social game manufacturer Zynga paired up with Unilever to create a virtual *LUX Fantastical Manor* for FarmVille players in China. For one month only, players were able to interact with Shu Qi, the brand's ambassador, and make their farms more attractive by purchasing virtual beauty items with their virtual currency. It may sound bonkers, but in countries such as China, the USA and Japan<sup>35</sup> where social play is most popular, brands that are able to use these channels as a means through which to engage prospective customers, are also more likely to drive sales and reach a wider net of willing consumers.




If social gaming isn't for you, fear not, there are other ways you can bring playful interactivity into your platforms and communications. One of the smartest approaches I have come across is that taken by Olapic, a business that replaces brands' stock photos with images their users have submitted on social media. By encouraging customers to participate, Olapic are then able to aggregate these images from a range of social platforms, and cherry-pick the ones most suited to a brand's specific usecase (a selection they make using a combination of human editors and a curation algorithm). According to co-founder Pau Sabria, this approach has enabled them to prove that realistic images increase sales,<sup>36</sup> which, when combined with the fact that around 70 per cent of customers agree to have their photos featured, should serve as encouragement to any brand, large or small, wishing to make their content a bit more genuine and customer-centric.

## MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

### Boost your bottom line

- **Reframe it** We generally find it difficult to determine the true cost of a product or service, especially when the product category is unfamiliar. You can help increase sales of such items by reframing your price in terms of concrete alternatives ('Be insured for life, for the price of a daily cappuccino'), displaying the price as an offer (5 for £5), or describing it as its daily equivalence (£361.35/year becomes £0.99/day).
- **Anchors away** In most instances you can increase your sales by anchoring your customers and a high number. You can do this by listing more expensive products first and using a popup or banner to prime visitors (e.g. 'Join 53,689 monthly subscribers'). If you're listing a sale price, put the original RRP on the left-hand side, and the sales price afterwards to increase the perceived size of the discount (e.g. '£50 £39').
- **Going low** To anchor low so that your baseline price looks more appealing than that of your competitors, you can try using partitioned pricing and separate the total cost of a purchase into discrete parts (e.g. item, shipping, customs).

- **The decoy effect** If you are offering two products (A and B) and you want to increase the sales of one in particular (B), introduce a third, redundant option (C) that is less appealing than the item you want to sell (B).
- **Product reviews** As a rule of thumb, the greater the number of reviews for a given product, the more positively that item will be perceived. If you want to generate more reviews, you can run an email or social media campaign incentivising existing customers to leave honest feedback on your site for products they have recently bought. Encourage them to use descriptive, emotive words relevant to the product category – you can do this by offering suggestions in the text box, or by priming them with specific keywords in your email or social content.
- **Make it personal** We tend to trust people who are most like us, so if you have a good relationship with your customers, invite them to complete a customer profile. By including personal information that they are comfortable sharing publicly (such as a photo, interests and gender), when they leave a review, other like-minded visitors will be more likely to relate to and trust their comments, which in turn will help encourage sales.
- **Be playful** If it's appropriate to your brand, you can have a bit of fun with your content and campaigns by giving your products a back-story. Aside from bringing a smile to customers' faces, this approach has been found to increase the personal significance of objects, thus driving up their perceived value and the amount that people will be willing to pay for them.<sup>37</sup> A brand that does this exceptionally well is San Francisco-based clothing company, BetaBrand, whose tone of voice is exquisitely tongue-in-cheek. Along with a rich track-record of ridiculous and bizarre ad campaigns (especially around the holidays), they also create micro-stories around their products. My personal favourites include the aptly named *Cordaround*, which are basically just horizontal-corduroys, and their range of *Vajamas*, pyjamas made out of a fabric so soft they've had to come up with a whole new adjective to describe it. Their website even provides a helpful soft-o-meter scale, in which the wonderfully descriptive 'Vagisoft' nestles charmingly between 'Pouch of a cloud kangaroo' and 'Womb of a marshmallow mermaid'.

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- **Use realistic photos** Where possible, use realistic images of your products taken in context, whether that's an item of clothing worn by a customer on the street, or a designer lamp photographed in situ in someone's living room. You can experiment by including pets, food, flowers and other everyday items to make your images feel more natural.
  - **Collaborate with your customers** Many customers show a willingness to collaborate with the brands they love, and you can tap into this directly. If you don't have a huge budget, run competitions inviting customers to post images of themselves using your product alongside a specific hashtag, and reward contributors by offering special prizes and deals (make sure you cover the legal Ts and Cs for image permissions).
  - **Make it social** Campaigns that focus on user generated content tend to have a greater reach and impact due to their inherently social nature. We all like to feel special and admired, so if you can delight your customers by featuring them on your website or in your ads, you can bet they'll tell their friends (which means more relevant prospective customers for you).
  - **Be interactive** If you're selling physical products, you should already be using zoomable, high-res product photos alongside your thumbnails, and you should also test the impact of interactive videos and 360-degree images on user behaviour.

## CUSTOMER SERVICE

This should go without saying, but regardless of where your audience is based (locally or globally) when it comes to customer service, people tend to expect a clear, continuous and useful interaction.<sup>38</sup> In an ecommerce setting, this includes good return policies, payment policies, sales advice, shipping options, FAQ sections, tax information and any handling costs.

# MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

## People want to speak to a real human

- **Make yourself available** The easier it is for customers to contact you, the better their overall experience will be. Whether you offer a Live Chat service or a range of more traditional contact options (contact form, email, location-specific phone numbers, postal address) your contact page should be clear, welcoming and easy to find.
- **Social media** As we saw earlier, when something goes wrong with a product or service, customers will often take to social media (in particular, Twitter) to vent or seek out an immediate solution to the problem. With so many people using social channels as customer service platforms, it's absolutely critical that you engage in social listening and actively participate in the conversation. By being on hand in this way, not only will you be in the position to nip any potential trouble in the bud, you'll also be able to engage with positive comments, which can help you nurture more meaningful relationships with your customers. There are plenty of tools that can help you do this at scale, but whatever your approach, your replies should be swift and have a personal, human touch.

# 15 PRICING AND VALUE

“ *People’s attitudes and feelings about losses and gains are really not symmetric. So we really feel more pain when we lose \$10,000 than we feel pleasure when we get \$10,000.*

DANIEL KAHNEMAN, PSYCHOLOGIST

## LOSS AVERSION

As we explored earlier, many of the things we enjoy (money, sports cars, attractive faces) give us pleasure by stimulating the reward (mesolimbic) system in the brain. So, if gaining something makes us feel good, then isn’t parting with it going to hurt?

In a seminal piece of research conducted in the 1970s, behavioural economists Kahneman and Tversky famously stated that ‘losses loom larger than gains’.<sup>1</sup> The idea that we prefer avoiding losses to acquiring equivalent gains implies that we ascribe greater value to a given item when we give it up, than when we first acquire it. Think of something you own and love – it could be a beautiful watch, a trinket you bought on your honeymoon or that tatty jumper your grandmother knitted for you as a kid. Remember how much it cost you originally. Do you have a figure in mind? Now, think of the price you’d accept if you had to sell it this instant.

In most cases, the second figure that people give is usually larger than the first. In fact, research has found that on average, we request twice the original price we paid for an item if asked to sell it later – meaning that, somewhere along the way, we’ve imbued it with extra value. Known as the *endowment effect*<sup>2</sup> (we ascribe more value to something because we own it) and related to the *status quo bias*<sup>3</sup> (our preference for the current state of affairs, a deviation from which is perceived as a loss), the fact that we place a higher value on objects we already own, relative to objects we do not, has some fascinating implications for our purchasing behaviours.

## PAIN OF PAYING

What happens when the thing that we're 'losing' is money itself? As it turns out, the experience can be pretty painful. In fact, the *pain of paying* is one of the biggest challenges faced by ecommerce in general,<sup>4</sup> and it may explain why people tend to choose flat-rate payment plans for services such as health clubs and utility bills, even when switching to a pay-per-use tariff would save them money.<sup>5</sup>

It's this same principle upon which the success of intermediate and alternative currencies rests, whether the air miles we accrue on flights, or the abstract proxies for money we use to pay for virtual items in games and apps. There's a reason for their proliferation – in many instances, adding just one intermediate currency between consumers and real money will significantly reduce their ability to assess the actual value of the transaction.<sup>6</sup>

But why is this approach so effective? When deciding what to buy, we subconsciously weigh up the pleasure of consumption against the pain of paying, and when the product in question carries a hefty price tag, the reaction in the brain can be extraordinary. fMRI studies have found that excessively priced products actually stimulate activity in the insula, a region known to be associated with physical pain.<sup>7</sup> This means that whether someone were to pinch you, or ask you for a fiver, your brain would respond in a similar, pain-induced way. It's a miracle, then, that any of us buy or sell anything at all.

What's curious is that this pain response can vary dramatically from one person to the next, with some experiencing far greater pain (described in the research as 'tightwads') than others (the 'spendthrifts'). However, it is possible to significantly reduce this pain for 'tightwads' by simply reframing the cost of an item, for instance from a '£6 fee' to a 'Small £6 fee'.<sup>8</sup>

Using the right descriptive frame isn't the only way you can reduce the pain of paying – another key component is the payment mode you use. Many of us intuitively know that the more abstract the payment method, the lower our feeling of discomfort, and the more impulsive our purchase decisions.<sup>9</sup> This is especially true for more emotional, hedonistic purchases (such as the late night kebab you know you'll regret in the morning), which feel so much more painful when paid for by cash than by card.

It makes an interesting psychological case for (or, depending on your perspective, against) the use of contactless payment methods for everything from transport to the more indulgent purchases we might make. Whatever the product, when we don't have to see or think about what we're spending, it's easy to kid ourselves that we're not spending anything at all.

It's for this reason that removing currency words and symbols (such as 'pounds' or '£') from a restaurant menu can significantly increase spending.<sup>10</sup> Now widely

practised by many high-end establishments, it's this approach that is to blame for minimalistic prices such as '24' versus the more explicit '£24.00'. By omitting currency symbols and decimal places, such menus are deliberately directing customers' attention to the food, not the price, thus lowering the pain of paying. It's precisely for this reason that taking payments through credit and debit cards or services such as PayPal, ApplePay and Amazon-style one-click checkouts, can be such effective means of reducing pain and boosting sales.

Many businesses also reduce the pain of paying by giving customers the option to pay in instalments, so that a table originally costing £399 becomes five easy payments of £99 per month (at a surcharge of £96). Although from a rational perspective this shouldn't seduce us, since we process and compare reference prices subconsciously<sup>11</sup> (£399 versus £99, instead of £399 upfront versus £495 in instalments), the brain can be tricked into thinking it's spotted a bargain. Of course, you can also go in the opposite direction and reward customers for paying the full sum upfront by offering a discount as an incentive.

## DISCOUNTS AND BONUSES

Although we might (correctly) think that a subscription offering '50% off the first two months' is the same as a discount of 'Buy one month get the second free', when it comes down to it, most consumers tend to prefer an offer when it's framed as a bonus ('Buy one get one free').<sup>12</sup> Aptly known as *innumeracy*, it's the same principle that lies behind our inability to see the equivalence between a 20 per cent discount versus £10 off, on a kettle costing £50. Although both discounts are numerically identical, most of us will prefer the 20 per cent discount.

It may seem irrational, but the brain is in fact applying a fast-thinking logic to the conundrum, perceiving the higher number as the bigger discount. So how do you decide which approach to take in your pricing strategy? Author and marketing Professor Jonah Berger recommends applying the *Rule of 100*.<sup>13</sup> If your price is lower than £100, use a percentage discount (e.g. '20% off'). If your price is over £100, use an absolute value instead (e.g. '£20 off'). This simple rule means that in each instance, you'll actually be using the discount with the highest numeral, thus tricking the brain into thinking that it's actually getting a bigger, better deal.

Given that we tend to prefer bonuses and value-adds to concessions, where possible it's best if you can avoid using the term 'discount', and if do use it, that you qualify it with a reason.<sup>14</sup> For instance, if you're running an end-of-season sale, give the sale price, the discount and the reason, e.g. '£185 (£55 off – end of season)'.

The size of your offers can also have an impact on sales, as can the media that accompanies the promotion. In a recent study conducted on the pricing of laundry products, Unilever looked at the sales impact of price promotions at varying discount levels, both with and without media (such as banner adverts). Although they found that the 'without media' condition proved most effective at the highest levels of discount (e.g. '50% off'), when media was added, the smaller discount levels benefited most. In fact, the lowest level of discount offered with media (e.g. a multibuy such as '2 for £4') actually proved the most effective at driving sales. This means that, with the right communication, even relatively low levels of discounts can be appealing to shoppers.

## THE CHARM OFFENSIVE

For years now, the world of ecommerce has been caught under the spell of *charm pricing*, any price ending in 9, 95, 98 and (most famously) 99. While nobody knows exactly how it got started, the mythical power of this approach is well documented, and businesses have been leveraging this principle to drive sales and attract new customers for decades. Now, psychologists are uncovering exactly why these little numbers are so hard to resist.

In 2003, two American researchers, Anderson and Simester, set out to put the charm of \$9 to the test.<sup>15</sup> Would more people buy a particular dress if its price ended in the number 9, as opposed to any other number? To find out, they teamed up with two national mail-order companies selling women's clothing, and ran an ingenious experiment.

They altered the price of four dresses and mailed out different versions of the catalogue to customers across the country. When the orders started coming in, the results confirmed what the researchers had long suspected. Each of the four dresses sold most when their price tags ended in a 9 – even if that figure was more expensive than the others (see Table 15.1).

**Table 15.1** The charm of \$9

Price	Numbers sold
\$74	15
\$79	24
\$84	12

*Source:* Adapted from Effects of \$9 Price Endings on Retail Sales: Evidence from Field Experiments, *Quantitative Marketing and Economics*, 1(1), pp. 93–100, p. 94 (Anderson, E. T. and Simester, D. I. 2003); reproduced courtesy of Springer Verlag.



So what's happening? While we may have come to associate '9' endings with sale items and discount pricing,<sup>16</sup> more recent research suggests that the main culprit here is the sneaky left digit.<sup>17</sup> For instance, let's say you wanted to buy a tub of gelato, and you had to select one of two options. It's unlikely that a one-penny difference between £3.60 and £3.59 would have any impact on your decision, yet if the difference were between £4.00 and £3.99, chances are you'd be much more persuaded by the latter – but why?

It all comes down to the way in which we encode numerical values. Although we like to think that we're logical, the process by which we interpret numbers happens rapidly and subconsciously, so fast in fact, that we process the size of a number before we've even finished reading it. In practical terms, this means that we interpret the magnitude of a price (£3.99) by the first number we read (£3), which anchors our perception of value on the leftmost digit. This gives us an intuitive sense (a cognitive feeling) that the charm price of £3.99 must be much lower than its £4.00 competitor, even though the difference is in fact minute (you can also emphasise this effect visually by minimising the two digits after the decimal, so that £3.99 becomes £3.<sup>99</sup>).

## FLUENCY

The above approach works because it leverages *processing fluency*: the easier it is for us to compute the difference between two prices, the larger we'll perceive the difference to be. That's why the difference between £5.00 and £4.00 feels larger than the difference between £4.97 and £3.96, even though the reverse is actually true (£1.00 versus £1.01).<sup>18</sup> You can actually use this to your advantage to maximise the perception of a sale discount, by using rounded numbers in your pricing (e.g. discount your price to £39, not £38.95).

Beyond numbers themselves, an item's pronunciation will also affect its fluency, which is why easy-to-pronounce products tend to out-perform those that are trickier to articulate, at least in the short term (an effect that has even been observed in real-world stock market data).<sup>19</sup> The same also applies to pricing – when we read a number, our brains subconsciously encode it in auditory form (as if reading it aloud).<sup>20</sup> In fact, research has found that the greater the syllabic length of a price, the larger the magnitude we perceive it to be, even if it looks the same length as another similar number when written down (e.g. £79.99 versus £80.10).<sup>21</sup>

Since it requires greater mental effort for us to process prices that are phonetically longer, our brains mistakenly infer that the price itself must be larger. This also explains why removing commas from your prices can influence customers to

perceive them as lower, which is why many electrical goods outlets price their items at, for instance, £1399 (thirteen ninety-nine) instead of £1,399 (one thousand three hundred and ninety-nine). In the absence of an innate and accurate understanding of value, it is heuristics such as these that we rely upon to guide our decisions, which is what makes these techniques so effective.

## CONGRUENCE

The size of the font in which prices are displayed can also influence our perception of value. This effect was illustrated in an experiment in which a group of people were asked to judge the sale price magnitude of a pair of skates.<sup>22</sup> Half the participants were shown the original price in a large font, with the sale price in smaller type (\$239.99, \$199.99), and the other half were shown the opposite (\$239.99, \$199.99).

Although both price sets were numerically identical, the group who saw the small sales font overwhelmingly judged the sale price more favourably, and were more likely to buy. Why? Because the sales price was smaller both numerically and visually, so the message seemed more *congruent* and therefore felt like better value. What's fascinating is that when asked about their decision-making process, the majority of participants said that the font size had not influenced their judgments at all, which just goes to show how easily our subconscious minds can be swayed. In a further test, this congruence effect even extended to the language used to accompany the sales price. Although participants rated the skate's 'Low friction' and 'High performance' as equally important product benefits, when the researchers split test these descriptors alongside the price, they found that participants consistently responded more favourably when the low price was accompanied by the words 'Low friction'.

## ROUNDNESS v. PRECISION

As we have touched upon, the precision and roundness of a figure can also influence our choices. For instance, studies have found that we incorrectly judge precise prices (e.g. £495,425) to be of lower value than round prices (e.g. £495,000) of similar magnitudes,<sup>23</sup> probably due to the fact that precise numbers are complicated and less common, thus harder to process and quantify. Since we tend to use precise figures when we're dealing with small numbers (such as 1, 2, 3), we

also associate precision with smaller values, which is why we will often pay more for an expensive item when the price is specific.

To decide which pricing strategy you should take (roundedness versus precision), you need to ascertain the kind of purchase your customers are making. If the purchase is emotional (for instance, buying a camera for a family vacation), they're more likely to be swayed by a rounded price than if the purchase is cognitive (such as buying a camera for a project at work).<sup>24</sup> This is because rounded numbers are processed more quickly, leading to a sense that the price simply feels right, whereas non-rounded (disfluent) numbers require greater effort, and are therefore more apt for logical purchases. That being said, when evaluating prices, we tend to assume that rounded price intervals (such as £10, £100, £1000) are artificially higher, so even if you are selling products in an emotional context, it's best to avoid such pricing and simply leave out the pennies instead.<sup>25</sup>

## MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

### Persuasion by numbers

- **Don't lose out** When it comes to a good sales pitch, we tend to respond most strongly to deals aimed at averting losses. So if you are selling something that can save people money, such as car insurance, don't tell your customers that they can save £300 a year by switching to you. Instead, tell them that by staying with their current provider, they're actually losing £300 every year.
- **Pain of paying** Parting with money is painful. Where possible, make it easier for 'tightwads' to part with their cash by reframing the message to reduce the pain (e.g. 'Only £5', 'Just £5', 'Small £5 fee'). You can also offer customers a range of more abstract payment methods, such as paying by contactless card or phone, using PayPal, or providing a one-click checkout for returning customers who already have an account with you. If you're selling high-value items or subscription services, offer to take payments via smaller instalments, and provide incentives (bonuses or discounts) for people who pay the full sum up front.
- **Discounts v. bonuses** In general, we tend to prefer gaining something extra (a bonus) than receiving a lower price (discount). Due to innumeracy, we're pretty bad at judging the numerical value of equivalent offers

when one is priced as a percentage (e.g. 20% off a £50 kettle), and the other as a price (e.g. £10 off a £50 kettle). As a rule of thumb, when selling items priced under £100, use a percentage (20%); for prices over £100, use an absolute value (£20). If you are giving a discount, qualify it by citing the reason (e.g. clearance).

- **Dressed to the nines** If you're selling mid- to low-priced items, use charm prices (numbers ending in 9, 95, 98, 99) to convey value for money. To maximise the impact of one-penny discounts, choose a number with a lower left-hand digit (e.g. £4.00 becomes £3.99).
- **From zero to hero** Where '9' endings denote sales, '0' endings can imply high quality. That's why, when used in the right context, price tags ending in '0' that omit the money sign can give consumers subconscious cues as to the luxury standard of your product or service. In such cases, it's worth avoiding '9' endings except for strict use in sales, since the use of 9s at other times can damage the perceived quality and value of your products and by extension, your brand.<sup>26</sup>
- **SALE + 9 = profit** Adding a 'SALE' sign to a charm price can have an additive effect, boosting sales even further. For instance, an item marked 'RRP £88, SALE £79' will generally drive more sales than if it's simply marked '£79'. So, if you want to influence your customers to buy more, use both techniques together.
- **Keep it fluent** The easier it is to process the difference between two prices, the bigger that difference appears. To maximise the perception of a sale discount, use round numbers in your pricing (e.g. don't use £38.95, instead use £39).
- **Congruence** When you're displaying a sales price, it's worth testing a smaller font size for its impact on conversions. If you are using language near your price, again make sure you choose words that are congruent with a small value (e.g. tiny, small, low).
- **Emotional v. rational purchases** Because we process rounded numbers more fluently, it is best to use these for emotional purchase decisions to help the price feel right (e.g. £28.76 becomes £28). For more rational purchase decisions, use a precise number with decimal figures (e.g. £28 becomes £28.76). Whatever you're selling, avoid rounded price intervals (£10, £100, £1000) as people are less likely to trust these.

## DYNAMIC PRICING

*Dynamic pricing* is a catch-all term used to describe the practice of pricing one product or service differently for different customers. It can be determined by a customer's perceived ability to pay, the time at which they purchase, or an arbitrary decision made by different vendors to sell the item at different prices. It is a strategy that is widely and successfully used to increase profits, and although it can yield positive results, there is nevertheless a difference between using it in a fair and socially acceptable way, versus an unfair, unethical way.

For instance, we have all come to expect airlines to offer different prices for the same ticket depending on how far ahead (or last-minute) we book. Although we may not like it, the fact that we know the rules of the game means that this particular kind of dynamic pricing tends to feel transparent and equitable. The same is generally true of discounted early-bird tickets for events, algorithmically inflated surge prices on Uber, and newcomer discounts offered in popups to website visitors so that they don't buy elsewhere.

However, dynamic pricing can also backfire terribly, as Amazon found out over a decade ago when customers realised they were being charged different amounts to purchase the same DVDs. While the company claimed to be running a 'limited test' to 'measure what impact price has on a customers' purchasing patterns',<sup>27</sup> many suspected that Amazon was using its buyers' profiles and browsing behaviours to personalise prices according to each person's means.

In fact, it was reported that when one visitor deleted the cookies on her computer identifying her as a frequent Amazon customer, the price that she was quoted for a DVD dropped from \$26.24 to \$22.74 – a difference of \$3.50.<sup>28</sup> Although Amazon didn't admit to any wrongdoing, the company did issue a public apology and offer refunds to customers who had paid the inflated prices.<sup>29</sup>

In economic circles, this kind of tactic is referred to as *first-degree price discrimination*,<sup>30</sup> and it basically does what is says on the tin. By judging an individual's willingness to pay, specialist software can directly tailor the quote a customer receives based on their purchase history, thus discriminating in price.

There is, however, one exception in which dynamic pricing can yield positive results online, both financially and emotionally. How? By using the *name-your-own-price* (NYOP) mechanism. In contrast to classic offline retail settings, NYOP relies on the buyer to make the initial offer, which can then be accepted or rejected by the seller, depending on whether it exceeds or falls short of a predetermined threshold price.

Essentially, this strategy follows similar rules to an auction, in which it is the vendor's prerogative to name a reserve price. Once met, this ensures a win for the highest bidder and a healthy profit for the vendor. If the buyer doesn't meet the threshold price, he or she can amend the offer in the following rounds until the item is secured. The only major difference between an auction and NYOP is the fact that customers in the latter category are not in competition with one another.<sup>31</sup>


NYOP strategies in ecommerce don't just benefit the business owner, however. The consumer wins, too. By opening up your products to flexible pricing, you can effectively reach a wider market – customers who might previously have been priced out can get a look-in, giving good hagglers the opportunity to save more money than their less experienced peers.<sup>32</sup>

It's a strategy that worked really well for Radiohead when, in 2007, the band offered its latest album on a name-your-own-price basis directly to their fans, cutting out the middleman and the wildly expensive promotion that usually accompanies any major release. While this strategy didn't involve a threshold price, by asking fans to pay whatever they deemed reasonable, the average album sold at \$8 apiece, totalling around \$10 million in profit over a single week. It exceeded the launch week sales of all three previous albums combined.<sup>33</sup>

## MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

### Dynamic pricing

- **Playing the game** If you are using any kind of dynamic pricing, make sure that you are doing so in a way that is transparent, socially acceptable and ethical (i.e. no covert price manipulation). People are generally comfortable to play the game if everyone knows the rules, and if you apply the principle in this way it can boost your bottom line without damaging your reputation.
- **Name-your-own-price** The benefit of this approach is that you can establish fixed threshold prices for every item you sell. This means that you'll always secure a minimum profit per item, helping you to sustain fewer losses in the long term (either through pricing your items too high for people to buy or so low that you don't break even). By using low threshold prices, you'll attract low valuation customers and realise sales



that you might otherwise have missed. Similarly, affluent customers will be attracted by higher threshold prices, which means that you'll accrue greater profit than if you simply use a fixed price. Because the final price is always driven by what the consumer is willing to pay, the outcome will usually be perceived as fair, even though dynamic pricing is at play. The fluid nature of the pricing also makes it harder for customers to use the final figure to infer the true value of the item sold.

- **Choosing the right threshold** In order to ascertain the right threshold price, you can either go for a completely flexible Radiohead approach, or use an automated system to segment prospective customers into value strands based on their offer history.

# 16 THE BEHAVIOUR CHAIN

“ *The success of many online services today depends on the company's ability to persuade users to take specific actions.*

*B. J. FOGG AND D. ECKLES, SOCIAL SCIENTISTS<sup>1</sup>*

Developed by psychologists to understand how persuasion is structured over time, the *behaviour chain* is a three-phase strategy that can be used to achieve particular goals or target behaviours.<sup>2</sup> Its purpose is to guide customers through a sequence of steps towards a final outcome, which, once achieved, completes the behaviour chain.

Most commonly, this pattern will involve: 1) attracting a new visitor to your website, 2) having them sign up to a free trial, and 3) converting them into a paying customer. For a behaviour chain to be successful, it must be carefully planned out so as to provide a compelling, well-structured customer journey that people will want to complete. It is this process that many social platforms use to attract and sustain massive member communities, and in the following pages we'll explore how it works, and how you can use it to attract customers online.

## PHASE 1: DISCOVERY

### Learn about the service

During the first phase of a behaviour chain, the goal is to make potential customers aware of your product or service. This can happen any number of ways: via social media, through friends, emails, word of mouth, pay per click, links from other websites or any other channel. While all of these approaches can be effective in attracting new customers, some are significantly more persuasive than others, with personal recommendations topping the list.

Beyond general buzz and word of mouth, a factor that can heavily influence the success of Phase 1 is the activity of existing users already at Phase 3, the level of true commitment. People at Phase 3 are experienced and (as the name



suggests) committed – they create, upload and share their own content which, if valuable enough both to existing members and Phase 1 users, can act as a strong incentive for newcomers to take a step forward and sign up (i.e. active users beget new users).

## Visit the platform

The next step is to encourage people to visit your website, app or platform. To illustrate this stage, let's take a look at Twitter. Having become widely adopted as one of the primary social platforms for finding news and sharing information about breaking events, many people now visit Twitter.com (the service's homepage) as non-members to see what's trending and search for specific topics. By visiting the website and interacting with the service at this basic Phase 1 level, new users are encouraged to discover the value of the platform for themselves, compelling them to participate more actively. If they decide they want to get involved in the conversation and tweet, share, comment or follow, they then have to create an account, thus entering Phase 2.

## PHASE 2: SUPERFICIAL INVOLVEMENT

### Decide to try

In phase 2, compliance is key. New users are encouraged to interact with the platform so that they can discover how it will fulfil their needs. The aim here is to engage users and establish trust by providing some initial value, so as to successfully move them to Phase 3.

While the order in which these steps are rolled out depends on the platform in question, it's interesting to note that some of the most successful businesses enable people to try their services for free before joining as members – YouTube, Spotify, Twitter, eBay and Amazon all allow people to browse their content before signing up.

A word of caution, however: as with any budding relationship, at this early stage, if you are to successfully lead your customers to the next step, it is crucial that you first build a foundation of trust. It is often at this point that many businesses make the fatal mistake of sacrificing long-term goals for short-term gains, such as acquiring people's email addresses with an empty promise of delivering value, and subsequently spamming them, passing on their details, or making it hard for them to opt out. By taking such a reckless approach, you risk losing your customers before you've even started.

One platform that enables other businesses to make the most of Phase 2, is Pinterest, which for the uninitiated, is a social platform that allows you to collect and 'pin' images from around the web to create themed boards. For instance, if you love sports cars and you have a Pinterest account, whenever you come across an image of a beautiful Porsche or Lamborghini you can pin it and add it to your dedicated board for cars. It's not just great for personal use, however. Many businesses spotted Pinterest's commercial potential early on, and have been successfully exploiting the platform to tempt users into trying their products and services ever since. How? Simply by including a few of their product photos in amongst other related, beautiful and aspirational images.

A great example of a successful page is that run by Whole Foods,<sup>3</sup> a food retailer that uses Pinterest to pin images of recipes, delicious-looking food and ingenious craft projects in a bid to encourage people to get healthy and creative. By becoming the go-to place for all food-related inspirations, Whole Foods' Pinterest page not only pulls in a huge amount of traffic to its photoboards, it also drives valuable footfall to the stores. By attracting new visitors in this way, Wholefoods encourages people to mentally invest in the brand's ethos long before they even set foot in one of the shops. For existing customers, this approach also ensures that Whole Foods remains top of mind, a useful skill when competing in a crowded marketplace.

From its humble beginnings as a handy place to collect beautiful things, Pinterest has become one of the primary platforms that brands can use to further their relationship with their customers. In fact, when Pinterest paired with Millward Brown Digital to explore exactly how people were using the platform, they found that a full two-thirds of pins represented brands and products.<sup>4,5</sup> They also discovered that active members were 47 per cent more likely to experience some kind of major life event (such as a wedding, buying a home or redecorating) within the next six months, and that of these members, Millennials were especially likely to use the platform to help plan for it. Crucially, they also found that 93 per cent of Pinterest users had also used the platform to plan for purchases, and that 52 per cent had seen something on Pinterest and then gone on to make a purchase online.

## Get started

Once you've attracted new visitors to your platform and they have decided to try your service, the next step in the behaviour chain is to encourage them to get started by taking a single action, such as creating a new account or signing up for a free trial. By offering something of value in exchange for a little information (notice the use of reciprocity), at this stage you can secure a more personal, direct means of connecting with your customers (e.g. via email or direct message).

This will provide you with information you can then use to personalise your messages.

This particular stage is quite straightforward – the easier you can make it for someone to sign up, the more likely they are to do so. Standard practice here is to allow users to join either with their email address or with a social profile (typically Facebook, Twitter or Google). However, as mentioned previously, for privacy-conscious individuals, the social sign-in can be an unpalatable choice, so if you wish to attract the full spectrum of customers, make sure you offer both options.

Of course it helps if you can offer a compelling incentive to sign up, and one platform that does this really well is Headspace, the meditation app I mentioned earlier. To attract new users, they offer a high-value trial of their beautifully designed product, in which you can take 10 days of guided meditations, absolutely free. You get to experience all the bells and whistles of this mini series and at the end of the course, *they* congratulate *you* for completing it! It's a great example of reciprocity at its best – by providing real value (useful meditation exercises), positive reinforcement (congratulating you upon completion), and inviting you to 'Continue the journey' (gentle nudge), this enjoyable and compelling experience successfully reduces barriers to purchase for what is a fairly high-priced app.

## PHASE 3: TRUE COMMITMENT

At this final stage of the behaviour chain, users are encouraged to adopt new, long-term patterns of behaviour, such as making regular purchases or habitually contributing user generated content to a platform.

### Create value and content

The most valuable form of user generated content is that which is deemed useful, interesting or entertaining by other people. Amazon, for instance, has developed an entire ecommerce platform around this model. By encouraging customers to rate and review the products they have bought, the company has designed a marketplace which not only helps users to make an initial purchase (try out the platform), it also boosts the utility of the site (a place to find valuable information) and encourages other customers to contribute (communal reciprocity), thus creating a virtuous cycle.

Another great example is the TripAdvisor website, which has gamified the reviewing process by rewarding its members for contributions that others might find useful. Sending monthly emails with provocative headlines such as 'Guess

how many people have seen your review?', Tripadvisor captures the attention of its users by showing them how many people have read their reviews, how many points they've earned, and how many 'Helpful votes' they've accrued in the process. By receiving a gamified snapshot of their reviews' performance and impact on others, contributors are compelled to hit the CTA and add yet another review.

## Involve others

In its early days, rather than adopt a carpet bomb approach to community building, Facebook grew its popularity incrementally by focusing its efforts on one specific, preexisting college community at a time. Auspiciously conceived in the dorms of Harvard University, the platform was gradually adopted college by college, its growth snowballing until it reached tipping point. Having started out as a student-only platform, when Facebook eventually opened its gates to the world, the hype surrounding it was so potent that the explosion in new users took the internet by storm.

While stories such as these may be few and far between, if you want to attract new visitors to your platform you can do so by encouraging existing members to involve others in two key ways:

- by inviting others to join (whether as contacts, friends, followers, connections, etc.)
- by encouraging users to share content and links with their peers

You can increase your probability of success by incorporating both of these approaches into your strategy. By encouraging users to create original content that other members will comment on, rate and discuss, you are, in effect, killing two target behaviours with one stone.

## Stay active and loyal

Once you've attracted a community of members or customers to your site, how can you ensure they stay active and loyal to you? When competing against millions of other businesses, it helps if your product, customer service and content provide use and value to your customers. However, if you want to keep people coming back for more, not only do you have to boost your brand salience (as in the Whole Foods example), you also have to encourage and remind people to actively engage with your platform on a recurring basis.

Every social network and most products or services achieve this through notifications and alerts, which are typically switched on by default. Other platforms, such as LinkedIn, use email alerts to notify users when they've received a

message, only revealing part of the information, so they have to read and reply in-app or onsite. While this can be annoying, this technique can nevertheless be an effective way to ensure users return to the platform, whereupon they can be exposed to further content designed to deepen engagement. Of course, not everyone will like this forced compliance, and many users will switch off alerts altogether in response. The fear of missing out on potentially valuable communications (such as job offers) may prevent many users from taking this all-or-nothing approach, but ultimately, I believe it is those platforms that invite rather than coerce their users to return that will enjoy greater success in the long term.

## MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

### Phase 1: Discovery

#### *Learn about the service*

How are you making potential customers aware of your products or services? Are you actively using all channels available to you? What are the incentives for people to share your content or recommend your services through word of mouth, social media or email? Are you using PPC, native advertising or any other form of marketing to help people become aware of what you offer?

#### *Visit the platform*

Are you making it easy for people to visit your platform and interact with it without having to sign up? What incentives are you providing to encourage people to return? How can you give visitors a taste of the value your products or services would provide?

### Phase 2: Superficial involvement

#### *Decide to try*

Once customers have visited your platform and have been exposed to your content and brand, how can you encourage them to interact with you in a more proactive way? This can mean taking a small step such as signing up for a webinar, downloading a whitepaper or subscribing to your newsletter.

## ***Get started***

Having connected with your visitors and made a good first impression, the next step is to invite them to actually start using your product or service. What kind of free trial can you offer customers in exchange for their email address or social profile login? How can you build in value, reciprocity, positive reinforcement and a gentle nudge to encourage them to become paying customers?

## **Phase 3: True commitment** ***Create value and content***

Whether you're asking customers to comment, rate, follow, like or review your product, or you want users to generate content to share with their peers, how can you encourage them to contribute on a more regular basis? What reward mechanisms are in place (such as points for number of reviews submitted) to elicit and reinforce these behaviours?

## ***Involve others***

How can you optimise your outreach (content, marketing, social media strategy) so that existing customers feel moved to share your content with their friends? Are you providing any quantifiable rewards (e.g. '£15 off for you and your friend') to encourage them to invite others to try your product?

## ***Stay active and loyal***

Once customers are actively using your product or service, how can you encourage them to engage more habitually? What reminders or notifications can you use to nudge people in a way that is useful, as opposed to irritating? Do different customer segments have different needs in terms of how (and how often) they wish to be contacted?

# A CLOSING NOTE

Thank you for choosing to pick up this book. I hope you have found our foray into the vast world of online persuasion at turns exciting, intriguing and above all, useful. Although we are continuously discovering new insights into the ways in which technology shapes our behaviours, in the face of all these advances, one thing is certain: no matter how we progress, humans will always exploit technology to meet our deepest needs and desires. Whomever understands these needs and the drivers behind them will hold the key to influence.

However, as we all know, great responsibility follows inseparably from great power, and while I have written this book in the hope that it may help you achieve your goals, like all tools, it is up to you to decide how to use it. After all, as marketers, designers and developers, we are both the architects and the users of our future web. So I'll leave you with this question...

What kind of world do you want to build?

# NOTES

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