
Seven key behavioural science-based concepts for optimising everyday communications

Crawford Hollingworth and Liz Barker

WARC

WARC Best Practice, September 2018

SUMMARY

Discusses seven Behavioural Science based concepts which are key tools for optimising everyday communications: Choice Architecture, Saliency, Anchoring, Framing, Chunking, Cognitive Ease and Social Norms.

- The seven concepts outlined above, all of them based around insights and evidence from behavioural science, are some of the most effective tools for enhancing communications.
- It's these tools which will help you obtain the desired response you so need from people, be they customers, patients, citizens or consumers.
- Applied as part of the 4-step process we outlined in our 'sister' Best Practice paper: How to apply behavioural science to build more effective everyday communications, you'll have a bullet-proof strategy for developing any piece of comms.

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This paper discusses seven Behavioural Science based concepts which are key tools for optimising everyday communications: Choice Architecture, Saliency, Anchoring, Framing, Chunking, Cognitive Ease and Social Norms.

To learn how these concepts can be applied to everyday communications such as various marketing channels i.e. letters, emails, texts and posters, see our 'sister' Best Practice paper: **[How to apply behavioural science to build more effective everyday communications.](#)**

(http://www.warc.com//content/article/How_to_apply_behavioural_science_to_build_more_effective_everyday_communications/123270) **This paper outlines a simple four-step process for applying these concepts to optimise everyday communications.**

Definitions

Behavioural science embraces the cognitive biases and nuances of human behaviour. It provides us with a far more accurate model of human behaviour, and gives us the frameworks, concepts and tools to both understand behaviour – why we make certain decisions and choices, form habits and generally behave in the way we do, and ultimately to change behaviour.

Communications (comms) is defined in this context as marketing, operational and organisational communications across multiple channels, including written (letters, emails, texts, posters etc.) and voice communications.

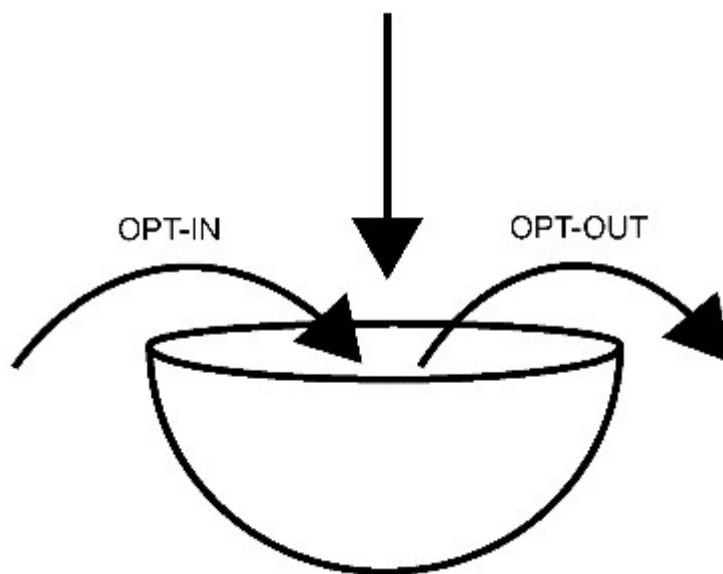
1. Choice architecture

How we **are presented with choices** can have a dramatic impact on what we choose – for example, we can be influenced by the **other options** we see, the order we look at them in and how they are **physical** or **visually** arranged.

Sometimes we might be steered towards a single option: one of the most effective ways to generate action known in behavioural science is to let customers know they are being automatically opted in to a service that is in their interest, whilst letting them know they can (easily) opt-out if they wish. This means that any communications - letters or emails - need only inform a customer of a change to their service and to tell them that no action is required unless they wish to opt-

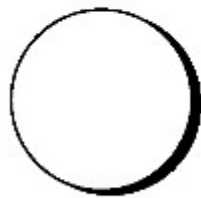
out. Typically, this results in around 80-90% of people accepting the change, compared to 30% or less if people need to proactively opt-in. Many have good intentions, but simply don't get around to it. For example, opt-out rates for the UK's auto-enrollment pension scheme are around 8-10%.

An automatic opt-in needs to be applied with care, because as it requires little or no thought on the part of the customer, they may not fully reflect on its implications or be aware of what they have agreed to.

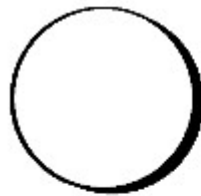


Another technique is to prompt a decision from a customer, asking them to choose between two or more options – this is known as active choice. Unlike the default approach, this requires customers to take action and make a choice in order to proceed in the consumer journey. For example, since 2011, drivers applying for a provisional license in the UK have been asked whether they would like to add their name to the organ donation register or defer that decision for now.¹

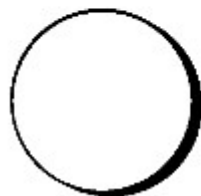
Check one of the following options:



YES, I would like to register



I do not wish to answer this question now



I am already registered on the NHS organ donor register

This type of technique generally leads to opt-in rates of 60-70% - still pretty effective, but less so than the automatic opt-in discussed above.

The bottom line is, if you need your customers to make a choice, think through the different ways you could present it to them. The exercise of exploring the potential choice architecture options you could adopt can be highly enlightening – remember there is always more than one way to present a choice!

2. Salience

A number of actions have been shown to improve salience. We **pay attention** to information or objects that stand out and **catch our eye**. In communications, this means our attention will **automatically be drawn to what's dominant** on the page or screen – **imagery, colour, larger, bolder fonts or symbols**.

Unsurprisingly, researchers have found that **bullet points** and **bold type** are effective in **highlighting action points**.

For example, an FCA trial optimising a letter to inform customers they were eligible for a refund on a financial product found that salient bullet points had the greatest impact of several tweaks, **raising response rates by 3.8% over the control**.²

Research has also shown that **location on a page or screen can be key; putting action points or key information first or on the left-hand column catches our attention most effectively**. For instance, a trial in New York City investigated the use of salience in their court summons to reduce citizens' failure to appear. The researchers focused on ensuring key information - the date, time and location of the hearing - were visually salient and easy to read on the letter. They also changed the title of the form from the rather vague 'Complaint/Information' to 'Criminal Court Appearance Ticket' - wouldn't the latter grab your attention quickly!? The new form alone **reduced the number of people failing to attend court by 6.4%: from 41% to under 36%**.³



Sometimes simple visuals can prompt action too. These TV licensing communications encouraging consumers to switch to paperless billing use coloured buttons to make it easy to understand and quick to act upon (see images).

With these tips in mind, take another look at a piece of comms you're working on. What immediately stands out? How might you pique someone's interest to get them started? Will the *single most important piece of information* that the consumer needs to know about get their attention? If not, how could it be made more salient? Adding bullet points, colour or bolding text can all help to bring the key information to people's attention.

3-4. Framing and Anchors

Framing or presenting information in a certain way and **using reference points or points of comparison**, known as anchors, **can dramatically increase meaning and therefore engagement.**

Comprehension of information can be improved by presenting information in a way that makes it understandable and which can be easily compared to what consumers are familiar with – providing what's known as an anchor or reference point. For example, useful framing and anchor points can be offered in contrasting an insurance premium renewal price with what a customer paid last year or what changes in benefits or terms and conditions compare to in real terms or against competitors.

We drew on the concept of framing for an online service directory that helps consumers find and get quotes from businesses. They asked us to help optimise an email **aimed at increasing the number of businesses subscribing to the service, by reframing the benefits of subscription.** We rewrote and reformatted the email to change the focus away from a transactional frame - subscription renewal - to the increased potential of attracting and finding new clients. This helped to highlight the benefits of subscription rather than drawing attention to an impending cost. In addition, we reframed the cost of the service to help make it feel more affordable, presenting it in terms of its monthly cost rather than the lump sum annual cost. These, amongst other changes, led to a 15% increase in subscription renewals which translated to an additional \$770,000 of business. On top of this came cost savings for our client, as their call centre staff no longer had to follow up on lapsed clients.

We can also **use language to help identify the potential risks of failing to take action.** People will typically make greater effort to avoid a loss than they will to realise a gain. For example, highlighting how much money people are losing through paying too high a tariff is typically more effective than showing the savings they can make by switching.

It's important not to scare customers so there's a fine balance between emphasising that something needs their attention and making it so threatening that people simply bury their heads in the sand. Writing in an empathetic, helpful

way, whilst still emphasising the urgency, can lead to significant improvements in response rates and customer satisfaction.

How might you reframe a message? There is always more than one frame. How might you reframe potential savings into real losses? Or how might you give numbers more meaning by putting them into perspective with easy to understand comparisons? Can information be positioned more favourably and with more meaning by providing simple reference points?

5. Chunking and feedback

*To help consumers feel that a task is **manageable, quick to complete and not too daunting**, it can help to minimise and **make clear the steps required to take action**. This technique is known as **chunking** and using it in **communications** can make the difference between a customer taking the **desired action, or never doing anything about it**.*

One example of applying chunking comes from work we conducted with a Superannuation (pensions) provider in Australia identified that many of its members had multiple superannuation accounts, sometimes up to seven or eight separate accounts, which was often overly costly. Despite the consolidation process being quite simple, members weren't taking it up as they found it overly complex and time intensive. Our recommendation was to increase cognitive ease (see our next concept, discussed below) and to chunk the process down into small steps, the first of which was asking members if they would like a free 'Super search' done by the Australian Tax Office on their behalf, to establish how many accounts they had and to perhaps even find lost accounts. To initiate, all the member had to do was respond to a text message with one word. **This simple intervention resulted in a double digit increase in rates of superannuation consolidation.**

So if your communication requires a customer to take action on something, analyse all the steps involved and look at how you can let them know where they are in that journey, whether there is an easy first step to get them involved and how you can feedback to them how they are doing and encourage them in their progress to completion.

6. Cognitive ease

*When information is presented in a way that requires minimal cognitive capacity – mental effort – and lets someone make decisions using more of their “System 1” thinking – automatic, intuitive, effortless – we can say it’s high in ‘cognitive ease’. Conversely, if people have to engage their ‘System 2’ mode of thinking – whereby it takes more effort to comprehend information – they are less likely to take action, and, particularly if they are busy, may give up trying to read it. Therefore, effective communication tends to ensure **high levels** of cognitive ease, making sure it’s as easy as possible for anyone to understand and respond to.*

To maximise cognitive ease, and better engage consumers, it helps to use Plain English, minimise jargon and acronyms and maximise use of simple layman terms. It can often be hard to put ourselves in our customers’ shoes and remind ourselves what terminology and language they will and won’t be familiar with. However, if language is too complex and alien, customers are unlikely to read it, let alone absorb the information and take action.

Richard Thaler, co-author of the bestselling book ‘Nudge’, won the Nobel Prize for Economics last year for his work on behavioural economics. He has a favourite mantra: ‘**Make it easy**’. This not only means communication should be easy to understand, but the desired action should be made clear too and easy to act on too.

Improving cognitive ease can also simply mean reducing the word count of a letter to make it less overwhelming. Legal expenses insurance company DAS worked with the behavioural science consultancy The Hunting Dynasty to make their welcome letters more easily understandable, demonstrating to the FCA that they have customer interests at heart. They reduced a 261-word letter to just 91 words whilst also increasing comprehension and retaining reading ease.⁴

Sometimes however, a long information pack is unavoidable and legally necessary. In this case, research suggests it can help to put a **summary sheet up front, so people can access key information easily.**

What parts of your communications might be engaging System 2 versus System 1? Have you asked others outside of your expertise to read it through and make sure it's accessible, with minimal jargon and easy to understand by a wider audience? If there is a lot of information to share, can you make it more succinct or at the very least put the key information in a cover page?

7. Social norms

*When we need people to take action or change their behaviour, letting them know that others have done it already – known as a **descriptive social norm** – can be an effective way of encouraging them to do likewise. **We generally want to do what others are doing and conform to the behaviours of our peers.** Most people won't defiantly refuse to take action, more likely they simply won't have got around to it, not realising that everyone else has.*

This technique is even more impactful if people are aware that 'others' like them in their area, peer or demographic group have responded already, particularly teenagers and young adults who neuroscientists have found are even more influenced by peer behaviour.

There is also another type of social norm – called injunctive social norms – which is about what society as a whole expects us to be doing. For example, society expects and approves of tipping a waiter, or not dropping litter or using sunscreen. Highlighting that it's customary to do something, or emphasising that most people believe or expect others in society to do something can generate a stronger response.

Can you express a desired behaviour in terms of the number of people already doing it? Can you hone in on the type of people doing it and match it to your customer(s)? Can you engage injunctive social norms – highlighting and reminding people about what society believes we should be doing?

Summary

The seven concepts we've outlined, all of them based around insights and evidence from behavioural science, are some of the most effective tools for enhancing communications and helping to make them more effective. It's these tools which will help you obtain the desired response you so need from people, be they customers, patients, citizens or consumers. Applied as part of the 4-step process we outlined in our 'sister' Best Practice paper: **[How to apply behavioural science to build more effective everyday communications](http://www.warc.com/content/article/How_to_apply_behavioural_science_to_build_more_effective_everyday_communications/123270)**

(http://www.warc.com/content/article/How_to_apply_behavioural_science_to_build_more_effective_everyday_communications/123270), you'll have a bullet-proof strategy for developing any piece of comms!

Key concept	Definition	Application
Choice architecture	Consumer choices are influenced by the way in which choices are presented to them. There is no neutral way to present choice.	If you need your customers to make a choice, think through the different ways you could present it to them. Remember there is always more than one way to present a choice!
Salience	Salience is the state or condition of being prominent . The salience of an item is what makes it stand out relative to its neighbours . Our System 1 automatically picks up salient stimuli.	What immediately stands out in the comms? How might you pique someone's interest to get them started? Will the <i>single most important piece of information</i> that the consumer needs to know about get their attention? If not, how could it be made more salient? Adding bullet points, colour or bolding text can all help to bring the key information to people's attention.
Anchoring	When making a decision, consumers anchor or rely on a specific piece of information and then adjust from this point.	How might you give numbers more meaning by putting them into perspective with easy to understand comparisons? Can information be positioned more favourably and with more meaning by providing simple reference points?

Framing	The way information is presented – ordered or framed – has a significant impact on decision making.	How might you reframe a message? There is always more than one frame. How might you reframe potential savings into real losses?
Chunking	A large task or goal can be daunting and put people off. Breaking down a task into parts makes it seem much more achievable and manageable.	Analyse all the steps involved in a task and look at how you can let consumers know where they are in that journey. Is there an easy first step to get them involved? How can you feedback to them how they are doing and encourage them in their progress to completion?
Cognitive ease	The natural desire a person has to make decisions and judgments using “System 1” thinking . When information is presented in a way that requires minimal cognitive capacity and lets someone make decisions using ‘System 1’ thinking.	Make sure the comms is accessible, with minimal jargon and easy to understand by a wider audience. If there is a lot of information to share, can you make it more succinct or at the very least put the key information in a cover page?

Social norms	When we are uncertain or unconfident about what to do, we look to other people to guide us – valuing their opinions and emulating their behaviours.	Can you express a desired behaviour in terms of the number of people already doing it? Can you hone in on the type of people doing it and match it to your customer(s)?
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Further reading

WARC Topic Page: **Behavioural Insight** ([http://www.warc.com//topics/consumer-research/behavioural-insight?](http://www.warc.com//topics/consumer-research/behavioural-insight?Sort=ContentDate%7c1&DVals=4294615732+4294615714+10787+10786+10785&FstEntry=false&RecordsPerPage=25)

[Sort=ContentDate%7c1&DVals=4294615732+4294615714+10787+10786+10785&FstEntry=false&RecordsPerPage=25](http://www.warc.com//topics/consumer-research/behavioural-insight?Sort=ContentDate%7c1&DVals=4294615732+4294615714+10787+10786+10785&FstEntry=false&RecordsPerPage=25))

WARC Best Practice: **What we know about consumer decision making**

(http://www.warc.com//content/paywall/article/bestprac/what_we_know_about_consumer_decision_making/108516)

WARC Best Practice: **What we know about behavioural economics**

(http://www.warc.com//content/paywall/article/bestprac/what_we_know_about_behavioural_economics/107582)

How to apply behavioural science to build more effective everyday communications

(http://www.warc.com//content/article/How_to_apply_behavioural_science_to_build_more_effective_everyday_communications/123270)

Hollingworth, Crawford,: ‘**Using BE scaffolding to improve communications**’ (<https://www.marketingsociety.com/the-gym/using-%E2%80%98be-scaffolding%E2%80%99-improve-communications#B0LV9wyHoY3RZ90c.97>), The Behavioural Architects, The Marketing Society, March 2016

Sources

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About the authors

Crawford Hollingworth

Co-Founder, The Behavioural Architects

Crawford Hollingworth is co-Founder of The Behavioural Architects, which he launched in 2011 with co-Founders Sian Davies and Sarah Davies. He was also founder of HeadlightVision in London and New York, a behavioural trends research consultancy. HeadlightVision was acquired by WPP in 2003. He has written and spoken widely on the subject of behavioural economics for various institutions and publications, including the Market Research Society, Marketing Society, Market Leader, Aura, AQR, London Business School and Impact magazine. Crawford is a Fellow of The Marketing Society and Royal Society of Arts.

Liz Barker

Global Head of BE Intelligence & Networks, The Behavioural Architects

Liz Barker is Global Head of BE Intelligence & Networks at The Behavioural Architects, advancing the application of behavioural science by bridging the worlds of academia and business. Her background is

in Economics, particularly the application of behavioural economics across a wide range of fields, from global business and finance to international development. Liz has a BA and MSc in Economics from Cambridge and Oxford.

TOPICS

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APAC: OUE Downtown 1, #44-03, 6 Shenton Way, 068809, Singapore - Tel: +65 3157 6200

EMEA: 85 Newman Street, London, United Kingdom, W1T 3EU - Tel: +44 (0)20 7467 8100

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