
How to apply behavioural science to build more effective everyday communications

Crawford Hollingworth and Liz Barker

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SUMMARY

Outlines a simple four-step process for applying behavioural science to optimise everyday communications.

- Marketers need to clearly define the behavioural response required by the customer and once the desired response has been identified, it may also be necessary to identify any potential behavioural barriers.
- Analysing the context(s) in which the communications will be received, read and acted upon is essential as one size may not fit all, and communications may need to be adapted for different audiences and contexts.
- The next stage is to audit the communications through a behavioural science lens, which allows the development of a deeper understanding about which elements of the communication are driving people to respond, which elements may be creating a barrier and any unnecessary elements that can be dispensed with.
- The smartest organisations will also embrace and invest in a 'test and learn' culture, conducting pilot tests and Randomised Controlled Trials to qualitatively and quantitatively measure the impact of changes to communications.

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Behavioural science has helped us to better understand how people think, how they perceive things and, ultimately, what factors might influence their decision-making and behaviour. Further, **behavioural science** has defined concepts and frameworks that, applied as part of a design process, **can significantly improve the impact of everyday communications such as customer letters, and emails, giving us simple tools for a more systematic approach to effective communication.**

This best practice paper outlines a simple **four-step process** for applying **behavioural science to optimise everyday communications**. See our 'sister' Best Practice paper, '**Seven Key Behavioural Science-based concepts for optimising everyday communications**

(http://www.warc.com//content/article/Seven_Key_Behavioural_Science-based_concepts_for_optimising_everyday_communications/123274)', which looks at: Choice Architecture, Salience, Anchoring, Framing, Chunking, Cognitive Ease and Social Norms.

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.

Where to start

Simply by looking at communications through a behavioural science lens we can see how they may or may not be playing to our subconscious wirings and biases. This lens helps us to understand critical aspects such as how cognitively easy a letter is to understand, absorb and act upon. It can also highlight how it may or may not affect the sense of urgency to act or how sensitive it is to the specific context in which it will be received and read. This process allows us to identify places where we can maximise strengths and remove or minimise weaknesses, as a result improving the effectiveness of the communication.

Everyday communications can be optimised to drive desired behavioural outcomes by improving clarity, salience and impact. Sometimes marketers may be optimising existing communications, such as redesigning an existing letter or email. It can also be valuable to feed into the development of new communications, inputting behavioural insights at an early stage to maximise effectiveness.

Essentials

Here's the four-step process we apply when tackling any communications challenge:



1. Define the desired behavioural response to the comms

The first and key part is to **clearly define the behavioural response required by the customer**. What would you like your customers *to do* following the communication? For example, we worked with a financial organisation that wanted to communicate a change in customer service for the business account holders. We helped them pinpoint a specific action they wanted their customers to take, simply **to put a new customer service number into their phone contacts** so they would find it easier and quicker to contact the bank when they needed assistance.

Once the desired response has been identified, it may also be necessary to identify any potential behavioural barriers - what people are doing instead of the desired response. Often, they are simply inactive, but sometimes communication can be triggering the wrong responses. These are important to identify at the start, so the comms can be designed from the outset with a specific response (and potential barriers to this response) front of mind.

2. Analyse the context(s) in which the communications will be received, read and acted upon

Where and when will they be read? One size may not fit all, and comms may need to be adapted for different audiences and contexts. So, research which deepens understanding of how each piece of comms will work within its context may lead to a more effective outcome.

More broadly, there are also huge benefits to exploring the end-to-end customer journey to identify how the context might prompt, encourage or hinder customer understanding and response. For example, our work with a multinational bank **to understand how to increase customers taking up mortgage protection products** revealed that the product was being offered in a context where customers were already overloaded mentally and emotionally - the mortgage application interview. By introducing new touch points at times when the customer would be in a more open mind to the communication we were able to put in place a more optimal contact strategy.

In more complex behavioural change goals, there can be multiple types of communications and in these cases it's useful to explore the role of different communications along the journey. Chunking the journey into smaller behavioural goals (often with different contexts) and using different types of communication to achieve these goals can maximise effectiveness.

3. Audit and optimise using insights from behavioural science

Once it is clear what the behavioural objective is and there is an understanding of the context in which the communications will be working, the next stage is to **audit the communications through a behavioural science lens**. This allows us to develop a deeper understanding about which elements of the communication are driving people to respond, which elements may be creating a barrier, as well as any unnecessary elements that can be dispensed with.

There are a multitude of concepts in behavioural science, but our sister best practice paper ‘Seven Key Behavioural Science-based concepts for optimising everyday communications’ identifies the most relevant and effective concepts for optimising communications: **Choice Architecture, Salience, Anchoring, Framing, Chunking, Cognitive Ease and Social Norms**

(http://www.warc.com//content/article/Seven_Key_Behavioural_Science-based_concepts_for_optimising_everyday_communications/123274).

4. Pilot and test

The smartest organisations are increasingly embracing and investing in a ‘**test and learn**’ culture, conducting pilot tests and Randomised Controlled Trials to qualitatively and quantitatively measure the impact of changes to communications and validate hypotheses about what might be effective.

Whilst it can be tempting to roll out changes in communications assuming that they will be effective, it’s best to trial and test using a control group initially. Sometimes subtle factors related to the specific context or customer group may mean that the impact of the comms was not as predicted - perhaps a lower response rate than hoped - meaning that hypotheses need to be adjusted and updated.

The good news is that simple everyday communications are fairly easy and low cost to test. Many organisations have access to a large database of customers, so getting a large enough sample size to ensure tests are sufficiently rigorous is rarely a problem and several variations can, and should, be tested.

For example, we worked to optimise the communications of a UK healthcare company and were able to test three different variations to work out which was the most effective in increasing the desired response rate.

Checklist

- Define the **desired behavioural response** to the piece of communication
- **Understand the context** in which the comms will be received
- Conduct a **BE audit of the comms** – analysing and optimising it using insights from behavioural science and thinking through this **3 step analytical process**:
 1. What is wrong with the existing comms
 2. What is right but could be stronger
 3. What behavioural science concepts are not being used and could be
- **Pilot and test** the optimised version

Don't be tempted to skip stages 1 and 2 and jump straight into 3. You can end up with ineffective comms that does not achieve your objectives. **We tend to want** to get stuck in to the meat of the problem straight away, but time and time again, our four-stage approach has initiated improvements in comms that would not have been identified if we had not spent time on the first two steps.

Be prepared to iterate. Whilst behavioural science can provide a guide to what to do and change, **tiny subtle differences in versions of comms could make all the difference.** **Test and learn and then go back and test again!**

Case studies

Below, we highlight two case studies which show **how this four-step process has been applied to communications.** Both resulted in significant uplifts in the desired behavioural response from people.

Case study one: Preventing failures to appear in court

The New York City Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice, BE consultancy company ideas42 and the University of Chicago Crime Lab recently partnered to see if they could **improve response rates to court summons** for minor infractions

committed by NYC citizens - things like littering, alcohol use in public, riding a bike on the sidewalk and spitting. Specifically, the desired behavioural response was to attend the court summons.



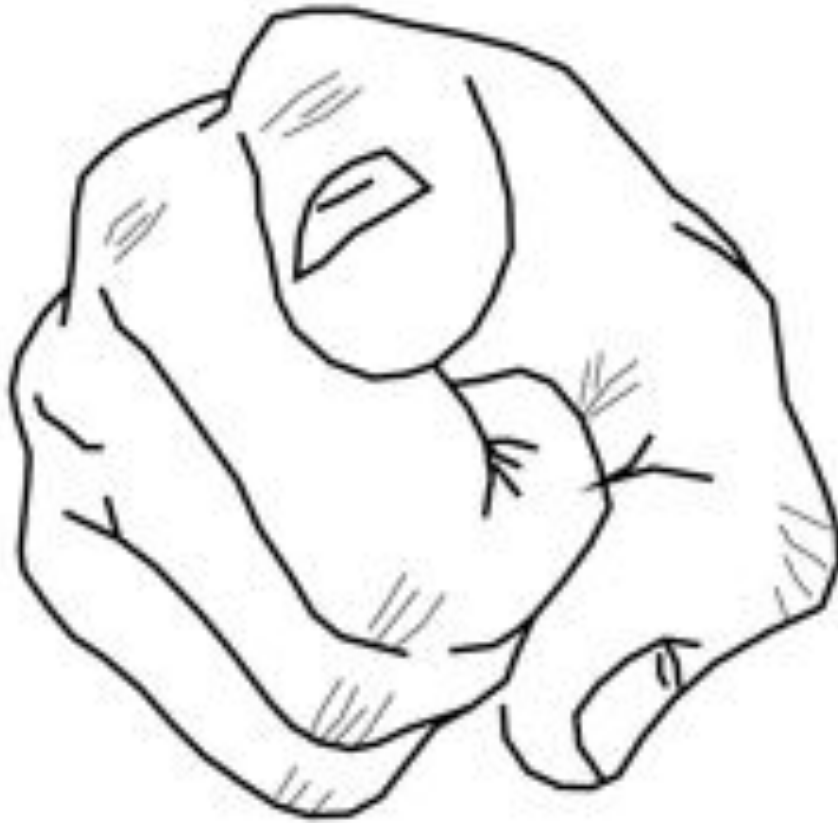
Despite the fact that they could be arrested if they fail to show up in court, **in 2014 around 40% of the 320,000 New Yorkers issued with a summons failed to appear in court to defend themselves and warrants were issued for their arrest.** Why were citizens failing to comply?

Through qualitative and quantitative research which analysed the different individual contexts in which the communication was typically received as well as the content and design of the comms itself, their audit revealed a number of potential problems:

- People did not expect a warrant to be issued for such a minor crime and felt it to be unfair.
- **Present bias made the immediate costs of attending court (not being in work) seem to outweigh the consequences of not turning up.**
- Some were put off by the negative perceptions they had of the **court experience, anticipating that it would be frightening and uncomfortable**, perceptions often created and magnified by the media – and known as **availability bias**.
- There was also a tendency for people to **bury their head in the sand** and ignore the whole situation – known as **the ostrich effect!**
- Many citizens struggled with the practical details of appearing in court, especially those who had inflexible or unpredictable jobs, finding it **difficult to put in place a plan for taking time off work and follow through on that plan.**
- People mistakenly **believed that most other people didn't attend court** either.
- Finally, some people simply forgot to attend!

To try to increase action and encourage more citizens to attend court, the team piloted two initiatives in 2016-2017. First, they simplified and optimised the court summons form to help people take action. They made simple, but effective changes to the form including:

- Changing the title of the form to make the fact that it was a **court summons more salient**. The new form's title 'Criminal Court Appearance Ticket' made the individual's status of defendant apparent from the outset, compared to the old form, confusingly titled 'Complaint/Information'.



- Making clear the negative consequences of not appearing in court, stating early in the form “To avoid a warrant for your arrest, you must show up in court”. This **frames and emphasises the potential loss the individual will suffer if they do nothing**. Evidence shows that people often respond more to information that focuses on potential losses.
- Using personal language, for example, “your arrest” or “You are charged”. This engages the citizen directly and gets their attention, making it clear what the form means for them.
- **Making the key information salient and easy to find** on the form, moving the court appearance date and time and location to the top of the form and writing it in bold text. This makes it easier for people to start making a plan as they have the information they need.

See the old and new form below.

The new form alone reduced the number of people failing to attend court by 6.4 percentage points, from 41% to under 36%. In 2014, had the new form been in place, 17,100 of the 320,000 warrants issued could have been avoided.

Changing the title of the form from the rather vague '**Complaint/Information**' to '**Criminal Court Appearance Ticket**' helped people quickly understand what the letter was all about.

The second action was to test a variety of text reminders to those issued with a ticket. They found the most effective messages were a **series of pre-court messages combining the consequences and plan-making nudges**. For example, "Remember, you have a court appearance tomorrow at 9.30am. Tickets could be dismissed or end in a fine (60 days to pay). Missing court for #### can lead to your arrest." **These messages reduced the failure to attend court rate from 38% to 28%.**

The cost of the entire initiative was relatively low - the only cost for the new form was the one-time redesign. Sending all 2014 ticket recipients 3 text-messages would have cost just \$7,500. Compare this to the cost of court time, police time for arrests and admin time and the value is immediately apparent.¹

Old Version (Left): CRC-3206 (5/12) **Complaint/Information**
The People of the State of New York vs.
 Name (Last, First, MI)
 Street Address Apt. No.
 City State Zip Code
 ID/License Number State Type/Class Expires (month/year) Sex
 Date of Birth (month/year) Ht Wt Eyes Hair Plate/Reg
 Reg State Expires (month/year) Plate Type Veh Type Make Year Color
The Person Described Above is Charged as Follows:
 Time 24 Hour (hh:mm) Date of Offense (month/year) County
 Place of Occurrence
 In Violation of Section Subsection VTL Admin Code Penal Law Park Rules Other
Title of Offense:
 Bronx Criminal Court - 215 E. 161st Street, Bronx, NY 10451
 Kings Criminal Court - 346 Broadway, New York, NY 10013
 Redhook Community Justice Center - 88-94 Visitation Place, Brooklyn, NY 11231
 New York Criminal Court - 346 Broadway, New York, NY 10013
 Midtown Community Court - 314 W 54th Street, New York, NY 10019
 Queens Criminal Court - 120-55 Queens Boulevard, Kew Gardens, NY 11415
 Richmond Criminal Court - 67 Targee Street, Staten Island, NY 10304
 Defendant stated in my presence (in substance):
 I personally observed the commission of the offense charged herein. False statements made herein are punishable as a Class A Misdemeanor pursuant to section 210.45 of the Penal Law. Affirmed under penalty of law.
 Complainant's Full Name Printed Rank/Full Signature of Complainant Date Affirmed (month/year)
 Agency Tax Registry # Command Code
 The person described above is summoned to appear at NYC Criminal Court Session Part County located at:
 Date of Appearance (month/year) At 9:30 a.m.

New Version (Right): CRC-3206 (1/14) **Criminal Court Appearance Ticket**
 Name (Last, First, MI) Date of Birth (month/year)
 Call Phone Number (where court may contact you) Home Phone Number (where court may contact you)
Show up to court on:
 Court Appearance Date (month/year): at: 9:30 a.m.
Your court appearance location: Other (specify):
 Bronx Criminal Court Kings & New York Criminal Court Midtown Community Court Redhook Community Justice Center Queens Criminal Court Richmond Criminal Court
****To avoid a warrant for your arrest, you must show up to court.****
At court, you may plead guilty or not guilty.
 Please see back for exceptions for Public Consumption of Alcohol and Public Urination offenses.
Court Locations: You must appear at the court location identified above:
 Bronx Criminal Court 215 E. 161st Street, Bronx, NY 10451
 Kings & New York Criminal Court 1 Centre Street, 10th Floor, New York, NY 10007
 Redhook Community Justice Center 88-94 Visitation Place, Brooklyn, NY 11231
 Midtown Community Court 314 W 54th Street, New York, NY 10019
 Queens Criminal Court 120-55 Queens Boulevard, Kew Gardens, NY 11415
 Richmond Criminal Court 67 Central Ave., Staten Island, NY 10301
You are Charged as Follows:
Title of Offense:
 Time 24 Hour (hh:mm) Date of Offense (month/year) County
 Place of Occurrence
 In Violation of Section Subsection VTL Admin Code Penal Law Park Rules Other
For Additional Information and Questions:
 Visit the website or call the number below for additional information about your court appearance and translation of this document.
 www.mysummons.nyc
 OR
 Call 646-760-3010
 Defendant stated in my presence (in substance):
 I personally observed the commission of the offense charged herein. False statements made herein are punishable as a Class A Misdemeanor pursuant to section 210.45 of the Penal Law. Affirmed under penalty of law.
 Complainant's Full Name Printed Rank/Full Signature of Complainant Date Affirmed (month/year)
 Tax Registry # Agency Command Code

Figure 2: Old and new versions of the Criminal Court Appearance Ticket

Case study two: Reducing goods donations sent after humanitarian crises

The Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) recently partnered with The Behavioural Architects Australia to see if they could **develop communications that would reduce the number of Unsolicited Bilateral Donations (UBDs) – goods such as clothing and household items - sent after times of humanitarian disaster.** Ultimately, the desired behavioural response is for people to donate cash rather than goods.

Of course, donors who send UBDs do so with the best intentions: helping those in need, but **sadly, statistics show that UBDs do more harm than good**; they clog supply chains and local ports, meaning that local authorities often have to pay to have the unrequested donated goods disposed of in landfill.

For example, 10 months after Tropical Cyclone Pam hit Vanuatu in 2015, the Australian Red Cross reported that there were still 18 shipping containers full of UBDs left on the wharf costing 1.5 million US dollars in storage, handling and container rental fees.

In-depth contextual interviews and a longitudinal ethnographic study with donors who had previously sent UBDs helped us to better understand the donor context. We identified that UBD donors tend to operate in an automatic, emotional and intuitive 'System 1' mode of thinking, piecing together information that supports their beliefs about sending goods, without stopping to explore the real facts about where their donated goods really end up.

Donors tended to see their goods as practical, immediate, incorruptible, always reaching the intended beneficiary, and generally a better form of donation, compared to cash. Donors tended to actively seek to find pieces of information that confirm these existing beliefs, rather than ones that challenge them. Below are images drawn by a donor to illustrate their System 1 decision-making process of donating goods.



Figure 3: Images drawn by a donor in qualitative research

To change **donors' behaviour** we would need to **disrupt the incorrect beliefs and narrative that donors have about where donated goods end up.**

Communicating a 'cash is best' message was not enough for this audience as it doesn't do enough to change beliefs or behaviours about donating goods. To generate more cash donations we needed to make salient why it is better – not necessarily in its own right – but because the alternative (donating goods) is not meeting the needs of those who donors are trying to help.

Developing and piloting the nudges

We drafted four different potential messages (see figure below) that might counter UBD's. These behavioural nudge ideas were quantitatively tested with a representative sample of 1026 Australians in February 2018. The most effective message leveraged new anchors and social norms:

Disruptive Anchors and Social Norms

Fact: Many donated goods sent to a disaster zone end up in landfill because efforts on the ground are focused on lifesaving aid, not unpacking goods donations. **Fact: Cash donated during humanitarian disaster never ends up in**

landfill and helps deliver immediate lifesaving aid. Most people donate cash because it is fast, flexible and meets immediate needs.

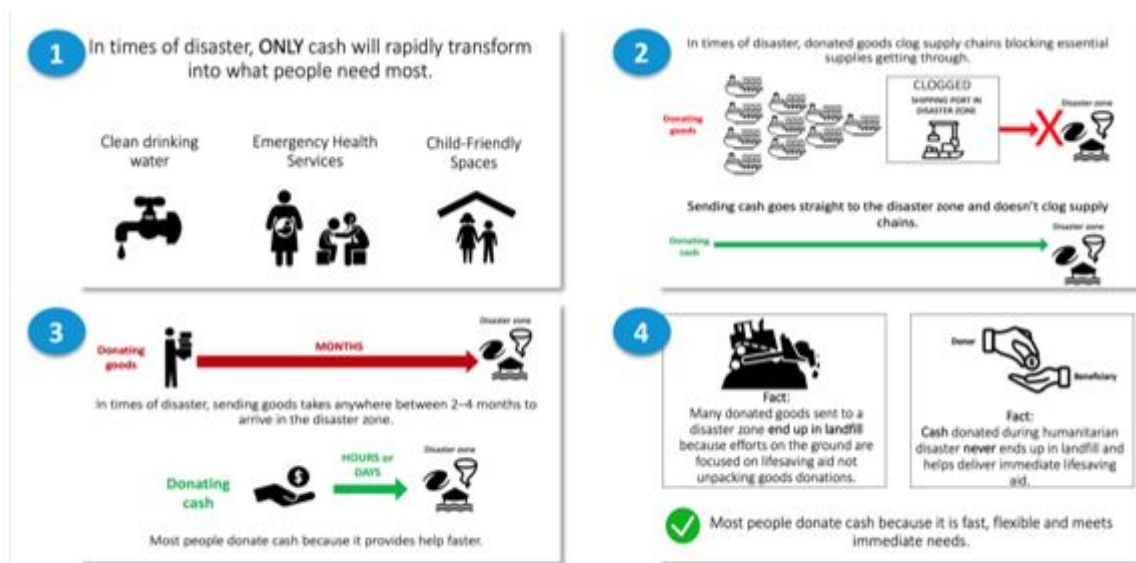


Figure 4: Four different messages were tested in quantitative research

In fact, it showed a 50% reduction in the number of people who would send a UBD in the future. This was more than double the reduction from the ‘cash is best’ message (number 1). The power of the landfill message lies in its ability to deliver real factual information (goods going to landfill) that disrupts existing beliefs.

Sources

1. Urbanlabs.uchicago.edu. (2018). **Using Behavioral Science to Improve Criminal Justice Outcomes**
https://urbanlabs.uchicago.edu/attachments/store/9c86b123e3b00a5da58318f438a6e787dd01d66d0efad54d66aa232a6473/I42-954_NYCSummonsPaper_Final_Mar2018.pdf

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/article/bestprac/what_we_know_about_consumer_decision_making/108516)

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

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

Hollingworth, Crawford: **‘Using BE scaffolding to improve communications**

(<https://www.marketingsociety.com/the-gym/using-%E2%80%98be-scaffolding%E2%80%99-improve-communications>)’, The Behavioural Architects, The Marketing Society, March 2016

Ideas42, the behavioural change consultancy, has developed a useful checklist to work through when developing and fine-tuning comms. Each of the 12 points is grounded in scientific and practitioner findings for what works in improving comprehension and ultimately response rates for **letters and emails**

(<http://www.bhub.org/best-practice/letters-and-email/>).

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 that 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

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