

# Behavioural friction



**R**esearch into habits and daily routines finds that the easier a behaviour is to do, the greater the chance that a new habit will be established. When we're establishing a new behaviour, we have to consciously think about doing it, which takes more effort and can make it seem harder to achieve. Minimising barriers so that it feels less daunting can facilitate the process of building a new habit.

Yet, with so many contextual variables currently in flux as restrictions related to Covid-19 change week by week – differing by country and even region – and with many consumers feeling cognitively strained, overwhelmed or anxious, there is more behavioural friction than ever.

Friction can get in the way of desired behaviour, but it can also be engaged to discourage undesired behaviour and steer towards the behaviour you want to happen.

## Analysing existing friction

It's important to identify the behavioural friction in people's lives that might be preventing them from adopting a new behaviour.

In 2018, a team of researchers used data from a cycle app to analyse commuter cycle routes across three European cities: Munster, in Germany; Castelló, in Spain; and Valletta, in Malta. The data enabled them to identify journey 'friction points' – where cyclists had to stop, slow down, switch routes from a designated cycle path to a highway, or even get off and push. These points in the journey mean a cyclist has to be constantly alert to the next hazard or navigation point, making the journey slower, creating fear and frustration, and even discouraging cycling altogether. As cities the world over rapidly redesign their road networks to give more priority to cyclists during the pandemic, this sort of data analysis is invaluable.

Today, we can find multiple examples of friction. Some governments are failing to communicate the virus rules and guidance in a consistent way, or have not made clear that scientific understanding is an evolving entity, so advice will change and guidance will be updated as more is known. This has generated confusion across many business sectors, which is then deflected onto consumers. Friction caused by uncertainty and lack of clarity is likely to make people think twice about certain activities when they are worried and unsure about the right thing to do.

## Reducing friction for a desired behaviour to happen

Once friction barriers have been identified and analysed, the next step is to try to minimise or eliminate as much friction as possible, to make a behaviour easier to do. Some of the best strategies to do this include:

- **Reducing the number of decisions:** the easier the set-up, the more likely we are to at least begin the new behaviour. How many decisions are you asking someone to make before they can begin? Are they likely to know or easily find the answers, or will the decisions confuse and discourage them?
- **Reducing the steps required to carry out the behaviour:** embarking on new behaviours and actions can seem daunting. If the steps required for the routine are simple and minimal – a three-step process at most, for instance – it’s more likely someone will try to adopt it
- **Reducing the perceived effort or any other potential barriers:** changing the status quo and starting a new behaviour is always going to feel like more effort, but if we can reduce any known barriers to the routine, we have more chance of success.

A study published in July 2020 provides a good example of the first strategy, to reduce the number of decisions required. Researchers found a significant impact on green electricity (100% renewable) take-up in Germany by automatically enrolling households into tariffs. A default green tariff led to an increase in green electricity consumption of almost 20%. Previously, other

information-based or switching campaigns had failed to affect household tariff choice. Although households remained free to opt out, few did so. Making it easy – the default or automatic choice – to use green energy helps reduce any existing friction in choosing to draw on renewable energy sources.

Contactless payments have played a big part in reducing friction lately, making it easier to pay for items and services, as well as maintain hygiene and physical distancing. More and more outlets are now offering contactless and a higher maximum threshold (£45 in the UK and €50 in Europe) for payment. This means that far more payments can be made using contactless, embedding the new habit more quickly. The Covid-19 pandemic has changed people’s preferences, with 59% of those surveyed saying contactless is their preferred choice of payment.

Analysis of contactless uptake by Dynata found that there seems to be spillover effects from using contactless. In the past, enabling contactless payments on public transport – Transport for London (TfL) in the UK and metro networks in Sydney and Singapore – triggered wider usage. It’s not clear exactly why, but it could relate to reducing friction barriers. Similarly, this push to use contactless now may drive continued usage even when virus risk levels fall.

While this behaviour has been driven by making it easier to use contactless, at the same time during Covid-19 it has become harder to use cash – simply because many vendors do not want to handle it because of the hygiene risks. Increasing friction can also be a useful strategy for driving new behaviour.

## Discouraging undesired behaviour

How might we increase friction to stop or reduce undesired behaviour? One 1981 study looked at how to reduce elevator use in an office building, with the objective of cutting energy use. Researchers found that simply making the elevator doors close extremely slowly was enough to prompt many people to take the stairs – for good.

There was a marked reduction in use of the elevator when the doors took the longest to close, but even when they returned to their original speeds, people stuck with the stairs. They had developed a new habit, driven by increased friction. Most people detest waiting and would rather be on the move, even if that means more physical effort. Making something

feel time-consuming helped to drive a more active behaviour.

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**“Simply making the elevator doors close extremely slowly was enough to prompt many people to take the stairs – for good”**  
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## Implications

- With our lives upturned for months on end, we have a ‘once in a generation’ opportunity to shape and drive new optimal behaviours
- One of the most effective ways to encourage people to try new routines, services or products is by making it as easy as possible to do the desired behaviour, or by making the old behaviour harder to do
- Understanding the barriers and friction to behaviour is key to designing successful strategies for new behaviours.