

Considering conscious, unconscious cues

 By [John Laurence](#)

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How do you like your popcorn? Week-old stale or freshly popped? If you are like most people, you are probably going to choose the fresh popcorn over the batch that has been lying around for a week. And when asked why you eat popcorn, you are probably going to name taste or flavour as a principle reason for doing so. Nothing remarkable there.

The role of habit

Most people don't realise how much of their behaviour is actually guided by routinized habitual processes rather than being goal-oriented. But you wouldn't be able to get anything done if it wasn't for having these non-conscious processes programmed into your daily repertoire of behaviours. From preparing yourself in the morning and driving to work, to most activities throughout the day, your brain relies on fast and efficient automatic behaviours to minimise the effort of having to consciously weigh-up every decision that it is encountered on a repetitive basis.

Habits are initiated by cues in our environments - we encounter the cue; we initiate a pre-programmed set of behaviours. Like when you come to a part of the road where a cop often hides in the bushes you will automatically lift our foot of the accelerator. These habits are learned through the repetition of a behaviour that was initially goal-oriented. On repetition of an effective behaviour, it becomes hardwired into our brains in the form of an automatic cue-response memory structure. This is an important role that a brand plays. We stroll through the aisle of a store, we see our usual brand of margarine and we place it in the trolley. No need to waste valuable mental resource on deciding between the numerous options available.

Now this is where it becomes interesting. Surely I would be able to make a good prediction of a person's future behaviour if I ask them about their attitudes and intentions? Well, when it comes to brands that are purchased on a habitual basis, the answer would be a resounding "no".

Stale popcorn

Take the popcorn example from above for instance. In a study exploring habitual behaviour*, researchers asked a group of theatregoers why they ate popcorn at a cinema. The vast majority cited taste as the reason. They then handed them a free box of popcorn upon entering the movie theatre. Unbeknown to the theatregoers, they were randomly assigned with either freshly popped popcorn or a stale week-old batch. After the viewing participants were asked to rate their liking of the popcorn as well as the strength of their habit of usually consuming popcorn at the cinema. The percentage of the popcorn they consumed was also measured.

Unsurprisingly, the participants who received the stale old popcorn rated it significantly less highly than those that received the fresh batch, and for those that reported a low habit of eating popcorn at the cinema, significantly less was eaten. But for those who reported high habitual consumption of popcorn at the cinema, the percentage of the stale popcorn consumed stayed the same as that for those who received the fresh popcorn, even though they had stated that taste was the primary reason for eating popcorn at the cinema. In other words, people with a strong habit of eating popcorn at the cinema ate the same amount, regardless of the taste.

Implication for marketing

How entrenched is your product in your consumer's habitual repertoire? There are three implications here. Firstly, more highly habituated products and brands are less sensitive to rational factors and are less likely to be consciously considered. Secondly, for more highly habituated products, responses to research on behavioural intentions are far less likely to predict actual behaviour. Lastly, for habitual purchase categories, if you want to change behaviour then it is important to carefully

consider the context as well as the conscious and unconscious cues that trigger purchase behaviour of your (or a dominant competitor's) product.

** Neal, David T., Wendy Wood, Philippa Lally, and Mengju Wu (2009). "Do Habits Depend on Goals? Perceived versus Actual Role of Goals in Habit Performance"*

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