

COLUMNS

Why behavior matters more than thought leadership

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Companies mapping out their application strategy often tell me their goal is to be thought leaders. But after digging deep into the psychological drivers of interactions with Web sites and mobile apps, it is clear that the conversation needs to be about behavior, not thoughts.

The goal should not be for consumers to think about your app, but rather to integrate it into their daily habits.

Let me explain.

I left the house the other morning, drove to the train station, hopped on the train, and only then could not for the life of me remember if I locked the front door.

After several frantic calls to my kind neighbors, I found out that I had, of course.

Like many of you, I leave the house at the same time every day, and do many of the same routines daily.

These routines are so frequently repeated that they have become unconscious. They have moved from the realm of controlled actions and become habit turning off lights, hanging the car keys on the key rack, feeding the cat, and checking Facebook on my smartphone.

You might be surprised to hear that last item.

Yes, using a mobile app is the same type of psychological habit as most day-to-day household actions.

Brains are happier when they are not thinking

To better understand how using a mobile app can become as habitual as locking the front door, let us take a look at what happens in our brains when we form habits.

Your brain loves routine. Routine allows you to follow the same route to work every day while your brain does other things, such as thinking about your presentation for tomorrow's board meeting.

Routine is valuable to your brain, because it frees up resources for more complicated actions. This explains why our brains reward us for routine, encouraging us to create more of them.

For example, after we flip on the light switch several times and the light turns on, our brain learns that this is what it should expect. The next time we flip the switch, we are rewarded with a small burst of dopamine.

After several similar loops, a new association is created. This behavioral pattern becomes literally etched into our neural pathways, and a new habit is formed.

Since our brains reward repetitive behavior with consistent outcomes, consumers form lots of habits.

In fact, a study by Duke University found that habits, rather than conscious decision-making, shape some 45 percent of the choices we make every day.

And there is one thing that brains love even more than routine: positive surprises.

Positive surprises deliver bursts of dopamine that are three to four times larger than those produced by habit-based rewards.

Your team won the big game? Jackpot at the slot machine? Dopamine burst. That post you worked so hard to compose got 500 likes? Woo-hoo, Dopamine Big Gulp.

When it comes to apps, we need to steer away from abstract goals such as thought leadership and start thinking in terms of clearly defined actions.

The conversation about your app needs to be about behavior. What is it that you want your customers to do? Do you want them to check in with friends on your app? Open it twice a day and take a specific action? Share content? Click? Read?

Our brains can only turn behavioral actions into routines.

The simpler the action, the quicker your users can establish habits.

Thus, the more clearly we can define the specific behavior that we are trying to initiate, the faster we can move on to the real questions that app creators should be asking themselves every day: How exactly can we trigger this desired behavior, and how exactly can we transform it from a controlled, conscious action into a subconscious habit?

Triggering habit-forming behavior

Stanford University researcher BJ Fogg posited that you need three things for human behavior to occur: motivation, ability and a trigger. Triggers are divided into two types: internal and external.

External triggers provide us with guidance as to what needs to be done next, such as the Like button on Facebook or the play button on an embedded video. These are crucial to keep users working smoothly on your app, and should be thoroughly considered in user interface design.

However, to truly connect your app with user needs, and create the associations that lead to habits, we need to intimately understand their internal triggers.

Internal triggers are the inner motivations and needs that impel us to use an external trigger.

In the context of apps, internal triggers are what drive us to use, and come back to, our favorite apps.

We use Waze to establish a feeling of control in an uncertain environment traffic or a new place.

We turn to Facebook when we feel lonely or the need to connect with people.

We play Candy Crush when we feel bored.

Each time we act upon these internal triggers, we receive the expected dopamine reward, and the behavior is reinforced.

What is more, in all of the above apps and many others, we receive the bonus of a pleasant surprise.

Since we do not know when the reward is going to come, we end up in constant waiting-mode.

We anticipate the email, the WhatsApp message or any of the daily small surprises that result in the dopamine burst that strengthens the habit loop even further.

With Facebook, 1,000 likes will do the trick.

With Candy Crush, getting through a really tough stage.

Each of these apps has effectively harnessed the ongoing rewards and random surprises that act as internal triggers associated with habit formation.

YES, CHECKING FACEBOOK and locking the door as you leave the house are the exact same type of habit. And, as we have learned, 45 percent nearly half of everyday actions are the product of habit.

Your challenge as an app creator is to get your solution into that 45 percent .

How? Start by identifying one or two simple patterns of behavior connected to your app, and designing cues and rewards around them.

If the behavior patterns you choose are easy enough, and the rewards are on-target, this will motivate repetitions. These behavioral repetitions trigger the creation of new associations, which coalesce into habits.

So, while thought leadership is a lofty marketing goal remember that thought is actually the last thing with which you want your users to engage.

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