

Episode 72 - Behavioral Science for Agencies: Media Planning

MichaelAaron Flicker: [00:00:00] Welcome back to Behavioral Science for Brands, a podcast where we bridge academics and practical marketing. Every week, Richard and I sit down to go deep behind the science of some of America's most successful brands. I'm Michael Aaron Flicker.

Richard Shotton: And I'm Richard Shotton.

MichaelAaron Flicker: And today we're starting a new mini series on what we are calling Behavioral Science for agencies.

Today we're gonna focus on media planning. Let's get into it.

So Richard, when you and I were thinking about what we wanted to cover next on the podcast, we were brainstorming different ideas and hearing so much feedback from our listeners and reading all the comments we have on all of our social channels.

We thought, what if we created two separate sets of miniseries, one mini series, all dedicated to marketing firms, advertising agencies, and how they can implement behavioral science for their brands. Then also we'll [00:01:00] do a series called Behavioral Science for Marketers, where we'll go through a number of topics just for brand managers.

And we thought that everybody would have interest in both sides, but if we got a little more specific into the practitioners of marketing, those that are working on these topics, it would just add a lot of value. So on the behavioral science for agencies. Set of work we're going to do one on media planning, one on creative, one on strategy, and one on the art of pitching.

Brand marketers listen 'cause it would be interesting and exciting for both sides. And then on the marketing side, we thought we might do on the brand marketer side, we thought we might do the four P's of marketing and we'll break down that and see and, and, and see what behavioral science powers or comes to mind on the most important parts there.

And so that's how we thought we [00:02:00] might go down the road in these miniseries. And while you and I love to be podcast hosts, we also are speaking

from this with a little bit of experience. Maybe you could spend a minute or two talk a little bit about your background and and why we, we felt comfortable starting with media planning, for example.

Richard Shotton: Yeah. Media planning is very much my background. So before I specialized in behavioral science, I worked at, public agencies and denser agencies as a media planner. So brands like Coca-Cola and Lexus, and I think this is a really interesting area to apply behavioral science. Now, often we talk about applying behavioral science to.

Creative and strategy. There were so many really simple applications as a media planner and a media buyer. So I'm excited about this episode.

MichaelAaronFlicker: And so from my side, Richard, I started XenoPsi which we now call XenoPsi Ventures. When I was a freshman in high school, we did digital marketing, digital advertising before we [00:03:00] started doing full service work and started creating our own brands.

But when we were a digital advertising and strategy agency. In the early 2010s. I first got introduced to behavioral science when we were working with AstraZeneca, a UK based pharmaceutical company here in the us, and we were working on how to help people understand why it's so important to take their medicine and how to keep them coming back to using their medication on a regular basis.

Behavioral science was really critical to that, and then we've now imbued it into all the things we do. So Richard has worked at ad agencies using behavioral science for media planning. I've owned ad agencies and now started my own brands. And I use behavioral science in the creation of the brands that we create and in the agencies that I own.

So from both angles, Richard and I have a lot to say about this, and we thought, why not make a, make it a podcast today.

Okay. So Richard, as we think about [00:04:00] how to set this up, we were thinking about. You know, as we like to do, what are some of the major behavioral science biases that media planners could think about harnessing when they work on their media plans?

Richard Shotton: Yeah, maybe the biggest theme, I think we'll start with a theme, is this idea of the, the fundamental attribution era. So it's a really longstanding idea from behavioral science. First experiment goes back to 1973.

And the work of two brilliant psychologists, Baxton and Darling, and they were very much interested in a common misunderstanding amongst people.

They argued that when we are thinking about the behavior of other people, we are too quick to attribute behavior to people's personality and too slow to attribute that behavior back to the context and the situation. So their most famous study was done with a group of [00:05:00] trainee priests. They recruit this group of priests.

They ask them a battery of questions about why they're joining the priesthood, and they're trying to get to an understanding of whether it's for an altruistic reason to help others or for their own salvation. And then once they've asked those questions, they get the priests to meet them on the campus, and they give them a brief.

They say, we want you to go to a nearby church and deliver a sermon on the Good Samaritan table parable. As the priests are heading off towards the church, that's when the experiment starts and the psychologists either say to the priests, oh my gosh, you are running late. You should have been there five minutes ago.

Or, they don't need you at the church for half an hour, but you might as well head down there now and they'll meet you in the, in the reception. So they're either putting the priest into a rush or they're relaxing the priests then follow a map to get to the church. And on the way through the prince and cloisters, [00:06:00] they pass a older gentleman who is slumped against a wall looking like they have breathing difficulties.

Now actually that's a colleague, a confederate of the psychologist, but the train priests don't know that. So they see this person with breathing difficulties. The psychologists are interested in who stops and who doesn't stop, and then they can cut that data by personality and by whether or not they're in a rush.

Key. Finding personality attributes make no difference to stopping rates, but whether people are in a rush or not makes a massive difference.

Michael Aaron Flicker: And personality attributes, just so everybody can follow along, is whether they said that they were becoming a priest. Altruistic reasons or for their own salvation reasons.

Richard Shotton: Exactly. So there's this claim about altruism.

MichaelAaronFlicker: Okay, got it.

Richard Shotton: So that doesn't make a difference. What does make a difference is if they're in a rush or not. 10% of people who are rushing stop, 63% of people who have plenty of time, [00:07:00] they stop and help. So you've got this massive sixfold difference in the stopping rates due to the situation.

People were in, the context, they were the mood. They were. That's the first half the study. The second half of study is why it's called the fundamental attribution error. The psychologists now go out, recruit a completely fresh group of people. They explain the whole setup of the experiment, but they ask participants pre to predict the stopping rate, see an exact opposite.

And now these new participants think that it'll be personality that determines whether people stop or help, whether they're out risk or not. They think the situation will make no difference at all, surely in a matter as important as helping a sick person, whether you're in a rush or not for a priest, should not matter.

So the psychologists call this the fundamental attribution error, and it is one of the first experiments that showed that we have this tendency to think about [00:08:00] explaining situations by who someone is, rather in what state they're in. Definitely relates to marketing. You know, it's very easy to see these studies about priests and things and think this is interesting, but it's miles away from my world as a media planner actually, that it translates into marketing very closely.

Think about the briefs that clients send out. They always, always, always say who the target audience is. I very rarely say what the target context should be, bu. You as a media planner should give us an and as a brand. In fact, you should give us much time, attention, and money towards thinking about what the right target context is and, and stop thinking solely about what the right target audit is.

MichaelAaronFlicker: So let me tease this out as we talk about this concept and, and let's break it down into a few moments into a few ideas. So when we talk about context, [00:09:00] one thing we mean is. The time of day that they we're hitting them, the content that they're seeing when you deliver it. Like, let's talk about what do we mean by context so everybody can really understand it.

Richard Shotton: So, I think if you target a target audience, you're targeting, you know, men, women, 16, 30, fours, whatever. It's. If you're target a cont

context, it could be someone is in a good mood, someone's in a got plenty of time. Someone is approaching their, their birthday. It, it's these areas that are, are fleeting and changeable, vary according to the when and where you are rather than these eternal characteristics of the, the personality.

MichaelAaronFlicker: And so let's get real specific for media planners. Is that done through digital targeting? Is that done through the types of mediums you choose? If you, if we've convinced folks that, well, [00:10:00] okay, they're much more susceptible if we get the right context. As a media planner, how do I put that into action?

Richard Shotton: So, I think this study is really about a change of prioritization for ads and advertisers. It's about giving this greater emphasis of reaching people at the right context, less emphasis on the target audience, so target context over target audience that that's the first point. So it's around where you place your activity, where you put your priorities.

Once people agree with that. The second question I think we will drive out is, well, okay. All very well and good to know. Context is important, but work context matter. Then I think you have to turn to other studies that start to identify some of these moments. So for example, there's a whole raft of work about the importance of reaching people in a good mood.

The first study I ever came across was a 2007 study by Fred Bronner. So he's at the University of [00:11:00] Amsterdam. Lovely, simple experiment. Gets 1,287 participants, they all flick through a newspaper for about 15 minutes. After that time has elapsed, he takes the newspaper away and he asks people to recall as many ads as they can.

He then asks people what mood, their, a number of different scales. One is from very stressed to very relaxed. The other is from very happy to very unhappy. He cuts the recall data by people's mood and he sees a very clear pattern if people are in a negative mood, so they are stressed or they're unhappy.

They recall about thirty four, thirty 5% of the ads if they are in a good mood, happy or relaxed. That goes up by virtually exactly 50%, so gonna 52, 54% of ads being recorded. There is a.

It's actually [00:12:00] noticeability or at release memory recall. Yeah, recall. And that could be 'cause they notice them more or 'cause they then convert that noticing to, to memory better. But it's an order I think far more advertisers should, should, should take note.

MichaelAaronFlicker: And so the takeaway for media planners of this part of our discussion is that the mood that we, that when our advertising is met by the audience, greatly changes the chance that it will A, be noticed or B, be recall. A a.

Richard Shotton: Absolutely. And the great, the great deal with this is it's not just those two metrics. I think there's a bit of an argument here of if someone is unhappy or stressed, what tends to seem to happen is they become very task driven.

They do not notice tangent smu like, like an adv. So you've narrowing of. That they're, their, their view, their their openness. So the first thing reaching people, a good mood [00:13:00] does is boost noticeability and recall. But of course, those aren't the only attributes that advertisers are interested in. So when I first read about BRO'S study, I thought, well, why don't we rerun this but test other metrics.

So I recruit an even large sample. Two people showed them a series of. Automotive ads and ask them how much they like the ads and then cut that data by mood. And not only did it reiterate bro's point that there was a positivity to reaching people in those good mood moments. It was an even stronger swing.

So liking went from 37% of people unhappy to 21% of ads were like when people are in a good mood. So you've got this 62% swing in likability. Not just likability as well. I then did a follow-up study with a median in [00:14:00] the, in the, in the uk, so Ben Saxon News UK and Chris Davis at Dentsu. And we show people a series of promotional ads and then we asked them to rate how good value the ads were.

And then we got that data by mood. And what we saw on average was that people were in a bad mood. 60% of them rated the promotional offers as good or great value when they were in a great mood, that went up to 76%. So in terms of price sensitivity also got this positive improvement. You know, that's a 26% improvement in the rating of exactly the same promotional offer almost seems like people's response to an offer is often intuitive and emotional.

What does that make me feel like? Some of that feeling doesn't just come from the offer itself. It's what you are already feeling. So if you're in a mood, you're much more likely to feel positive when you see, when you, when you see it, when [00:15:00] you see an ad. So the point here is whether it's noticeability recall, likability, or price perception, there is a massive benefit to reaching people at those positive moments,

MichaelAaronFlicker: maybe as a future point of interest.

The next question in my mind is intent to purchase or actual purchase doesn't go up. I mean, I think that would be the end of the analysis. That would be very interesting to see if doesn't only increase marketing metrics, but would it increase business metrics?

Richard Shotton: Yeah, I mean, I think there is an argument, well, if you haven't noticed the had.

It can't, you don't like the far less like your farm, there's a lower propensity to engage with it and believe it. And then I suppose price sensitivity. You know, people think so's a better deal. All of these things, I think you're absolutely right, should lead through to hard business metric. I think it would be super interesting to stop testing that on a, on an e-commerce site site, potentially.

MichaelAaronFlicker: [00:16:00] Excellent. So I'm thinking about our media planners and our brand managers that are listening to this. Episode and they're saying, okay, lots of interesting que lots of interesting points. Does it mean that we wanna advertise during a live sporting event? When your team wins, they're more likely to be in a good mood and therefore more likely to recall your ad.

Is that the practical implication of what we're saying here?

Richard Shotton: Absolutely. So that would be one example. So I think there are lots of ways you can reach people in a positive moment. So there's a giant time diary survey called IPA Touchpoint in the uk and they show some quite predictable patterns in mood.

So people are more likely it's been a good mood when they're in the evenings and the weekends, then during the day and during the evening. So you, you could use that as a.

MichaelAaronFlicker: So time, time bounding, knowing when people are generally in better moods. That's great.

Richard Shotton: Could be activity targeting, I dunno what [00:17:00] the New York subways like Russia, but it's pretty bloody unpleasant in London, so that would not be a place to get people in a good mood, maybe around in a, in, in a cinema, for example.

So it could be around reaching people based on their activity,

MichaelAaronFlicker: like going to the beach or at at a park?

Richard Shotton: Exactly. Or then, you know, I think getting closer to certainty of Poit mood would be changing the the content strategy that you are trying to run your ads around. You know, if you are running YouTube ads, well prioritize, upbeat, funny content.

Maybe there's a strand that you can go after or you can find a platform that's much more likely to be human-based. You know, these are all ways that I think you could take. These academic studies and actually change your, your targeting strategy.

MichaelAaronFlicker: So the brief comes in, it's very clear on the who we are targeting and what we're advocating is that using context.

[00:18:00] Rather than the, rather than the target audience alone, we can increase the likelihood that the ad is noticed and remembered simply by putting, making sure we are delivering the ad to when people are more likely in a good mood.

Richard Shotton: Yeah. Yeah. The, the argument here would be we have a mistaken assumption Marty. people of similar demographics, behave in similar ways. Now, denying that's true that there's an element of truth there, but I think we overestimate consistency of approach. We often think, oh, well, you know, two 40-year-old men are gonna be roughly similar. Actually, what this argues, the fundamental attribution error is two people who might be different genders, different ages, different income groups.

If they are both really stressed, they will have more in common with that other stress person in how they behave. Billion people who share some demographic action. So it's this idea that actually we are so [00:19:00] fixated on one element of targeting. We are underrepresenting what is a very powerful targeting tool around the mind, state and context.

And then the second part, which comes from the broader work and in some way follow up, is one of those moments, pretty much whatever brief you're working on, which could be worth considering, is reaching people when they are happy, reaching people when they are. Relax because of these increases in like, to notice, remember, like, and, and being willing to just spend their money.

MichaelAaronFlicker: You know, what comes to mind for me is for so long, whether you called it Facebook arbitrage or Google ad hacking, there was a lot

of time and energy that we spent with our e-commerce businesses saying. How can we not just target all men, 20 to 40, all women 35 plus, but how can we do that and then get some extra, [00:20:00] extra targeting that will really unlock it today in 2025?

These programmatic platforms want the AI algorithms to do it for you. So there's less arbitrage opportunities on programmatic platforms today than we used to have. But this. Behavioral science insight can be really helpful in, in linear tv, buying in, in radio, potentially in out of home, in your non programmatic placements because you have the chance to think, well, where can we find people that might be in a better mood?

And. If everything else is the same, why not buy with those with, with that lens, it narrows you, it helps give you a decision filter when you might not otherwise have one. You know, when, when the brief may not otherwise give you more direction than that.

Richard Shotton: Yeah. Yeah. A, a, a, absolutely. And, and the grief is the, there are so many of these moments [00:21:00] that behavioral scientists have identified and I think an awful lot of.

You wouldn't think of targeting them unless you'd heard about the experiments. So there's, there's another study, and this is one of my favorites. There is a brilliant NYU psychologist called Adam Alter. He wrote Drunk Tank Pink, a few other great books. And back in 2014 he worked with Hal Hirschfield and he comes up with this idea of nine ends.

Nine ends is someone whose age ends in nine. 29, 39, 49, so on and so forth. Alter's argument is this group of people disproportionately likely to make big changes to their, to their lives. Now, when I first read about that, I thought, this is just rubbish. Why would anyone whose age ends in nine be more open to change?

But you read Alter's argument and it's brilliant. And he says, well, it's nothing, nothing [00:22:00] magic about an ending in nine. It's the fact that our culture arbitrarily gives great importance to the turn of a decade. So indisputably becoming 40 is a much bigger deal than becoming 39. No one would disagree. An order says, as we approach these landmark moments, because they've been given this importance, we at least start reflecting on our our lives.

We step off autopilot and we consider if we should change our behavior, and it's this very fact of stepping off autopilot. That means that people are persuadable.

That's his argument. Like a great behavioral scientist. He doesn't just end there. A great logical argument isn't enough. He then showed remarkable creativity and finds three different data sets to test his idea.

First time marathon runners, they're 48% more likely be nine enders than other ages. Wow. The then, well, yeah, unfortunately, that's the positive one. They get a bit more depressing after that. He then looks at an affairs website called Ashley Madison, [00:23:00] cheery slogan, life is short, have an affair. There are 8 million male users of this website and they're 18% more likely to join when their age ends in nine and then really depressingly.

He looks at American suicide data and sees a small but statistically significant uplift in suicides when people's age agents in nine. So each of these three different data sets corroborates his finding has people approach a landmark moment much more likely. To start thinking about which way their life's going.

Many people think it's not going brilliantly, so they make these big radical changes. So if you are ever, let's say, trying to sell a non-alcoholic beer and you want to get people to try it, they've never tried non-alcoholic beer before. Target nine enders, if you want, maybe to get people to go on a world cruise where they can seek new countries and do something completely different.

Target nine enders. If you wanna get people to quit smoking start jogging for the first time. Any major change, this is an amazing audience that you can target. And I would suggest if you [00:24:00] hadn't read Animal's Work, who, who would think? Of, of targeting that in their brief.

MichaelAaronFlicker: So we will, in the show notes, drop the Adam Al Alter's book.

Richard and I make no commission by you reading books we recommend. We're just sharing good ideas. So we'll drop the link to his book and his bio so that we can make sure everybody gets a chance to read it. It also helps as. Either a media planner looking at a big, broad brief, or as a brand manager saying, we're targeting everybody 25 plus.

To say, well, if we don't have unlimited budget, what if we start it by testing with our 29, 39, 40 9-year-old as a starting spot and then we can always grow from there. But it gives you a, a step in to narrowing your target without breaking your targets, without breaking the brand's brief.

Richard Shotton: Absolutely. So it could be, you know, the media planner [00:25:00] goes on Facebook and identifies from their data, people whose agents in 29, they use that as a target.

It could be you look at your own database and identify people who are 29 and think to yourself, well wait a minute. If they're likely to make a big change during this year, I should be overservicing them to make sure they don't flee to a competitor. Great point. Maybe you want to sample your, you know, your Guinness and you've launched Guinness Era Zero.

Sampling a product, sending out products is hugely expensive, but maybe if you just target 10% with this sampling of your new product that. It's a much more effective way of getting the most out of your budget there. There's lots and lots of practical things people do once they know about maintenance.

MichaelAaronFlicker: Yeah. And, and as a media planner, so often we're looking to help. Guide the client of where to make their budget bets. Where's the best place to take the money that we have dedicated to the campaign and get the best outcomes? So you don't have to use your [00:26:00] entire media budget in this way, but if you segment a portion of the money and you test it against the, the, the, the rest of the spend, it just gives you that little bit more data, that little bit more insight.

That maybe then will help inform the next brief or the next action that you do. Absolutely. Absolutely. But Richard, there's one exception to the nine ender rule, and please, so let everybody know that it's all nines except for

Richard Shotton: 19.

MichaelAaronFlicker: 19?

Richard Shotton: Yeah. So, and this might be one where there's a cultural impact, so. In America and you know, being America, you could do this.

I feel on, on kind of dodgy ground here, but my belief is turning 21 is a big deal turning 19, isn't it? Would that, would that be fair? Yeah, that is correct. In Britain in 19 isn't a big deal. Turning 18 is a, is a massive deal. So. Alter's point is, look, this is nothing about nine [00:27:00] per se. It's if the culture gives that turn of a decade a, a big importance.

So if 20 isn't a big deal, well you wouldn't expect this effect amongst 19 year olds. So yeah, he absolutely finds that.

MichaelAaronFlicker: For those of our listeners who may not know what we're referring to. In America, turning 21 signals the ability to buy alcohol legally. So the reason Richard said that it may have a cultural impact is obviously in countries where the drinking age is 18, like in the UK or in countries where alcohol consumption is not the center of it, like many Muslim countries across the globe, then it has less of a moment to turn 21.

But in American culture generally. Going from 19 to 20 is seen as no, no big deal. Turning 21 is the big moment of cultural significance. So to, to Richard's point, to Alter's point, it's whatever the [00:28:00] culture has put a massive significance on becoming a decade, thirties, becoming 30, becoming 40, becoming 50, or becoming 21 in this instance.

Richard Shotton: Yeah, absolutely, absolutely.

MichaelAaronFlicker: So we've talked about. Context, we've talked about budget. Anything else that we can wanna add, Richard, before we wrap up today's episode and and, and come to a conclusion?

Richard Shotton: I, I think the only thing to say would be if you are a media planner and the Brona study or the outer study has, has your interest, there is so much more out there.

The amazing thing is if you use the studies when you are presenting to clients. Firstly got this amazing set of experiments that can stimulate ideas that are gonna work. And then secondly, it makes your job easier if you aren't presenting to a client. And you all argue everything from authority in your experience.

You spend half your time going back [00:29:00] and forth debating whether what you've suggested is the right seat. But if you bring these neutral peer reviewed studies to your presentation with a client, it really switches the question from, you know, should we focus on target context? So which target context should we reach?

It changes the question from should we reach people in a good mood to, how do we reach in a good mood? I think it makes your life as an advisor easier because you've got this neutral evidence to take with you. So there's, yeah. Two, two big benefits to behavioral science

MichaelAaronFlicker: and the one build I'll give that we have used a lot in the past if it's helpful to those that are trying to bring behavioral science into their media planning is these studies were not done.

For the benefit of media planners, these studies were academically designed and peer reviewed to prove how humans act, period. So now you're discussing with your client, this is a [00:30:00] insight into human behavior. Now what are we gonna do as media planners about it? It changes the discussion over whether or not this media product or this media technique is.

Is true that this is a, an insight about human behavior that we can then exploit or use to our benefit.

Richard Shotton: I, I, I think you're so right there that this isn't a problem with Google or WP, but if you are Google or if you're WPP and you produce research about what media's effective, there's gotta be a bit of.

Doubt in the client's mind thinking, well, you have, that's vested interest in me wanting to put my money to search or wanting me to spend a larger media budget. How much can I trust that recommendation? But you're right, these studies were not done with anyone with skin in the game. They were done by academics who won't benefit an iota if you spend more on search or less in search, bigger media budget, less smaller media budget.

So I think, yeah, you're right, that new Tri gives them, it gives them credibility.

MichaelAaronFlicker: Lovely.

[00:31:00] Okay, Richard, so let's wrap up. Big takeaways from today's conversation.

Richard Shotton: Three big things.

I think the first is we as an industry are fixated on type audiences. That's inherent. Every brief that leaves a client's office.

The argument from the fundamental attribution is that we overestimate the importance of that target audience. We underestimate the importance of thinking what can text people are in. So the mantra there would be greater focus and tight context, not just target audiences. The second big point was, well, once you've made that decision to focus on these contexts, which ones are the important ones?

And the first area we discussed with Mo work from Broner and the. Follow up work I've done suggests that if you reach people when they're relaxed, if you reach them, when they are feeling upbeat, they're more likely to notice your ads, remember your ads, like your ads, and spend some cash. So target those moments.

And then the final [00:32:00] set of Experie talked about was a brilliant idea from Adam Alta and how Hirschfeld about nine enders. If you ever have a brief where you need people to change their behavior radically. Target people lose HNS in, in nine, and they're much more likely to be open to your please.

MichaelAaronFlicker: And there you have it folks, if today's episode sparked a new idea for you, do us a favor, hit the follow button, leave us a review or share this with someone who loves marketing just as much as we all do. And if you have a favorite behavioral science principle or an example of some work that you see in the world, let us know and we can feature in an upcoming episode.

Until next time. I'm Michael Aaron Flicker.

Richard Shotton: And I'm Richard Shockton.

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