

Episode 71: How Five Guys uses the illusion of effort to make their burgers taste even better

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

RS: And I'm Richard Shotton.

MAF: And today we're diving deep on the behavioral science Powering Five Guys, one of America's fastest growing, most successful restaurant chains.

Let's get into it. So Richard Five Guys is a hamburger and fries restaurant. I noticed in our prep you all on the other side of the pond, don't call it hamburger and fries, you call it.

RS: Oh, you say hamburger fries. I mean we also say chips as much, but I think especially when it comes to like a McDonald's or a five Guys, you don't have to talk about fries.

So

MAF: you would say fries? Yeah. Yeah. Got it. So a burger and fries restaurant. Five guys is really an [00:01:00] impressive business accomplishment. Uh, to give you a sense of the scale of this, uh, restaurant, 1700 locations globally doing \$2.3 billion a year in sales by comparison. In an out burger, a beloved burger chain here in the US 378 locations or internationally, well-known Johnny Rockets 350 if that wasn't enough, 1700 locations, five guys currently operating.

They have another 1500 underdevelopment, so they will easily cross 3000 in the next few years. Um. So, as we said in the opening in the last 30 years, five guys has really become one of the fastest growing successful restaurant chains, uh, in the us. But we always like to talk a little bit about the history and the start.

Uh, the founders in [00:02:00] 1986, husband and wife combo, Jerry and Janie Murrell. They create the concept of five guys with their four sons, Jerry and the

four boys. And as the story goes, eventually they have a fifth son. Those now are the five guys that run this burger chain. Uh, and uh, it's a story of one store.

That does one thing incredibly well, that then grows and franchises early, and, uh, really, uh, is a great business success. And as I was doing research for the episode, just one fun fact, like Chipotle five guys has no freezers, uh, in any location, uh, to prove the freshness of the quality of their ingredients.

Everything is stored only in refrigerators or uh, at room temperature. Uh, really, again, talking about the quality and ingredients and the freshness of the [00:03:00] food, but as you and I started to look at the behavioral science that we can learn from because of five guys, you and I did not focus on their advertising and marketing.

We focused on the experience that you have in the restaurant. If you've never walked into a five guys, uh, you might be able to picture their red and white checkered uh, uh, facade. You know, everything is a no frills, uh, experience, but some really unique things are happening when you walk in. First off, they advertise that there is unlimited free refills of their fountain sodas.

Another perk is that. All 15 of their burger toppings all are free of charge. And there's bins of peanuts un uh, uns shelled peanuts that while you wait for your burger to be [00:04:00] made, you can crack and eat as you go. But there's one thing that's really interesting that they do, which is that they train all of their staff to do what they call an extra topper.

It's an extra topping of fries. When you get a ba your bag, you open the bag of five guys. You will always find extra fries strewn at the bottom of the bag. This is actually a trained on and measured at five guys to make sure that every bag has a large portion of fries with an extra scoop or topper within the bottom of the bag.

It's designed to give the impression of a generous serving, and this reminded you and I of the 11 Madison Park episode, episode 56, where there's a surprise and delight as part of the experience. So [00:05:00] a lot going on here designed to make a great experience, and especially this training, to make sure there's extra fries in every order.

What's going on here, Richard?

RS: Yeah, so the, the fries and the extra part is fascinating 'cause I think that taps into an idea called the peak end rule. So this is the idea that rather than

doing everything quite well, you try and find one opportunity in the customer experience to a standout moment that's doing the A, that's creating a peak moment.

And then ideally you put that at the end of the experience. So you know, as they're pulling together your fries and burgers, the last thing they should do. Should be to, to chuck that extra scuba rising. Now, we've talked about this a couple of times. We talked about it in the Disney Parks episode. We talked about an 11 Madison Park episode, but the evidence that we gave has sometimes been criticized.

So I took us through last time, a study from [00:06:00] early nineties by Daniel Carne Andrad, and what they showed is memory. Of the pain level of a colonoscopy was not the average level of pain from that operation. It was how people felt at the very end of the operation and the single peak moment. So the single worst moment, those two moments peak in them, disproportional importance.

Now a few people have said, okay, well that's amazing, and if I was running a surgery, it would be a super useful experiment. But colonoscopies and marking are pretty. Far away from each other. So some people have been a little bit skeptical about the evidence you've provided in the past, but Kahneman's study was just the first study into the P and rule.

Lots of other people have looked at it in more commercial settings. So one of my favorite studies in this area comes from Amy Doe, who's at Dartmouth, and in 2008, [00:07:00] she tests peak enl. She sets up a raffle. And she tells a hundred people who take part that they're for won and she gives them a A, A-A-D-V-D that they can watch showing it's a slightly DVD, um, and half the people are given a great DVD or they pick from a list of great DVDs, half picked from a list of mediocre DVDs.

Once they've watched the film, she can then contacts them, say, oh, you've got, you've got a, a bonus, uh, DVD you can have as well. And this time, if people have previously picked from the great list, they now pick from the mediocre list. If people have previously picked from the mediocre list, they now pick from the great list.

So what she's now doing is people have got the same experience, one great DVD and one media DVD. All that's changing is. [00:08:00] Some great thing first. Some people get the mediocre thing first and what she finds is the, the ratings of their happiness from taking part in the, in the raffle vary significantly.

So people who end with the high quality DVD, they rate their experience 16% better and those who end with the mediocre DVD, that is a far more, I think, commercial setting about films and brands and, and.

That shows that yes, the peak end rule works in medical settings, but finishing on a high is just as important in the, in these kind of more, um, business-like settings.

MAF: What, strike that. That's so helpful to hear you walk through and what strikes me about our case study here with Five Guys is. It can be very enjoyable to have peanuts while you wait.

And if you happen to dine in, it could be really nice to have extra [00:09:00] Coca-Cola, but everyone, 100% of the people that get the bag of food will open and have the peak end the end be really satisfying that there's extra fries at the bottom of the bag. So it's, it's, it's making sure whether you dine in or dine out.

Whether you, whether you are in a rush or not. Every product delivery has the peak end rule built into it. Much like what, uh, Doug is explaining in the DVD example, it's a, it's a really nice application of what Doug is studied here.

RS: Yeah. And it's, uh, I think it's one that shows again, like in the 11 Madison Park, uh, episode that these peak moments don't have to be expensive necessarily.

This is an. About giving away, you know, on level 10 pounds worth of value. It is an extra scoop of fries. But it's the difference between what people expect and what they get. That's enough to make it a peak moment. [00:10:00]

MAF: It's a great point because, uh, if you look at, uh, some of the interviews with, uh, the founder of, uh, of Five Guys, Jerry Murrell.

He says that the cost of those extra fries are already baked into the cost of the order. So in this instance, they're only giving away the perception of something extra. Really? You've already paid for that extra scoop of fries in your meal anyway. Yeah. Yeah. So what other biases, uh, would Five Guys be harnessing here?

The,

RS: the other, uh, bias, I think they're really good at harnessing is the fact that the way that the restaurant is laid out is you can always see into the kitchen.

That's one of the things they've, they've set up, and that I think, taps into an idea called the illusion of effort. So this is the argument that exactly the same product, like Burger will be rated [00:11:00] differently dependent.

On whether people think lots of effort has gone into its creation or a minimal amount of effort. So one study in the area, um, comes from Kruger, who's at the University of Illinois 2004 study. He recruits 138 people and he gets them to read poem. That's called Order. Half the people are told that that poem took four hours to write.

Half the people are told it took 18 hours to write. Remember, everyone just sees exactly the same poem, but the people who think it was knocked out quickly, they rate it at 5.8 on from an 11 point scale, whereas those who think a bit more effort went into it, they rate it at 6.4 on the 11 point scale, so the same artistic product is rated 10% higher.

If people told this story of effort going into. Just judge products on their inherent [00:12:00] qualities, uh, you know, artistic merit in the case of a poem past, in the case of a burger. A lot of what drives our perception is whether or not we think the chef or the poet put effort into that, into that product.

MAF: To me, this is a critical point, and it brings up, uh, episode 13 when we did it, when we talked about Dyson vacuums.

And one of their ad campaigns is how many tests they ran to get to the perfect vacuum. Another example of the illusion of effort. But this one that's, that's, that's almost proving in Dyson's case, the illusion of effort to how sophisticated the, the, the invention is. This illusion of effort is very, is much more relatable to me in most business cases, which is you can see the work going in and therefore the, uh, you can see why it should be worth more.

RS: Yes, and I'm very conscious, the hys and bergs are quite [00:13:00] different things again, but all these studies, the thing to focus on is the inherent or the core insight, not the peripheral detail. Because you see exactly the same factor happening in a, in a restaurant setting. Uh, Ryan Bowell is a researcher at Harvard and he has tested the impact being able to see the chefs at work, so gets 299 people, uh, to go to a restaurant, and some of them can see into the kitchens, others can't, and then he gets those people to rate quality of their meal.

And he finds if you can't see into the kitchen, the average rate is 4.6. You can, it's 5.5 again, exactly the same product is rated this time 22% higher if people see, can see the work going on. Now, I think that's fascinating because everyone

presumably in a restaurant knows that a chef has had something with your food, of course.

But by seeing into the, [00:14:00] into the kitchen, it's just made more salient and it's more front of mind. Subtle tweak. Allowing people, allowing diners to see you, the chefs at work, that will create greater appreciation for your product.

MAF: So that's really helpful to hear back in the Kruger study. Not just did they have a greater appreciation or uh, or sort of more value, they also believed there was willing to pay more for it.

There was an actual increase in the perception of value. To me, that's almost the, the thing that penetrates the business insight. It's nice that they have more appreciation. But it's much more important that they have an actual, uh, increase in the perception of value. Yeah, that, that's

RS: a, that's a very good point.

So, yeah, I forgot about that element. There was a, there was another question that, that Kruger asked where he said, imagine this poem is being sold to magazine. what you think a fair [00:15:00] price would be for it? And if people thought the poem was knocked out in four hours. Average, uh, estimate was \$50. If it was 18 hours, it was \$95.

So that is an almost doubling, I think it's a 90% improvement in, in value perception. So yes, we think the quality of the poem is better when we know effort got in, but we're also prepared a more as well. So yeah, these are commercially a, a applicable findings.

MAF: Richard, it strikes me that this illusion of effort.

Really can be applied to almost every industry in almost every setting because showing the effort that goes into something is, is often something that we try to erase from the experience. Fast food is about getting it done quickly, fast fashion is about moving quickly through trends, but actually this behavioral science bias would teach us a little bit The opposite.

RS: Yeah, yeah, [00:16:00] absolutely. There's, uh, I was speaking to someone who worked at a big. Pub chain in in Britain and they were saying they would get told off by management if they didn't take out the meals within five minutes. Actually, the delusion of effort said suggest actually the management are mistake in there.

If I'm in a pub and I've ordered a roast dinner, even if you can reheat in five minutes, I'm not sure that's the necessarily the best thing to do. Maybe feel like there's work and effort going on there. Maybe, you know, 10 minutes would be the ideal, uh, amount of. What's so interesting about behavioral science is it suggests that you should put a question mark at the end of this drive for, for speed and think, well, maybe we could boost our appreciation if we, on certain occasions, added a little time to the, to the process or we were transparent and let people see into the kitchen so they could, they could, they could see all those activities going on.

MAF: In your example of the pub, if not making it hike more time at [00:17:00] four minutes, having the waitress stop by and say, you know, we, we really pride ourself on moving fast here. We're just finished roasting the next fresh chicken and yours will be out. And a minute later it comes out. Gives that you, you're making the effort obvious.

You're making sure even if you decide to deliver fast, that you make the effort visible.

RS: Yeah, yeah, absolutely, absolutely. Lot, lots of, lots of different ways. The other one I really like is there's a fast food, I think the Japanese chain, they do a lot of sushi. Probably just in Britain at the moment. I think I, uh, called isu, not in America yet, that I'm aware of.

Yeah. Yeah. I think found a moic have been ex prep. But anyway, they have a problem. Loads of these stores are at train stations. And if you've got an audience at a train station, they do not wanna be waiting long for the food. So they will bring out food very, very quickly like the, the meso [00:18:00] soup. Uh, so they have this danger of, well, I'm serving people very quickly.

And because it's so quick, they might, they, they, the dyna might assume that it's poor quality. So what they often have is an aboard outside the shop that will emphasize not the slowness of the delivery of the food. The amount of effort that went into its, uh, creation, the experience of the, the meso. So there's something like one of the aboard says, we've heard that it takes 10,000 hours to learn a skill properly.

Well, our meso master, actually hero, has 744,264 uh, hours of experience in creating miso soup. So they're switching the attention from speed of delivery of food. To length of time to get to the state where you can, uh, create these amazing recipes.

MAF: So much creative opportunity. Once you understand the science behind it to say, how are we going to use this illusion of effort in a way that meets our business [00:19:00] needs?

We still have to put turn miso soup quickly. We still need to deliver roast chicken fast, but get the benefit of this behavioral science insight. So there was one more area of. Five guys that we wanted to narrow in on, and this is that Five guys has in the past tested other menu items. They've thought about doing, uh, chicken sandwiches and they got rid of it.

They've tried other food and they've, they've struck it and they are known as a burger and fry place. They have a hotdog on the menu, but that's about it. And so they're known for doing one thing really well. There's some behavioral science behind this as well.

RS: Yeah. The idea here around simplicity and focus is, is the key part.

So there's a series of experiments called the the gold dilution effect, which is people are suspicious if you [00:20:00] claim to be able to, a wide variety of of tasks. So the experiment I want to discuss was a 2007 study. Comes from two University of psychologists, university of Chicago psychologists, uh, Zang, and I yell at fish bank and they recruit a group of people and they tell half of the people that jogging is good for your heart health.

And they give some reasons about why goggles good for heart health. Next group of people, they give them exactly the same paragraph on Jogging's cardiovascular benefits. They also say jogging is brilliant for your bone density. Both groups are then asked about how much they believe jogging is great for heart, how health, and what you see is it's the first group who rate jogging benefits and heart health better by the [00:21:00] order of about 7%.

So argument from Z is.

That brands or behaviors can work for multiple varied reasons. Now there's a phrase, certainly in British, you know, uh uh, jack of all trades, more of none. We kind of assume that there's trade offs. If you're brilliant in one area, you're gonna be less good in another. So bring all this back to, um, five guys.

The argument here is if you specialize and do one thing, people will believe that product is better than if you offer really broad range of of services. Even if the un blind taste test conditions, the beef burger is just as good, whether you're just

beef burgers or also adding in chicken burgers, we don't just eat in those blowing conditions.

[00:22:00] Our preconceptions affect the actual taste. If we think you're offering too many services, we will rate your core service as worse.

MAF: It's fascinating, and we actually had iel at Fishbach on the show, episode 66 or thereabouts. Check, check it out. But really hearing this helps us think about how we can be more single-minded in our brand's focus, or if that's not an opportunity for your brand, how we can be very single-minded in our communications.

Like if we happen to have a wide range of products, even just focusing our communications one at a time so that we can make the case that that is, uh, that's our focus. I think even that might help.

RS: Yeah, a absolutely. But people need to recognize if you keep on in an ad telling people more and more reasons to believe there is a potential negative implication.

Now there's this phrase that extra reasons become averaging rather than [00:23:00] additive. So if, uh, in the case of, um, uh, this kind of jogging scenario, now heart health is an eight out of 10 power reason, and bone health is a four out of 10 power reason. Combining the two does not create an impact of 12. It creates an impact of, of, of six.

So we've got to recognize that there are costs to adding on additional reasons to. Knowing that knowing the experimental body of evidence should be really useful for marketers because if you are in a bureaucracy, lots of different moving parts, lots of different people, lots of different opinions, the easy thing to do is just say, well, ev let everyone add in their their favorite reach.

Yeah. What Zang of Fishback says, no, no, no. If you do that, recognize you are removing some of the persuasive power.

MAF: The other thing that comes to mind to me is when we had Les Burnett on the show, he talked about how important emotional branding is [00:24:00] and making an emotional connection with your consumer.

It comes to mind here because it's very hard to make an emotional connection with multiple things. It not only might it scientifically have an averaging not additive effect. Am I thinking about how it's helping with heart disease or am I

helping with bone density or is it a third thing? All of a sudden, my emotional connection that I get from seeing a jogger thinking about preventing heart disease gets interrupted when there's too many rational benefits or there's too many benefits.

Laid on top. So there I don't, I don't, I don't think I'm specifically talking about cognitive load, but just the sense that a simpler message, a more clean message, has the better chance to be more emotionally connective has lots of scientific benefits that that less bonnet talks about. And then here we can see through Zang and Phish back's work that it can also be [00:25:00] more believable if it's more singular in focus.

RS: Absolutely, and I think this is a strength of five guys that we are not post rationalizing. Um, there's a lovely story about founders of five guys going to Ocean City and visiting a really popular fry shop called Thrashers French fries, where not only did that shop sell nothing else other than fries, they only had one condiment.

Now it was french fries with side of vinegar. And supposedly the founders were so impressed with the quality of this. They believed that that simplicity and focus was something that they should emulate when they rolled out their own restaurant. So I, I think this is, uh, a case. Both of the desire isn't just something that's coming from a past post-rationalization.

It was there in the founder's mind. And secondly, it's a really nice story of. Having an openness to the experience of [00:26:00] others, you know, taking simplicity from, uh, Thrashers, maybe looking at other companies to get the peak en rule, maybe other companies did, to copy the, um, the open kitchens and we can learn from, from other brands, especially if we lay over layer over this, um, uh, set of experiments from behavioral sorts.

MAF: That last point, I just want to double underscore for everybody listening, which is. There's so much ability to learn from others. The question almost becomes, what do you take from others? How do I choose? Is it an open concept? Is it a open kitchen concept? Is it speed and delivery? Is it customer service training?

How do I know what to replicate? What were the things that drove the greatest outcomes for some of the best brands in the world? And. Our consistent argument for years you and I have had is let behavioral science let academics [00:27:00] guide you because you can have confidence in the findings and then choose the applications that most fit your business, need most fit your brand

need, but, but you can have more confidence in what you're choosing because there's peer reviewed academic studies behind them.

All right. As we come to a close, Richard, would you give us a little bit of a recap of our conversation today? Yep. So

RS: we've covered a few different areas here. I think there's three key points. The first is the peak end rule. The when people are remembering the experience you have had at your restaurant or your brand, they do not remember almost equally.

What really shapes their memory is how you close the experience and the single highlight of the, the time they've spent with you. So this is the idea of the peak end rule. Some moments matter more than others. We then talked about five [00:28:00] guys and the open kitchens, and that taps into this idea called the illusion of effort.

We do not judge the quality of a burger or, or how much we're prepared to pay just on its inherent qualities. It. We are also deeply influenced by the stories that go around it. And if a communicator or a brand draws attention to the amount of effort that went into creating that product, we will value it more highly.

Exactly the same thing will be valued more highly if we know looks of coming into it. And then finally, we talked about the gold dilution effect. The key believe that there are trade offs, that you as a brand cannot be all things to all people. So don't tell people that you do. Lots and lots of, oh, there's lots of amazing reasons to pick your brand.

Every additional reason. Weaken the belief in your core message. So be single-minded. Pick one thing to communicate, two things to communicate that you do brilliantly. Don't keep on adding [00:29:00] a long list of mediocre reasons to believe.

MAF: Thank you for the summary. So as we come to a close today, Richard, we're talking hamburger and fries.

What's the way? That you ha order your burger and fries? Is there toppings that you prefer? What's your favorite order? At a, at a five guys or, uh, any burger chain?

RS: I, I, I've not been to, I have been to five guys I think once or, or, or twice. But I'm probably more likely it's been a, a McDonald's and I would say keep it simple.

Don't, you know, get a plain burger and I absolutely love the, would you call them kins? We, we call them pickles. Oh, okay. The girl, well, I love the kins, so Yeah, or your, your pickles that, that's the highlight. Ideally, I'm going with someone who doesn't like pickles and I can have theirs as well.

MAF: For me, that would be, uh, a hamburger, not a [00:30:00] cheeseburger.

Yeah. Yeah. I'm my good one. Same for you. Lettuce, tomato, pickles, ketchup. A one sauce. That's a, that's a perfect burger. What, what, what? A one sauce. Oh, A one sauce is apparently American. Then it would be, um, known as a steak sauce, uh, uh, with, to, uh, I guess tomato and worre sauce in it. Uh, but it's you found in every steakhouse and in every supermarket in America.

I'll bring you a bottle the next time I come to London. Yeah. And there you have it everybody. If today's episode sparked a new idea for you, please do us a favor, follow us, leave a review, or just share this episode with someone who you think loves Marky as much as we all do. And if you have a favorite behavioral science principle or an example of work you see doing well in the market, let us know and we might be able to [00:31:00] feature it in an upcoming episode.

Until next time, I'm MichaelAaron Flicker. And I'm Richard Shorten.

Ad: Behavioral Science for Brands is brought to you by Method One, recognized as one of the fastest growing companies in America for the third year in a row. Featured on Inks, 5,000 list. Method One is a proudly independent, creative, and media agency grounded in behavioral science. They exist to make brands irresistible, helping people discover products, services, and experiences that bring moments of joy to their lives As behavior change experts Method one creates emotional connections that drive true brand value for their clients.

Focusing primarily with indulgence brands in the CPG space. Find out more@methodone.com.