Ep82 - How Heinz used precision and the pratfall effect to make its ketchup unforgettable

MichaelAaron Flicker: [00:00:00] Welcome back to Behavioral Science for Brands, a podcast where we bridge the gap between 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 MichaelAaron Flicker.

Richard Shotton: And I'm Richard Shotton.

MichaelAaron Flicker: And today we're diving deep into one of America's most beloved condiments.

We're talking about a company that has been at the dining room table in America for almost 150 years - heinz ketchup. It's literally the topping in America, Richard, that school children and adults alike grab for almost always. Let's get into it. Before we get into today's episode, Richard and I wanted to share something with you all that we've been working on for over two years.

Richard Shotton: Yes. On September the 30th, we are releasing our biggest collaboration yet, and it's called Hacking the Human Mind.

MichaelAaron Flicker: It's a book that [00:01:00] dives into 17 brands, just like we do here on the podcast, but goes into a lot more detail and we unpack over 30 behavioral science principles in the book.

Richard Shotton: We've designed it to be really practical, super easy to read with lots of ideas that you can apply at work.

Robert Cialdini has read one of the early copies, and he said he couldn't put it down.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Rory Sutherland was very generous, and he said, it's a book for the ages. You can pre-order it right now on Amazon by just typing in the title, Hacking the Human Mind, or after September 30th, wherever books are sold. So Richard, today we're diving into Heinz Ketchup, as we were saying in the opening.

It's one of America's favorite condiments and really. A fascinating study for today's podcast. Let me give a little bit of background, like we like to do, and then we'll jump into some of the behavioral science. So Heinz Ketchup, one of the most iconic [00:02:00] brands with over 150 years of history. It was founded in 1876, making it both older than the Eiffel Tower and the light bulb.

And for all that time, the base formula has not really changed. The recipe is largely tomatoes, vinegar, sugar, salt, and spices, and it does change depending on where it's sold. Today the company produces over 5 700 different products sold in almost every country in the world. But since we like beginnings in this podcast and we'd like to learn where things come from the story of Heinz starts with its founder Henry Heinz, when he's 25 years old, and he's living at home with his mother in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

That's where he creates his first product. He calls it a pure and superior graded horseradish using his mother's [00:03:00] recipe. And like we see so many times in our examination of other brands, whether they're great marketers or they just have unique insights into buyers. Hez does a number of things differently early in his career that set up a lot of his success.

So that clear horse radish that he took from his mother's recipe, he puts it in clear glass to display his purity and quality compared to what most of the other folks on the shelf were doing, which was putting their horse radish in dark bottles, brown bottles to cover up the quality of the ingredients.

In his ketchup product, he changed the traditional spelling of catsup, C-A-T-S-U-P, to ketchup, K-E-T-C-H-U-P, to be distinctive again on the shelf. And he even comes up, his early, early winner is Pickles. He ends up calling himself the Pickle King because [00:04:00] he wanted to be remembered as something really unique in the in, in the market.

But for all his marketing ideas, and there's even more in biographies about him and the history about him. The one that stands out as having some of the most enduring nature is coming up with the 57. And originally it was 57 varieties was a slogan that he started early on to attract customers. It's still on the bottle today.

We're gonna come back and talk more about that, but interestingly, it's a completely made up number. As the story goes, Heinz was visiting New York City in 1896 and he sees an advertisement for 21 styles of shoes. He found it memorable and he thought attaching a number to his own brand would help it stick with consumers.

So the company carved 57 on [00:05:00] hillsides as train passengers would drive by and say 57 good things for the table. It was that line was featured on an electric billboard in New York City in 1900. It was six stories tall, 1200 fluorescent light bulbs, and it had a 43 foot long flashing Heinz pickle. So you know, a lot of marketing flare.

A lot of intrigue and using this 57 originally was meant to show all the varieties, but it's a number that is interesting both on where they put it on the package and in the number itself. Richard, why don't you help us unpack what's going on here with this specificity?

Richard Shotton: As you say, there's, there's an awful lot going on and I think some of the success of Heinz is due to that sense of scale and grandeur and, and marketing flare, but also I think he was right in the fact that a very precise specific number sticks in the [00:06:00] mind more than a round general one, would we really be talking about Heinz 50 or Heinz 60? Now, there is something about this precision that makes it more, more powerful. Now, that's not just an opinion. There's quite a lot of evidence about the power of precise numbers. So there's a brilliant study from Schindler and Yauch Rutgers University.

So 2006 study, recruit a group of people and they show them an ad for a deodorant. Now, sometimes they say the deodorant reduces perspiration by 50%, so that is a round number, a general number. Sometimes they say it reduces perspiration by either 47 or 53%. So he gives these similar numbers, sometimes a precise claim, sometimes a round of claim, and then he asks people how accurate.

So they think the Jonce claim is, and how credible do people think the claim is? And he sees a very clear pattern. [00:07:00] If people have seen the precise number, they think it's 5% more accurate, sorry, 5% more credible and 10% more accurate than people who saw the the round number. So the argument here is. When people see round numbers, they think they've just been plucked out of the air.

They think they are being communicated from a position of ignorance. If see people see a very precise number, they think that person knows what they're talking about, there must be a very good reason why they've picked such a, a, a precise thing to focus on. So I think Heinz was onto something here, and some of it, as we say, was the flare, but some of it comes down to the power of precision.

MichaelAaron Flicker: And we've talked about this before, episode 13 had Dyson, and he uses a similar example of precision. You wanna remind everybody what we talked about in Dyson's episode.

Richard Shotton: Yeah. So it, it's a lovely one. It goes all the way through. Dyson's advertising their pr, their website. Even. In fact, the very first line of James [00:08:00] Dyson's autobiography, they all talk about the fact they went through 5,127 prototypes before they gotta the bagless vacuum.

Now again, he didn't say 5,000. He didn't say five and a half thousand. He was very, very precise and the precision is part of the, the impact, the number as the Schindler study search shows.

MichaelAaron Flicker: So check out Dyson's episode if you want to hear more about how Dyson uses precision in their marketing. And Heinz, not just 57.

Heinz has tactically used this point in some of their advertising. They talk about the slowness of the poor, of the ketchup at exactly point zero two eight miles per hour. That's how fast the ketchup will come out of the bottle. So they're, they're, they're using this precision not just in 57 varieties, but in other advertising they're doing.

Richard Shotton: So it's a regular thing they're doing, but that puts them, I think, at odds with an awful lot of advertising, an awful lot of advertisers talking. They [00:09:00] generalities. I think we could learn from Heinz, we could learn from Dyson and try and add precision in where we can. So don't say you've got. A million customers say You've got 1.1 million customers.

Don't say 90% of our customers give us a five star review, say 91.3%. We are in an environment, unfortunately, as commercial advertisers where most people don't trust us. Most people don't believe us. So you wanna be working with these innate biases. And precision's probably one of the simplest ones you can do to generate that sense of trust.

And you know, as Heinz also realized that that boost of memorability.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Yeah, I think there's also, you know, so we, we have this study that shows that there's, it was a 5% lift. In, was that the number?

Richard Shotton: Yeah, five in credibility, 10% inaccuracy.

MichaelAaron Flicker: And it's interesting that it does add just a smidge of friction to understand what is being communicated when you see that that tho those precision in the numbers.[00:10:00]

Normally we talk about how removing as much friction as possible is the, is the preferred route. But in this instance, a precise number does cause a little bit of friction, doesn't it? Yeah,

Richard Shotton: you're absolutely right. And that friction does lead to memorability. There's a whole body of work that suggests that, and I think Heinz have harnessed this too.

So you talking a few years back now, and we'll put these in the show notes, but there were these wonderful ads they ran. I think they might have been even inspired by Mad Madmen where it was a picture of some chips. And then it just said, pass the Heinz. Now what's interesting there is virtually ev, every other advertiser would've shown chips.

Smothered in ketchup, or you might say catchup, but I have no idea what that, that word is.

MichaelAaron Flicker: We're both ketchup.

Richard Shotton: Yeah. Yeah. We're both ketchups. Okay. Okay. What, what Heinz did so clever though, is let you imagine the pouring of the, the, the product on those chips. Now, that I [00:11:00] think is a very lateral interpretation of what psychologists know as the, the generation effect.

So the original study was done well back in 1978 at the University of Toronto by Norman Slamecka and Peter Graf, and they showed people pairs of words. So, some people might see rapid fast, other people saw rapid FAS blank. Both groups were asked to try and remember these words and what. RAF and ska found was that the people who saw the uncompleted words, they remembered about 15% more.

So they called this the Generation Effect because they argued if you make it too easy for people. To kind of imbibe your messaging, it just washes over them. But if you involve the audience, if you [00:12:00] put this little bit of friction in it this time, the friction is the audience has to generate the answer themselves.

And that act of effort, that little bit of processing power that makes the information far, far stickier. So. Precision and then this generation effects. These

are two similar tactics that Heinz have used across the years, both of which embed that message that little bit, little bit more strongly.

MichaelAaron Flicker: You know, it's it, it's almost a takeaway that we talk around in a lot of these podcasts, but.

But it's almost worth taking a moment and, and focusing on it, which is, there's no one golden rule, there's no one magic bias. It's about how you apply the behavioral science insights we talk about in these episodes to your business case. So. Should all friction always be removed? This is a great example of both both of these examples of where we really shouldn't remove all the friction and a little [00:13:00] bit of friction increases memorability and, and, and it's more about looking at the body of, of, of insights that we have access to the body of academic research we have access to and understanding the.

Broad business problems that you're facing and trying to match them up.

Richard Shotton: Yeah, I, I, I, I, I think you're right there. I think, I think it's a, a really interesting example. And, and the other part is trying to make a message memorable. It's not that there is a. Single solution. Well, you could use precision, you could use the generation effect.

There's also things like this idea of concreteness that we are much more likely to remember words that we can visualize. So I, I almost see behavioral science as this suite of tools that the marketer has to pick, not just the right one for the right problem, but also. Even when you're very specific about the problem, say memorability, there's still different tactics.

You know, you just want to try, which [00:14:00] ones help you solve the problem. And I, I, I really love that variety because I don't think accepting behavioral science means that you as a Marty or you as a copywriter, suddenly lose your, your role. You know, it's your role to pick the, pick the right study.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Richard, you know, we had a great guest on earlier this year, Nancy Hart, who spoke about how.

Applying behavioral science principles to business problems. The best way to know if they're working is testing them and not just testing them by asking people how would they feel about this, but actually testing the reactions people have when they don't know they're being tested. We'll put the episode number in the show notes but it's a great.

Way to approach testing to know if you're really getting the results that you want with the behavioral science principles you're using.

Richard Shotton: Absolutely, absolutely. [00:15:00]

MichaelAaron Flicker: So Richard. We've talked about these two pri, these two biases, but there's a third one we prepared for today and it comes to one of our favorite behavioral science principles.

That's the pratfall effect.

Richard Shotton: Yeah. So what Heinz are doing, you mentioned around the use of precision when they talk about the slowness of their product. I think you could argue slowness when it comes to a food is. A bit of a flaw, like most people want their ketchup straight away. So at first it feels a bit strange that people might a consumer sorry, a brand might emphasize this problem, but we've talked in previous episodes about the pratfall effects, which is essentially the idea that if you admit that there is a flaw, you become more appealing and also you become more believable.

We've around.

What floor you admit is crucial and [00:16:00] we've always made a logical argument that you need to pick a flaw that has a mirror strength. So, you know stellar Archis used to go out and say, reassuringly expensive. The floor is that they are expensive and the assumption is therefore, that they're high quality with he.

The floor is there slow. And we often think things that are slow are gonna be argued. There's a phenomenal study that, I mean, recently we've become aware of by GERD Bonner at the University of Bielefeld in Germany, which actually proves this idea about the importance of a related flaw. So what he did back in 2003 recruits 131 people and he shows them an ad for a restaurant.

Now on virtually all aspects, the ad is the same, but one thing changes. So first set of people just hear about the [00:17:00] positives of the restaurant, that it's got this like cozy atmosphere and they rate it. The kind of appeal of going at 4.29. The next group. Hear the same positive that it has a co cozy atmosphere, but they hear an unrelated negative feature, so they hear that it doesn't have dedicated parking, so it's unrelated to the coziness.

Now, interestingly, as the pratfall effect suggests, there is a slight increase in appeal, so up to 4.51 now, but what's super interesting, and this is completely new that we've never discussed before. The third group of people they're told about. The positive, the cozy, cozy atmosphere. And then they're told about a related weakness.

So they're told the the restaurant can't accommodate large groups, so the fact they can't accommodate large groups, that is testament to a problem with the fact the restaurant is small and therefore, or cozy. And that group by far give the most positive ratings. So [00:18:00] they rate the restaurant 5.62 in terms of appeal.

So that's a 31% improvement on the no negative ad. So, so what we're seeing here is if you want to I think replicate the power of some of these Heinz ads, if you want to use the practical effect, if you admit a flaw, you get a little bit of benefit. Probably 'cause it's makes you feel a bit human, it makes you feel believable.

But if you wanna maximize the benefit, you have to be really, really careful in the flaw that you pick. You want to find something that relates to whatever strength you are trying to, trying to land.

MichaelAaron Flicker: It's not only that you need to find that narrow strength that you want to that you wanna highlight, but you also have to present it in a way that colors for people's minds why why it, it, it would be that much more desirable to have it, or why it's so [00:19:00] much better because of it.

You know, the, how does you know? Episode one, we did Guinness. Things come to those who wait, does that, does that get you there? Or, that's not enough? That was an interesting use of the effect, but doesn't fully get you there.

Richard Shotton: I'm a big fan of that one. I. It hasn't picked this random floor. You know, it doesn't say, you know, Guinness smells a bit funny.

It says Guinness, good things come to those weights. They're emphasizing, like Heinz have done slowness. And in fact, I think the Heinz a might have well inspired the Guinness. A I think Heinz came out a little bit early with their emphasis of slowness. Yep. And I think it is true that most times in life we know that if something takes a bit of time.

It tends to be higher quality, right? If someone knocks together a a, a dish for dinner in two minutes, it's probably not gonna be that taste. They haven't put love and attention and care into it. If they've spent an hour, you know, working hard, sweating away in the [00:20:00] kitchen, it's probably gonna be a bit nicer, you know?

Two things aren't definitely correlated. They're not kind of, one always follows the other, but they happen enough that it creates a linkage to people's minds. And the whole point with behavioral science is people are pattern makers. We, we simplify life by looking for patterns. And those patterns take on a, a, a life of our own.

So emphasizing the slowness for Guinness or Heinz? Absolutely. I think it applies the pratfall effect almost to, its, its pinnacle.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Huh. I had not thought about this as we prepped the episode, but all using the pratfall effect also relate it. It feels to me connected to what we talked about earlier in the episode.

It does cause you to have to complete the idea. Good things come to those who wait. Oh, that's because the head of the Guinness needs to settle, you know still the slowest ketchup in town. That was Heinz's line, you know? Oh, that [00:21:00] means it's thick and so it must be higher quality. You are completing the thought with a Pratfall.

A strong mirror pratfall effect because you are kind of completing the rest of the thought and solving it a little yourself. Like you talked about in the middle study where you had to finish FAS and then you put the T in. Do you think there's something to that?

Richard Shotton: I think certainly those two examples and I think that that's probably the, actually as you say, it's probably quite a common, fast their effects. I was thinking maybe with Stellar Artois, real reassuring, expensive, they kind of complete the link for you, but I think you're right. Most examples you have to. Do it yourself.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Avis, we try, we, we we're number two, so we try harder.

Richard Shotton: Oh yeah. Yeah. So try harder. Yeah. They, they complete tasks.

So I think it certainly leads to the opportunity for the generation effects. We've got lots of good examples. And then maybe the other thing that, those examples you've mentioned show is that there is an r as well as a science to a great piece of copywriting. [00:22:00] We've seen with the generation effect, a little bit of effort will make it more memorable, but you could certainly push that too far.

You could make a really mentally draining, time consuming puzzle that the audience is meant to resolve. And I think most people wouldn't even bother engaging. So there is this sweet spot of. Hard enough generation effects, but not so hard that the audience walk away and good things come to those who wait and slowest catch up in a town.

I, I think they fall into that category of that sweet spot.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Final build on this episode 18, we looked at the Economist and. What's interesting about comparing these ads with the Economist ads, the economists knew very specifically that their audiences felt they were smarter than the average cat. That they were just a little more clever than other magazine, newspaper readers, [00:23:00] and they play on that in their generation effect. And so it, it, it's not only do you have to get the right copywriting if you can reveal something about the person reading it I think that, that that's another element of what makes it really effective.

Richard Shotton: Yeah. So I, maybe we could all agree there is a sweet spot.

For ease and difficulty in theory, but what that sweet spot is varies by brand. If your whole premise as a brand is the audience is super intelligent, maybe you can push that sweet spot towards the difficulty end. If you are trying to appeal to everyone and your brand has no link necessarily with intelligence as a value, maybe swing it to the, to the other end.

Yeah, that idea that. You should think about using these brands through a lens of, sorry, use these biases through a lens of what your brand stands for. Completely agree with that. That makes, I think that's absolutely true.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Amazing. Amazing. So we covered a [00:24:00] lot of different studies today. We talked about a lot of different brands.

Could you summarize, bring us back to the three biggest learnings from today?

Richard Shotton: Yeah. So we talked about. Three broad areas. We talked firstly about the power of precision, so that's the Schindler study with the

deodorants. And Schindler showed that we are more likely to believe and think data is accurate if it's precise rather than round.

So a really simple costless tweak the advertisers can use. The second thing we discussed, which was on graph and cca, those Canadian psychologists, was the generation effect, which is. If you just tell your audience what to think about your products, there might be an issue with memorability, but if you let them come to their own conclusion, you let them solve that problem, generate the own answer, their own answer, then the information tends to be much stickier.

And then the third and final thing we discussed was the practical effect. But [00:25:00] rather than just talk about that Aronson study that we've repeated many a time that shows if you admit a flaw, you become more appealing. We talked about a much less well known study by boner in Germany, and what he showed was that.

You get much bigger impact from the practical effect if you pick a flaw that relates to your, your core strength. And I think that is where usage of this bias goes from quite powerful to one of the most powerful tools in an advertiser's arsenal.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Lovely. As we come to an end today, Richard we were thinking about what fun question to ask the weirdest thing.

Or the most unusual thing you've put Heinz ketchup on.

Richard Shotton: Oh my Lord. So Heinz ketchup. I'm, I'm probably quite weird in what I put on bread. Normally chili sauce, though. Rather than plain Heinz [00:26:00] ketchup. I think I might have destroyed my taste buds over the last few years. So I, I think putting chili sauce on, on, on bread is probably my, my, my weakness.

MichaelAaron Flicker: So this is a toasted piece of bread or an untoasted piece of bread?

Richard Shotton: Toasted untoasted

MichaelAaron Flicker: doesn't matter

Richard Shotton: as long as it's spicy. Yeah, yeah, yeah. What about you, where you gone with your, your heinz?

MichaelAaron Flicker: This is a, this is a northeast. United States thing, we put ketchup on eggs. So scrambled eggs, fried egg, and ketchup is a very common thing, and across most of America, people are poor.

They can't believe that, that we do that.

Richard Shotton: I mean, I'm must I, I, as a man who is allergic to eggs, I'm not gonna start doing it myself, but I'm, I'm amazed that people find that abhorrent. I think I would've thought a bit of ketchup or HP sauce

MichaelAaron Flicker: would be nice. Yeah, yeah, yeah. A little bit of sweetness. Yeah.

Well, it adds to the saltiness. Absolutely. Well, there you have it everyone. [00:27:00] If today's episode sparked a new idea for you, do us a favor, hit the follow button, leave a review, and share this with someone who loves marketing as much as we all do. And if you have a favorite behavioral science principle or example of something you see working in the world, let us know and we'd love to feature it in a few show episode.

Until next time. I'm MichaelAaron Flicker.

Richard Shotton: And I'm Richard Shotton.

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