Ep103 - How to use behavioral science to create positive social impact

MichaelAaron Flicker: [00:00:00] Welcome back to Behavioral Science For Brands, the podcast where we bridge academics and practical marketing. Every week we sit down and go deep behind the science that powers some of today's most successful marketing. I'm MichaelAaron Flicker.

Richard Shotton: And I'm Richard Shotton.

MichaelAaron Flicker: And today we're beginning a new miniseries.

On social good from how behavioral science can help support the environment to our health to improving our communities. We're going to take a tour through a number of different areas, and today we're starting with one of the most important things about our health, and that's avoiding smoking. Let's get into it.

So Richard, we chose smoking. Not to be a a light pole topic, but to really get people to understand and think about how behavioral science [00:01:00] can be used to help drive big behavior change across a long period of time. And when we were thinking about that, smoking just seemed like a great case study that would be a lot of interesting material and a lot of interesting fodder for conversation.

Richard Shotton: Yeah, it's, it's an area that's well researched by academics. There's an awful lot of experimentation in how to stop people smoking. So great topic from that respect. And then also when it comes to your health, it's probably one of the biggest things that people can do. You know, if you're a smoker, you know, everything else is.

Playing around the fringes. You know, stopping is probably the, the biggest thing you can do if your health. So it's a big meaty topic and there's lots and lots of research out there.

MichaelAaron Flicker: I had that as part of my prep notes for today. Smoking remains the mo, the leading cause of preventable death in America, killing almost 500,000 Americans each year, and it imposes $600 billion in annual [00:02:00] health and productivity costs in the country.

Richard Shotton: Yeah, so even though the government spend a lot of money trying to stop people smoking, when you hear the scale of death, the scale of economic impact, it doesn't make you wonder why governments aren't putting more money behind behavioral science interventions. The.

MichaelAaron Flicker: As we said, it's a interesting topic, so let me bring us back and just kind of put smoking as a health topic into context for everyone.

And then we'll talk about some of the behavioral science. If you look back specifically in the United States, so in 1955, the mix is about 54% men. 24% of women are cigarette smokers. 10 years later at the first NHIS assessment of Nationwide smoking, they say 42% of all US adults were current smokers, and that number was then 52% of [00:03:00] men, 34% of women.

It was marketed in the 1960s as glamorous. It was even being recommended by physicians. And today those numbers seem staggering because public health campaigns have successfully shifted cultural norms and dramatically reduced smoking. And a major turning point in that history was in the mid 1960s, surgeon General Luther Terry, released a first official report linking smoking to lung cancer and bronchitis.

And then from that, there was a Federal Labeling Act, a Federal Advertising Act, and 1969, the Public Health Cigarette Smoking Act. All of these in together started limiting advertisements on TV and radio. Started adding warning labels to cigarette packages, and started to give us the studies that came in the seventies, eighties, [00:04:00] nineties, and two thousands that we're gonna talk about today.

But really compared to those early numbers, cigarette smoking in the United States has fallen dramatically. Today the number was from 1965 was 42% of adults. Now the number's 11%, so only 28.8 million people still smoke cigarettes, about 13% of men and 10% of women, but still, that's almost 30 million people still smoking every day.

And the story internationally is pretty similar. The latest WHO tobacco trend study shows that globally the number of people smoking in 2024 is 1.2 billion. It's a 27% reduction from 2000, but still. One in five adults smoke worldwide. So interesting. It's gone down dramatically [00:05:00] over from 1965 to today, but still lots of people smoke and it really creates this burden on all economies to cover the cost of healthcare and as you say, lots of work by governments and nonprofit institutions trying to help educate and reduce the amount of smoking overall.

Richard Shotton: So, yeah, and I, I love your point about even though. It's a very big public health success. This drop in smoking, there's still so much further to go. 1.2 billion people continuing to do something that's highly likely to cause cancer is a massive health challenge. So some of these experiments should be useful.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Yeah, and it's, and. Like so often we talk about, on this podcast, you and I have a lot of excitement. Behavioral science has a lot of interest in looking at what people actually do rather than what they claim to do. Yeah. And so this very well documented we're very, very well discussed. Health hazard [00:06:00] with an addictive substance really leads to a lot of very.

What would you say? Fertile territory for us to study because people are making a decision to smoke, presumably even knowing the health concerns, even knowing the consequences of their health. So maybe let's dive into some of the studies and what's a first bias that we can look into and learn more from?

Yeah.

Richard Shotton: So we often talk about this idea of, of social proof. So social proof is the argument that humans are a social animal. We are deeply influenced by what others do. So if we think lots of people buy a particular product or lots of people smoke, we are more likely to do ourselves. We'll find it more appealing, we'll change our behavior to, to mimic those others.

Now, now, often when we've talked about. Social proof. It's been on quite trivial matters. Like there's a cini study from 2008. We often talk about that. If you tell [00:07:00] people, most guests in a hotel reuse their towels, you increase the likelihood of those towels being reused. We've talked about a fang study where he looked at the choice of dishes on a Chinese restaurant menu, and if you said most popular dish, that dish became even more popular.

Better than even saying things like the chef's recommendation, but people might think, well, okay, social proof influences consumers and citizens on trivial decisions, but surely a matter of life and death like smoking. Surely that is going to be harder to to influence. But the evidence suggests social proof is very powerful, even when it comes to attempts to quit smoking there.

There's an amazing datasets, an American dataset running for about 30 years, 1971 to 2003, where for. Certain area [00:08:00] called Framingham. People gave an awful lot of their, their health data to researchers. So researchers can

look at this longitudinal data for more than 30 years and see what influenced various different behaviors.

And back in 2008, Nicholas Krysta Susa, Harvard used that data set to see whether giving up smoking was related to what our social network were doing. So he looks at this data set and what he finds when he looks at 12,067 different people, he finds that if a contact quits smoking, then an individual is more likely to try themselves.

And the power of that social network varied according to its strength. So if someone's sibling. Quit smoking while there was a 25% chance that they would reduce their smoking levels. [00:09:00] But if it was a spouse, someone we see every single day, if they quit, then there was a 67% increase in likelihood to to, to try to quit as well.

So Krys argument. Is one of social proof that smoking is almost like a, a, a virus. That if one person takes it up, then they encourage others to do so. But the great thing is that happens in reverse as well. So if one person quits it, then increase the probability that others do so. So yes, we see social proof working in really important commercial situations, but even in matters of life and death, it's hugely important too.

MichaelAaron Flicker: When we prep this study, the number that decreases amongst siblings, 25%. The number that decreases amongst spouses, 67%. I'm not sure if you hit that number in your, in your recap, that's a major difference showing the [00:10:00] power that you were, that, that, as you say almost almost a triple effect by going by, by having a spouse make that claim rather than a sibling.

Richard Shotton: Yeah. And, and it's the. It's the behavior of the spouse and the sibling. So if the sibling or spouse stops, then you see this ripple effects occurring amongst other smokers. And the closer the quitter is to other people, the more impactful that influences. So, you know. A sibling when you were an adult, they might live five miles when you might see them once a month.

So yes, they have an impact, but it's the spouse that quits. That's the one that has the really big effect. Exactly as you say, 67% reduction.

MichaelAaron Flicker: It makes you think about what that impact could be on marketing. So if you know that the tighter the social circle is, the more effect it has, the tighter the bond, the more of effect it has, [00:11:00] then targeting the

social circles of those trying to quit could probably create a bigger impact since they'll be more receptive to that messaging.

Richard Shotton: Yeah, a absolutely. So I think if you are a government and you know someone is quitting, they've signed up to one of your programs, this is an amazing opportunity to try and uncover maybe through a social media, through LinkedIn, other people in their network and target them accordingly. The other way I think you could look at it is if you are a government and you have a fixed budget.

Let's say in Britain you've got 10 million to spend on encouraging people to stop smoking. What. Might feel logical is to just spread that across the country evenly. You know, you

MichaelAaron Flicker: geograph

Richard Shotton: get the low fruit.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Let's say just get wide, wide, wide focus. Get the low hanging fruit.

Richard Shotton: Yeah, but this idea from Krysta is this use of social proof.

I think what this suggests is focusing tightly on particular geographical areas. [00:12:00] So you make a really big push and say Liverpool or Birmingham or Glasgow to get people to quit smoking. And then what you hope is that once you start getting. A few successes, then they start building on each other. Then you get this ripple effect.

Then you can get you know, chain reaction as it as, as it were. So it leads you down this concentrate and dominate approach in terms of a geographic messaging.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Hmm. To go on one side tangent here, we're talking about how this concentrate and dominate approach can really help stop smoking. Do you think that this has implications for brand marketers, so many of our listeners?

Are, are listening with an interest of behavioral science and how they can apply them to their brands. Then we're talking today in this mini series about how behavioral science can help with health. But do you think that there, that this,

this insight applies to brand marketing as well? I know [00:13:00] it's a little bit of a tangent.

Richard Shotton: Yeah, I, I certainly think so, and it's probably worth. You know, drawing an analogy again with smoking, which is, you know, smoking is a addiction. Mm-hmm. It's a phenomenally hard behavior to change. So something like concentrate and dominate. I think is really dialing up the power of social proof to its absolute maximum.

So going back to the brand world, if you have a behavior that is particularly hard to change, you know, maybe you for some reason need to win over, reject people previously disliked your brand, dismissed it, then I think smoking could be a really nice analogy. Then that might be the time to use this concentrate and dominate approach.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Makes great sense. And just for everybody listening, we made the first point about the idea of the closer the social bond is, the [00:14:00] more, and, and if you can get a, a spouse to quit smoking, that's gonna have the biggest effect. And now we're using this term concentrate and dominate. Can you just break down for us, how are those similar and how are those, how are those connected?

Richard Shotton: Yeah. So there, there, there's, there's two bits here. As you say, there's firstly this argument that the closer the bonds, the more powerful social proof that fit with an awful lot of experimentation. We are most influenced by people like ourselves.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Mm-hmm.

Richard Shotton: So if I know a Brit has changed their behavior.

That's slightly influential. If I know a Londoner, which is where I live has changed their behavior, it's more influential. If I know my neighbor has changed behavior, it's even more influential. If I know my wife has changed behavior, it's, it's even more so, so, so social proof isn't a one size fits all approach.

The closer we are to someone, the more their behavior influences us. So that, that's kind of one point. The second point about concentrate and dominate is if [00:15:00] we accept. That what we really wanna do, if we're gonna change a very deep rooted behavior, is have them the, the, the, the smoker say, or the person whose behavior wanna change.

We want to have multiple people in the network changing at the, the same time, so we can start getting almost this kind of, a lot of palooza effects. I got it. You could call it the kind of manga phrasing. So if you. Dominate one city at a time, maybe with your messaging. I think that's the way that you almost get ahead of steam up behind your behavior change programming rather than isolated attempts that fizzle out.

You get a self reinforcing, element of change.

MichaelAaron Flicker: That's, that's really clarifying and I think you know it. One idea is to use that geographically, as you described, concentrate and dominate. Another way is to use social media to reinforce it amongst very narrow. Of demographic [00:16:00] psychographic targets so that it feels like it's everywhere amongst social groups, even if they're geographically dispersed.

But the idea is to get that rip, that lollapalooza effect, as you say, that idea that it feels like it's everywhere around you. So you could do it geographically with more traditional media, or you could do it through social networks, closed wall. You know, using, using that type of targeting seems like another way you could go about it.

Richard Shotton: Absolutely. Both of those I think would work, work really well. Yeah, absolutely.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Great. Okay, so that's kind of big insight number one into how we can learn from smoking and about bias and insights there. Let's move to a next bias, and we're calling this the foot in the door technique.

Richard Shotton: So the foot in the door technique, that is a phrase that was coined by two American psychologists called Freeman and Fraser.

And it's the idea that if you want to change someone's behavior in a big way, like get into quit smoking. You don't ask people to make a huge leap and change in one go, but [00:17:00] instead you identify a very small step that that group can make towards their goal. You get 'em to do the small step, and then once they've done that, you follow up with the bigger ask and that two step process, tiny steps begin with then larger requests that tends to be more effective.

So the classic study came in 1966. Freeman and Fraser go round a Californian neighborhood and half the participants, half the people, they knock on the door. They give them a five minute talk about road safety, and then at the end they ask the homeowners to put up a big ugly sign. Say, drive carefully.

They ask 'em to put that up in their front yard. Now, not many people want to do that. It's a very ugly sign. It's a big imposition. Only 17% of the homeowners agreed to put up the sign. That's the first half of the experiment. The second group, [00:18:00] Freeman and Fraser begin by doing the same thing. Knock on the door, five minute talk about road safety.

But then at the end of that spiel, the request changes. Now Freeman and Fraser. Ask people to put up a tiny little sticker, three or four inches long, two inches high little sticker to go up in the window saying, drive carefully. It's such an important subject, such a trivial ask. Virtually everyone agrees.

The psychologists leave. They wait two weeks and then they go back. They knock on the door, and to anyone that's put up a sticker, they ask them to put up the big sign. And most people do. You get 76% of that second group? Wow. Putting the big ugly sign. So 17% in the first group where they jumped straight to the launch request, 76%.

In the second group where they did a two step process, little sticker first, then big sign. [00:19:00] Their argument is that the second approach is much more effective because. People feel a really strong pressure to be consistent with their parcel selves. So imagine you are a homeowner and you're in that second group, you've agreed to put up the little sticker.

When the psychologists come back and ask you to put up the sign, you are in a bit of a bind. 'cause you think yourselves, well, I must care about road safety. I put up the little sticker, and if I care about road safety, shouldn't I put up the big sign? So it's a really interesting tactic that can be used both commercially, but certainly in this world of smoking.

Know, getting someone to stop smoking is a massive ask. Don't go straight to you. Smoke 40 a day, smoke nothing. What you really wanna do is try and introduce people to a really small step that they can take, and if you can get 'em to agree to that, that's your kind of your beachhead that you can [00:20:00] then build on.

MichaelAaron Flicker: It's why they call it the foot in the door technique. You get one foot in the door, you get them to make a small action and then the bigger action can follow. And it's such a lovely set of experiments because it really applies to what we've seen be super successful in the smoking world. Great American Smokeout was a super successful, very long running campaign by the American Cancer Society and they hold this event.

It's on the third Thursday of November and. As you say, rather than getting people to commit to stop smoking, they say, can you quit for just one day? And they use that as a springboard to go on from there. So they start this in 1976. It goes nationwide in 1977, and it's been a nationwide event. Ever since.

And Richard, you and I had a guest on recently who talked about [00:21:00] Stocktober Similar. Who was that? That was on,

Richard Shotton: that was, that was Ardin. So I, I'm less familiar with Great American Smoke out, but in Britain we have Stocktober, which is a, a slightly more recent intervention, but it's going on a 10 or 15 years.

MichaelAaron Flicker: 2012, I think it was

Richard Shotton: October, 2012. Very well, 14 years. Very good of memory. Yes, yes. Well, what they do is ask people to go out for one month. That's right. And then once you've done your month, then they've got your data and they're trying to encourage you to give up for longer. So it seems a more extreme version with Great American Smokeout, where where they're asking to give up for a day.

Now, that's a really small first step, but a wonderful opportunity because people will think to themselves, well, surely I can quit for a day? That's easy. And then once they've got a bit of momentum, you can remind them that they're quitters. And people want to try and stick to that, that identity.

MichaelAaron Flicker: The Joe Arden episode I'm just pulling up episode 95 is really a great listen, because in the conversation we talk [00:22:00] about how Stoptober is a 28 day commitment.

But on their website and in their advertising material, they talk about the benefits I'm making up. After four hours, after 24 hours after four days, they really break down all the benefits you get in very small time chunks. And we had a conversation with Joe about how was that impactful and she. She talked about very eloquently about how that added a lot of immediacy to a 28 day campaign.

So similar concept, you're, you're, you're projecting those benefits just like the Great American smokeout, very small, short foot in the door technique to get people to feel the momentum of their commitment.

Richard Shotton: And this experiment can definitely be used. On anti-smoking campaigns, but it can also be used on any commercial campaigns.

Yes. What a marketer needs to do is think to themselves, what's my end goal? And then what is the smallest thing that [00:23:00] I can ask my audience to do that will change their identity? And then once they've done that, you then remind people that they are a exerciser or a quitter or a, I don't know, a, a subscriber.

And then once they've got. That action that the, the, the audience can look back to in their past. You can then try and encourage 'em to make even bigger steps. And because people wanna be consistent in their past behavior, it's a very effective way of, of encouraging change.

MichaelAaron Flicker: I'd love to double click on that point, Richard, because I think this is an insight that you and I talk quite a bit about wanting to be consistent with your past self.

Maybe we could talk a little bit more about that because it's the underlying reason why the foot in the Torah technique works. Maybe we could talk a little bit more about that desire to be consistent with your past self.

Richard Shotton: Yeah, there's a lovely study from Steve Martin who's at Columbia University where he explicitly [00:24:00] tested this idea of consistency.

So he was trying to get people to turn up to appointments and the, the standard practice before he he ran the experiment was people would come in for an appointment, they'd be given a card with the time and date of the next one, and they may or may not turn up what he, iNSTIGATED was a new system.

So now when people came out of their initial appointment, they were given a blank card and the receptionist asked the person to fill out that blank card with a time and date themselves. And what Martin noted was that there was an 18% reduction in no shows. And his argument is very similar to what we've been saying.

He was saying people hate this sense of being inconsistent and it's, it's looked down upon by many, many cultures. So if you can get people to make a public statement about what they [00:25:00] intend to do, they are much more likely to follow through than if they just privately think to themselves. They may or may not turn up.

So, so you go from. The very hard to change world of smoking all the way down to a challenge, like, you know, getting people to turn up to a, a restaurant appointment or a doctor's appointment. You can apply this same principle just in slightly, slightly different ways.

MichaelAaron Flicker: I think it's so helpful because it gives us, as commercial marketers that challenge of how can we break down a big idea into a smaller thing that is achievable.

That's kind of part one of the challenge. Then part two is how can we use that activity that we got people to do to build on it and go from there? That's a whole second part of the effort. So if you break it down into this way, it starts to give you achievable chunks to move people to the behavior change that you hope for.

Richard Shotton: Absolutely.

MichaelAaron Flicker: So Richard. Thinking back [00:26:00] to that Joe Arden episode, she shared 350,000 additional quit attempts happened in that month. The first time they ran, stopped October in 20 20 12, compared to what would normally have been tried in a normal October in the uk. So you could just see this concept of.

Making a public declaration and really doing something smaller and achievable, like a 28th day challenge was super effective. So really a nice way to combine both of the things we're talking about in this Stoptober example.

Richard Shotton: Yeah. And for American audiences. Where 350,000 quit attempts might feel small.

You've gotta remember, Britain has a population of about 70 million, 10, 12% smokes. What's that? 7 million people? You, you, you're looking at 350,000 extra attempts out of a universe of 7 million. It's a very, very significant, significant number.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Great point, great point. Are there any other biases [00:27:00] that we can learn from the Stoptober case study here?

Richard Shotton: I think there is. One other, and it's about the power of positivity. So the whole kind of body language of stoptober is very, very positive. And that's quite different from the history of public health messaging. Cer certainly in Britain, they used to be in the seventies and eighties, maybe

even the nineties, a lot of shock advertising that tried to scare people into to quit attempts.

But the evidence suggests that that might not be the, the best approach. There's an idea that was first experimented on by Lowenstein, George Lowenstein, who's a, a Carnegie Mellon called the, the Ostrich Effect. So his original argument was, if you make people feel. Bad about a particular matter, you scare them or you make them feel [00:28:00] ashamed.

What tends to happen is people begin to ignore the message. You know, he calls it the ostrich effect, you know, a metaphorically stick their heads in the sand. Now, his original study, which we have talked about before, was done in the world of finance. So. Lowenstein gets access to, I think it was Vanguard in America and a big Swedish stock market fund provider.

He gets anonymized data and what he sees is that people are much more likely to check their stock portfolios when the stock market's rising than when it's falling, and it's a big effect. Stock market falls by about 1% and people become five to 6% less likely to check their portfolios. Now he argues this is proof of the ostrich effect.

He says, look, the information about your wealth level is equally valid, whether it's gonna be good news or bad news.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Mm.

Richard Shotton: [00:29:00] But what this experiment suggests is people aren't behaving in a fully logical manner. They turn towards information that makes them feel good about themselves. They turn away from information that makes them feel bad about themselves.

Now, as I say, that was done in a very, very different world. It's done in finance, not health, but you see something very, very similar happening with Health Metric. It's a 2014 study done by Julio Ella at the University of Bologna where he goes out and looks at a new scheme where women, a very big company, 7,000 employees, are offered a free mammogram.

So a check to see whether they have breast cancer. Brilliant catch early, much better chance of survival. But what Zella finds is that over time, there is this perverse finding that. If one of the women who was scanned had cancer was a cancer was [00:30:00] discovered rather than encourage people, people to

follow suit and get checked, it actually dampened the desire for coworkers to get a test.

So it dampens likelihood of getting the test by about 8%. And this is an example of the ostrich effect when you remind people that there could be a very bad piece of news. Even if it's better than, you know, not finding out and discovering it in a year or two years time, but that fear of what could be at the other end actually led people to come less likely to do do the test.

So when you have health messaging in particular. It. It feels such an obvious thing to do to scare people to change, but what Lowenstein and Ella suggest is be very, very careful. Often it can backfire. Fear can be useful if change is very easy. But if it's a complex health situation, often it's bad to try and [00:31:00] lean into positivity rather than fear.

MichaelAaron Flicker: You know, it strikes me that. The way that the company handled the sharing of the information or the way that they talked about the benefit of the mammograms. Could have changed the result of the opt-in based on this insight that you're sharing. So terribly upsetting to hear that as they find cancer, less and less people wanna participate in the program.

But it does give you that opportunity to say. Well, how could you reverse that with the right type of messaging?

Richard Shotton: I, I, I think you are absolutely right. These findings aren't kind of written in iron, you know? Mm-hmm. They tell you about probabilities and propensities. Once you know the. The unsophisticated communication of bad news can lead to this unfortunate impact.

Then I think you go, you, you, you can [00:32:00] think about ways to either counterbalance it by maybe abusing other biases, you know, emphasizing maybe how many people have done the test, social proof, maybe getting people to do a really small first step. Or you can try and think about maybe emphasizing the positivity of the news.

You know, that Mr. Jones and Mrs. Jones. Had this negative news, but it was successfully removed. You know, you could think about That's right. How can we put a, a positive spin on it?

MichaelAaron Flicker: I think that to me is something that you could get lost in that the, that the studies tell you the natural propensities of what people will do.

And then our job as marketers is to use that to make better campaigns, to make better outcomes. So I think that's, that's a beau beautifully said. What you said, and this really applies to smoking and the smoking industry for. Anywhere in the US you go. They have two types of [00:33:00] warning labels. One is just text, but many states allow graphic, or I think mandate graphic, unpack warning labels where they show shriveled lungs or they show you know, pictures of, of, of death.

And it's really a shocking. Offputting experience, and this is just what you're talking about almost to the, an extreme degree, how showing those might create an ostrich effect where people just don't even want to, don't want to think about. That that bad message because it's so it's so off-putting.

Is that, is that possible?

Richard Shotton: I, I, I, I think so. And, and, and there's an element that, you know, they, I either, either might try and ignore that message as much as possible, or in a situation where it's graphics on a pack and it's hard to ignore, they might go to amazing mental gymnastics to explain why it [00:34:00] doesn't.

Happen to themselves. So it could be a, a kind of literal ignoring or a kind of psychological defense mechanism. You know, I think there's an argument for trying to get people to engage in these quick programs by emphasizing the, the, the positive upsides, rather than focusing on that, that fear mystery.

MichaelAaron Flicker: I think that's, that's really helpful to hear. And so often we think about. What is the effect directly on the subject that we're marketing to? So we're thinking about how will that be received by the smoker and what does that cause them to do? There was a really interesting 2022 trial known as the Casa, CASA, randomized clinical trials that put two different types of cigarette packs into market.

Some were blank packs. [00:35:00] And some were packed with these graphic warnings that we were talking about, and they tracked the behaviors of 357 smokers, and what they found was smokers with the graphic warning packs hid the cigarette packs 38% more often. Then those with the blank packs that had no pictures on them.

So. This, as soon as there was no warning labels, it was much more comfortable for people to leave their cigarette packs out on the table, hold them in their hand while they were smoking, and smoking became more visible. So something, it

was a very small trial, only 357 smokers. But super interesting to see that those graphic packs maybe have the ostrich effect in a different way and that they're trying to hide the, the unsightly.

Imagery from others, which is just a fascinating other angle of it.

Richard Shotton: Yeah. And, and then it shows you the, the complexity of it in [00:36:00] the, they're obviously trying to decrease the amount of times they see this horrible negative imagery. Now if that is so extreme, they, you know hide their packaging. And, you know, rarely use clothes or in a room, they don't go too often.

It might actually have a positive effect in the, they're not prompted so often to smoke, but you can certainly see the the kind of ostrich effects, I think, in, in action.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Yeah, I think the point of the study was that they hide the pack in there. Pants rather than hold it out when they're smoking. Yeah.

Or they keep it in a purse rather than out on the tabletop. But your, but to your point, maybe if they're hiding it enough, it helps decrease smoking because there's

Richard Shotton: fewer little reminders of, of you of that.

MichaelAaron Flicker: There you, there you go. And, and, and, and mostly it just shows how complex these challenges are. One stimulus may create.

Anticipated or a beneficial effect. And there may be side effects that you weren't walking for, you weren't watching for, and so you don't know what, what, what [00:37:00] they've done. But all I think that's a

Richard Shotton: really good way of, of, of putting it because what you might think is, you know, you have this simplistic view of human nature in which all we have to do is educate people about the, the horrificness of smoking, and it will lead to change.

Knowing about the ostrich effect suggests, well, wait a second, there might be a backfire effect because people will just stop thinking about the, the health messaging. So at least it encourages a humility to go out and test what a seemingly obvious information intervention will, will do. I think that is

something, especially in an matter of serious, as serious as smoking is worth, worth, worth laboring.

MichaelAaron Flicker: I think that's, that's a, a lovely point. As we come to a close on this episode, we had one more kind of idea that we wanted to bring to everybody, and that's thinking [00:38:00] about how can the role of humor and positivity possibly help change people's perception even better than a negative message. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Richard Shotton: Yeah, and this, this very much relates to. The ostrich effect, but maybe rather than just leaving a problem for marketers, there is an opportunity here as well. And that is some of the tactics that we automatically gravitate to in like the sin areas of marketing, you know, encouraging people to have baked snacks or, or, or alcohol.

Well, you can use some of those tactics of humor and amusement and and wits when you're trying to. Get people to behave in a more healthy way. Now that might sounds ridiculous, but there are lots of examples of it used really powerfully. And it might have been in the Gerard episode again, [00:39:00] where we discussed the Australian campaign.

Dumb ways to die.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Mm. So

Richard Shotton: this was a campaign, I think it was either Sydney or Melbourne. It was a metro, and they wanted to make sure that teenagers didn't go on the tracks rather than showing people posters of the horrendous physical damage that could do. Instead, they came up with a very witty song, which talks about all the dumb ways to die, like sticking a fork in a.

Electric plug by, you know, rolling yourself in honey and going and playing with a bear. You know, ridiculously bar Rockaways are dying. And then they kind of said at the end of this song, the dumbest way to die is to to go on the tracks. And that was a phenomenally successful campaign because it was amusing.

It meant that a very hard to reach audience actually wanted to pay attention. And the message went in almost in this kind of Trojan horse like manner.

MichaelAaron Flicker: 28 Cannes Lions five Grand Prix, [00:40:00] one of the most awarded campaigns in history by using humor and lightheartedness,

humor and positivity rather than this more easy to gravitate towards scare tactics.

Richard Shotton: Yeah, I think people have a rule of. Thumb in their mind, which is essentially let's do more of the things that make us feel good. Less of the things that make us feel bad. And on one hand that sounds ridiculously simplistic, but if you think about many public health messages, they ignore that they, so this situation in which people feel scared or ashamed, and you know, just as you know, that rule of thumb suggests a lot of people then choose to ignore the message.

MichaelAaron Flicker: I think it probably it probably also raises for me this idea that serious topics require serious advertising is probably a fallacy. You know, serious topics [00:41:00] require big ideas, but humor. And positivity can be the right Trojan horse to deliver a bigger message. Yeah. And, and sometimes you, you, you see that marketers mistake the seriousness of the.

Of the, of the goal with the way that they bring the creative to life.

Richard Shotton: Yeah. Ab absolutely. So when we were writing Hack in The Human Mind, one of the most interesting chapters, 'cause we interviewed some of the people at the, the company was Liquid Death. And that's exactly what they said. They have, you know, health interests, water far fewer calories than soft drinks.

They have environmental interests cans far better than, than plastics. But rather than have a. Hair shirt, dry series of messaging about moral worth. What they did was make their ads very, very witty, very funny, very gruesome, and by making it such interesting engaging [00:42:00] communications, people wanted to lean into it, and therefore they've got more sales and done more environmental and social good than, you know, the, the, the basic literal approach might have delivered.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Insert shameless plug if you Yeah, yeah. Your, your, your copy of Hacking the Human Mind by all means pick it up. But yeah, Richard well said. That really is that, that really was a delightful part of that chapter, which is you wouldn't have necessarily known that was part of their inspiration unless you talked to them and really heard that was that was part of what they were trying to do.

Turn the industry. On its side and do something in a new way and they got a lot more attention for it because of it.

Richard Shotton: Yeah, it it completely, as you say, serious products don't need serious advertising.

MichaelAaron Flicker: So as we come to an end today, maybe you can bring us through the main ideas and studies that we talked about as we [00:43:00] wrap up.

Richard Shotton: Three big studies we've covered. The first was social proof, one of the most powerful, important biases in the whole cannon of, of behavioral science. This is essentially the idea that we as humans or a herd species, we deeply influenced by other people. If you can make a behavior look like it's commonplace, it'll become more appealing and people are more likely to do it.

We've talked many times on the podcast about how commercial brands can use that. But what was so interesting about the Krysta study we opened with was that same principle of social proof can be applied in the life or death matter of quitting smoking. So that that was the first big thing. The second theme was when you are trying to change behavior in a big way, remember the foot in the door technique, the most effective way to change big behaviors is not to do it in one giant leap.

But instead identify what is the smallest ask you can make of an audience. Make that request. [00:44:00] And then once people have changed their behavior, then follow up with your larger ask. And because of this desire for people to be consistent with their past selves, they are much more likely to follow through.

And then the final area that we, you know, discussed at at length, that's this idea of the ostrich effect. Even if you have a very serious subject about life and death and cancer and quitting smoking, it doesn't mean your message has to be equally serious. If you scare people, if you make them feel ashamed, there is a real risk, not a definitive guarantee, but a real risk.

The they stick their heads in the sand and they ignore your messaging. So even with the most serious topics, think about how you can inject. Enjoyment and levity and positivity.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Thank you, Richard, for those summaries. It's really helpful to think back through the whole episode and and summarize it in that way.

So [00:45:00] as we come to a close, a wrap up question for you. Yeah. What's one thing that has helped you quit a bad habit? We've talked about these very serious things. Have you used one of these techniques or did you do something else? To quit a habit you wish you could change.

Richard Shotton: So I, my, my probably worst habit is I have a real.

Predilection for crisps. So for chips as, as you'd say to the extent that I've just had my 50th birthday and one of my best friends knows how much I love crisps, and she bought me a giant box of 50 different crisps types from all around the world. Weird flavors amazing variety. You know, she knew that would be my very well appreciated.

So I have this big love of crisps. I'm always trying to cut back, and the thing I have found that, that the best way of doing that is even though I live opposite a shop in South London, if I don't have crisps in the house, the fact that it takes about 30 seconds [00:46:00] of effort when I've got that pang and that hunger and that desire, half the time, it'll stop me bothering to eat.

So. Adding in a little bit of, little bit of friction friction, that, that for me has been one of the best ways to curve my crisp eating habit. What about you? Have you had a any success in, in, in changing for good?

MichaelAaron Flicker: Well, I, I, as you were forming the question, I was thinking to myself, I've had left success then I would like in life.

Richard Shotton: I'm not sure my crisp habit has been completely destroyed. So yeah, I don't wanna have danger of over claim here, but

MichaelAaron Flicker: yeah. No, no, not at all. But, but. When I've had success changing a really hard to beat habit, I've reframed it. As a different thing in my mind. So I had this vision that I, that, that, for me, being really great at work meant doing more hours than anyone else, than my clients, [00:47:00] than my coworkers.

If I put more hours in than I was gonna be the best. And the human truth that we, I think all. Have experiences, more hours does not lead to better work. It only leads to more hours. Yeah. I had to reframe that the smartest people find the way to do the best work in the least amount of time. How could I change the challenge to be, how can I be more efficient with my time?

How can I be more smart with using other team members to partner with me? How could I change the way I approached my work so that it was about doing? Less better rather than doing more than everybody else. And once I saw it differently, once I reframed it, it really changed the way I approached work. And I've used that in my personal life and that's really been very helpful.

Richard Shotton: Yeah, I mean, reframing is a brilliant one. Maybe if we continue the miniseries, we could do one on healthy eating. 'cause there's an awful lot of work about reframing and how that can be used to encourage maybe healthier eating choices. [00:48:00] I like that.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Let's make that a plan.

Richard Shotton: Yeah. Okay.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Until next time. If you found this podcast interesting, engaging, please share it with others that you think would like to hear it and leaving a comment, clicking follow, giving a like really helps us reach more people.

So we'd ask that you do that as well. And until next time, I'm MichaelAaron Flicker.

Richard Shotton: And I'm Richard Shotton.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Thanks for listening.

Advertisement: 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 Ink's, 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 [00:49:00] 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.