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

Richard Shotton: And I'm Richard Shotton.

MichaelAaron Flicker: And today, we're sitting with David Robson.

Award-winning science writer, author of three books, most notably the Expectation Effect, which is won the British Psychological Society Book Award. We're very excited to talk about that and much more, let's get into it. So, David, welcome to Behavioral Science for Brands. As you know, Richard and I are on this little mission to find the best applications of behavioral science in the world, apply them to the world of marketing, and we're super excited to have you today.

David Robson: Yeah, I can't wait for the conversation. Thank you for inviting me.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Yes. Wonderful. So if you'll indulge me, let me give our listeners a little background on [00:01:00] you and it's set the stage before we get into our conversation. So David, you're an award-winning science writer based in London specializing in medicine, psychology, and neuroscience.

Your work has been featured. I'm sorry, you've, you've worked as a features editor at The New Scientist and as a senior journalist at BBC, and your writing has appeared in The Guardian, the Times, the Wall Street Journal, the Atlantic, and much more. And you're author of three different books, the Intelligence Trap, the Expectation Effect, and your latest book, the Laws of Connection, coming out in paperback this June, which we'll talk about later in this show as well.

And if that wasn't enough, you're extremely active on LinkedIn and Twitter, where you regularly distill your own writing and complex behavioral findings into actionable insights. We're thrilled to have you. Welcome, welcome, welcome. So as we get into our conversation, our listeners love [00:02:00] stories.

Maybe we can start with how did you get introduced to the world of neuroscience of consumer psychology. Where does this story start for you?

David Robson: Yeah, I mean, so I guess right from when I was a very little kid, so about five or six years old. I was always super fascinated with science. Especially I guess that was born from David Attenborough's series, life on Earth.

Which I just found it was almost like a spiritual awakening in a way. I'm kind of agnostic religiously, but I found that that just awoke so much awe and wonder for me, and I've just been hooked on science ever since. But at the same time, I just love writing and reading. So I always had kind of, you know, little short stories or like I'd try to write like, you know, children's novels when I was growing up.

And. Then, you know, I studied mathematics at Cambridge University and once I [00:03:00] was about to graduate, you know, I really had this kind of dilemma of what I wanted to do. And so science writing just seemed a way to marry all of my interest. And it was while I was at New Scientist Magazine that I just gravitated towards neuroscience and psychology in particular because it felt so personally relevant.

You know, I'd be reading these journals and I'd be finding. All of these discoveries that I could apply to myself to improve my own memory or decision making. And I thought, well, I want to share what I've learned with as many people as possible. And that's really the aim with each of my books. You know, that answering deep questions that I wanted to know selfishly, and then I thought, well, this is a really great story to tell the rest of the world.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Could there be a more you know, romantic vision of how you go deep on a topic than solving it for yourself and feeling like you ha you've learned something to share. Has there been something that's been surprising to you doing this multiple times? Having come out with your [00:04:00] third book? Every time you do it, you go into a, a meaningfully deep topic. Anything that surprised you as you've gone kind of back to do this over and over again?

David Robson: Yeah. In the process, I guess I was kind of relieved to find that it does become easier with time which I guess isn't guaranteed

actually. But yeah. What I do find fascinating is the first chapter's always the hardest one to write.

It's almost like in the gap between books when I've been. You know, doing the marketing and publicity for the previous one, I almost forget how to write long form and so it takes a bit of time to warm up. But once I've, and each book has a slightly different tone and slightly different approach I guess.

So the first chapter's difficult to kind of, to shake that out and to work out what my template is gonna be like, how I'm going to tell these stories. And then once that's done, it becomes much simpler and it's, you know, just a real pleasure. I know a lot of people complain about the writing [00:05:00] process, but I just really love it.

I love. You know, synthesizing all of this research and just finding the way through it, finding that narrative that's going to be the most compelling and honest way of communicating it to as many people as I can.

MichaelAaron Flicker: And as you've gone through all these different topics, you are running up to things that affect consumer psychology or marketing and advertising.

You've kind of run into these moments in, in, in your studies. We're gonna, we, we, Richard and I have prepared a number of different things that we'd love to chat about, but just to kind of more globally is there's takeaways after doing all of this writing that you think about consumer psychology or about product and marketing that come to mind to you kind of more broadly?

David Robson: Yeah, definitely. So I, I think like the writing the expectation effect no, the intelligence strap, sorry. My first book, hadn't necessarily expected of that to realize how important intuition can be, not [00:06:00] just in making consumer decisions, but actually in making the right consumer decisions. And so that has always stuck with me, that actually we, you know, we can make very good rational decisions, deliberative decisions if we're considering relatively few number of factors.

But actually if we're making decisions where we're have to having to weigh out multiple different options. Multiple different qualities. Were

better to absorb all of that information. You know, it is good to do the homework, but then let it incubate and then go back to that. And, and I've let it just kind of pan out and trust your gut.

And often your gut is much better than if you try to do these laborious kind of calculations to work it out. So that's always stuck with me. And I just think the idea that, you know, sitting on something and then, and then kind of leaving it to settle and, and letting. Maybe some factors that you didn't expect to, to really count, to actually come to mind and and then to make the [00:07:00] decision after that.

I think that's something I apply all the time now, especially with those big decisions like, you know, buying a house or a car where you are making a huge investment.

Richard Shotton: Yep. Yeah. That is well one of the phrasing that sticks in my mind when we talk about the really big decisions, there was this English economist called Ken Binmore.

Con's work was started to become a bit more popular. He said like all these biases, you know, I'm sure they work when people are buying ounces of crisps or cans of Coke, but they're all gonna work when people have big purchases like a car or a house, because then they have such a strong best interest to think things through more clearly.

But Richard Dana's response was, was amazing. He said, look, can you get this completely the, the wrong way round? You know? When you are buying a really small purchase, you do it really regularly. You learn your preferences, you know what you like, but if you're doing something of a massive scale, like buy a car or anything of, of huge expenditure, [00:08:00] you do it so rarely.

You don't really know what, what you think. You don't, you know, that you, you, so he said, you know, Taylor's argument and he called this the binmore continuum, was that actually it's those huge purchases were often the biases are of most passed. Whether it's social proof or, or anger, and it's when we don't have our own experience to rely on, we have to look at other rules of thumb to get by.

David Robson: Yeah, no, I totally agree. And I think anchoring especially is so important for those huge pur purchases. And I, I think sometimes if we, ironically, I think if we try to make a totally rational

deliberative decision with that we can allow the wrong things to so we caught up on. Kind of state of the kitchen or the decoration or you know, we're thinking about how much that might cost us to redecorate the place, but we're completely ignoring the fact that the location might be perfect for us, and that's much harder.

Find a suitable place in a suitable location, and that's gonna affect your [00:09:00] quality of life for such a long time. I think intuitively we often understand that, but when we we're trying to be smart about it, we often miss that part.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Yeah. We were with another guest last week, Roy Sutherland who's a vice chairman at Ogilvy uk.

And I don't know if this comes from a study or this is his own experience. He said real estate agents, you all call them the state agents in the uk. Yeah, we'll always show you a more expensive place first, like, like that will always be your anchor, regardless of what you've said your price range is. I don't know if there's data behind that, but it was very interesting insight because it helps anchor even the choices of what you're looking at.

And then of course, everything you said, David.

David Robson: No, I think that is true actually. It's just, I mean, you know it's quite a sneaky trick, but it definitely does work because then whatever you see next seems like a real bargain in comparison. Yeah, yeah. There's certainly studies by

Richard Shotton: I think Margaret Neil and North [00:10:00] Craft who've shown that anchoring does affect people's perception of what a fair price to pay is when it comes to houses.

They showed people who were in market for a house first didn't houses, asked 'em what they thought they were worth. And all they did was randomize the asking price. And they showed that on buyers that asking price acted as an anchor and there was a very big effect. But what was really interesting, the did it on estate agents and the effect wasn't as large in terms of its scale, but professionals were influenced by the bias span room as well.

I think often there's this bit of a miss in the realm of behavioral science Now, lots of martyrs now accept behavioral science affects consumer good purchasing. There's evidence that it affects professionals as well. I think that's something that's under exploited, under under tap. Well, interesting.

MichaelAaron Flicker: So David, you you, in the, in your opening, you started to talk about the expectation effect. Maybe you could tell us a little bit more about the expectation [00:11:00] effect and we can learn from you about that.

David Robson: Yeah. So the expectation effect as a phenomenon quite simply is that our beliefs can become self-fulfilling prophecies, and it can happen through various mechanisms, which can be perceptual behavioral, but also physiological.

So our expectations often do change objective measures of what our body's doing. Things like inflammation, blood pressure you know. Activity in the areas of the brain that are involved in pleasure or pain all of these things. Yeah. And it's very powerful. I mean, it can, in the book I kind of explore, you know, obviously how this has been studied extensively in medicine with the placebo effect, but it can also influence how we respond to exercise, how we respond to diet to different food substances and how that can affect, how easy it is to go on a diet and lose weight, and it can even affect your aging. So people with positive views of [00:12:00] aging tend to live about seven years longer than people with negative views.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Can you connect that for us a little deeper? How does this expectation effect affect views of exercise or dieting?

That would be helpful to have you explain and then maybe we can connect it to what brands might do with this as well. That'd be helpful.

David Robson: Yeah, sure. So so with exercise, for example, we all have this kind of sense of how fit we are compared to other people and whether we're naturally good at exercise or whether we're, you know, just not sporty, whether we're naturally count potatoes.

There's might be an objective component to that, but I guess with all of the expectation effect, but I'm trying to say is our beliefs are formed of an objective component and also a totally subjective component. Like it

could just be you had a really bad experience in gym class at school, but actually there's nothing.

Wrong with your body. Nothing to mean that you can't get fitter. You know, everyone can improve with regular training. [00:13:00] Now what the research shows is that that can change those views, can change both our perception of the exercise, so how hard we feel that we've been working, how tired we feel, even after a short amount of time on the treadmill.

But that it can also change things physiologically too. So, the gas exchange of it within the lungs, like how much oxygen you are transferring within your lungs and how much carbon dioxide you're expelling that can be influenced by your beliefs about your fitness. So there's this great study from Stanford University that looked at this and I just gave people a genetic test and then gave them sham feedback about what that test showed and people who were told they had.

Sporty genes tended to have, you know, more efficient gas exchange in the lungs than people who were told they had the negative genes. And in that case it was, the effect was actually bigger than the effect of the genes [00:14:00] themselves. So just believing you had the good genes was better than actually having the good gene.

Richard Shotton: We, we've found that people are skeptical of behavioral science and psychology. You know, they've heard about one or two studies that don't replicate and then, you know, they're cynical about all of them. If you were trying to persuade a died in the wall, cynic about the power of the expectation effect, is there one study that you think is most powerful persuading the doubters?

What's the, what's the gonna single most solid bit of evidence for the expectation folk?

David Robson: Hmm. Yeah, I mean, that's a great question. So first of all, I'd say, well, convinced me was not the single any single study, but more the wealth of evidence. And I think what I especially appreciated was the fact that you had converging evidence from lots of different types of studies.

So you'd have the longitudinal studies that would be tracking people over time, and you could see a temporal pattern there. So the beliefs

would [00:15:00] often proceed the physiological effects that you saw, for example. We've had the mechanistic studies, so you know, where you are kind of changing someone's belief in the way that I described straight away and you know, in a single laboratory session and then you're seeing, say, a hormonal change immediately after.

You know, it's those kinds of things that we understand the mechanisms, we can see the long-term effects on the effects that convinced me. I do think the strongest argument for the power of expectations is just the sheer amount of. Times we've observed the placebo effect and it's opposite the Nobo effect in medicine.

You know, it's, you get a very few people who owed term placebo deniers who say that that's a statistical artifact. But actually even then you've had further studies that have interrogated that and have shown that actually, you know, even when you, [00:16:00] even when you compare someone taking a placebo. To someone taking no treatment, someone taking the treatment.

You can see the differential effect of, of the strength of the expectations on the physical responses. And that's especially true of something like pain relief, for example. And, you know, further evidence for the power of placebos with pain is the mechanism has been tested so thoroughly in that we know that when you take a placebo painkiller your brain.

Produces these chemicals called endogenous opioids. So its own kind of opioid system. It starts producing those chemicals and you can then, you can surreptitiously give someone a chemical that blocks the effects of opioids. And what you see is that the placebo effect then disappears. People will take the placebo, but they don't report any pain relief.

And I think that's just impossible to explain. Ready? Right, unless there's some physiological mechanism. 'cause these [00:17:00] people obviously, if it was just some kind of purely subjective report or they were just trying to please the researchers by saying by telling them what they thought they wanted to say, then it shouldn't make a difference.

But giving that opioid blocker really does make a difference. So yeah, I think it's studies like that that have convinced me it's,

MichaelAaron Flicker: it's such a great point, David, because we have talked more broadly on the podcast about. The biases of research. And

if you can give yourself behavioral research where they don't know what you're looking for, they can't affect the, the person being researched doesn't understand what they're being asked, and you observe the behavior and not the direct answers to the questions.

It gives you so much more insight. So this is a great example of that where, you know, if you block the opioids that are being produced. I had no idea whether that was happening or not. It's really a great example.

David Robson: Yeah, exactly. I mean, another example again with pain relief, placebo pain relief is [00:18:00] that you can see a real difference in the amount of pain relief people experience by whether they receive their, so this is using the real drug, but you can see there is a placebo effect even with the real drug.

People get more pain relief from morphine if their doctor tells them that they're receiving it than if it's given surreptitiously through a drip. Again, if. If the placebo effect didn't exist, we just wouldn't expect that to happen. It should be the same throughout.

Richard Shotton: Yeah.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Very interesting, very compelling.

Let's take this conversation and apply it to product marketing, advertising, building brands, which is most of our listeners are in. Are either responsible for brands or responsible for growing products. What exper, what evidence have you seen that this bias affects the way people experience products?

David Robson: So I mean, if we stick with pain relief we can see that the branding around [00:19:00] painkillers can really influence the amount of. Pain relief that people experience from those. Again, I think this is evidence for the existence of the placebo effect in general, but then I think specifically it's relevant to marketing and it shows how creating that very consistent message can, you know, not just influence who's buying your products, but then the experience that they're having of those products.

And so, so what we see with these painkillers is that if you give someone a kind of specific brand such as Nien, they have more pain relief than if you give them a generic brand or a supermarket brand, for example,

something less prestigious. And you can see with something like Nien, that's really the, you know, through, you know, years of advertising, it's really created this expectation that they're powerful. Now, everything about the, the packaging, the wording that's used, it tells you that you're getting something that's going to bring you relief. [00:20:00] And so that's much more likely to happen when you take that compared to something generic, which is a lot plainer, lot less interesting that doesn't have this history.

You don't have the. Memories of when of it working in the past, which could be then self-reinforcing. So all of those factors, I think, contribute to this, this effect of branding in the placebo.

MichaelAaron Flicker: You know, the literal application of this to me, like pops into mind. You go and buy in America, Advil or Tylenol and it says, you know 33% more effective than store brands.

But it, and, and, but there's also this like lateral effect of that. We talked in a previous episode about Listerine and you know, it tastes so strong. It must work mean like it, I'm forgetting, I don't remember the exact line, but you got it, Richard.

Richard Shotton: The taste you hate twice a day. So really emphasizing it's got a horrendous taste and people have an [00:21:00] expectation that, well, if it tastes bad, it's gonna be potent.

So emphasizing the, an illness of the taste. Create those positive expectations, which is, I think you'll say, David, they become self-fulfilling.

David Robson: Yep. Yeah, absolutely. And I think though, I think I've seen research that I can't remember how reliable it is that, you know, bitter tasting pills do seem to have a bigger effect than stuff that's sweet because we do have that kind of intuition I think that we've grown up with that if something pays bad, it's good for you.

Yeah.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Do you have any insight of whether or not. The brand telling you this thing, the longevity of the advertising, like you called out for the brand name versus Morgan or any, any physi, a

physical experience like a bitter pill. Do you have a sense in which of those is more impactful or which of those more effects?

Expectations or, or altogether they just add up. [00:22:00]

David Robson: Yeah, I haven't seen a direct comparison, but I do think it is the, the sum of them that's more powerful than any particular element. Actually. I think when you get the right combination, that's that's what really produces the biggest effects. I would say also we have seen some really interesting case studies where this has kind of backfired when companies, for example, have changed the slight, they've slightly changed the recipe for their pills so that they've changed like a different color, even though the active ingredients remain the same. And what you see is that you have a huge increase in the reports for things like side effects as a result of that, because you've lost the trust of the consumer when you do that.

I think the change in color, an example I'm, I'm thinking of, I can't remember what drug it it was now, but it was it might have been a, a thyroid medication and the [00:23:00] change happened in New Zealand and I was change, you know, from being white to off-white. It really wasn't that important, but it became kind of self-perpetuating because then the media got hold of this story and then the more media coverage that this attracted, the more that those fears were being reinforced.

And so you saw, you know, a thousand fold increase in the. Number of side effects that were being reported and the number of people who were deciding not to take the medication as a result.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Fascinating. Fascinating. do you think that in that example, or more broadly, there was things that a brand could have done to be aware of that to be aware or to guard against that type of change, but sometimes you have to change a color of a pill or sometimes there will be things that need to happen.

Any guidance that you have on how brands can protect themselves from ending up in an unfortunate situation where it becomes self perpetuating?

David Robson: Yeah. I mean, [00:24:00] so I can't remember the details of this, but I think it was, they had changed the manufacturing site and for some reason that also demanded a slight change in the recipe.

I'd say, you know, before this was studied, I think that particular company probably just. Came as a complete surprise because it hadn't been seen before. But I think now we do know this there probably were steps that could have been taken. So warning people in advance and kind of preempting those responses I think can be very powerful.

You know, we see this also just in combating fake news or misinformation in general, is that actually that kind of inoculation can, can help to. Lay people's doubts and fears before they've even had a chance to embed within the mind. So yeah, that's what I would say. Think very carefully about how you're communicating those painters and reassuring people upfront.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Very helpful.

Richard Shotton: I find the, the the [00:25:00] studies around branded painkillers versus non-branded painkillers, one of the most interesting experiments that you, you, you covered in the book. The question there, I suppose comes in Britain at least. It's becoming increasingly well known that Neurofen and ibuprofen are pharmacologically almost identical.

Does that knowledge then reduce the impact to the expectation effect? If I know Neurofen is chemically the same as ibuprofen, does the expectation effect disappear?

David Robson: I would expect it to, so I'd be how, I'd love to see a study that tested that. But yeah, I would expect to, because. This is one of the things that I love about the expectation effect is that normally educating people about what's happening can work to their advantage.

You know, people absorb that information, especially if you explain it clearly, you give the evidence, then people tend to you know, change their mindsets by themselves. So I I absolutely would think that. [00:26:00] And conversely, so when we're talking about expectations creating these side effects, we do know that if you educate people about that possibility than they do, they're much less susceptible to, to that phenomenon, which we call the Nocebo effect.

So yeah, I would, I would imagine that that knowledge is helpful and also, you know, then people can start using the placebo effect to their advantage. So there've been lots of studies looking at open label

placebos where you actually tell people. You're taking a placebo, but you know, you say you're taking this an uphill, but don't worry, it will have an effect because of the mind body connection, because of all, all of the things that we've discussed.

And what you see is that people actually do experience significant pain relief, like clinically significant pain relief, but chronic conditions as a result of, so so that knowledge really can be power. And I, I would imagine then, you know, if you empower people by educating them about the fact that even one [00:27:00] of these generic painkillers can be just as powerful as the expensive brands that they've been buying, then I imagine they can change their mindset in a similar way to get the most relief from that pill.

MichaelAaron Flicker: How does we talking about brand name painkillers versus store brand painkillers, how does price affect expectation? How does the, the, the price you pay change the way you feel ?

David Robson: The Yeah, I mean this study that comes to mind look to people's appreciation of wine and we could see a very clear correlation between, the price and what people reported, how much they imported enjoying the wine, the words they used to describe it. Also the brain scans showed, you know, greater responses in the areas associated with rewards. So it really does make a difference. You know, we assume that we're paying more for something, we're guessing higher quality, [00:28:00] and we appreciate that more.

I also think we're probably just focusing our attention more. We're savoring it more 'cause we know. How much of our time has gone into earning that money that we spent on the products that we bought?

Richard Shotton: That's such an interesting study.

David Robson: Hmm.

Richard Shotton: Yeah. I was just gonna say it, it's it, it poses a conundrum for business owners and marketers because one of the most regularly used tactics to increase demand is to put your product on promotion that reduce the price.

The danger is that work quote from Bahir, I think, is that if you repeatedly reduce the price, you're essentially training your potential consumer to have a negative set of expectations about your product. And they will not just create negative images, they'll actually create a negative, potentially more negative experience.

About the, the product consumption. So I think people have gotta be really careful about excessive discounting or at least be aware that it can affect the actual taste of the wine in this case.

David Robson: [00:29:00] Yeah, I think you're right. I, I think that one way around that is just to make the original price very salient.

So people are remembering how much it should have cost even if they got the bargain. And I think that. That could make the all the difference actually. But like you say, if it's repeated, if they become to just expect the price to be that and they, you know, maybe come to be suspicious that the original price is even the correct price, then I think you're right.

Then that could have a negative effect on the experience, the perception of what they're consuming.

MichaelAaron Flicker: So we've talked about painkillers. Are there other. Categories that are more prone to the expectation effect. Are there certain types of people or consumers that would be more prone to the expectation effect?

David Robson: Yeah, I mean, so let's say food's another one. So we've spoken about wine. You know, there's so many ways that the expectation effect can change [00:30:00] perceptions of food. I mean, just in terms of the, you know, the taste of it. The words that we use can lead people to savor the experience more. So one of my favorite studies looked at consumer's responses to chocolate cake.

And I found this really interesting also from a dieting perspective, that you, by having these really sumptuous descriptions of the chocolate cake of people, you know, queued up to get their sliced. People were happier to have a smaller slice when it had this really sensuous label because they realized that they would get as much pleasure from a smaller portion and that they probably didn't need the big portion to get the pleasure that they were craving.

So I think that's, you know, very useful if we're trying to cut down on our calorie [00:31:00] intake to just focus on those. Sensations, but also they were willing to pay more for a smaller slice too. So it changed the way that they were that, you know, the kind of cost benefit analysis that they were performing.

So, you know, that's, that's one thing that we should bear in mind, I think, for all foods. But then what's especially important is that then you can see some effect on the satiety. So how much, how full people feel. After they've eaten again, that might be a perceptual, purely perceptual expectation effect because essentially the signals we're getting from the gut are pretty messy, actually.

Like, you know, that we do have sensors in the gut's walls that can measure the stretch as we've eaten, but it's really not accurate. So the brain is using all of its other knowledge, you know, such as the site of the food or the descriptions. To work [00:32:00] out, you know, has it had enough nutrition essentially, and that can shape your cravings later on.

But what really shocked me was that it can also then change the way the body is responding hormonally to the food that you are eating. So we saw this with this experiment looking at how people responded physiologically to a milkshake. They came into the lab on two separate occasions. They drank exactly the same milkshake on V vacations.

There was nothing different in the way it was composed or produced. It was only the labeling that was different. One instance, it was presented as this really luxurious treat. The labeling described all of the kind of full fat ingredients that had gone into it. The ice cream, the chocolate, the, the other one the other time the labeling presented it as this sensible health shake. So it was something that was meant to just keep you [00:33:00] full up, but not give you much pleasure. And it not only did it have quite a very, of a very bland branding, but also in the nutritional information, it, it emphasized how little fat, it had, how little sugar.

And it gave a lower calorie rating for the for the content. What the researchers did in each case was they measured levels of the hormone ghrelin before, during, and after the participants ate these milkshakes. So ghrelin is called the hunger hormone. The higher it is, the more hungry we feel. Normally if we're eating a big meal, you'd expect ghrelin to spike very quickly.

Just as you're about to eat because you've seen this delicious plate in front of you. You know, it's telling you to make the most of that opportunity. And then it, it dips dramatically because you're full up. You don't need to eat more food. You can conserve your energy, digest that food without seeking more food.

Now that's exactly what you saw [00:34:00] when the milkshake was labeled as this decadent, luxurious snack when it was labeled as this very bland health shape with barely any. Any flavor or any calories. The grilling just didn't really change at all. It just stayed at this plateau. That's, you know, if you are dieting, that's the last thing you want your food to do because you want to make sure that each calorie you consume reduces your cravings later on. And that just was not happening when these people ate that food labeled a whole shake.

Richard Shotton: For me, that was one of the most interesting sections of the, the book. Where you are quite scathing about many manufacturers of healthy or diet foods, how they misuse the expectations. It, you've talked about some of the kind of problems of labeling something as healthy.

What could those manufacturers do, do, do differently? How could they make sure the expectations that their packaging or their [00:35:00] advertising create are as, as positive as possible?

David Robson: Yeah, I mean, so it does depend on culture. So that's worth emphasizing that they've actually looked at our associations across different countries.

And so in France, if you label something as healthy people associate that with it also being delicious and pleasurable, that's not the case in the UK or the US or some other nor Northern European countries. So the word healthy for some people can just be in itself, it can be quite offputting. But I think we can get around that we can emphasize, you know, even if something's healthy, I think you can still make a lot about all of the health giving properties of that food.

That does seem to also help people too. It helps to curb their cravings later on because even if it's not, emphasizing how delicious it is. I think telling people, you know, it's got this much protein, it's got the, all these vitamins, you know, that's telling them that they're getting something

that's important and useful for their [00:36:00] body and that does seem to help.

But I think also, you know, these healthy meals, they probably have been designed to be rich in flavors and we should just be emphasizing that, directing people's attention to the things that they could be appreciating about those products that go beyond the health benefits. So, you know, why should.

Low calorie drinks still feel like a treat. Like what, what are you trying to, how have you created this product to make it feel like a celebration and, 'cause that's what I think we should be doing with dieting. The best diets are still going to make food. The core part of your day is still going to be some, one of the things that you can afford to, you can get comfort from, that you can celebrate.

And so I think marketers can really hold that top of their mind as they're designing their branding.

Richard Shotton: So if you have a healthy food, emphasize it's tastiness. That seems to be the key message. But what was something else that you said there? That if people emphasize what a health food adds, like more protein, more [00:37:00] vitamins, that tends to not create the negative perceptions.

Whereas if you say what you are missing, you get this negative expectations. But is that, is that fair? Is that what you were, you were saying?

David Robson: Yeah, exactly. So I think a lot of the experiments had looked at labeling that had. Created this mindset of deprivation. So it's all about the kind of, how it's low, in fact, low in sugar, but it's not really saying what it's adding.

Instead, like, like you said, it's not, whereas if you say it's, you know, full of all of these crucial vitamins, it's full of this protein that's gonna help you to grow your muscles and maintain your tissue, you know, emphasizing that fact it, it doesn't create the same sense that you are missing out.

Whereas I think a lot of health foods do, are focused too much on just being like low calorie for example. That's the salient information that

people take away. And you don't want that to be, that can be part of it, you know, that can be maybe why they choose it, but you don't want that to be what they're thinking about as they're consuming the food, as they're as they're trying to get [00:38:00] pleasure out of what they're eating.

Richard Shotton: I think the, maybe the worst culprits here in the world of healthier products who perhaps non-alcoholic beers. I mean, even the phrase non alcoholic beers, they're very much stressing what's absent there. I've seen a couple of people who have tried to do what you are suggesting, which is focus more on the kind of upsides rather than the deprivation.

So one which didn't take off, which I think was more about the quality, the products than the marketing. Budweiser used to harass prohibition brew, which I thought gave it this wonderful mystique of kind of naughtiness and stretch. And then the other one was, there's a brand called Infinite Session.

So emphasizing you can have more fun with your friends, you can stay longer, you can keep on over the pub for, for much more time. So I think that they are those brands were both trying to apply some of those principles that you're talking about.

David Robson: Yeah, I think that's a great example actually. Yeah.

Which actually just it's a bit of a tangent, but it does remind me of not [00:39:00] one of my favorite experiments on. And I think this shows how with taste, in particular, how expectations are powerful. There was researchers at MIT in the us they were looking at they kind of created these beers that it sounds pretty disgusting when you hear what went in it.

So they just put some, they added vinegar to a bunch of beers. Yes. Yeah. Right. It doesn't sound appetizing, but I mean, I've tasted it and it is actually. Pretty nice. But what they found was that if they labeled that as special, MIT brew and it seemed kind of high tech, you know, maybe they'd use some kind of new scientific technique to create the beer people.

And they didn't tell them about the vinegar. People really loved it. They preferred it to their normal, like bud buys or or whatever else they'd be

consuming. If you told them just up front, you know, we've got. We've added vinegar to this beer. They hated it. You know, really it [00:40:00] was very polarizing based just on the labeling.

And so, yeah, I think, you know, like when you talk about non-alcoholic beers, you know, what you really want, like you said, is to conjure up something that feels special. It feels like a treat, you know? And I think you're right, like calling it Infinite Session is a great way to do that because it's showing you how much more fun you might be able to have, like how you can extend your night out, if you drink that beer. Yeah,

Richard Shotton: I think that's a super powerful study. 'cause I think they had another version where they told people the beer had vinegar in, but only after they'd tasted it. And then they asked them what they, they thought, and they found that if you revealed the negative information after an experience, it still reduced perceptions versus not being told about the negative ingredient.

But not by very much. It was much better. To tell people after the event about the vinegar added rather than telling them about the vinegar being added before they tried it. Now, that I think has got loads of implications of brands. 'cause what you could think [00:41:00] is, well, if we've got a non beer, if we've got a fat free yogurt, let's get people to taste it first and then remove, reveal what's being removed.

Let people. Sample it without those negative sets of expectations that come with healthiness. So I I I, I agree with you. I think it's a wonderful study that lots of listeners could, could think about flying when they, when they're sold new products.

David Robson: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I totally agree. Yeah. So I hadn't, I had never thought of it that way actually, how that part could be practically applied.

I think you're right. 'cause when you've lived through an expectation effect, it can, it does become self-reinforcing. So, yeah, I think it's getting people to. You know, have an open mind before they try something new is essential.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Yeah. We have a episode that listeners can call back on on Kraft Macaroni and Cheese, and they change their they change the, the way they make Kraft MA and Cheese to remove some

undesirable coloring, undesirable [00:42:00] elements because they don't tell anybody.

And the campaign they run six months after the food has been on the shelves, the new formula's been out, is you've been part of the line, the largest blind taste test in the world. Like, and, and then they reveal it to the point of not revealing the change until after the, the experiences occurred, until after they've tasted it.

And we talked about that in that episode, and I think it's all about the same concept of how do you, if you're going to make a change, how can you use that expectation to your advantage? Or how can you reveal it after they have had a positive experience? So I think that it's all related. It's very exciting.

Richard Shotton: With, with all these studies, I see so much value to food marketers. So why do you think more brands, especially let's stick in the world of maybe health to to where the, where the, where the applications are, are, are, are most obvious? Why do you think more brands aren't applying the expectation, or why do you think they're [00:43:00] misapplying it so regularly?

David Robson: Hmm. I mean, I, I, I feel like this might just be the lag that you have between academic research meeting the industry. I mean, I have given talks to different brands, including like a pasta brand about these results. And I think, you know, hopefully it will be feeding into what they're doing. But I feel like one of the.

The reasons they haven't applied it so far is that it, it doesn't feel very intuitive actually, that these things are gonna make a difference. And, you know, you are, you're producing something with, with a very specific purpose for a very specific market. People who want to lose weight you know, it seems to make sense to emphasize the, the kind of primary thing that they will be looking for in their foods.

That's why I still think it should be a part of that. Like we do need to let people know the calorie content so they can make these decisions and so that they can know how much they're consuming each day. It's more a [00:44:00] question of balance. I think that's the thing that's maybe been lacking. You don't want that to be the only thing that they're thinking about.

So I do hope that we will see change in the future as more people become aware of this,

MichaelAaron Flicker: and it connects to a point that we make often, which is learning about this. Part of the listening to this podcast is one thing, designing an experiment with your own brand where you can trial run it, test run it out in the real world and see the reactions you get.

See, the feedback you get is a way to baby step your way towards, towards implementing these insights more fully. You don't have to convince the entire board or your leadership team that you should just change all the messaging all at once. Where can you find a small test that you can. More balance the message, David, to your point, and then see how that performs short term.

But also, I would argue qualitatively, do people react to your product differently? Even if it doesn't drive more sales immediately, how does it change the [00:45:00] reaction? That can be a leading indicator of it being a good idea to do more of

David Robson: for, yeah, I think that's key as well, because I do wonder if making these changes wouldn't necessarily have an influence on the immediate sales because it might not be more appealing when people are in the supermarket making their choices. What you might find is that then people will come back to your products more loyally, because once they've had that great experience of having this site food that actually leaves them feeling very full up and satisfied and that they've had a, a great experience, then you know, they'll stick to their diets for longer.

They'll be relying on those products for longer.

MichaelAaron Flicker: This is a great, this, we've covered a number of different topics across a number of different industries. Really appreciate the conversation today, David. Really it's been, it's been a great, a great talk. We always ask the wrap up question and we were wondering is there an example of behavioral science being [00:46:00] applied today?

These insights that you see in the real world that really is exciting to you, that you think is being done well? We always like to bring it to action. So not anything we talked about today or anything through your work where you have an example of it really working in the real world that you might wanna share with us.

David Robson: Yeah, that's a good question. Cause you know, obviously it's something that's always top of my mind. I mean, I, I do think the marketing of painkillers has been obviously very successful. It's been proven to change people's experience. I feel I would add one caveat to that, which is that it might well be having a long-term effect on the size of the placebo effect that we see.

In all trials now, all clinical trials in the us. So there's evidence though, over the last few decades that placebo effect has been steadily increasing painkillers. And there's one theory that this is because [00:47:00] people it may well partly be because of the advertising around painkillers and just that people come to have higher expectations of what those.

Drugs can do which is slowly increasing the placebo effect, but also the more people understand about the power of the mind body connection, it's almost becoming its brand. The placebos are becoming their brand in their own way. So when you have these clinical trials comparing placebos to pills in the past there was always this kind of fear in the people in the trials that they might be, they were worried that they might be taking the placebo pill, and so that could be producing negative expectations.

Now because people know that even the placebo can be helpful, potentially they have higher expectations of pain relief regardless. So that could be another explanation for the increase. You know, something that I would really love to see you do can now see placebo pills that are available commercially.

[00:48:00] I'd love to see in the future more opportunities for and more companies kind of getting creative with how they can use the placebo, how they can help people to. Use of the mind body connection themselves. So yeah, that's what I would like.

MichaelAaron Flicker: David, thank you so much. And as we always do, the discussions we've had today, the studies that we've talked about, Richard and I will collect them and put them in the show notes so folks can read more about our conversation, get the full transcripts of today, and thanks again for joining us.

Really appreciate it.

David Robson: It's been a real pleasure. Thank you.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Until next time you can find us at the consumer behavior lab.com or search for behavioral science. For brands, anywhere you listen to podcasts, happy listening.

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