

Ep 130: Interview - Michael Norton, Harvard Business School professor and author of The Ritual Effect, on how brands turn ordinary consumption into rituals that build emotional connection

Michael Norton: [00:00:00] Sometimes when I talk about rituals I'll start the talk by having everybody stand up, and by the third step in it, everybody's synced up, which is crazy 'cause I didn't tell anybody to do anything. Sometimes you'll see somebody who claps too early or stomps too late, and people's heads, no joke, swivel at the person and they look disgusted, like angry, like irritated.

And I say, "You've never done this ritual before in your life. I made it up, and within 30 seconds there's a right and wrong way to do it, and you're mad at people for doing it differently from you."

MichaelAaron Flicker: That was Dr. Michael Norton, and what made that clip so interesting is it shows how a simple action can quickly start to have meaning and even start to make people feel right from wrong.

Dr. Norton's view is [00:01:00] that rituals can come from anywhere, and they surprisingly come from everywhere. He really draws a line between a habit and a ritual, where a ritual's something that starts to matter to people. And from there, our conversation opened up into how rituals shape everyday life, why they become even more important in moments of uncertainty, and how brands can turn ordinary acts of consumption into richer, more emotional experiences.

Dr. Michael Norton is a professor at Harvard Business School and author of the book The Ritual Effect. And now, on to our show.

Welcome back to Behavioral Science for Brands, a podcast where we bridge the gap between academics and practical marketing. Every week, we sit down and go deep behind the science that powers great marketing today. I'm MichaelAaron Flicker.

Richard Shotton: And I'm Richard Shotton.

MichaelAaron Flicker: And today we're sitting with Mike Norton, Harvard [00:02:00] professor and author of The Ritual Effect.

Let's get into it. Mike, welcome to Behavioral Science for Brands. We're thrilled to have you join us today.

Michael Norton: Thank you both for asking me to come on.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Yeah. We have been reading your material, watching your p- professional appearances as it were, and before we get into discussing rituals, discussing behavioral science, and going much deeper, we thought we might play a little game.

We call it quick fire round. Mike, what do you think your friends or family might say about your passion for rituals?

Michael Norton: They would say Beautiful Mind, the movie about John Nash when he's in his room with all the pegs and everything connecting everything, they would be like, " that's sort of him with rituals."

MichaelAaron Flicker: Is there a code phrase or something they say to you to say, "Enough seeing the rituals in the world, let's get back to normal everyday life," or do they just [00:03:00] love you through it all?

Michael Norton: I think it's more of a glance that I get- ... where I realize I should probably knock it off and start acting like a normal person.

MichaelAaron Flicker: And would you say that ... What's the one area you think rituals ha- seeing these rituals and teaching them has mo- been most impactful? Is it in teaching to your students, is it in business, or where is the thing that you think it's made the most impact in the way you see the world?

Michael Norton: I think it's the, We have big rituals funerals and weddings and stuff like that. I think it's really the small rituals that we kept uncovering that people have that they come up with themselves. For me, that was very eye-opening in understanding humans, but also in understanding myself.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Maybe that leads into our final quick fire question.

How does it ... How have you changed now that you see rituals so much [00:04:00] more clearly in everyday life?

Michael Norton: It's funny because, y- you, once you're thinking about it, you can't stop seeing it. And one version is you just see everybody doing rituals all the time. But again, I think for me it's the looking at myself and realizing how much of what I'm up to every day has some element of ritual in it is just continues to be very interesting to me

MichaelAaron Flicker: Amazing.

L- let's bring our listeners in on the background here. So you wrote in 2024, *The Ritual Effect: From Habit to Ritual, Harnessing the Surprising Power of Everyday Action*, and you mean something very specific about rituals. So maybe you could give us a little bit of the backstory. What do you mean by ritual, and how is that different than a habit or a routine?

Michael Norton: Yeah, I think so in some domains, rituals have very little to do with habits. So for [00:05:00] example we typically don't make a habit out of weddings and funerals . You know what I mean? We're not-

MichaelAaron Flicker: Ideally

Michael Norton: not ... we're not married every day on, at 8:00 AM and make sure we do it but I think so lots of times they're not rel- very closely related, and then in some important cases they're, they can be quite closely related to each other, like with health habits and things like that, where we're every morning trying to go for a run or trying to improve ourselves in some way.

And there, I think it's been harder for us to differentiate clearly between habits and rituals. But this is cheesy, but I gotta ask you this question which I've asked everybody, which is, in the morning, do you brush your teeth and then take a shower, or do you take a shower and then brush your teeth?

Richard? Shower, teeth. Shower,

MichaelAaron Flicker: teeth. Absolutely incorrect, my friend. I brush my teeth- Oh, I love it ... and then I shower.

Michael Norton: The heathenism. I always wanted to look to see if, you know those micro expressions of disgust- Yeah ... that couples can have? Yeah. I

always wonder when [00:06:00] someone says that they have a different one, it's just what the...

But okay, so it, weirdly, it's about 50/50 in most audiences, the order, which is, I don't even know what to make of that. But the key question for your question, to get back to it, is if I ask you to change the order tomorrow morning, and really imagine I asked you to do that, you had to do it, does it, do are you like, "I couldn't care less."

What difference does it make?" Or does something about it bother you in some, you had some sort of a weird feeling thinking about it?

Richard Shotton: Yeah, definitely a... So I would do it, of course, but it would feel a little bit off. It would feel a bit strange, be a bit irritating. Wouldn't feel quite right.

Michael Aaron Flicker: I think I would be worried I would forget to do something else the rest of the day.

I do it in an order so I don't miss anything, and I'm worried if I start wrong, it, the rest of the day might go wrong, too. Is that superstitious? Yeah. Wrong.

Michael Norton: You used off and wrong, I think if you do it in a different order. And [00:07:00] for... This one's also about 50/50, actually. So about half of people, it's just a ridiculous question to ask because they have things they need to get done every morning, and they do them, and why would I possibly care what order I do them in?

And then about half of people- Something about it bothers them. They'll do it it's n- most people don't say, "I can't do that." They'll do it, but they have this feeling of being off or wrong. And for me, that's a little bit the beginning of a difference between habits and rituals, where everyone's doing the same thing.

We're brushing our teeth and showering. But for some people, it's stuff they've gotta get done and check off their list in the morning. And for me, that's closer to a habit. And for other people, it starts to matter how they do it, or when they do it, or who's there when they do it, or what time. All of these sorts of things start to matter.

And as soon-- I think as people start to care about how things are done, they l- [00:08:00] they move further from being

just a habit towards something that's a little more emotional, a little more meaningful. And by the way, I wanna say good habits are great. I'm not a anti-habit in, in any way. It's just interesting to me the, the continuum on which they lie and how to think about the differences.

Richard Shotton: Th- that's a very clear distinction between what's a habit and what's a ritual.

Why do some things get elevated to a ritual? What makes them b- why would a, the person undertaking it start giving it such importance?

Michael Norton: One of the m- most frustrating things about studying this is even if we just use the admittedly silly brushing your teeth and showering example, is that two people can be doing the exact same behaviors And for one person, they couldn't care less, and for another person, it's deeply meaningful and important to them.

And so if you think of religious services, [00:09:00] some people are there because they're expressing their faith and it's incredibly important to them. Other people are there because their parents made them go. But if I'm looking down, everyone's doing the exact same thing the entire time. Actually, I can't tell-- We didn't find a magical, if you clap twice it's not a ritual yet, but if you clap four times it is, and we looked we really did try to think about are there specific behaviors that are additive? And there's-- We really haven't found any that are necessary that any behavior can become imbued with meaning. And for most people, which ones become imbued are a little bit random. It's the, it, it is true that people-- there is a personality individual difference where some people have more, some people have fewer- Yeah

which we can talk about. But the sheer randomness of the behaviors that people start to imbue with meaning and with ritual, it's still to me just astonishing because we'll use anything around [00:10:00] us and build it- Yeah ... into a ritual. Or we don't, couldn't care less- Yeah ... and it's just like trash that we throw away.

Richard Shotton: Y- you mentioned different people have a different propensity to create rituals. And one of the bits of the book I absolutely loved was you mentioned Malinowski, and he talks about-- And this is jumping a very long way from toothbrushing to Papua New Guinea fishermen. But he talks about the, when the people that fish in choppy waters were much more likely to have rituals than those who fish in the calm lagoon.

And I thought this point around rituals being born of uncertainty was interesting because arguably the you could argue we're entering a period of uncertainty, technological change, societal change. Should we expect an upsurge of rituals?

Michael Norton: I think we, we do see with cultural changes that people will quickly adapt and innovate with rituals.

Which again, is not really how I had been thinking [00:11:00] about rituals. I thought of them as things that come from the past and are handed down to us from our families, from culture, from religion. And instead you see people constantly freelancing. So even with When COVID happened, you can, There's rituals that we do before that.

And so in the US, Thanksgiving is a huge thing. The family gets together. People complain about it nonstop. I hate these people. They voted for the other person," all this kind of stuff. When COVID happens, you could imagine that people are like, "Thank God we don't have to do Thanksgiving this year."

And no one did that. They tried to figure out a way to do it over Zoom. And the same with weddings, and the same with funerals. And the technology actually... Sometimes it feels like technology gets in the way of meaning and meaningful interactions, but people will sometimes use [00:12:00] technology to deliver on their desire for rituals.

And we saw it in lots of different domains that people were adapting whatever they'd been doing face-to-face and trying to keep some of the meaning going by, admittedly not as fun but looking at people on a computer screen.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Is there a benefit that one derives from it being more of a ritual?

Meaning if I have a ritual connection to my toothbrushing, is there some, is there something better that happens because of that? Or is it purely my own association with that activity?

Michael Norton: I see rituals as a kind of n- not exactly high risk, high reward, but let's go with that specific phrase for a minute, which is...

And again as silly as it is, so brushing your teeth and showering, if you do it in a specific order, you-- People say, "I feel great. I feel ready to go." these are just, this is literally what people say, "I'm ready [00:13:00] to start my day. I feel

good about my day." And as you both said, if you can't do it the way you wanted, you feel weird and often terrible.

So if your kid comes in and interrupts the thing, now it's actually worse. And so if you think about having rituals it's, they provoke a lot of emotion, but it's not always positive emotion. And I think that, that would've been nice actually, it would've been nice if we had a book where if we said If you clap seven times, it's a ritual, and that will make you six points happier."

That would be like an amazing thing. The secret ways of happiness or something like that. And that's not I think how they typically work out, and they do provoke a really wide range of emotions, some of which people will say, "I feel better," and some of which people will say, "I actually feel worse having done the ritual," or getting interrupted.

Michael Aaron Flicker: When I was younger, I had-- I went to a speech where a military general said, "Make your bed before you start the day [00:14:00] because then you will have accomplished something and you will build off that accomplishment." And I'm not sure if that's why I make my bed every morning, but it does feel ritualistic like I cannot s- I certainly could not go onto my next thing until I get that done.

But I'm aware of that as a benefit of doing that ritual. Or if I ritualize working out, I know beyond just it being a routine, there's some benefit. Is there any connection with the out- the benefits I'm looking to derive or the outcomes, or that doesn't seem to be correlated?

Michael Norton: It's-- This is a great question.

So in lots of domains, we can't look for causality because, for example, I can't randomly assign you to a partner to marry and then randomly assign you to either do a ritual for five years or not. You know what I mean? If w- if we could, we'd do it. But in many domains of life, it's actually quite hard for us to [00:15:00] really limit...

So family rituals can't randomly assign you to any, any new family. So there's lots of things that we're not able to look for causation, and there we of course look for correlations and see what's going on. And we have the problem of do people do rituals because it makes them feel that way or do they feel that way?

All sorts of stuff. In some domains though we can actually do experiments. So for example with team rituals or group rituals, when we randomly assign some

groups to do different kinds of rituals i- including clapping and stomping stuff, one example is the groups who face each other while they do it versus face away from each other while they do it.

If they do that ritual and then we ask them questions about meaning, how meaningful was that behavior? Or we ask them, "You're gonna do this task together next. How meaningful is that task?" We see actually that people have shifted the meaning that they associate with these behaviors. So s- when we can, I think I would say [00:16:00] sometimes we try to look at causality, but unfortunately it's limited to some cases where we really have that kind of control.

Richard Shotton: Michael we've talked about a few everyday examples like toothbrushing and bed making and th- that, that team perform example. A lot of the listeners are marketers, they work with brands. Is there a role for rituals in consumption? I have to say one of my favorite

Michael Norton: Ways to start a talk about rituals now is to show brands that...

Not brands that encourage rituals, encourage their customers to engage in rituals, although there's those too, but literally brands that have the word ritual in the name of the brand, including just the brand is called Ritual. It's astonishing across product categories, and it's been ex- I didn't [00:17:00] do the math, but exponential in terms of the use of this word over the last five years.

It's like coffee and tea and s- and skin products and alcohol and all these sorts of crazy things. Fine events. So there's some marketers have this belief or sense that there's some resonance or power to this word that captures people's attention and does something different than if the brand's called something else.

We have not tested that actually. So a brand that's literally called a ritual versus not.

Richard Shotton: Yeah.

Michael Norton: Do you in fact engage with it differently? Does it change the psychology of the relationship? It's a, like an experiment waiting to happen- Yeah ... I think, because the world is doing it all the time now, and all we need to do is just the control condition and see what's up.

Richard Shotton: But you did do a test, I believe, around giving people almost ritualized steps before eating a chocolate bar or some carrots and that had a positive result on appreciation. Is that true?

Michael Norton: We [00:18:00] do see that in some consumption experiences there is some sense of, like if you ask what's an example?

People who are into wine, for example. If you don't do the whole wine thing the sommelier and the decanting and all the s- all the wine stuff, I'm not a wine drinker. They do say it doesn't taste very... This experience isn't any good. If you don't care about wine, you couldn't care less if they swish it around or not.

And so we have people's lived experiences that when these sorts of things happen, it enhances their experience. But of course if an experience is terrible, it's very unlikely that if we had you do six steps, that you would say, "This is the best meal I've ever had," so I think the lived experience is there for many people, but I think the limitations on what rituals can do are, are quite important.

MichaelAaron Flicker: So there's rituals [00:19:00] like consumption of wine that are well understood and maybe fairly universal. I've heard you talk about Oreo cookies as a different type of ritual example. Could you explain that and maybe how unique everyone's connection to Oreos are?

Michael Norton: I think that I don't work for Oreo, just to be clear, so I don't have any vested interest.

This is not

MichaelAaron Flicker: an endorsement.

Michael Norton: But if you wanted to design a product that prompted interaction and customization, and it's just a cookie, it's just brilliant. It re- it really is because if you-- Google how to eat Oreos and you'll get, first off, an insane number of hits. If you say how to eat brownies or something, there's noth- there's no thing, right?

It's not, that's not a thing. But with Oreos, it's do you twist it first or dunk it or lick the thing? People have all these kinds of associations with it, and they care ' cause they'll [00:20:00] argue with people. You know what I mean? That my way isn't the right way. Which we should talk about that rituals they can feel good to us, which is nice.

Sometimes they can feel right to us, which is a nice feeling, but it also means that other people's rituals are wrong, and so you get conflict happening. But yeah rituals are Oreos are just a fantastic case of taking a ... Cookies are delicious, but taking a mundane product category and really differentiating with ritual.

Michael Aaron Flicker: Do you think that the brand did anything to support that, or do you believe that that this was just a happy accident?

Michael Norton: Yeah, they're ... If you look at some of the packaging or some of the ads, they're about the dunking and twisting. So I'm not sure if they initiated it and made us all do it from the get-go, or if it was something that people naturally started to do and then they built on it.

But if you look at [00:21:00] the advertising, you will see the twist kind of th- like a hand with the twisting and the dunking encouraging you, I think, to think about how you eat this particular product.

Richard Shotton: Th- there's a similar example in Britain. I think we've talked about this before for the power of scarcity.

So I don't think you get these in the US, but stop me if I'm wrong. Cadbury's Creme Eggs? So it's a chocolate- We do. Ah, okay. Okay. So apologies, I thought they were a, a British thing. But the, the ads in the 1980s were all, "How do you eat yours?" And then it's Do you bite off the top and suck out the middle?"

Or, "Do you nib- eat in two goes?" th- there was definitely a, an emphasis on picking a particular appro- approach to eat it. So I think they, they tried to create this sense of ritual.

Michael Norton: That is fascinating because in the US in that time period, the advertising was, for that product, was a bunny- Yes

that clucks like a [00:22:00] chicken. That is correct. That was the- That's correct ... that was the mascot and sponsor, and they're going obviously for a totally different vibe on, "These are real eggs," kind of thing or something like that.

Richard Shotton: Yes.

Michael Norton: Yes. So it's quite fascinating actually that the, the branding folks in those two countries came at it a completely different way to think about engagement.

Richard Shotton: Yeah. The, the ... I think the other nice thing they did from a behavioral science perspective, they built scarcity in. So certainly in Britain, you're o- it's only available January the 1st to Easter. And again, they had a- they got a bit greedy in the 1980s. So in the 1980s in Britain, they tried to sell them all year round, and they actually saw demand drop, so they put that scarcity limitation back on.

So it's a lovely example of rituals and scarcities, like layering on kind of bias after bias.

Michael Norton: Yeah. Yeah.

Michael Aaron Flicker: I wanna come back to this right versus wrong- thread. But before we do, do you think that there are things that brands can do to enhance rituals or [00:23:00] maybe to create their own ritual moments?

Michael Norton: One of the brands that does the so Stella Artois actually has a very, a lot of their advertising and I shouldn't say a lot, some of their advertising and marketing is specifically about the, the ritual of how you consume the product, and they have really great marketing on all the steps.

There's-- And they have, I can't remember, th- there's like religious terminology that they use, like the- Oh ... I think beheading maybe is one of them, you know, when you take the... And it's this specific process, I think, and so you're even if when you're consuming the product you don't go through all of that, I think that some brands are creating these associations that this is a richer, more involved experience.

This is not just a beer that you're drinking. There's something else behind it that's a little bit more resonant.

Richard Shotton: The other example that springs to mind in alcohol, [00:24:00] after you mentioned Stella, would be Guinness. There, if you served a, certainly an Irishman a, a pint of Guinness and you just poured it in one go, I think they'd be absolutely aghast.

It has to be poured to, I don't know, two-thirds, let settle, then you finish it off. Now, I don't believe in a blind taste testing, and I'm sure I'll get some angry

emails about this, that anyone would be able to tell the difference between a properly and a non-properly poured pint. But-

Michael Norton: As someone-

Richard Shotton: regardless of that ... whose

Michael Norton: grandparents- Yeah. Oh ... emigrated here from Ireland I think that you're very wrong.

Richard Shotton: Oh, okay. Okay. That's the ritual- On the fact you couldn't do a blind test ... of coming out.

Michael Norton: Okay. Okay. I'm sorry. I try not to be prescriptive, but in this- Yeah ... particular case, I think- Okay ... you're very wrong, and I'm very angry.

Richard Shotton: Okay. Let's go back to the more, the safer ground maybe. Okay. Because I think an Englishman should not pronounce too much on a Guinness. It is a dangerous area for me to be in. But I certainly think it elevates [00:25:00] the drink. Do you think it's that sense, you were saying that it positions it as a more than just a commodity product, and it's the expectation that then leads to a, a more positive experience.

We experience what we expect to experience to a degree. That's right, and I think there's another

Michael Norton: element, not to all consumption rituals, but to some, which is truly they actually just make us slow down. Oh. And we know that savoring is great. The word itself is great, right? Savoring things is awesome, and we never do it.

We consume things as quickly as we possibly can. And so in some cases, rituals will, Guinness, even though that's a sensitive subject now- Yeah. Yeah ... Guinness slows you down, right? It's not just a beer that you get in the thing, you drink it right away. You gotta wait for the thing to come, and there's a process behind it.

And I think we don't-- I don't know if we have great data on waiting specifically but I could imagine that [00:26:00] even just the fact that I've made you wait, not in an annoying way, but in a way that appears to have some meaning or purpose- A

MichaelAaron Flicker: benefit ...

Michael Norton: could in itself actually just make you're still gonna drink the beer pretty quickly, but maybe there's just a little more savoring of the experience when we build in ritual.

MichaelAaron Flicker: So we talked about we talked about how Oreo does some ritual reinforcement on the package. Stella does it in their advertising. I was thinking about like a Supreme clothing or some of these brands that build social aura around scarcity, Richard, or around demand. Any other examples, Mike, that you've seen where the brands have done a good job helping spread the knowledge of a ritual that, that have helped propagate that, that unique thing about the brand?

Michael Norton: Yeah. I think actually I was [00:27:00] just writing something about festivals, which are can either be there's a bunch of bands playing and you show up and you have some beers, or they build them into these very ritualistic experiences that resonate much more. And the state's Burning Man is a great example.

If you think about if we go back to religious texts, it's y- lots of religions have people going to a desert, consuming some substances, and perhaps engaging in some music, and then maybe even at the end there's some sort of ritualistic fire. And it's exactly what Burning Man is. It's a- Absolutely

it doesn't have the religious component, but it certainly is a spiritual component that they've built into it. And I do think you can look at different festivals on are they trying to build it into something more than just it's a bunch of music and here you go, into something that actually has more resonance.

And you can [00:28:00] truly, you can just rank them, I think, on the ones that are... I don't mean just about the music in a bad way. Music's great, but are they trying to deliver on music only or are they trying to engineer a richer experience for you?

MichaelAaron Flicker: Very cool. So you raised this k- provocative idea a little bit ago that something about rituals is that I feel very passionately that my way of performing that ritual is the right way Help us understand that a little bit more.

Michael Norton: So I sometimes when I talk about rituals I'll start the talk by having everybody stand up, and then I just show a screen that it starts with, I

think, clap once, stomp once, and then the next line is, I think, clap three times, stomp three times. And there's just a list of b- behaviors to do. And I actually don't tell people to do anything.

I just click it, [00:29:00] and it shows up, and there's a pause, and then s- someone will clap, and then other... You hear smattering of clap and stomping. And by the third step in it, everybody's synced up Which is crazy 'cause I didn't tell anybody to do anything, but it's synced up. When they sync up, they start to smile, and usually actually they speed up as they go.

Which like, if you think of the mechanics of that, it's incredibly difficult to get a group of people to do the same behaviors at the same time and increase the rate of those behaviors simultaneously as well. It's crazy if I try to do that. People just do it naturally when they're in this setting.

But the cool thing that happens is sometimes you'll see, 'cause you can watch the audience of course, you'll see somebody who claps too early or stomps too late, and people's heads, no joke, swivel at the person and they look like [00:30:00] disgusted. Like angry, like irritated. And I'll ask what what happened with that?"

And what people say is, "They were doing it wrong." And I say, "You've never done this ritual before in your life. I made it up, and within 30 seconds there's a right and wrong way to do it, and you're mad at people for doing it differently from you." And I think if it can happen there, you could just imagine if you add culture, family, religion on top, you could of course see how the rightness of mine just automatically means that yours is not just different but wrong.

Richard Shotton: One of the bits in the book that I loved was firstly that discussion of how rituals can sometimes divide us. What I thought reasonably linked was how a mischievous party can use someone's ritual against them. [00:31:00] And I liked the peppering of sports anecdotes through the book and the one about Wade Boggs, the third baseman of the Red Sox, who had this very specific ritual.

He had to do his batting practice at 5:17, he had to do his sprint runs at 7:17. And so Bobby Cox, the manager of the Blue Jays, told the the team to switch the clock from 7:16 to 7:18- Yeah ... so that hopefully it'd get in Boggs' mind and put him off. And I thought that was I, I don't know, I love the the mischief behind, Yeah

Bobby Cox there. That's gonna go down, I think as one of the great kind of mind games in, in, in sports.

Michael Norton: Completely. And the planning and effort that went into messing with the clock, it- Yes. Yeah ... shows the power of the belief that Wade Boggs- Yeah ... will no longer be good at baseball, you know- Yeah

if you get him to skip this.

Richard Shotton: And it certainly seemed that was a, a theme through the book that sports people in particular seem to develop these rituals. [00:32:00]

Michael Norton: Yeah. I think if you look one thing that you can Google is the word ritual and brand, and you'll just spend an afternoon finding all the brands that have the word ritual in them.

Another one you can Google is any athlete's name and the word ritual, and you'll get all kinds of amazing stuff. Or any musician and they tend to be very elaborate. And w- we don't know for sure that the level at which the competition or importance increases also causes you to increase the complexity of the ritual, 'cause we don't have the again, control condition to figure that out.

I don't have two Rafael Nadals. But you can see how casual people who play tennis might have something where they bounce the ball the same number of times and then let's get on with it. And Nadal has a 79-step thing with the shorts and the s- eyebrow and all his wristbands and all this kind of stuff.

You do see that [00:33:00] people who perform in highly anxiety-provoking situations very often will say, "Actually, I do this-"

Richard Shotton: Yeah ... "

Michael Norton: thing that's not just a second, but takes me a little while to get into it." Yeah.

Richard Shotton: And with that, 'cause as you say, you can't have a test and control, Nadal versus not Nadal.

What you could do though is measure the accuracy of a, a serve, sometimes allow Nadal to do his ritual, sometimes not. H- now, too expensive to hire Nadal, but has that been done with college basketball players or NFL play-football players?

Michael Norton: I don't f- I don't... Maybe, but not to my knowledge actually.

I think when you interview those athletes or musicians, they use the same words that you two used about brushing your teeth and showering, which is, "I feel ready to go, ready to start. F- I feel prepared." But if we didn't let Nadal do his ritual... There's two things. One is [00:34:00] if we didn't let him do his ritual, he'd still be quite good at tennis, and even worse, if I do his ritual, I still suck.

Yeah. It would be amazing if we found that you do the thing of the thing and suddenly you're that good. So again, these like boundaries around, I think, how much rituals can change us, I think are, we're always thinking what's the likelihood that this is really gonna move the needle? It, m- let me say, it moves the needles on emotion, but then the link to then and now you're gonna change your life going forward, just like with any beha- as you guys know, with any behavior change, much, much harder to get those sorts of results.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Yeah. And getting emotional resonance is one of the most important jobs that brand marketers have. And so while behavior change is tricky and messy and complex, we spend a lot of our time, Richard and I, talking about what are the [00:35:00] ways that we can stack the odds in our favor? What are the ways that we can work with human nature rather than against it wherever possible?

And so if working with rituals gives you a greater chance to have emotional resonance or it gives you a greater chance to have emotional connection, it feels like a thing to consider to increase your chances of getting to what else you need to get done I suppose as long as it doesn't get in the way.

Michael Norton: That just reminded me of if you look at skincare routines over the-- I'm gonna make all of these numbers up just to be clear but at one time people didn't do anything. You just went about your day. Then soap was invented, and maybe you used soap over your entire body. And then people are like, "hair is different."

So then you've got like shampoo and soap. And then it's like the face is different from the rest of the body, so now we have [00:36:00] soap for the face, soap for the body, and shampoo. And then it keeps going. The nose is different from the... And so you can see with skincare that these products keep getting added to the ritual of it for all of these very, very specific things.

And now you've got on Instagram people showing you their 30-minute every morning, all the things they do with their skincare. And so there's a- another

sense where building into things that people are already doing can be a way to get some of the magic, I think, of ritual, I-- magic in quotes, of ritual rather than start from complete scratch with a brand-new product and just try out of nowhere to get people to start thinking this is a very meaningful thing.

Very tough lift. But when you can build into something that people are doing, I think a little bit easier to get it into the slipstream, that moves us maybe onto [00:37:00] the idea of kind of DIY rituals rather than ones that are legacy rituals. Could you talk about how your earlier work with Dan Ariely and Daniel Mochon into the IKEA effect relates to this idea of a, a DIY ritual?

Yeah. So the IKEA effect came from came from the observation that many people have terrible products that they've made themselves that they really like. And by many people, also me. A watercolor that you painted in, in university, whatever it might be, you keep it with you all the time.

And the question is what's going on? Why do we value the- those so much? And of course, 'cause we were trying to be funny, we did-- had people put together IKEA furniture and Legos and origami and things like that. And what is, and it's actually quite important, so there's other research on I designed it myself, is a separate [00:38:00] effect.

And there I think you've got-- you can customize the things you make, and then part of the reason you like them is because you customize it to your own preferences. Totally fascinating research. We were interested in what if there's no customization even? What if it's just the effort that you're putting into it?

Does that alone prompt people to value things differently? And we tend to see yes, the answer is yes, and I think it's, it's-- I, I would say when I, when we first identified it, I was thinking of it as kind of a mistake because you're overval-- if you work on your house and then you set a higher price to sell it and it doesn't sell, you've made a mistake because you overvalue the commodity.

The older I get, I think, the more I think- what an amazing gift that if we just put a little effort into something, we can see it as something really profound and important to us. For me, that's a, I guess it's a bias or [00:39:00] whatever we, whatever words we use, but in fact it's this incredible thing that we have access to.

And we went from that insight that putting effort into things matters, to looking at this, as you said, DIY rituals versus legacy rituals, where some rituals come to us fully formed. That's the kind that I was thinking I was studying, and the

kind that most of us think about. And then there's this other kind that people come up with all the time, where they're putting in a little bit of themselves into the process of coming up with the ritual.

And we thought, I wonder if that's part of why these become imbued with meaning, is that they're not just cookie cutter literally, they're things that you have to invest yourself in.

MichaelAaron Flicker: I have not heard of the "I designed it myself" insight versus the IKEA effect, which Richard and I have read your work on and we have talked about before. What else did-- [00:40:00] what-- how else would you tease those apart? Or what else was interesting when you learn-- when you originally understood the "I designed it myself" effect and then decided, "no, let's look at the IKEA effect," with no customization at all?

Maybe you can just talk a little bit more about that.

Michael Norton: Yeah I think actually we were probably working in parallel maybe even on the research unknowingly. And I think actually if-- I believe I'm so bad with, but I believe that paper came out before ours, and I remember first thinking they-- we're done.

They already did the-- Yeah. ... did the thing and now we got-- we did all this work and we got nothing in it. And I think we hadn't been thinking actually about the difference between is it effort that you're putting in that's non-standard in a sense that I can make this cake the way that I want to make the cake, or is it effort that you're putting in that's standardized?

And is there a difference between them? And the answer easily could've been no, or it could've been that without customization, effort doesn't matter [00:41:00] at all, right? There's lots of different possibilities that could have come up with those two, and instead what we see is customization has some effects and matters for sure, and then underneath it, one of the reasons customization can be so effective is also because you're just putting a little bit more of yourself into the either creation or consumption of the product.

MichaelAaron Flicker: So helpfully here.

Richard Shotton: Who was the customization research done by?

Michael Norton: I think Martin Schreier was one of the first people and maybe Christoph Fuchs. I could look it up. I don't want to miss a name.

Richard Shotton: Okay. Cause what we'll do, all the papers that-

Michael Norton: And Ulrike Kaiser and also- ... you reference

Richard Shotton: in your own, we'll put in the show notes.

Michael Norton: Yeah. There's kind of a t- a team of researchers that did lots of cool work- Yeah ... In this area. The, all the papers, not only are they cool papers, but the studies are funny. So which is- That's perfect ... the highest form for me of that group is really very creative.

MichaelAaron Flicker: So Mike, as we're coming [00:42:00] to a close, there's a few kind of summation questions that have been forming for me, and I thought I might ask you and give you some time to talk to us about.

Maybe we can start with a more broad question. What's something that you believed strongly over your career that you've now changed your mind on?

Michael Norton: Probably ev- everything.

MichaelAaron Flicker: You believed everything strongly and now you have changed your mind.

Michael Norton: I think possibly, Yeah ... I think that might be true. Ritual specific, I think that the learning for me was, So when I started studying them, I was thinking of the tradition kind. Then we started studying these DIY kind that people are coming up with themselves. But even through all of that, I wasn't thinking that I do them. I was looking at the humans are up to this thing, isn't it fascinating? It's [00:43:00] not good or bad, it's just fascinating to study.

And then I think it slowly dawned on me that, of course I'm doing them as well. Actually, we were talking about our kids earlier and when we had our daughter and brought her home, we came up with this insanely elaborate bedtime ritual- ... that all, all parents spontaneously do, by the way which is crazy, right?

That we're like, " no, we have to read this book and then this and then the bath and then the thing." It's insane that it comes out of us. Speaking of high stress situations- ... Performing at Carnegie Hall, here's another one where you're, you gotta get your kid to sleep. And of course, we did the exact same thing.

I was studying rituals and had no awareness that we were bringing a ritual to bear on an incredibly stressful situation in order to try to make things go better. And I think in the end, it probably had very little effect on our daughter's sleep.

But it had an enormous effect on our feeling that we had any control whatsoever about what was going on.

Richard Shotton: Interesting you use the word stress. [00:44:00] When I think about the most important rituals to myself it, I hadn't linked them this way, but I'm not a very good flyer. I have a ritual song that I listen to as I take off. I have a ritual song that I listen to as I, I land, and it helps me get through it.

And then the other thing is, before I go on and do a, a big talk as a conference, I will always undo my shoelaces and do them up very tightly. Like- So-

Michael Norton: Like-

Richard Shotton: They, yeah, and they're both linked. They are stressful situations. Maybe the talk, you need to be a bit more in the zone, but I think it's the stress that links them.

Michael Norton: A crazy number of people, if you ask them what they do before a big presentation at some point they go into the bathroom and talk to themselves in the mirror.

Richard Shotton: Yeah.

Michael Norton: It's like a human, it's a fundamental human thing to be like- Yeah ... "You've got this," in the mirror to yourself. Which again- Yeah ... is completely insane.

Richard Shotton: Yeah.

Michael Norton: But I do think if you're very nervous about something that's coming up, if we had a magical solution to calm your anxiety, like if you snapped twice and your anxiety was gone, I would say, "What are you talking to [00:45:00] yourself in the mirror for? What are you tying your shoes tight for? Snap twice."

But we don't, right? You can take a pill and things like that, but I think in these situations where the stress is high and we don't have a solution that solves it, sometimes those are the exact places, as you said, where we try to-

Bring ritual to bear. Knowingly or unknowingly, we try to bring ritual to bear.

Richard Shotton: Yeah. And I'd never when I started doing them, I never thought of them- in that way. I do also like the difference between a Brit and an American here, that mine is a silent expressionless doing up my shoelaces, buttoning myself tighter, whereas there's Americans pumping themselves up in the mirror.

Shouting. I feel like our nations have been defined.

Michael Norton: Yeah, that's quite- They say stereotypes. Yeah. I think one of the funny things actually about rituals too, is that we use them for opposite purposes. So we use rituals to amp up, and we use them to calm down. That's crazy, right? You know what I mean?

That there's some solution that actually we use for opposing purposes. Or this isn't quite the [00:46:00] same, but weddings and funerals, they're not really going for the same emotion in those two things. But for both of them, humans decided, "no. Let's use some ritual on these as well."

MichaelAaron Flicker: For those that are interested in applying rituals for commercial use, what's the most important thing you would leave them with?

Or what's the top thing you think is most missed when it comes to applying rituals for commercial application?

Michael Norton: I think when we do user testing of whatever we're trying to notice a lot of different things and ask a lot of different questions. But one of the things I think can be useful to look for is are there people who are using it in an interesting way, in a different way?

And sometimes that's just extremely idiosyncratic to that person, but sometimes what v- what they're building into it can be something that you can actually [00:47:00] look to say, "Oh, actually doing it in that way does seem to have more resonance with people." So you're looking-- It's not the seven-point scale at the end of the thing, did you like the cookie or not?

It's-- And it's not just are you having difficulty with the product, which of course we do in user testing. It's literally how are people using the product, and is there anything in it that could be interesting that we could help other people do and maybe increase their emotional resonance as well?

Richard Shotton: I like the humility of that approach.

Rather than a marketer trying to, from up on high, create something, see what already exists, and then build on it, much as I imagine maybe happened with Oreos and the Cream Egg. Love it.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Mike, as we come to a close, final question for you. Our listeners have heard our whole discussion. What's the one thing you'd wanna leave them with as they get back to their days and as they get back to their jobs and life?

What's the one thing you'd like to leave with them to think about?

Michael Norton: I would say, [00:48:00] Audit is not the right word but do an inventory or something on your, on yourself for starters, and just notice all the different ways that ritual... Tying your shoes, whatever it might be. Notice all the diff- and your, with your kids, with your spouse, with your extended family, at work.

Anywhere in life I think we see people doing rituals, and I think it can be very useful to just think for yourself. Y- Next, tomorrow morning, pay attention to what you're doing and be like, "You know what? I've been doing it this way for 38 years, I just realized." or whatever it might be.

So I think that's a big part. And the other thing is, if you don't think you have rituals- ask your spouse or partner, ask your children, ask your coworkers, and they'll be very happy to tell you about- ... the many things you have that you really like to have them done in this particular way, and you feel really good, and you get very upset if they're not done in that way.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Thank you for [00:49:00] our chat today. For those listening at home, if you found today's conversation engaging, please share it with someone that would find it useful, and and comment on our channels. It helps us reach more people just like you. And until next time, I'm MichaelAaron Flicker.

Michael Norton: And I'm Richard Shotton.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Dr. Mike Norton, thank you so much for being with us today.

Michael Norton: Thank you both.

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