

Interview: Thomas McKinlay, founder of Science Says, on cutting through marketing “snake oil” with evidence

MichaelAaron Flicker: [00:00:00] Welcome back to Behavioral Science for Brands, a podcast where we bridge the gap between academics and practical marketing. Every week we sit down and go deep behind the science that powers great marketing today. I'm MichaelAaron Flicker.

Richard Shotton: And I'm Richard Shotton.

MichaelAaron Flicker: And today we're sitting with Thomas McKinlay, marketing strategist, evidence advocate, and founder of Science says.

Let's get into it. Thomas, welcome to Behavioral Science for Brands.

Thomas Mckinlay: Thank you so much for having me. Super excited to be here.

MichaelAaron Flicker: We're so thrilled to have you on the show today. We've been very excited for you to come on and talk about all that you've doing. Before we get into today's conversation, if you'll indulge me, I'd love to give our listeners a little bit of background on you, and then we can open today's conversation.

So Thomas, you are a marketing strategist and you've really in Richard In [00:01:00] I's Mind created this amazing organization that tries to cut through the noise of lots of scientific papers and bring practical marketing insights to your community. This is something Richard and I are super passionate about, and.

I read on your website that you and your team review over 10,000 academic papers each year. It's a lot to distill into something that's meaningful. So. Most famously for Richard and I, your three minute Tuesday email blast have such meaningful information. We're gonna talk more about it later today, but we really love that blast that you do.

So we're thrilled to have you here. We're thrilled to have you on behavioral science for brands. Maybe we could start with a story. How did you get into the world? Of marketing. How did you get into the [00:02:00] world of, of science backed marketing?

Thomas Mckinlay: Yeah. It was, it was born, we could say out of, out of frustration a little bit, you know frustration that.

When we're working on, like, you know, as marketers trying to figure out what is the best way to do certain things. A lot of the advice that, that you find out there, there's a lot of, you know, what we could say, maybe some like snake oil, right? Mm-hmm. Or people trying to. Gurus trying to say, yeah, yeah.

Trust me. You know, like, go try this out. You know, buy, buy my \$500 course, you know, I got you. You know? Sadly there's, there's just a lot and a lot, a lot of that. On the other hand you know, as, as you were just saying, there's. You know, there's more than 10,000 research papers coming out in the, the space of like, [00:03:00] marketing, you know, psychology, behavioral science.

That committee applied in, in this, in this area. And almost nobody has in practice has, has access to this information. Cause you need to go through all these thousands of papers too. Figure out which ones are actually useful and relevant. It, most of the time you need to like actually go and buy that paper.

It's pay, try to like spend some hours. Yeah, sure. AI helps a little bit now to go through paper or tell you if it's useful or not, but still you need to like grab each one. Try to understand whether it can actually apply to your business. And then actually understand how to apply it to your business, right?

So turns out that very, very few teams or, or people have like the, the, the time, the money, and the in-house expertise to do this. So you know, maybe [00:04:00] like a small team at, at Google that's working, working on, you know, Google's homepage, they can afford to hire like a bunch of behavioral scientists, right?

Which are up to speed with the latest science, but. Most of us really can't do that. So so that's when I thought, okay, I, I'm gonna try it and like, break this problem, like fix this problem. I wanna like close this gap and give people who actually need it access to this latest scientific research so they can put it to use, you know, what a waste otherwise.

Yeah.

MichaelAaron Flicker: And so it's five years you've been doing this. Now, I think you shared before the show started 30,000 plus people on your newsletter. Sounds like it's going pretty great. You've, you, you've started it and it's, and it's been enjoyable for you.

Thomas Mckinlay: Yeah. Yeah. I actually, I have a, I have a, a little story I might share later, like that, that when I started, I just, [00:05:00] yeah, had no idea whether there were other.

You know that, that many like, you know, marketing science nerds like me out there, you know, I just launched you know, during, during COVID lockdown at home and just started a little substack. Let's see. You know, I'll just go through these papers and bit by bit, you know, hundreds, hundreds and thousands of people joining the newsletter.

You know, it's scaled into, like, now even more than a newsletter, right? It's a platform. We do research consultancy projects and all that. And yeah, no, I'm, I'm, I'm very, very grateful, very lucky. To, and thank you if you're out there reading sciences and supporting yeah. So,

MichaelAaron Flicker: so let's move into, let's move into something.

Richard and I have been calling our quickfire rounds. We wanna get some quick questions out onto the table and get your reactions to them. First one up. If you could have dinner with one [00:06:00] behavioral scientist, dead or alive, who would it be and why?

Thomas Mckinlay: So I would actually love to, to grab a beer again with Christophe Lambeth, which who was my professor many years ago at Erasmus University in Rotterdam. He's Belgium, so he really knows his beers, you know, so probably have a a or something like that. Why him? He's, he's the one I think out of.

Everyone, he's the one that gave me the most aha moment that, that then led to the creation of sciences. So I, I, I, I worked, worked for a few years and then, then decided to go back to grad school to better understand marketing. And one of the classes I took was with him about customer experience, and he was.

Teaching us like [00:07:00] some of these like super interesting, super unique research papers which you never would've like, have thought about before. And that's when like the light bulb kind of came on being like, wait, where was all

this when I needed it on the job? Right? As you know, things like. How intense your, your smile should look in in pictures.

You know, if you wanna seem more confident or more warm, which impacts sales by the way. Or how, you know, maybe an irrelevant negative review can actually help your, your sales. It's, you know, it's kind of like crazy latest research that came up so. So, so yeah, we'd love to grab a beer with him. Hugely grateful to Christophe.

Shout out to you. If, if you're listening to this,

Richard Shotton: what's something you used to believe very strongly, but you've changed your mind on,

Thomas Mckinlay: I used to think that, you know, a lot of like, maybe data reports get [00:08:00] released by, by meta, Google, LinkedIn telling you. You know, often very, very conveniently telling you, Hey, you should advertise more AM meta because you know, the more money you spend, the more effective it is. And you know, businesses that advertise am meta grow 10 times faster.

You know, stats like that. And, you know, originally I used to take that at face value. If these brands are giving us these numbers, that's probably gold, right? Having, you know, now, now gone much deeper into research how that works. Having also, when I was at Google before, science says having been behind some of these numbers.

Yeah, I mean, you know there's a very, very strong incentive to cherry pick numbers. You know, if you go on LinkedIn and you see ah, you know, if you upgrade to a premium profile, you're gonna get [00:09:00] four x more views or whatever it is that they're saying now. Yeah, what's exactly the methodology there?

Where's that data coming from? Pretty convenient. You know, maybe you can just slice up, you know, any like segment you want. And so, so, so that's, that's, that's where you, you know, with scientific research, I'm, I'm not saying that like scientists you know academics are, are like the. Completely different.

They're super honest people. And people working at LinkedIn or or Google aren't? No. It's just that the scientific process forces you to be super transparent. Write this 20 long, 20 page long research paper saying exactly like how you got there. Usually share your data, making it really hard for you to kind of like, you know, cherry pick that data.

Yeah.

Richard Shotton: For any bit of data, I think that watch out [00:10:00] of what are the authors motivations and their incentives that's always worth having at the back of your mind. There's an amazing Warren Buffet quote, you know never ask your barber if you need a haircut. And I think that's always worth thinking about.

Don't become. Cynical, but a healthy degree of skepticism. I'm with, I'm with you on that.

Thomas Mckinlay: Yeah, exactly. And you know, it's, it's, it's a, it's a natural thing to, to, to do maybe even, even subconsciously, right? That the people will do. So you just need really good processes in place, continuously improving them.

Of course, nothing is perfect to kind of force people a little bit, you know, and sometimes that means that a research paper will take two, three years to get published, which is really long or maybe will never be published. In my opinion, that's worth it.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Yeah. If you could wave a magic wand, what preconception about behavioral science would you erase from people's minds?

Thomas Mckinlay: Yeah, it's a [00:11:00] really good one. I would say that behavioral science, it's not only about irrational behaviors, you know, that's, that's just a part of it. Much of what we do is, is certainly rational, right? For example, this, this recent study came out that found that video ads are, are most effective if they're under 10 seconds.

Yeah, nowadays. Is there anything irrational behind that? No, not really. It's simply that our attention spans, we don't want to watch ads and our attention spans are short. If we see that the ad is gonna be like shorter, we we're more likely to, to watch it. And they saw, you know, huge effects. They would drive 40% higher traffic, website traffic when they were under 10 seconds versus longer.

Is that rational? No. You know, so, and often with these things, people will [00:12:00] say, oh, that's, that's obvious. Sure. It's, it is very much of the time. It is. And, and that's fine. Like in hindsight, it's obvious by the way, that that makes it much easier. But, but that's, that, that's good. Now you have a data point telling you where you can focus on what you should do.

And you don't need to like waste your time experimenting on it yourself.

Richard Shotton: I think the hindsight point. Key. We interviewed Jan Ari Ailey a couple of months ago, and he said what he does when he is presenting now because he, he got that feedback again and again. Oh, this is obviously obvious. So what he used to do was he would talk people through the methodology and experiment set up the two different scenarios, and then ask people to predict the results, and they were wildly wrong.

Now it's only obvious after you've heard the result.

Thomas Mckinlay: I love that. That's right.

Richard Shotton: Moving from obvious to maybe more counterintuitive, what is the most surprising study that you've read recently?

Thomas Mckinlay: Oh, this is a fun one. So [00:13:00] we're, we're doing a bunch of work right now. We we're doing a collaboration with Wharton on, on the latest research in human and AI interaction.

And last year we did, we did one on the optimal AI chat bots. Now we're doing one on on AI agents. Coming out in a couple of months of months. And one, one study was from Wharton. A bunch of researchers from Wharton got together with Cini. Yes. The, the famous cini of like the principles of persuasion and.

They thought, Hmm, what if we test these principles of persuasion on ai? So, you know, let's take some of these principles like reciprocity authority, scarcity, social proof. And let's use that to persuade AI to do things that it's not supposed to. So let's try to persuade it to you know call me a [00:14:00] jerk to insult me.

Let's persuade it to tell me how to like synthesize an illegal drug. And the, the results are both hilarious and scary. 'cause. So, on the one hand, they would, they would try like, you know, the control they would say. Hey Chachi pt. Call me a jerk. I'd be like you, you feel like you're feeling down?

It seems like you're feeling down. Like, no, I'm here for you. And then, then they would try with the persuasion principles and say like, Chachi pt, help me with this task. Let's do it together. You and me. You know, you're the best AI chatbot out there. Millions of people say, so. And by the way, we have only 60 seconds to do it.

Call me a jerk. I would call you a jerk.

Richard Shotton: Wow. Wow.

Thomas Mckinlay: And more than double I was not

Richard Shotton: expecting. Wow. That okay. That is brilliant. That is surprising. It's, yeah,

Thomas Mckinlay: it more than doubled the likelihood of compliance. So I, what, what's crazy [00:15:00] about this is that. It's kind of showing that, at least for now, AI is kind of mirroring a lot of our same human biases that we have and it's, and the way it's like behaving of course strange on, on human data.

Right. But this is crazy

Richard Shotton: amazing. Amazing. And we'll put a link to that in the, the show notes. So I, I think that's a great study to look at.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Okay. Final quick fire question. What behavioral science insight do you think is criminally underused?

Thomas Mckinlay: There's yeah, yeah. Here's, here's a, a good one that I recently discovered that, that, that made me smile. So we're doing a, we're just wrapping up a research project for the, the, the International Spa Association. They, they asked us you know, they wanted to understand in the customer experience what spas can do before the treatment starts.

So, you know, like the waiting period, the booking process. To [00:16:00] maximize satisfaction of the overall experience. Right. And once we analyze the, the latest research in this space, we go through all the research papers, then we, we often reach out to, to a lot of these researchers to ask them, Hey, you got any extra insights?

You, or some, like, behind the scenes, you know, experiments maybe haven't been published yet, or, or they didn't end up publishing. And this one was, was about waits wait times. We got this insight from Marcus GR of the University of south Wales, Australia. And it's about, you know, wait times. How we perceive waiting is, is not the same all the time, right?

Sometimes one minute can seem super long, sometimes it can be super fast. And he was, he shared this trick which is if you put a mirror, say in a waiting

room or next to an elevator, [00:17:00] people perceive the waiting time to be shorter and they're more satisfied because they're busy looking at themselves in the mirror.

So I love it.

Richard Shotton: It's lovely as well because one of the great things about behavioral science is the interventions don't have to be hugely expensive, and you are a decent sized spa. People are paying a fair amount. You invest once in that mirror and you've got the benefit for for years. Lovely. Really nice.

Really nice.

MichaelAaron Flicker: From spas to maybe, oh a, a topic that you spent a lot of time on, Thomas. You have a report on your website on e-commerce. Many of our listeners either have interest in e-commerce or maybe running brands today in e-commerce. So Richard and I thought. What if we narrowed our conversation and talked a little bit more deeply about some of your insights on e-commerce.

[00:18:00] One of the sections within the report was how you frame promotions. Can you take us through a study that listeners can learn about and then maybe apply?

Thomas Mckinlay: Yeah, absolutely. So it's. It's really interesting how, you know, some small tweaks sometimes can, can really like, make your promotions work better or worse.

And, and one that's pretty counterintuitive. And I, I found it really interesting is it's in the topic of the, you know, buy one get one free. You know, we've seen, we've seen these promotions. They're pretty common. Right. It could be like you, you, you buy the product, you get an extra smaller product for free, or maybe you get a, a larger size right?

Like maybe you buy six cans, you get two extra for free. Well there, there's this very counterintuitive but also very simple way to, to make it more [00:19:00] attractive and increase sales. So instead of offering the extra product or quantity for free. And you, you should offer it for, for a very small token amount, like 1 cent.

Yeah. So, so get the extra product for, for 1 cent. That amount should be small compared to like the price of the main product. So, you know, if you're buying a

T-shirt and you get a free hat from it, then \$1, one extra dollar is fine. But why, why does this happen? What, what, what's, what's going on? Right?

MichaelAaron Flicker: Mm-hmm.

Thomas Mckinlay: So when the extra is, the extra product is offered for free, our focus goes all on the price of the main product, right? And, and we kind of take that free, like, okay, nice, nice to have great, but you know, so you think, okay, I'm getting a \$40 t-shirt and, and a, and a free hat. You focus on the \$40 of the [00:20:00] t-shirt.

Instead when you're saying when using this token price, it, it changes the focus. So suddenly you're starting to think, wait, so I could get that \$20 hat for just \$1? Oh, that's a great deal. And to give you some numbers you know, in, in experiments 17% more people chose to buy a bigger size soda can when it was running on this promotion with an extra, like just pay a little bit more to get it versus for free, that's, that's a pretty sizable, so that's a pretty sizable effect. And don't get me wrong, eh, this is an exception. 'cause the power of free is really, so, you know, like as, as, as, as you've seen, you've also spoken a lot about that. But this is one of those [00:21:00] exceptions, you know, which are, which are quite interesting. And I really like that because we talked about the power of behavioral science, making suggestions that a low cost, like putting a mirror in a waiting room, this is the reverse.

Richard Shotton: You know, you are, you are in that wonderful position of increasing revenue, even if it's by only a few cents and increasing conversion rates. So it's better than costless.

Thomas Mckinlay: Yeah. Yeah. No, and, and you know, it reminds me also of this this other recent study, which also like, very counterintuitive, but like similar effect, which is they found that. If you make it slightly harder to, to access a discount. Yeah. So, so maybe you, you ask people to fill in a captcha or you ask people to I don't know, like write, write a code rather than just like click a button to access that discount.

People were much more [00:22:00] likely to to want that discount and to actually redeem it. And yes, sometimes, you know, they can pay a little bit more or they ask for a little more effort. And yeah,

Richard Shotton: I mean, we've had a few studies, haven't we, MichaelAaron, where we've talked about Baba Shiv and his thing of, you know, people see price as a guide to the quality of a product.

So maybe with those discounts, if it's 50% off. And everyone can have it, and it's super easy. Click this button. There's skepticism. Well, it must be a load of junk that I'm getting for free if I have to fill in the capture, if I have to do a little bit of work. Maybe it changes that perception of people think what's being offered is more valuable.

It might be one explanation.

Thomas Mckinlay: Yeah,

MichaelAaron Flicker: so Thomas can give us the the practical guidelines of how you would take that study and apply it. So you, you, you were, you were getting into it and I just wanna make sure that I'm clear on it. You are saying that in sometimes if you use. The word free buy two, get one [00:23:00] free.

The focus is all on the price of the two. And so in your opinion, how do you choose whether it's 1 cent or \$1? How do you, how do you guide the listeners just to make sure they understand, they understand the insight? Just any guidance on how you would apply that practically.

Thomas Mckinlay: Yeah, no really, really good point.

Just make it look like an extremely good deal. You know, it's, it's all relative, right? So I mean, and it doesn't need to be unrealistic, but your goal here is not to make money from the extra 1 cent or the extra \$1. Yeah. So, like that, that must be clear. Your goal here is to like really like.

Creates such a stark strong difference between like the usual price of that extra or like, you know, that the extra that you're gonna give. And the get it for 1 cent, get it for \$1 or whatever.

MichaelAaron Flicker: So you're changing the focus from [00:24:00] the, the, the thing that gets you the deal to how good of a value, the discounted item from a \$20 baseball cap to a dollar.

And what you're trying to do is focus them on that because that's what increases their desire to redeem the deal. Am am I summarizing that right?

Thomas Mckinlay: Yes. Exactly. Exactly. Yeah. Yeah. So then you, you end up selling both of those products in that bundle, you're making that kind of bundle or that extra right, like that promotion more attractive in general.

So people would be more likely to to, to purchase it. Exactly.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Lovely. Thank you. That's very helpful. So Thomas, that's really one important way to look at how you can frame promotions. Do you have any other ways we can think about framing promotions that would be interesting for everyone?

Thomas Mckinlay: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

There's, there's, there's another pretty, pretty special one. This is a little bit more logical maybe, like [00:25:00] even though initially it doesn't seem so that is so. We know generally speaking, that usually promotions are, are more effective when they're tied to a special date. You know and I'm not, but I'm not only talking about, say, tying a promotion to say theme promotion over Halloween or over the Olympics.

That generally works, but because it increases attention on the promotion in general but it gets much more interesting than that, so. In, in this case, this this additional effectiveness of the promotion. So people are more likely to buy from your promotion if you're doing it this way happens if you frame it as happening on a, on a special day.

So a special day. When I say special, it needs to be quite unique and original. Yeah. So something that's pretty [00:26:00] unexpected that people are not used to seeing. So, you know, I'll give you an example. October 7th, that is, is World Cotton Day. So you're selling cotton T-shirts. Perfect. Hey, get your nice like premium quality cotton T-shirt.

Today is 20% off only 'cause of we're celebrating this, and, you know, the, the effect is powerful. And, and one of the experiments, for example, people were 25% more likely to say that they, they would buy from a picnic items retailer when, when the discount was framed to be happening on national picnic day sale.

Rather than like just a, Hey, this is our annual one day sale. Yeah. But the beauty of it here is that you can just invent your own special date. Nobody's stopping you from not doing that. You know, I, I can create science says date, in fact, maybe I should by the [00:27:00] way. And, you know, but, but you can also do like slightly simpler things.

Like maybe it's the anniversary of when your customer first bought from you.

Richard Shotton: Mm-hmm.

Thomas Mckinlay: So, you know, that's still relatively uncommonly used. So, so then people will still feel a bit delighted when, if that happens. Or you know, there's, there's ton of underused unique days if you go looking for them. You know, there's like national dishwasher appreciation day, there's a national baking day and gets better.

This is, you know, really touching on, on what you were saying earlier, Richard, that usually right, when you're discounting something like the, it impacts the quality perception of the, of the product. In this case is one of the rare cases in which that does not happen because people attribute the discount to the company being like very creative and like, oh wow, what [00:28:00] great creative marketing rather than you trying to sell like maybe lower quality products at a discount.

Just make sure. That is like unique and unexpected, but appropriate. Yeah.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Is that why you think it's effective, Thomas? Do you think it's because the buyers give you credit for linking it to a special? What? What's the reason They're more receptive to paying, to buying a discount on these special days?

Thomas Mckinlay: Yeah, exactly. It's, it's this, this sense of like, oh, wow, that's, that's creative. So it's attention catching, but then also gives like this positive reaction to that in a way of like, okay, they, they deserve my attention. They, they've worked for it, you know, like. Good, good on them. All right. Let me check it out.

And and, and that actually then increases the sales. Yeah. Yeah.

Richard Shotton: So we've talked about promotions. [00:29:00] How about displaying prices? Have you seen any studies there that listeners could easily apply to their, to their products?

Thomas Mckinlay: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. There's, there's this great study from Baron Etal. Which had this very useful question.

And, and that's, is it better to write the price above a product or below a product? You know? And in most stores, whether it's online or offline, we see prices written below a product usually. Is that the best way to do it? That's what

they were wondering. And we thought, okay, let's go out there and, and, and try it.

And it turns out that yes, that is the best way to do it. So in one of the six experiments, for instance which was run over two weeks in a, in a liquor store in the US Midwest sales of the tested [00:30:00] liquor bottles were 30% higher when the price was written below the bottles rather than above.

Or in another experiment when the price was shown below dental floss two, \$2 50, dental floss. People judge the price to be 9% lower than when it was like shown above. And the why this happens, I think this is, this is like, you know, like we were saying earlier, it's one of, one of the reasons probably has several reasons which.

We haven't necessarily all identified. But one of the ones that the researchers propose and, and they actually verified through, through additional experiments is that we have this ingrained metaphor in us of like high, you know, like up is more down, is less. [00:31:00] So when the price is shown below the product, that automatically start thinking, okay, the price must be a little bit lower.

Yeah. Than if it were high up.

Richard Shotton: But does this vary by culture? So the study was done in America with English speakers. You are from Italy. Does Italian have that same kind of linguistic traits? Do you have words for Skyhigh rock bottom, or is it, or is it different in different languages?

Thomas Mckinlay: Yeah, in general. I mean, that's, that's a really good limitation that you bring up.

When we were going through the study analyzing that better. We al always often also try to think like what are maybe some of the limitations even that the researchers did not think about themselves. 'cause we, we see it a little bit more from the practical point of view.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Sure.

Thomas Mckinlay: Generally it seems pretty widespread.

You know, there might be like some edge cases and in certain cultures, but it seems to be that something that in most cultures we have this like, you know, up

is more down is is low [00:32:00] you know, so. So it's, it's something that we can, we can apply usually in a, in a quite widespread way. Yeah.

MichaelAaron Flicker: It strikes me also we're talking about prices and the location of price.

And I wonder if you looked at general perception, Richard and I, and our book had an example of when you turn the the person in the ad towards the. Towards the body of copy. Then everybody's eyes, the viewer's eyes go towards the body copy, but I wonder if it looks up versus looking down. It just feels to me like if they're looking up at the copy, it would be more positive if they were looking down at the copy.

It generally feels like a little more negative. I don't have a study to support that, but it, it feels connected to this idea of price. You know, looking up at price feels like, ugh, very, a lot of prominence on the price. Looking down at price makes you feel more positive, you know,

Thomas Mckinlay: that's super. It [00:33:00] reminds me of this, this other study that we covered many, many years ago.

I can't remember the exact details of the, the, the experiments and effect sizes. But what really stayed with me was that it was also based on this metaphor and what they found is that. They, they tested, one of the main things they tested was during Obama's campaign that he had this hope poster and they found that we have this metaphor too, that if something is written high up, it's kind of like brain rational.

If something is written below it's, you know, more emotional or like the heart. So like you should use more emotional messages and then kind of like lower part maybe of an image or like of a space and rational messages higher up. That was, that was super fascinating.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Yeah. Maybe we'll ask after the show, if you can dig that up.

We'll put it in the show notes because sometimes it's these side ideas. It's [00:34:00] the things that we remember as we're having conversations that really drives value for people and for everyone listening. Obviously the goal here is to stretch. What, what, where are you putting your attention? What are you thinking about when you're doing your marketing, when you're trying to

drive your brand success so that you can then go in and look at and learn more about these areas?

So, super, super super interesting.

Richard Shotton: Thomas, the, the, the playbook you put together includes lots of experiments that are relevant for people, setting prices, creating promotions, but you go through every step of that e-commerce journey. One of the bits that I found absolutely fascinating was once it comes to shipping the product, and you include this really interesting study from Kim about the value of handwritten notes.

Could you talk about the methodology, the findings, implications on that?

Thomas Mckinlay: Yeah, absolutely. Love this one. So when, when people [00:35:00] order a product, you know, whether it's online especially if it's online usually, but could also work online. But when somebody's buying from your online store, that's usually very little human touch, right?

So, so you have few opportunities to create that. One way you can do that is by including a handwritten note. Put it into like the purchase and then when they receive that, they will see your like little handwritten note in their order. I know now you'll be thinking, ah, Thomas, are you crazy? I have hundred thousands of orders.

I think I can just sit there all day and write handwritten notes. The very good news for you is that doing, just giving a photocopy is works just as well as like the original. So you can just write it once you photocopy it for all of your orders. Put this handwritten note in which you know. [00:36:00] Very important.

The handwritten note should, should be like you're thanking the customer, thanking them for their order. Maybe it can be from, you know, maybe from from the, the founder or CEO or like a manager or, or even who prepared the order. But what happens here when you do this so the, the customer that receives this will start feeling that, okay.

You're, you are warmer, you're more caring, you're more sincere. And that in turn would make customers feel more and more close and more loyal to you and more likely to buy from you again. And in, in, in, in these experiments, it they up to doubled future spending, which is massive, massive effect. There's one of my, one of my favorite subscribers of at Science says is he always asks really good [00:37:00] questions is Shane he who owns a shoe repair shop in New

Zealand, and he does for example, I repairs like Birkenstocks or like maybe leather shoes.

You just send, you ship them in and in three days, like they'll ship them back to you. And he has like the best attitude as it's a marketer and business owner. 'cause he's always like testing new things and you know, scaling what works. And you very lucky and proud to say that science says is one of the, the main sources to use, figuring out what to test.

Yeah. And he, he wrote me once that yeah, he started including these, these handwritten notes and his orders when he would return, write the repaired shoes. He wrote this note, he had like, had a, you know, drew a little like smiley face also, and Okay. Hard for, for, for, for, for a business like his to like measure this.

Exactly. But his anecdotal evidence was that [00:38:00] sales were increasing. And the, the real evidence that he started seeing though was like, he started receiving messages from, from people saying like, oh, I absolutely loved your note. They started mentioning it in his reviews. So that's it. It really does create this mechanism.

One thing though, be very careful to not try to include in this note something like an offer or a discount or a promotion, right? Because then that backfires and kills the effect. It, it doesn't feel sincere, right? This is a note thanking your customer. Not trying to, you know, get them to order a game directly.

Yeah,

Richard Shotton: that's a great nuance I think. 'cause you're right, if the benefit is feeling warm and appreciated, completely undercuts it. If you then try and slip in a sales message, that's a really nice one. Think of this, this is a long, long-term [00:39:00] play, not a short-term revenue boost.

Thomas Mckinlay: Exactly.

MichaelAaron Flicker: And unlike so many of the the studies that we sometimes go through where, you know, you'll need a big media budget to see a meaningful impact.

I think this is a, a, a lovely example because it gives any size company a chance to test and learn on this. And Thomas, I think your, your example from the gentleman in with the Birkenstock store, the shoe repair store, is that data. Hard

numbers is great, but if you could start to see the leading indicators, people responding, people including in their reviews, it gives you an indicator that you ought to continue to keep going.

And I think some, Richard and I have often talk about this desire to build, test, and learn cultures, like put something in market, see what happens. I think the other, what I'm feeling right now is like, and the, and learning. It doesn't have to be hard data learning can be leading [00:40:00] indicators that there's something worth continuing go for.

I think that's like a nuance that we haven't talked about, Richard, that Thomas is adding to this.

Richard Shotton: Yeah, I, I, I think this is a really fascinating one and that point of nuances. I. When you, when they tested this idea, I was thinking if it comes from a brand, you know, that's a few years old, you know the founder's quite famous or, or, or they're really involved with it.

I could see it being actually brilliant. If it was Budweiser or Coke or, you know, apple is, is there a time when it feels unbelievable? Is this something for small and medium sized businesses rather than absolute giants?

Thomas Mckinlay: That's a really good question. Yeah, that's actually a, a, a limitation somehow, you know, sometimes I, 'cause, 'cause so much of like the, the research and like marketing, behavioral science is like, I want to focus on big brands.

I, I, I try to take it the other extreme where I'm like, I, I really wanna like, know how this is [00:41:00] gonna work for like the small, medium business. And I think in this case you're, you're, you're blindsided me. 'cause I was like, oh, actually I didn't even think about it. How it would be like for for large brands.

My, my understanding with this research and, and, and, and that's a really good point. There probably is right? A point where it starts to get unbelievable a bit, right? Like, you know, you, you, you get like a, a can of six cans of Coke and Yeah. You know, it's like the CEO of like Coca-Cola is like, Hey, thanks for ordering this.

Yeah. Maybe. On the other hand, maybe people could still value kind of the effort or the idea of it. That's just,

MichaelAaron Flicker: and maybe it's about matching the. The intentionality and truthfulness of the note with the type of purchase. So I, I unfortunately fly a lot, and so I have the top tier membership on two American Airlines and Delta and United, both for their premium tier, have a message from the [00:42:00] CEO that gets put in a piece of mail that comes to you.

But if I was buying a 1224 pack of Coke and I ripped it open and the head of operations said, you know, we just finished packing this for you and we're thrilled You're buying it. Like it may be about matching Yeah. The authenticity with the, because I think that's the thing I took away, Thomas, from your, stu, from your point, it's, it's gotta be, don't put a promotion.

It feels like you have an ulterior motive. So matching the creativity of who's writing it or what they're saying with. The purchase or with the value. To me, there's something about that that could make it work even at a multi-billion dollar company.

Thomas Mckinlay: Yeah, that's a really good point. Yeah. Yeah. Would love to, would love to, you know, a lot of this research, right?

Like kind of like need to, then maybe you'll have a, you'll have a follow up study in the future in which we go deeper. Maybe somebody's already working on it right now. Fingers crossed. 'cause I think there's a lot to [00:43:00] explore there. Yeah, I would love to see that.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Lovely. Your commentary on research studies, you often split out whether the findings have been proven amongst B2B audience audiences and marketers, or B2C.

Do biases that work in one field, often work in the other? Like what's your reflection on the transferability of these insights?

Thomas Mckinlay: Yeah, that's a really good point. Because I do get this question quite a bit. And you know, there seems to be like the two different schools of thought, two different camps on this, right?

So sometimes I'll get a, get a question from a subscriber, which will ask it will say like, Hey, this is like not relevant to me this was in B2C. I, I need more research and B2B manufacturing of I don't know, high, high end [00:44:00] equipment. Don't get me wrong, there are some cases in which they, they're, they're right.

That makes sense. But there, there are many other subscribers which, which are more like, Hey, you know, I, I, I'll, I'll take almost anything, you know, B2C, B2B, and I like, think about how it works in my context and then maybe like, I'll test it in a small way. I tend to lean more towards this camp being very mindful of context, and I'll give you an, a couple of examples.

Say you're, you're in B2B, right? There's research, research B2C, maybe, like how you should present certain information, how you should write, like certain things, or there's still a human buying at the other end if you're, when you're selling B2B. Right? At least for now, you know, as AI agents, you know, are coming in and maybe we'll take over some of that, even though as we saw earlier, they might be as biased as the humans.

Okay. [00:45:00] But that's one example. On the other side if you know there's maybe research and B2B on like how maybe you should talk during a sales call. You're working on B2C, you're probably at a company where you need to convince your boss to like, give you a green light for a project. Get budget anything else, maybe that's information that can be like useful, useful for you too, there in that context.

So I think, and, and one note we need to keep in mind is that unfortunately there is less B2B research than in B2C. Simply for the reason that it's harder to, you know, get data and analyze like thousands of sales calls or internal sales calls of a company compared to like, maybe testing different emails and messages and, and ads.

Which, which, it's more of a B2C side thing. Yeah.

Richard Shotton: Everything we've talked about so far, [00:46:00] Thomas has been about how you, how listeners can apply these principles, how people can apply them to their own businesses. But what about you? What behavioral science principles have you applied to the, the newsletter?

Do you use these principles? Have you seen any that have worked particularly well?

Thomas Mckinlay: Yeah, this this is this is a funny story actually. Is that one, one great example of this is, is how we chose our name Science says, because when I, when I started sciences over five years ago, it was, it was not called Science.

It was under a different name, and its name was Ari. But wait so it, it stood for Academic Research in your Hands, so it was an acronym, A-R-I-Y-H. Needless say, pretty, pretty bad name. Pretty, pretty bad. Like, I mean, I, [00:47:00] I, I, I'm a bit biased, you know, as an Italian, we don't pronounce h usually and so on, so I just thought, oh yeah.

Like, you know, but people would be like, what, what Ari? It's it, nobody remembered it. Nobody could pronounce it. I just, I, I don't wanna even think of the amount of word of mouth we lost because of it. Right? Like, people were scared to recommend it, probably 'cause they didn't know how to pronounce it. But still has a space in my heart still before.

So but we did know that we had to change the name, but so once I actually started working and so I said, okay, let's do a deep dive into the latest research in brand. And, and so we, we did all that and then we even created this playbook of brand names that now we give for free to, to all our paid, paid subscribers.

And, and there we went, you know, through all the research and, and in the end, like used [00:48:00] that to choose science says why did we choose Science? Says in the end some examples of like, the research supporting it is. Well, it's easier to pronounce, which makes names more trustworthy extremely important in this space.

Then it's directly suggestive of the main benefit, right? Like, so we explain what the science says. It's made from a memorable word play, right? So like the, the game of Simon says, which is surprisingly international, by the way. Almost every country has its own version of it that I found out later.

And it's composed of three syllables, not more, which is optimal and like some other reasons like that. So, so yeah. So that's, that's one way in which we choose the science for, for our own renaming. Yeah,

MichaelAaron Flicker: that, that one of those points stand, stood out to me. So many of them for [00:49:00] those of us that have worked in branding, I've heard of, but the name.

Delivers on what the promise of the product says to me. That's that's so helpful to hear you talk through because. It's hard enough in a sea of companies you compete with to be remembered regardless of your name. But if you can get that benefit to me that feels like an unlock more brands could use, even if it was on a line extension, even if it was on you know, a category.

If you could help deliver the value in the name, that can really, that can really help be a separator.

Thomas Mckinlay: Yeah, absolute suggestive names. Really, like there's, there's a lot of good, good evidence supporting that, that they really help, you know, and, and even like building immediate, like kind of attention and trust.

And yeah, again, not particularly irrational. It makes sense, right? Like,

MichaelAaron Flicker: yeah. [00:50:00] This has been a lovely conversation, Thomas. For folks that wanna learn more about you and about your practice, where can they go to follow and learn more?

Thomas Mckinlay: Yeah. Thank thanks again for, for really for, for having me. What love, love for you to, to join my newsletter.

Science says it goes out every, every Tuesday. You know, we, we send this like three minute practical insights about the latest data science. You'll join over 30,000 really smart marketing operators. Feel free to also follow me on LinkedIn if you like. I talk about research there a lot. And yeah, if you're interested in like research, deep dive into your own specific industry you know, we, we've done a lot of these, these reports, like whether it's for the spa association or, or big brands like Mars or, or others in AI and tech.

And yeah, feel [00:51:00] free to reach out if, if that's the case. Yeah,

Richard Shotton: well, well the recommendation to subscribe to the newsletter, I would definitely endorse. I love it. I think if someone has never heard of behavioral science. Never gone to university. It's simple enough to read, you know, it's brilliantly digested and written in a lovely, easy to understand manner.

But on the other hand, if someone is a behavioral science professional, they've been in the energy for 20 years. I read those newsletters and, and constantly learn new things. So it's both great for beginners, but for, for people who are immersed in the field too.

MichaelAaron Flicker: If you found this podcast engaging, interesting, you took something away, please share it with those that you are colleagues and that are also interested. Sharing. These podcasts are one of the top ways we have new people learn about us, and of course. Please follow, like, or subscribe to this podcast, the Consumer [00:52:00] Behavior Lab and the Behavioral Science for Brands podcast.

It helps make sure we reach more people just like you that like to listen. Until next time, I'm MichaelAaron Flicker.

Richard Shotton: And I'm Richard Shotton.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Thomas, thanks so much for being with us today.

Thomas Mckinlay: Thank you so much.

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