

Start with the end in mind

Streamline your research and sharpen your insights by thinking behaviourally

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What if there was a way to bring a laser focus to your research projects that allows you to get more actionable insights for less budget? A simple switch to thinking about the exact behaviour you want consumers to change can give you that - and more.

The challenge

Consumer insights have been continuously required to become faster, leaner and more impactful. As a result, we have gotten better at delivering insights in a more agile way and integrating data from different sources. Yet despite this progress, we are still often grappling with the same question: how do we transform data into actionable insights the business can *actually* use?

Primary research is being increasingly complemented with data from behavioural analytics, social listening and experience tracking. Connecting the dots in these mountains of data from different sources requires not only technological sophistication but also intellectual creativity because navigating and synthesizing data is cognitively taxing, time consuming and cumbersome – especially now after COVID-19 intensified the digital revolution in our industry. Streamlining research is also becoming increasingly important as our industry battles with the participant crisis that has been partly caused by years of long, poorly designed surveys.

The answer to these challenges is not adding more glitz, glam and jazz hands to our research. Instead, we need to shift our focus to the ultimate objective of every research project and strip everything back to the *exact* consumer behaviour we want to change.

Start by identifying the right problem to solve

A decade after the publication of Nobel-prize winner Daniel Kahneman's "Thinking Fast and Slow", we are all too aware of the foibles of our mind. Human brains love to find meaning and identify patterns even where there are none to be found. We generalize from our own experiences, subconsciously following the path of thought that is most salient in our minds and keenly confirm our initial hypotheses to avoid thinking any harder than we absolutely need to.

It is therefore very human when we fall in love with our own hypotheses about why consumers are doing something. Every stakeholder in an organization will have slightly different hypotheses informed by their experiences and perspectives, and these unspoken hypotheses exert an invisible influence on how research briefs get written, the choices made throughout a research project as well as how the findings are analysed and interpreted.

Thankfully, you do not need to become a behavioural science expert leverage the benefits of *thinking behaviourally* – we just need to heed the wisdom of another Nobel prize winner, Albert Einstein: “If I had an hour to solve a problem, I’d spend 55 minutes thinking about the problem and five minutes thinking about solutions.”

Although the ultimate goal of any research project is to change consumer behaviour, the objectives in market research briefs typically talk about outcomes: for example, awareness, retention or growth. Yet thinking in terms of target behaviour has many benefits for both the client-side research and those working in agencies because it can bring brings precision and clarity to marketing objectives and research briefs and helping to streamline research projects by reducing redundancy (e.g., “nice-to-know” questions). It can also create a common language to align stakeholders and help them think more concretely about how the research will eventually be used.

Step 1: Defining outcomes and behaviours

In order for this process to work, you need to go through each step carefully - skipping through will compromise the result, just like taking shortcuts when building the foundation of a house will make a building unstable regardless of how beautifully decorated it is on the inside.

The process starts by creating two types of statements and working backwards from the outcome to the specific target behaviour(s) that you want to influence (Figure 1).



Figure 1 From outcome to behaviour

The first step is to determine the desired business outcome: for example, what would the CEO be happy to see at the next annual report? Make sure the outcomes are specific, measurable, targeted to a specific audience and limited in a time frame. Avoid general or vague statements like “raise awareness” – think instead what kind of objectives the CEO of your company might need to share with the board and aim for that level of detail. No matter how high the awareness is for your brand, it does not pay for salaries nor dividends to shareholders – therefore, dig deeper to define an outcome that directly links to the bottom line.

Once you have defined the business outcome, think about what kinds of behaviours are needed to reach that business outcome: in other words, what behaviours do we need to influence so that we can empower the CEO to delight the board with his update.

In everyday language, we often talk about outcomes and behaviours interchangeably: we might colloquially talk about New Year’s resolutions like healthier lifestyle, for example. The reason these types of resolutions often fail is that they specify the goal (where you want to be) but not how you will get there. When this happens in companies, it is the equivalent of a group of friends deciding to go on holiday to “southern France” but not specifying where exactly or how and when they’ll get there. Even though it seems simple enough as a plan when all friends are sitting in a London pub, some of them end up in Marseille, others in Nice, and one couple in Biarritz. In other words, the

dream of a holiday together did not materialize and eventually results in a less-than-amicable discussion about what went wrong with such a clear plan.

In the context of marketing, outcomes are typically broad and have a longer timeframe; include many decision points and consist of things like thoughts, attitudes, scenarios and results. Behaviours are narrow, consisting of specific actions that people take within a short timeframe and potentially only include a single decision point (Figure 2).

Outcome	Behaviour
• Broad • Thoughts, attitudes, scenarios, results • Long timeframe • Includes many decision points • e.g. healthy lifestyle	• Narrow - specific actions that people take • Short timeframe • Single decision point • e.g. eating fruit instead of cake, cycling to work

Figure 2 Outcome vs. behaviour

For example, the desirable *outcome* of “healthy lifestyle” can be achieved with the help of many different *behaviours* which depend on the individual’s circumstances. For example, healthy lifestyle might mean:

- Cutting meat entirely out of one’s diet
- Reducing meat consumption by half
- Switching your chocolate snack to an apple
- Cycling to work every day
- Getting off the bus a few stops earlier
- Going to the gym once a week
- Hiring a personal trainer

Alternatively, it could be any number of other behaviours not listed here, so if you and your partner decided to have a “healthier lifestyle” without defining what that means for each of you, it might result in misunderstandings and disagreements – just like not being aligned on the definition of the business outcome might do across multiple teams.

So, thinking about the business outcome, think about what it is you want to achieve:

- Are you looking for growth, maintain current position or something else?
- In what time period to you want to see the change?
- How will you measure if you have succeeded?

Once you have defined your business outcome, make sure it is:

- realistic given the time, budget and other resources you have available
- not a vague ambition (‘increase sales’) or a customer insight (‘increase confidence’)
- not a customer behaviour but an ambition for the business

Try to be as specific as possible with the terms you use and what you can *actually* measure (see Table 1 for examples).

Table 1 Improving outcome statements

From this...	...to this
• More frequent reading habits • Move people up the purchase funnel • More paying customers	• Increase the number of paying subscribers by 10% in 2022 • Double payments through our app for users of our service within 12 months

Once we know what business outcome you're looking for, we can work out what behaviours are needed!

Step 2: Define your target behaviours

The next step is to work out what behaviours people are currently doing that you do not want them to do, and what you would like them to do instead. For example, they might browse your news site without logging in and you would like them to log in first, because then you can track their behaviour and subsequently target advertising to them, generating more revenue for the business.

This might seem simplistic but don't give into the temptation to skip this step by glossing over it: be as specific as possible and describe the behaviour so precisely that you could draw it. If you're in doubt about whether something is a "behaviour", think about if you can see it – you can see behaviours, but not emotions or thoughts.

Think about things like:

- Who is doing the behaviour? (e.g., individual, household, or larger groups)
- How often do they do the current behaviour?
- Do you want them to stop current behaviour, start a new behaviour or replace something they are doing with another behaviour?
- Do you want them to change the frequency, duration or intensity of their behaviour?

When you are describing the target behaviour, make a clear and explicit causal connection to the outcome you want to achieve – if you struggle with this, it may be a sign you haven't found the right behaviour yet.

The business outcome you have defined influences what behaviours you want to target as well as the resources needed to change the behaviour because behaviours vary widely in their characteristics. Going through this process meticulously helps you articulate how you understand the behaviour in question and often it will reframe the problem in ways that open up different ways of solving it. Thinking about behaviour explicitly will also help you design solutions that match its characteristics – one size does not fit all when it comes to changing behaviour!

The characteristics of a behaviour matter because they influence the level of effort in changing it, the motivation required and the kinds of emotions it might spark in the process (see Table 2). For example, behaviours that are repeated are influenced by previous experiences but the amount of feedback a person has from these experiences is very different if the behaviour is repeated daily, annually or only a few times in a lifetime.

Table 2 Sizing up your challenge

← Easier to change	Harder to change →
• One-off or simple behaviours • When you have more control over context • When you need to influence behaviour <i>once</i> only • Starting or stopping – depending on the behaviour	• Continuous or complex behaviours • When you can't control the choice environment, or you need to adjust many things • Complex activities that include coordinating many behaviours • Established routines or patterns of behaviour • Replacing a behaviour (vs. start/stop)

Another dimension to consider is your audience's motivation and the strength of their existing preferences – this will help you establish how open they might be to changing their behaviour in general and how much effort it will take from you to achieve that.

According to the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2011), there are six types of motivation that can be arranged on a continuum from stronger, more autonomous motivation to weaker, more controlled motivation (Figure 3). The stronger your audience's existing internal motivation, the easier it is to influence it and, conversely, if your audience has little desire to do the behaviour you want them to do, it will take a lot of resources to achieve your goals. If you discover your audience's motivation is relatively weak, you might also want to check if the outcome is worth the resources that are needed in the process – be honest with yourself about what the ROI is likely to be!

Figure 3 Types of motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2011)



Finally, consider what level of control you have over the environment where the decision or behaviour takes place. For example, if your target behaviour happens on a website that you own (e.g., conversion to buying) you have a relatively high degree of control over the decision environment. On the other hand, you have much less control over the environment if your target behaviour is getting more people to visit your website in the first place or visit it more often. Changing behaviour is even more challenging if it is more in the physical world and involves a product people use in their homes – in these situations, you have very little to no control over the behaviour.

Step 3: Prioritising and choosing target behaviours

In addition to evaluating the size of your challenge from the perspective of the people whose behaviour you would like to influence, it's also important to consider the target behaviours from the organization's perspective. If you have many potential target behaviours that could help you achieve the business outcome, it might not be possible for the organization to expend resources to address all of them – at least not at the same time!

One way to choose between target behaviours is use something like the Impact Likelihood Matrix: a visualization approach that will help you map behaviours onto a simple diagram according to their prioritization criteria scores (Figure 4). First, you estimate the likely impact – the extent to which changing the behaviour will contribute to achieving the outcome you want – and map it on the y-axis. Then, map the likelihood that your target audience will actually change their behaviour on the x-axis. Once you have mapped all of your potential target behaviours, you will be able to see them in a two-by-two matrix where the behaviours fit into one of four quadrants.

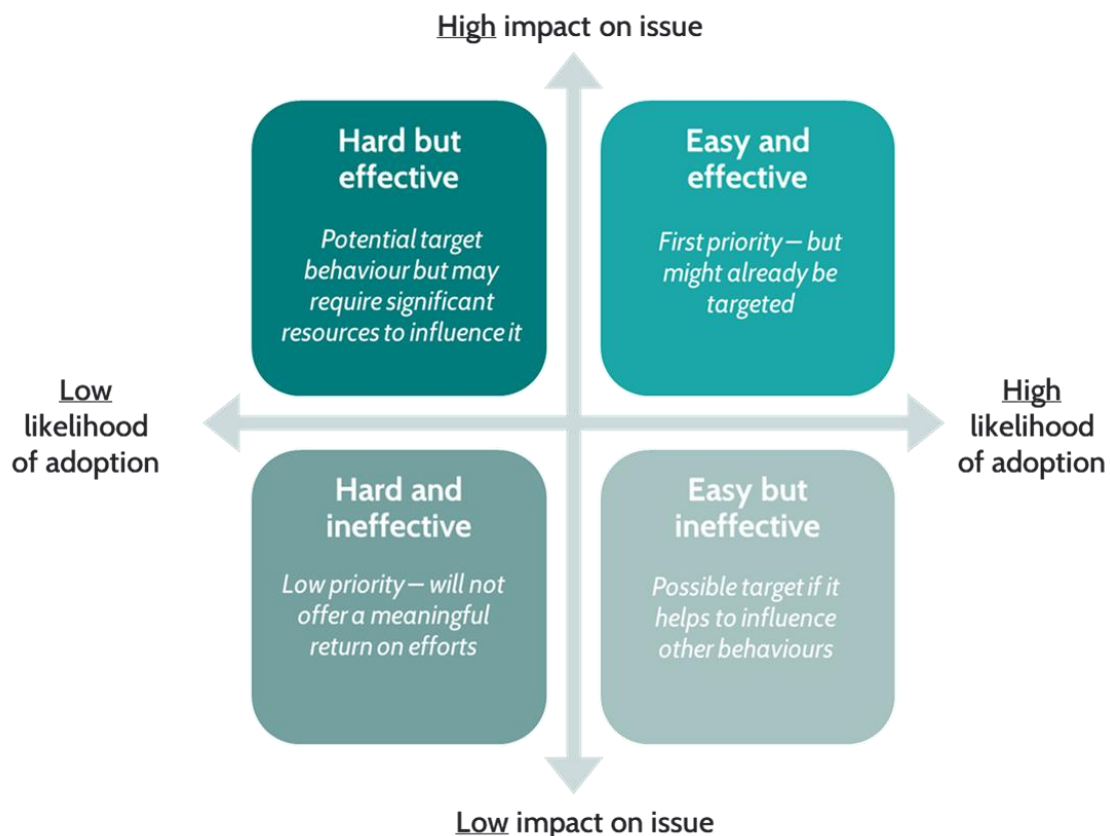


Figure 4 Impact Likelihood Matrix (adapted from Kneebone, Smith & Fielding, 2017)

If a behaviour sits in the bottom left quadrant, addressing it will be hard and likely ineffective – it won't contribute much to achieving your outcome and requires a relatively high number of resources. In the bottom right quadrant, influencing the behaviour is easier but still unlikely to make a big difference to the outcome you are looking for – unless they are connected to other behaviours that do.

In the top left quadrant, you will find behaviours that could be longer term goals or areas that require more investment because they contribute a lot to the desired outcome, but you will need to work hard to influence the behaviour. Finally, the top right quadrant represents the behaviours that potentially offer the highest rewards and contribute the most to the business outcome you are looking for.

The End

Thinking behaviourally with this approach can seem almost disappointingly simple and easy as there is nothing shiny, sparkling or mysterious about it – it can feel deceptively common sense and, as such, tempting to engage in the process lightly. However, once you have tried the process properly you will see how it crystallises your thinking about what you want to achieve and how you will get there:

First, it will help you define tangible, measurable business objectives that connect directly to the bottom line. This will clarify your research briefs and ensure all stakeholders from internal clients to agency partners are aligned and focused on the same goal. The increased clarity helps the research provider to optimize their methodology, sample design and content by streamlining it to the essentials you need for your decision-making.

Alternatively, you can use this approach to find out if you already have the answers from the data sources that exist in your organization and untangle it so that you understand the scope of the problem better.

Finally, being focused on the end behaviour you want to influence makes it easier to generate clearer, more actionable insights and recommendations – sometimes at a fraction of the usual cost, but always improving your ROI.

References

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