

PEOPLE MAKE MOST DECISIONS UNCONSCIOUSLY

You're thinking of whether or not to make a purchase of software for your department at work. You do some research online, have some vendors make presentations to you, and talk to people in your industry to see what they use. What factors are most influential in your decision-making process?

In my book *Neuro Web Design: What Makes Them Click?*, I explain that people like to think that they've carefully and logically weighed all the relevant factors before they make a decision. In the case of the software purchase, you've considered the features and functionality of the software, the reliability of the vendor, and the pricing of each contender. You've considered all those factors consciously, but research on decision-making shows that your actual decision is made primarily in an unconscious way.

Unconscious decision-making includes factors such as

- ★ What most other people are using: "Most people seem to go with product X."
- ★ What is consistent with your persona (commitment): "I'm the kind of person who tries the latest and newest."
- ★ Whether you can pay off any obligations or social debts with this purchase (reciprocity): "That vendor gave me a free 60-day trial and free training and support."
- ★ Fear of loss: "This product is on sale, and if I don't buy it right now the price may go up."
- ★ Your particular drives, motivations, and fears.

UNCONSCIOUS DOESN'T MEAN IRRATIONAL OR BAD

Most mental processing is unconscious, and most decision-making is unconscious, but that doesn't mean it's faulty, irrational, or bad. People are faced with an overwhelming amount of data (billions of pieces of data come into the brain every second!), and the conscious mind can't process all of it. The unconscious has evolved to process most of the data and to make decisions according to guidelines and rules of thumb that are in the individual's best interest most of the time. This is the genesis of "trusting your gut," and most of the time it works.

AUDIENCE RESEARCH IS CRITICAL

In order to fashion a presentation that will compel action, you need to know as much as possible about your audience, including the possibly unconscious reasons that will compel them into action.

It's easy to get caught up in all the logical reasons why someone should take action and to forget that most people are deciding based on unconscious, and often emotional, reasons.



The power of knowing your audience

I was giving a presentation to a client about why they should change the design of their software. I believed that by changing the software they would save money on customer training and calls to the help desk, and they would have the satisfaction of creating a product that people wanted to use. But I also knew that the decision to stop development on the product in order to fix the problems I was talking about was a big decision for the product manager. In preparing my presentation, I had to decide how best to frame my recommendations to the client. If I wanted them to be willing to fix the problems with the software, even if that meant affecting the project deadlines, should I talk about saving money on customer training? Calls to the help desk? The reputation of the company in the marketplace?

Before I put together my presentation, I interviewed my main contact at the company, as well as two other people: a colleague of my contact, and my contact's boss. In those interviews, I discovered that my contact's boss saw himself as a maverick, someone willing to take risks and go against the prevailing winds.

When I put together my presentation, I focused on how stopping product development at this time was a bold move, that going to market with a "just OK" product that had some problems was what everyone else did, but that a maverick, someone who was willing to take risks, would do something bold: pause development and fix the problems. Of course I also gave all the regular logical reasons that this was a good idea.

It worked. The message to the "maverick" came through in the presentation. He decided to stop production and fix the problems. Because I took the time to understand my audience and what would motivate them and compel them to action, I was able to adjust my presentation to spur action. In the chapter "How to Craft Your Presentation," you will learn how to put your audience research into action. In order to get people to take action, though, you must know your audience well.

AND DON'T FORGET THE LOGICAL REASON ON TOP

Although the real reasons for taking action are based on unconscious factors, once people decide to act they will need a logical, fact-based reason to explain their action to themselves and others. You should, therefore, provide a logical, data-based reason why they should decide to act—but realize that that may not be the only or even the real reason for the decision.

Takeaways

- * In order to influence people to take action, you need to understand their unconscious motivations. The more you know about your audience, the better able you will be to communicate in a way that propels decision-making.
- * When people tell you their reasons for deciding to take a certain action, you have to be skeptical about what they say. Because decision-making is unconscious, they may be unaware of the true reasons for their decisions.
- * Even though people make decisions based on unconscious factors, they want a rational, logical reason for the decisions they make. So you still need to provide the rational, logical reasons, although they're unlikely to be the actual reasons that people decided to take action.

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FEAR OF LOSS TRUMPS ANTICIPATION OF GAIN

You are preparing a presentation for your project team in which you will suggest that the team change the method they use for the next project. Should you base the presentation on all the advantages that the new method will give the team (anticipation of gain) or on the possible problems and things that will go wrong if they don't change to the new method (fear of loss)?

One of my favorite pieces of research on unconscious mental processing was conducted by Antoine Bechara and his team (1997). Participants in the study played a gambling game with decks of cards. Each person received \$2000 of pretend money. They were told that the goals were to lose as little of the \$2000 as possible and to try to make as much over the \$2000 as possible. There were four decks of cards on the table. Each participant turned over a card from any of the four decks, one card at a time, and continued turning over cards from the deck of their choice until the experimenter told them to stop. The subjects didn't know when the game would end. They were told that they earned money every time they turned over a card. They were also told that sometimes when they turned over a card, they earned money but also *lost* money (by paying it to the experimenter). The participants didn't know any of the rules of the gambling game. Here are what the rules actually were:

- ★ When they turned over any card in deck A or B, they earned \$100. When they turned over any card in deck C or D, they earned \$50.
- ★ Some cards in decks A and B also required participants to pay the experimenter a lot of money, sometimes as much as \$1250. Some cards in decks C and D also required participants to pay the experimenter, but the amount they had to pay was only an average of \$100.
- ★ Over the course of the game, decks A and B produced net losses if participants continued using them. Continued use of decks C and D rewarded participants with net gains.

The rules never changed. Although participants didn't know this, the game ended after 100 cards had been turned over.

THE UNCONSCIOUS MIND PICKS UP THE DANGER FIRST

Most participants started by trying all four decks. At first, they gravitated toward decks A and B because those decks paid out \$100 per turn. But after about 30 turns, most

turned to decks C and D. They then continued turning cards in decks C and D until the game ended. During the study, the experimenter stopped the game several times to ask participants about the decks. The participants were connected to a skin conductance sensor to measure their skin conductance response (SCR). The participants' SCR readings were elevated when they played decks A and B (the "dangerous" decks) long before they consciously realized that A and B were dangerous. Their SCR increased before they touched—or even thought about—using decks A and B. Their unconscious knew that decks A and B were "dangerous" and resulted in a loss. This was evidenced by the spike in the SCR. However, that's all unconscious. Their conscious minds didn't yet know that anything was wrong.

Eventually participants said they had a hunch that decks C and D were better, but the SCR shows that the old brain figured this out long before the new brain realized it. By the end of the game, most participants had more than a hunch and could articulate the difference in the two decks, but a full 30 percent of the participants couldn't explain why they preferred decks C and D. They said they just thought those decks were better.

FEAR OF LOSING WHAT YOU ALREADY HAVE

People are most afraid of losing what they already have or what they almost have.

Barry Schwartz (2004) researched people buying cars. Participants test-drove cars with all the options.

- ★ In one condition, they were shown the price of the car with all the options. If they said the price was too expensive, they then were asked to take away the options in an effort to reduce the price.
- ★ In another condition, they were shown the base price of the car (without options) along with a description and price of each option. They were asked to select which options they wanted to add, increasing the price with each option.

He found that people will spend more money in the first condition. The theory is that when people have experienced the car in its entirety they will be reluctant to lose what, in some sense, they feel they already have.

PHRASING YOUR MESSAGE IN TERMS OF LOSS RATHER THAN GAIN

In order to get people to take action you should consider framing your presentation around fear of loss rather than anticipation of gain. You can certainly build in the positive aspects of why they should make a certain decision, but ultimately phrasing the request for action based on fear of loss will result in more action.

For example, let's say you are making a presentation on why your team should switch to using a new vendor for the company's ad campaigns. You could focus on how good the new ad agency is, the wonderful work they do, and all that you would gain from working with them. The new agency is larger, they have more experience in your industry, and so on. But it will be more effective if you start with what you will lose if you don't go with the new agency—you will lose all the experience that a big agency has, you will lose opportunity, and so on. You are essentially saying the same or very similar things, but you are phrasing them in terms of what the people in the room will lose rather than what they will gain.

Takeaways

- * People respond and react to unconscious signals of danger.
- * The unconscious acts more quickly than the conscious mind. This means that people often take actions or have preferences but cannot explain why they prefer what they do.
- * A powerful communication in your presentation is to point out the danger of taking a particular action or the danger of not acting.
- * A powerful communication in your presentation is to point out that people might lose something they already have if they do not act now.
- * It's important to have explicit calls for action in your presentation in order to seize the opportunity if people are ready to act.

PEOPLE WANT MORE CHOICES AND INFORMATION THAN THEY CAN ACTUALLY PROCESS

If you stand in any aisle in any retail store in most parts of the world, you'll be inundated with choices. Whether you're buying candy, cereal, TVs, or jeans, you'll likely have a huge number of items to choose from. No matter what you are asking people to decide on, if you ask people whether they'd prefer to choose from a few alternatives or have lots of choices, most people will say they want lots of choices.

TOO MANY CHOICES PARALYZES THE THOUGHT PROCESS

Sheena Iyengar's book *The Art of Choosing* details her own and others' research on choice. In graduate school Iyengar conducted what is now known as the "jam" study. Iyengar and Mark Lepper (2000) decided to test the theory that people who have too many choices will not choose at all. They set up booths at a busy upscale grocery store and posed as store employees. They alternated the selection on the table. Half of the time there were six choices of fruit jam for people to try, and the other half of the time there were 24 jars of jam.

WHICH TABLE HAD MORE VISITORS?

When there were 24 jars of jam, 60 percent of the people coming by would stop and taste. When there were six jars of jam, only 40 percent of the people would stop and taste. So having more choices was better, right? Not really.

WHICH TABLE RESULTED IN MORE TASTING?

You might think that people would taste more jam when the table had 24 varieties. But they didn't. People stopped at the table, but they only tasted a few varieties whether there were six or 24 choices available. People can remember only three or four things at a time (see the chapter "How People Think and Learn"), and they can decide among only three or four things at a time.

WHICH TABLE RESULTED IN MORE PURCHASES?

The most interesting part of Iyengar's study is that 31 percent of the people who stopped at the table with six jars actually made a purchase. But only 3 percent of the people who stopped at the table with 24 jars actually made a purchase. So even

though more people stopped by, fewer people purchased. To give you an example of the numbers, if 100 people came by (they actually had more than that in the study, but 100 makes the calculations easy for our purposes), 60 of them would stop and try the jam at the 24-jar table but only two would make a purchase. At the six-jar table, 40 people would stop and try the jam and 12 of them would actually make a purchase.

WHY PEOPLE CAN'T STOP

So if "less is more," then why do people always want more choices? It's part of that dopamine effect. Information is addictive. It's only when people are confident in their decisions that they stop seeking more information.

LIMIT THE CHOICES IN THE CALL TO ACTION

In order to maximize the likelihood that people will take action after your presentation, limit the number of choices you are asking them to make. Limit the number of options you give for the call to action to three or four at the most.

Takeaways

- * If you ask people how many options they want, they will almost always say "a lot" or "give me all the options." So if you ask what they want, be prepared to deviate from what they ask for.
- * Resist the impulse to provide your audience with a large number of choices for action during your presentation. Only give them a few choices for what their next action should be.

PEOPLE THINK CHOICE EQUALS CONTROL

Even though we know that it is best to limit the number of choices you give people during your presentation, it's important that you provide some options, because people equate choice with being in control, and they feel a need to be in control.

In *The Art of Choosing* (2010), Sheena Iyengar describes an experiment with rats. The rats were given a choice of a direct path to food, or a path that had branches and therefore required choices to be made. Both paths resulted in access to the same food in the same amounts. If all the rats wanted was food, then they should have taken the short, direct path. But the rats continuously preferred the path with branches.

In experiments with monkeys and pigeons, the animals learn to press buttons to get food. If given a choice between one button and multiple buttons, both monkeys and pigeons prefer multiple buttons.

In similar research with humans, people were given chips to use at a casino. They could use the chips at a table that had one roulette wheel or at a table where they could choose from two roulette wheels. People preferred the table with two wheels, even though all three wheels were identical.

Even though it isn't necessarily true that more choices means more control, people feel that it does. If people are to feel in control, then they need to feel that their actions are powerful and that they have choices to make. Sometimes having many choices makes it harder to get what they want, but they still want the choices so that they feel in control of the decision.

People have a desire to control their environment. This makes sense, since by controlling the environment they are more likely to increase their chances of survival.

Here are some ways for you to make people feel in control during your presentation:

- ★ If you have activities for people to do, give them choices. For example, in some of my presentations I have people choose a Web site to evaluate based on the design topics I've been discussing. Rather than assigning them a Web site to evaluate, I let them pick one.
- ★ If you have activities that people will do with a partner or team, let them pick who they work with rather than assigning teams.
- ★ When you have a call to action at the end of your presentation, don't just give them one thing to do. Provide up to three or four different actions they can

take. For example, at the end of some of my presentations I discuss where they can go for more information. I often have the following choices:

Read one or more of my books.

Read some of these other books I recommend.

Sign up for one of my classes.



The need to control starts young

Iyengar describes a study of infants as young as 4 months old where the researchers attached the babies' hands to a string. The infants could move their hands to pull the string, which would cause music to play. Then the researchers would detach the string from the music control. They would play music at the same intervals, but the infant had no control over when the music would play. The babies would become sad and angry, even though the music was still playing at the same intervals. They wanted to control when the music played.

Takeaways

- * People need to feel that they are in control and that they have choices.
- * People won't always choose the fastest way to get something done. You may want to offer more than one way, even if the alternative methods are less efficient, just so that people will have a choice.
- * Once you've given people choices, they'll be unhappy if you take those choices away.
- * Provide several (up to four) different calls to action at the end of your presentation rather than just one.
- * If you have activities during the presentation, let people choose which activity they do or who they do it with.

PEOPLE MIGHT CARE ABOUT TIME MORE THAN THEY CARE ABOUT MONEY

Say you're out for a Sunday bike ride on your favorite path, and you come across some kids selling lemonade. Do you stop and buy lemonade? Do you like the lemonade? Does your buying or liking the lemonade have anything to do with the wording on the sign next to the lemonade stand? Apparently so.

Cassie Mogilner and Jennifer Aaker (2009) from the Stanford Graduate School of Business conducted a series of experiments to see whether references to time or references to money would affect whether people stopped to buy, how much they were willing to pay, and how satisfied they were with the products they bought. They conducted five experiments.

SPENDING TIME VERSUS SPENDING MONEY

The first study was the lemonade stand previously described. Sometimes there was a sign that said "Spend a little time, and enjoy C & D's lemonade." This was the "time" condition. Sometimes the sign said "Spend a little money, and enjoy C & D's lemonade" (money condition), and other times the sign said "Enjoy C & D's lemonade" (control condition).

A total of 391 people passed by either on foot or on bikes. Those who stopped to purchase lemonade ranged in age from 14 to 50, and there was a mix of genders and occupations. Customers could pay anywhere from \$1 to \$3 for a cup of lemonade—the customer decided on the price. The authors comment that the high price was justified by the fact that the customers got to keep the high-quality plastic cup. After customers drank their lemonade they completed a survey.

More people stopped to buy lemonade when the sign mentioned time (14 percent). In fact, twice as many people stopped when time was mentioned than when money was mentioned (7 percent). In addition, customers in the time condition paid more money for the lemonade (\$2.50 on average) than customers in the money condition (\$1.38 on average). Interestingly, the control condition was in between on both the number of people stopping to purchase and the average price. In other words, mentioning time brought the most customers and the most money, mentioning money brought the fewest customers and the least money, and mentioning neither was in between. The same was true when customers filled out the satisfaction survey.

The researchers came up with the hypothesis that when you invoke time in the message, you make more of a personal connection than when you invoke money. To test this idea, they conducted four more experiments in the lab rather than in the field to see how the time versus money messaging affected people's ideas about purchasing iPods, laptops, jeans, and cars.

PEOPLE WANT TO CONNECT

At the end of all the experiments, the researchers concluded that people are more willing to buy, will spend more money, and will like their purchases better if there's a personal connection. In most cases, that personal connection is triggered by references to time instead of money. The idea is that mentioning time highlights your experience with the product and that this thinking about the experience makes the personal connection.

However, for certain products (such as designer jeans or prestige cars) or for certain consumers (those who value possessions more than experiences), personal connection is highlighted by mentioning money more than by mentioning time. These people are in the minority, but they are out there.

EVALUATE YOUR AUDIENCE

It's important to know your audience. If they are influenced by prestige and possessions, then by all means mention money, but otherwise saving time might be more influential.

Takeaways

- * Be aware that most people, most of the time, are more influenced by time and by experiences that produce a personal connection than by money or possessions.
- * When you are making an argument for taking a certain action, you can mention the amount of money saved, but you might want to stress time saved as much or even more.
- * Remember that people always want to connect. Look for ways during your presentation for people to get to know each other and connect. For example, if you have them do an activity, leave enough time for them to share their results with someone else in the room.