Ep99 - Interview: Tim den Heijer, author of The Housefly Effect, on how friction, incentives, and context shape behavior

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

Richard Shotton: And I'm Richard Shotton.

MichaelAaron Flicker: And today we're sitting with Tim Den Heijer, creative strategist, author, and one of the most insightful voices connecting behavioral science.

With real world marketing and advertising. Let's get into it. Tim, welcome to Behavioral Science for Brands, Richard and I, are so excited to have you here.

Tim Den Heijer: Well, yeah, I'm very excited to be here as well. I've known Richard for a while. Big, big fan of the podcast. I hope I can tell you something new.

Maybe tell you something you already know, but in a D English accent,

MichaelAaron Flicker: if that does nothing else, it will make us all feel smarter by hearing your accent. But no in our prep for [00:01:00] today's call, we've had a lovely conversation before we hit the record button. If you'll indulge me, Tim, I'd just like to give our listeners a little bit of background on you and then we'll get into today's, to today's conversation.

You're the author. Of the House Fly effect, a very compelling book on how nudge psychology steers everyday behaviors. You're also the founder and co-owner of Brain Creatives, where you develop creative campaigns inspired by behavioral science for clients, and you are regular contributor to many industry publications like Marketing Facts and The Daily Express.

We're thrilled to have you here for our conversation. Thrilled to be here. Yep. So maybe we can start with a story. You've become an enthusiast and expert in how psychology and behavioral science steers decisions, but how were you introduced to this world of [00:02:00] psychology and behavioral science? Where did, where, where did Tim first meet this field and get interested in it and fall in love with it?

Tim Den Heijer: Well actually me and my business partner, the Boer, we were creative directors and managers of the larger advertising agency for about 10 years. And the thing is that agency was very successful at creating effective campaigns. So the problem I had wasn't that I didn't know what worked.

The problem I had was that I couldn't explain why it worked. And as we did better and better with an agency we got a request from the press to Oh, tell us a little bit more about this effective campaign. Yeah. Well, we sort of know it works, right? So I got more interested in that. And, and that happened around the time when a lot of the, the big names in popular Behavioral Science started releasing their, their popular books.

So that was a great time for that [00:03:00] to, to to, to read more about it go back and, and study a bit more. And then I think I went very quickly, I think within a year from, well, this will help better explain what I'm doing. To this changes the way I, that I do stuff. I really need to find a new way of working because all the stuff I learned in advertising or a lot of it, and a lot of the stuff I learned in school really doesn't apply anymore.

And they're going to be people who are like 22, 23 coming from school who know better than a strategy director. So it's really time to to change her way of working. And well, it was just so much fun to start looking at it from that angle to not look at it like, well, what do we know that works?

And what do we appreciate in, in the advertising industry? What might win as an award? Basically go back to what do we know about why people do what they do? And the, what we have are the motto of brain creators is inspired [00:04:00] by science because we really felt that way. It was really like, this is much more inspiring than looking at other creatives work.

And

MichaelAaron Flicker: yeah.

Tim Den Heijer: So there,

MichaelAaron Flicker: Richard and I have talked a lot about this maybe even more off camera than on camera, how sometimes great creatives, great strategy people have access to what motivates human behavior. And they don't know the why they, but they have a hunch or they have an insight and it works. What have you found about learning the science that's.

Been so helpful to you? Is it, is it being able to explain it more? Is it thinking more about human behavior? What's the thing that now that you've done these studies that, that it's opened up for you?

Tim Den Heijer: I think two things were really interesting to me or really worth worth for. Would you put it valuable for me?

The first one was learning that I could use a completely different language to explain my ideas. Mm-hmm. [00:05:00] So I, maybe 10, 12 years ago, I would talk to a CEO and say, well, you really need guts to do this because it's very different. And CEOs don't really like to be heard that the advice you give them takes a lot of guts and courage.

So now I would say, well, if you use the full restorative effect, you will be noticed. This is scientifically proven. So it's the same idea. It's a different language and I found that people will. Listen to your ideas as a creative better if you can explain why they work, rather than if you put it in standard creative language, which is all about guts and feeling.

So that's one thing. The other one is that while it's cool when you have a certain hunch and then you find some piece of research that proves that you're right. It's mu it's much more interesting that you're not, that you're, well, I think it was Kaman who said the problem with [00:06:00] intuition is that intuition doesn't warn you when your intuition is off.

We don't have a meta intuition for that. So, o on one hand to know how to explain my hunches, and on the other hand, to learn not to trust them too much. Always question them. I think that those two things are are yeah, most valuable to me.

MichaelAaron Flicker: In all the work that I've done with CMOs, there's a class of CMOs that I've come across who believe their hunches are the reason for all of the brand success.

They're convinced that they just have a read either on the consumer or on their brand better than anybody else. And maybe one of the things that most connects

all those CMOs is that. Luck eventually runs out like, you know, like they were high flyers, they were successful, nobody could help add, but then that intuition fails them.

So this idea that you should lean into your intuition, but there is a counterweight. [00:07:00] We don't have meta intuition. This there's a counterweight that we should be using academics or using studies to help validate and show us where our intuitions may be off. That takes a lot of humility, but it, but to me it's so inspiring to hear you say that.

Tim Den Heijer: Well, I think what me and my business partner also discovered was the first few times when we were younger, when campaigns were tested, you would hope that your idea would pass the test. Right? It's like, so like we got an a, it passed the test. And then when we started running our own agency and basically we were the ones who said, well, let's test this.

Our whole ideas started changing and we were like, wow, we discovered something we didn't know. That's really cool. We thought this scene would work really well, and it doesn't. Now we can, I really found that maybe also working in creative a little longer that finding out you're wrong about something means that there's a lot of stuff that you can [00:08:00] try that you haven't tried before.

Rather than copying yourself because you, you believe in that. So we started getting excited about being wrong. Because yeah, it, it, it's, it's something new, something you didn't know, something that can stimulate you. So that changed our whole approach to testing. Which I think it's a lot of fun to find out that you don't know everything yet and that things might be different and try to understand why that is.

I think to make it a little bit more concrete, we we once a TV commercial, where we were working with real people who had been through a very rough patch and they had been helped and they were really touched and grateful, and we were filming these real people. So you can't do it like six or seven times.

You have to, maybe you can speak to them twice, but then you have to have them. And then there was this wonderful moment where the woman we interviewed started crying because she was so touched and so grateful by what the charity had done. So we thought it was really like, did you get that? Did [00:09:00] we get that?

What's the sound of? Yeah, we have it. And then we edited it, edited the, the commercial put it, put it through I think EEG, an eye camera, and we could just see the brain going, no way. So that was our money shot. That just didn't work. And then we talked to a psychologist who said, well, it's a bit like a stranger next to you on the bus that starts crying.

You're not going to put your arm around and you're gonna be like, maybe I should send that somewhere else. Maybe I should press

Richard Shotton: the bell.

Tim Den Heijer: Yeah, that's good. And then we were like, okay. Yeah, I, I understand that this works in a TV show where I have. Gotten to know this character, but when it's a TV commercial, it's 25 for 30 seconds.

I don't have the time for that. It's just a, a stranger crying in my living room. So that really, that that was like something that we were sure we were right about and then we were wrong, and then we were just sort of excited. And I'm telling you now, we tell everybody like we found out something that we didn't know yet.

So yeah, I think research can [00:10:00] really make creative work more fun.

MichaelAaron Flicker: It is interesting in this story that the research that you did was e, e, g and I, cameras not a focus group, let's say where, you know, it's always interesting when you hear claimed responses. You may want to have an emotional connection to someone who's crying on camera.

You may, and the people that make the ad know it was authentic. So you want to share that with the world. But it's interesting that what really proved it to you was the actual responses people had of pulling back, of shutting down, and that's what taught you, you know, gave you the confidence to say, no, this can't work.

Could have gone differently if you had chose a different research methodology. It strikes me.

Tim Den Heijer: Yeah, I think so. I think the problem with, I mean, I know that there are researchers who are great as focus groups who can really get. Passed a lot of those problems, but people are media savvy and people have a, have a very [00:11:00] clear concept of what works in communications.

So they will always look through the glasses of of an expert also and say, well, if I was an advertising expert, I would expect this to happen. And. So, yeah, so EEG and I cameras also aren't the solution to e to everything. But if you want to know about these, these system one reactions to to, to a commercial for instance, they are very valuable.

Mm-hmm.

Richard Shotton: I, I, I really like your point about a skilled researcher knowing the danger of claim data and then looking for tactics to try and get around the problem. Mm-hmm. I think it was Timothy Nisbet. Sorry, Timothy Wilson or who, who did this, but it was an experiment about charity donations and what they realized was if you say to someone, would you donate money?

Everyone is gonna claim they are very, very generous people. So the way they got round that was to say, how likely [00:12:00] is it you think, you know, one of the fellow students would donate money. And what they found is people were. Either not truthful or didn't know their own generosity, but what they were bloody good at was ascertaining what their friends and peers would do.

So, so yeah, I think they're, you know, I'm always a big fan of experiments. I think that's the, the gold standard. But even if a researcher knows the danger of claim data, I think they can put tactics in place to try and boost the validity of the answers.

Tim Den Heijer: Yeah, definitely. We actually used that same insight as the basis for a, a political campaign a few years back for prime Minister Margaret, where we made a campaign where we, we, where we knew that if you ask people, what do you think?

Who do you think your neighbors are going to vote for? That that's sometimes a better prediction of the, the elections than if you ask them, what are you going to vote for? I that insight very, very interesting to us. Yeah, so we did a campaign where we asked people in the streets, are you going to vote for Marco Luther?

They said, no, no, I, I won't. I vote for [00:13:00] different party. I don't agree with his ideas. And we said, well, but can you tell us why other people will vote for him? And they would start saying, well, he's a great leader. He's really trustworthy. He's he's always there you can count on. And, and it just gave these beautiful reasons to vote for him.

Well, they didn't want to vote for him himself. So it was a very fun way to make a political campaign where people who don't vote for your candidate are telling you what's so great about him, but it was based on the same insight. Yeah.

Richard Shotton: Yes. Yeah, yeah. Oh, brilliant. And we, we'll put a link to that study in the show notes and just check the author.

I'm not sure if it's, I always get the mixed up. It's either Timothy Wilson or Richard nsbe, and I've kind of blurred them into a single entity, unfortunately, in my mind. So, so, so Tim, thinking about things you've been doing recently, you've written a, a, a brilliant book all about behavioral science and advertising and marketing.

And before we delve into the, the content of the book, can we just stop and talk about the title? Yes. There's an awful lot of books [00:14:00] out there that just are, you know, behavioral science and multi effectiveness. They're quite dry. You call Jaws the Housefly effect. So what was behind the title?

Tim Den Heijer: Yes.

Well, I think it all started with a, with a little insight that a five from the book I wrote it with and I had. We said, it's sort of weird that when I go to a talk about behavioral science, especially in the communications and marketing field the speaker will usually start out by explaining that in just pure information doesn't change people's minds or their behavior.

And then he will proceed to give you pure information about that for about an hour. So,

Richard Shotton: physician heal thyself?

Tim Den Heijer: Yeah. Yeah. So, so our, our deal was we should use some insights. When we're making this book take our own Medicine, starting with the title. So what would work? And then we heard about this thing called the Effect Effect, which might be Apal, but it was very funny that people are more [00:15:00] interested in something when you call it an effect.

And then we said, okay, it's going to be the hm effect. And then we were talking about, well, what's the most basic example of a nudge especially in the Netherlands. That's the little fly in urinal at Sri Airport. And then Ava said, no way. I'm going to name the book after Urinal. And then our editor said, we're not going to do a book named after Ur.

No, we were hoping for something like behavioral science in. Real life or something like that, which I'm the advertising guy and I said, I think it might work. We have a Dutch word, which is actually like a. A bit of a bigger fly which is not the fly that's in the urinal, but it sounds really nice and Dutch effect.

So we used that one and then our agent said, well, it's brilliant Yeah. To know name it effect. And I was like, well, it's just one book. Let's do it, Ava. Well, we're now on book number five and edition number eight. And there are points if, [00:16:00] if you look for me online, you'll often see a picture of me with a big slide of a urinal behind me.

And I sometimes sometimes at breakfast I say to my daughter, well, daddy is off to talk about als to people again. But it was something that we really well, we put some thought into it thinking what, what can we use to draw people into it? And also illustrate this idea, there's very small things that don't really seem to make sense, can lead to behavioral change.

And well, for the listeners who don't use men's als skippo had the, had the problem that the guys who do use them didn't aim too well. There was something called splashback was the problem. It cost them a lot of mon money to clean it up, but it's also very inconvenient when the the restrooms are closed in.

Yeah, in an airport. And what was fascinating was that they brew this little fly in it guy started [00:17:00] aiming at fly and it worked. But when you ask them why, I don't know. It just happened. And I think most of us who work in behavioral change, which is most people, basically. Would love for behavior change to be that simple.

The people say, I, I don't know why I did that. It just happened. So then we started looking for other instances where behavior change just happens. We some because of something small. And then we found that this was because basically we wanted to write a book about everything we loved about behavioral science and we needed some kind of filter to say, well, what's going in the book and what isn't?

So then we said, okay, we're just going to focus on all these instances where some, a small change has a larger effect. And call that the house slide effect. And well then afa, who, AFA is I have to say this right, she has a PhD in behavioral economics, but she has done several studies. One of them is biology.

So when she was on board with [00:18:00] actually naming it after the, an animal, she's like, we have to have seven classes of this animal. And she got very, very serious about it. So that helped us sort of divide up the information so we, we. Playfully gave these different species of flies. Different names. Yeah.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Well, that's what struck me. Your book chapters are themed around these various flies. So maybe you could, let's go deeper on that. Can you tell us how did you choose the, the, the different chapters and the flies? You have some very interesting ones. Tell us how, how, how it went from there.

Tim Den Heijer: Yeah. Well, once again, we started from behavioral science and we knew that people are really receptive to lists of seven.

So we said, okay, can we make this work with seven species of flies? Can, can that work? And if, if I'm completely honest, I think five of them make total sense, and two of them are sort of like. This stuff has something to do with each other. [00:19:00] It belongs in the same chapter. I'm not sure if it's adjacent or the same thing, but let's, let's combine them.

But we found that it really worked, and I think the ones that really stuck out to us were the pain fly. So everything that has to do with avoiding pain affording discomfort. The social flights. So everything that has to do with well, all these instances where what other people think or do are maybe more important than what's going on in our inside our own head.

So a few of these really work well, and we had a lot of fun with it. And then sometimes we have these discussions, well, what should, should this be the pain fly? Or maybe you see a traction flight. We just invented these, right? Let's let's not take it too seriously. Yeah.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Oh, that's lovely. So let's talk about the pain fly.

Can may tell us a little bit more about it and what can marketers learn from the pain fly?

Tim Den Heijer: Well, I think if I look at my own work in marketing and advertising, I think [00:20:00] lots of what I learned once I started looking through a behavioral science lens is in this area of the pain fly. Because marketers tend to think of everything that's attractive about their product or their brand, and they, they tend to think if you can just get people really enthusiastic, they will change their minds and change their behavior.

Whereas you often, first of all, well there's the famous quote by Cy start with why. We always say start with why not. What's, what's stopping them. And basically that's the pain flies all the stuff that's in the way because people worry about if they think it's a hassle, they think they're going to regret it.

They, and maybe they don't, they don't even worry that they will regret it, but they will worry that they're the only one who, who made this mistake and other people will laugh at them. So I think one thing that really started making sense to me was I think I can mention this name. Yeah, sure. I can.

We, we used to work for Center Parks long ago when we [00:21:00] worked at og. And sometimes, and this before we had kids ourselves, we were sort of puzzled that people, that, that consumers were so enthusiastic about center parks because we were like, well if you for that money, you could also fly to India, you know?

And then when, when, when I started looking through that lens of the pain flashers, I was thinking, okay, this is basically defensive decision making. These people aren't optimizing for the, the best holiday of their life. They're making sure it won't be a disaster. If your kid gets ill, you can go to your own physician.

There's going to be food. Your kids like, you're going to sleep in a bed, that's fine. The pool is going to be open. It's not going to be a disaster. And at that point in life, people want to be sure that they are avoiding a lot of pain and maybe some blame around that. That's much more important to them than getting the best holiday experience of their lives.

Maybe they will do that later when the kids leave home or whatever, but for now, it's just before you in pain. And that's what that [00:22:00] brand was in the Netherlands at least built about. So I think a lot of brands can learn from that because they think that people are optimizing for the for the best results.

And then they think, why aren't they choosing me? And basically they're managing that bottom line. They just don't want it to be a disaster.

Richard Shotton: You mentioned, Tim, that marketers are reverse to this idea that they seem to be genuinely attracted by focusing on the positives. Mm-hmm. Have you found, if you tell a marketing director or a creative or a anyone in, in the business about loss aversion of the pain fly that you've won them over, or do they tend to be resistant still?

Tim Den Heijer: I find that one example that has to do with it is not, not exactly the same thing, but I'll have to explain to you in English what the campaign is about. But it's a very famous and successful long running campaign in the Netherlands. That's interesting because it goes about this in a very [00:23:00] like in an oblique way.

I think Richard, you would say it, it is lateral, not literal. Okay. Yeah. So there's a, a brand that makes snacks that you can fry or heat in your home. Like stuff you would buy at at a snack bar, but now you can buy it in your home. And it's called Morra. And Morra had a campaign that was basically very simple with a girl called Cora, Cora from Mora, and she would basically look into the camera and tell you, we now.

This new snack and it tastes great. And then her colleague would come and it would taste and would say, oh, it's so nice. And that's it. It seemed like a, not a very creative or very clever head. But if you saw the commercials you wouldn't, you wouldn't really notice it until someone pointed it out.

But the cord was always dressed in like a white lab coat that was spotless. And she was always in a completely clean kitchen where it was just white tiles [00:24:00] and and stainless steel. And then we found out that the, the problem that Moha when they started out was that people thought, this is dirty stuff.

This is what led left over after they slaughter the animals, that goes into the, okay, so they, but they never made one ad that said, well, you might think that this is from a dirty slaughterhouse where, but actually it's a very clean place where we put this stuff together. They never did that. But the whole campaign was basically about taking away that barrier, that pain in the background, and it worked like a charm.

Nobody thinks Morra stuff is from a dirty ETO anymore. So when I tell them, okay, one of the campaigns you grow grew up with that you never questioned was actually doing this in the background, then they're like, okay, this is interesting. Yeah.

Richard Shotton: Okay. That's, that's interesting. So winning them over by looking at their kind of past portfolio, [00:25:00] identifying as they've already had success with a bias and using that as a, a beachhead to nice.

Yeah. Or maybe not

Tim Den Heijer: those people themselves, but what, what, what you can say, okay. So brands you really look up to that you grew up with, that were obviously great at marketing, we're actually doing this, but you just didn't realize that this is what they were doing. Makes I think that and, and that goes for a lot of great advertising.

I know Richard, it's also often your approach to figure out why great advertising from the past actually has a behavioral insight that maybe they couldn't name yet, but they felt inside it. And if you can point that out, it's not like you have to do it completely differently now. You have to use some of the, of the insights that have worked for others and, and make them work for you.

Richard Shotton: Yeah, that, and that's the approach of MichaelAaron and my last book, hacking The Human Mind. So what we do is, yeah, identify 17 super successful brands and then use that as an entry point to explain a behavioral science. So for each of the brands, we pick one or two experiments [00:26:00] that don't fully explain the success, but.

The, the, that, that that brand has used repeatedly to generate, you know, part of it, its success. And I think it's a, a way of turning what can be a, an abstract discussion into something that is much easier for people to understand and therefore easier to apply. Yeah.

Tim Den Heijer: Yeah. And I also think in, in marketing, we have this addiction to saying all the old rules don't apply anymore every year.

Also because nobody's actually wants to do the business of figuring out what the old rules were, you know? And then there are like these, there are these books like tested Advertising Methods, which is like a hundred years old. And it has basically, it has some direct marketing rules in there where you can go, yeah, that still works today.

But nobody, so I think it's sometimes it's, it's really good to point out, well, we weren't this this industry wasn't crazy for 70 years until we started looking through a scientific lens. It was just very much hit and miss and [00:27:00] intuition. We can more systematically make great stuff now that we understand why it works.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Tim, do you find that when you're explaining these concepts to clients, when you're selling in creative, what in your, in your experience. Talking about the actual academic study, talking about the, a known

example like you just talked about, what percentage are you using each? Is one always your go-to rather than the other?

Is there a third way as you try to bring behavioral science into your work? What's the, what's the, the method that's worked MO best for you?

Tim Den Heijer: Well, I think I've been very lucky that I do a lot of keynote speeches together with my co-author and my my business partner and our books and our own podcast have been quite successful in the Netherlands.

So for the last few years, most clients that choose to work with us have seen some something of that and are like, I, I want that for my company. [00:28:00] So we don't really need to convince them. Sometimes we need to convince the people they work with and sometimes there's one person who's really enthusiastic about it.

What really works is to say, look, they all have to like these inspiration days where they go away for a couple of days and have speakers and sessions and say, book us for that. And we'll just do a really fun, like, edutainment session where we show them how interesting behavioral science is and sort of get them excited for the, for that that really works.

And then I have found that once you are discussing the business, it really a lot of improvisation has to do with it. You really have to listen to what's important to them and dig in your mind and say, oh, but do I know a case that really has something to do with that? You know, an example of that.

It shouldn't be a standard, sorry. You should really be. Well, basically proving that you can take their concerns and, and their [00:29:00] challenges and at least say something interesting about, well, how science and creativity can help them with the next step. But I think it is, it is a pitfall to sort of turn into a teacher when you're actually there to provide a service.

And you have to walk deadline. It's a fine line. Yeah. That's so helpful.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Okay, so let's go to our next fly in the book. How about the social fly? Can you tell us what marketers can learn about the ideas of the social fly?

Tim Den Heijer: Well, I think what's the most interesting thing to me about the social fly is whenever people behave in a way that's, to me, rationally, unexplainable.

The explanation is always in the social realm. It's always about the, the people around them or how they want to be perceived or something they have done or said in the past that they want to be consistent in. So the most irrational behavior in my [00:30:00] eyes, always has to do with this social element. This goes all the way into well, for instance, war crimes when, when they look at what's going on there, it always has to do with a group.

Three or four or five guys who are trying to impress each other or going off the rails together. So this behavior that really puzzles us always has something to do with a social element. And I think what's really interesting from a media standpoint. Instead we have been focusing more and more because obviously Google and Meta want us to on targeting where we will send this message to MichaelAaron and one to Richard and another one to two.

So we are not building this shared frame that we all look at a brand or a product through anymore. And I think it's. Incredibly failure to realize that it really helps. Well, for instance Gox, the watch brand in Netherlands, they sometimes advertise, or the [00:31:00] store itself advertise in newspapers that are read by nobody who is able to afford Gox because they know that the people who are able to afford a Gox want to know that the people who aren't able to afford a otics know how expensive ADON is.

This is very clever marketing because they understand the social. Meaning of a, of a wristwatch if they, and obviously I think that there have been agencies who have talked to the, the VX retailers and said, well, you're wasting your money there. You should really target it. People who are into luxury watches and who can afford it.

But they understand that it doesn't work that way. So I think and this also goes for charities. How can you be a, a meaningful brand within society rather than just meaning something to one person and maybe something else to a different person. So I think the, the media we use I still love especially digital outdoor, you can really.

Give people the idea that, oh, everybody's seeing this. I can, I can refer to this [00:32:00] joke because I, I'm sure somebody else has seen that ad as well. You know I think it's a really meaningful addition to a media plan to make something that, that feels like everybody's seen it.

Richard Shotton: Yeah. I, I think you've, I think you've definitely onto something being there.

The, the power of a public statement. Is not necessarily in persuading the audience that your brand stands for something. 'cause people can be skeptical. But if you can persuade them that, say your beer brand represents being laid back and fun, even if the audience don't believe it, all they need to know is that everyone else thinks that.

And then buying the product becomes a, a, a very sensible thing to do if you want to project that, that image. There's an amazing, amazing article which will stick in the show notes by, I think it's Kevin Similar. I think it's the title ads don't work that way and it's all around. The value is not in persuading the audience, it's persuading the audience that other people think certain [00:33:00] attributes about, about your brand.

Tim Den Heijer: Yeah. Well, I think it's easy to lose sight of that within the, the, the obsession with targeting.

Richard Shotton: Mm. Maybe one final fly. This, this is my favorite one, and it was the incentive fly. And I love stories of incentives when they don't quite work in the way that people expected. Can you tell us an example of maybe when an incentive incentive has, has, has backfired, and then what can advertisers do differently so they don't suffer the same fate?

Tim Den Heijer: Well, I think, the interesting thing about the incentive fly, the, we call it in Dutch, is that it seems like the, like, well maybe if people who aren't necessarily in charge of marketing within a larger organization, when they feel that sales are down, they would say, well just use that. That always [00:34:00] works.

And it's hilarious that it's, of all the different tactics we describe, it's the one that backfires most often. Of course we see that in, in this, in post promotion dips. So you sell, sell a lot of, a lot more during a promotion and then you sell a lot less effort and it doesn't work. But I think the most fun example, and I know don't know if it's been discussed on the show before, but is the Cobra effect where there was I think it was Delhi in in India there were a lot of co glass there, co glass snakes.

And so they said, well, let's fix that with with an incentive. If you bring a cobra. To to the government. The government will give you some money for it and people will catch the coal glass and they will they will be gone. But then of course, people figured out that if a male co and a female co will like each other very much, you'll have a lot of small COAs you can also bring to the government for.

Okay. So now, but this wasn't yet really a problem. There were [00:35:00] lots of covas being turned in for the government. Then the government was like, well, this is not the incentive we need. We're going to stop paying you for covas. And then people were like, well, what are we going to do with all these covas?

I'll just put them in the park. So they actually made the problem much worse. And I think that's why the Global Effect is still the name for all these instances where you try to persuade someone by just basically offering them money for it. And it works out quite differently. I know when I was a student, I had a, I didn't have the greatest job, but I had a job that, that I made some money with.

And we also had a in, in my student house. There was a rule that if you if it was your turn to clean the kitchen and you didn't, you have to pay like five euros. And so as soon as I could afford the five euros, I never cleaned the kitchen again. And tell people, try to explain, well, no, it's not a service you buy for five euros.

It's, it's a fire. It was, for me, it was the same thing. So I learned that one early on.

Richard Shotton: Yeah. Yeah. And do [00:36:00] you think there are ways that marketers can avoid. These backfire effects or are they something that just will always happen and will always blight campaigns?

Tim Den Heijer: I think they happen. A lot more when the incentive and the actual intrinsic motivation are very far apart when they have very little to do with each other.

And, but sometimes you still need to do that. Sometimes you need to say, well, to change behavior, I'm just going to give people a little present, take a win, or whatever. But then the important thing is to reframe it in communications as soon as they have done it. So to go back to the Delhi example, maybe, maybe as soon as people had turned in that snake for money, they should have said, well, here's a beautiful letter in which the government, thank you for helping us.

You are really concerned about the safety of children and older people in our streets. And it's wonderful that you are one of those people who are really working to make this a more safe city. And if the, once you [00:37:00] reframe the behavior that was actually caused by some external trigger as something that's intrinsically motivated, people will usually take that.

People say, yeah, yeah. Well, now that you mention it, I am very much concerned about helping other people. I, I actually think it's, it's the most normal thing in the world. I don't understand why not everybody does this. And we actually use this in campaigns where we try to get people to recycle. We basically, they win like, like a pie by recycling.

But then we tell them, oh, it's, you are one of those people who is making this neighborhood beautiful and it's so great that you're doing this. And they will usually say, yeah, yeah, that's true. So if you, it is really the aftercare after using the incentive fly where you re. By tapping into more important values.

So basically using behavior to change attitude rather than the other way around. But really taking the step to reframe it explicitly. I think that's the, that's the big win there.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Yeah. It strikes me that being a [00:38:00] practitioner in marketing and behavioral science, sometimes you have to have a sense for what's actually going to get someone to do something.

And then you can apply more thinking to make sure it sticks. Tim, your point here is like, you know, it may take a bike, it may take a check from the deli government to get any motive, any action actually started. I love that term. It's the aftercare. It's what you do after that can really return the right behavior time and time again.

That's such a helpful way to think about it, to make sure you don't just get the KPI that you want. You don't just get a measurement, but that you actually get to lasting behavior change that you're looking for.

Tim Den Heijer: Yeah. I think it's Adam Ferrier who has this phrase in, in his book where he says remember, behavior changes minds more efficiently than the other way around.

Richard Shotton: We had Adam on a while ago, so Yeah. I think, yeah, the [00:39:00] advertising effect. I think he, he, he, he talks about that, that's a lovely, lovely example. And I think there's some research up that backs up the idea. I think there's some Jack Brem work that shows I think that they, they gave people an incentive to take part in an experiment, and I think they got to choose from some house I household appliances.

And they got people to rate how much they liked the appliances. They then got them to choose which one they wanted as their incentives. And then once

people are picked, they asked them again a little bit later to rate how much they liked the incentives. And what they saw is the, once it was. Had had been picked once people felt they had chosen that item, they then retrospectively rated it higher.

And the argument from Brem is people use their past behavior to explain to themselves who they are. So they look back on past behavior, think, well, I must be the type of person who, you know, you said, likes to keep children safe from cobras like say [00:40:00] a bread maker. And once that's in their mind, you know, all these, these attitudes follow suit.

Tim Den Heijer: Yeah. And then you can also add a little bit of the social fly by using dynamic social proof. Because if your incentive is working, then more people will start to do whatever behavior you want 'em to do. So then you can also communicate, well, you are one, you are part of more and more people who are starting to do this.

So it also feels like Okay, we, I, I'm, I'm, I'm part of something bigger.

Richard Shotton: Yeah. So yeah.

Out outside of the flies, you've got your. The sections looking at your different types of biases. You talked earlier about applying some of the behavioral science principles to the book itself, and then you also talked later about edutainment, and one of my favorite stylistic things was the fact that.

The book wasn't all one way. It wasn't you just preaching and telling people about these ideas. There were boxes scattered all the way through in which you [00:41:00] try to encourage people to apply some of the principles at home. And you had lots of ideas how they could do it. Could, could you tell us about one of those?

Try at home biases, which was your favorite? Which do you like most?

Tim Den Heijer: Missing I, I, I think one I really like is temptation Bundling.

Richard Shotton: Yeah,

Tim Den Heijer: and I know that this is AFA and I both use it once. So it's basically give yourself a little treat once you do something that you really want to do, but don't really get around to.

And I know that AFA actually did this with where she kept an audio book on a, on an audio player at the gym. So she could only listen to that book where she was at the gym. And then I think a few years ago when we were working on the book my wife and I were discussing that it would be really go great to go for an evening walk every, every night.

It's, it's very healthy. It's good for the brain. [00:42:00] We have a teenage daughter. Sometimes we need to discuss adult stuff. Good to have a work for that as well. So, yeah, it's, it's a great thing. But we weren't doing this and then we were looking at the map of Amsterdam and we were like, well, if we take this route, then we can, then the point where we turn around can be the craziest part in Amsterdam, which is outside for all.

So basically the heart of the red light district.

Richard Shotton: Yeah.

Tim Den Heijer: And then suddenly that work became a lot more fun because there's always something crazy happening there. And we're like, a couple of months ago, two guys were fighting the guy who was dressed as Neptune and he was actually using this huge fork to fight it, you know?

So we were making this, well, maybe slightly boring, walk a lot more. Interesting by saying, okay, we're going to give ourselves this little treat that we're going to walk down this this canal where there's always craziness going on. And we actually, it works for about, I think four nights a [00:43:00] week.

We actually take a, an almost two hour walk now. So it's really good for our help. But so yeah, that's temptation bundling, finding out a way to reward yourself. As part of what? Of something not afterwards, but the reward is sort of baked into the thing that you feel you need to do. That's when I really that that's really worked wonder for us.

Yeah.

Richard Shotton: Nice. Nice.

MichaelAaron Flicker: I believe this builds off of this idea, and let me, let me see if, if anything else comes to mind for you. But so much of what you've talked about in the, the reason you wrote the book was that small interventions can have a large effect was in all of your work, is there one or two that's most surprising?

The, the smallest changes that led to big outcomes that. That surprised you?

Tim Den Heijer: I think I'm well, actually I studied, studied Dutch linguistics, [00:44:00] so I'm a writer and linguist is basically what I'm, and I'm still surprised that changing the way you worked, the exact same message or what you name something has such a huge effect on on behavior because rationally it shouldn't.

No, rationally the word should have a meaning, and it doesn't matter which, which word you choose. And I've seen it in a bunch of tests or ways that you word like a, a call to action. But I think the most, well, the, the the example I always like to give in presentations I, you might be familiar with it, is, when they renamed the Patagonian tooth fish, which is very ugly, but nice fish to Chilian sea bass. Is that how you would pronounce it? Yeah, exactly.

Richard Shotton: Exactly.

Tim Den Heijer: Yeah. And I think it's now an endangered species because they changed its name, which has to be horrible for an animal because it doesn't even know it has a name.

Right. But [00:45:00] I'm always surprised that how, how much words and names matter to for behavior, you know?

Richard Shotton: Yes. So I, I agree with you on that one. I think that's a, a lovely example in the, and the Patagonian tooth fish to the Chilian Sea bass is, is a wonderful bit of creativity and has a phenomenal upside in terms of the sales.

I wonder if the listeners are for something that isn't as exciting, but they can probably apply it to their work. There's a study that I love from about seven or eight years ago. And it's from Peterson at the University of Texas, and he got 1000 hundred 17 people to go through an e-commerce journey, and they've got to buy a basket of items and he does it so that one of the items they're trying to buy is always not there.

And I'm picking my words carefully now. He then asks everyone to rate their irritation with the store and the brand. And then he cuts the data by the specific phrasing he [00:46:00] used. So half the people when they went through the e-commerce journey, they saw that missing item labeled outta stock. The other half saw it labeled, sold out.

What Peterson found was that there was like a 13 or 15% variance in irritation levels. So people got irritated if it said out of stock, much less so if it said sold out and, and his arguments are wonderful, and it goes back to your social fly. He says, if you label out stock, what you have done as a business is drawn attention to your incompetence.

You are telling people you couldn't manage your supply chain. But if you label that product sold out, what you are subtly suggesting is that this product has been unexpectedly popular. There's, there's been a surge in demand and that's why it's not there. So you're using this social proof idea, this popularity breeding, more popularity in your, in your favor.

So absolutely. I love that as an example. And you've got the really natural, really creative, amazing examples. Chi zba, [00:47:00] and then you've got the more mundane, but applicable everyday examples, like sold out versus out stock. So that's, that's a lovely example. Yeah. It makes a big

Tim Den Heijer: difference. And one I really like that maybe it, it, it is a famous one as well, but if you buy a telephone or a computer and it breaks and you have to go back to the store and somebody at the surface desk is going to look at it, that's not an exciting thing.

Right. But as Apple users are like, well, I've got an appointment with a genius. At the Genius Bar. Well, these people don't win Nobel Prizes. They just try to fix your phone. Right to, to rebrand that. Not the Surface Desk, but the Genius Bar. You're going to talk to a genius. It just works. Yeah.

Richard Shotton: Yeah.

Interesting about that one. I, I hadn't thought of that. And then wondering where the benefit lies. I mean, sometimes in the the expectation and the positivity that the customer brings to bear. I wonder also maybe as staff morale, the easier maybe to recruit for that role. Yeah. [00:48:00]

Tim Den Heijer: It implies that apple apple makes stuff that is so in, so brilliant.

That it very rarely does it break, and when it does, it takes a genius to figure out what went wrong, you know? Whereas a regular surface would say, yeah, we get this all the time. That's not what, what you need a genius for, right? You need a genius for these very rare occasions where nobody understands what's wrong.

So it makes, it makes it feel like a very rare occasion that an Apple product needs surface or repair. So I think it's it's sort of, it's over the top, but it does work. Yeah.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Tim, as we're coming to a close on today's conversation, we always like to ask a final question. In market example that you know of today, can you give one final thought for what marketers could take away?

One final [00:49:00] thing they could think about using in their work to improve their brands? What's one takeaway that you'd like everybody to have?

Tim Den Heijer: Well, I think specifically with Brent I, I used to work in Brent Loyalty for a long time. It's it's OG one. And we had this idea that people were loyal to brands.

And I think that the big the big insight for me, one, once I started learning more about behavioral science was, oh, they're not, they're not loyal to the brand. They're loyal to their past selves. They're loyal to their own selves, to, to their own behavior. Which sets certain expectations, which also explains that the, the meaning that a brand has to people, why they can be really disappointed in a brand.

So yeah, I think the one thing you, you have to keep in mind is what does this say about me and what does this brand mean to me? And basically people are, like I said, they're loyal to themselves. And I [00:50:00] think well this is, this is a lot of marketing theory, but in the last few years we've been focusing very much in, in marketing on penetration, saying, well, loyal customers really don't really bring that much value as we used to think.

But I think once we start looking at, through a behavioral lens at brand loyalty and what brands mean to people, I think there's still a lot of new things to discover there.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Tim, thank you so much for being on with us. For everyone listening, Tim's book is The House by Effect, how Nudge Psychology Steers Your Everyday Behaviors.

If you found this episode interesting and insightful, please share it with others that can learn from it. And as always you can find us at the consumer behavior lab.com.

Until next time. I'm MichaelAaron Flicker.

Richard Shotton: And I'm Richard Shotton.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Tim, thanks for being with us.

Tim Den Heijer: Thanks for inviting me. Yep.[00:51:00]

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