

# How to use Bikeshedding to your advantage

This is the next article in a series on how behavioural economics and 'being human' affects your business.

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In 1957 historian and author Cyril N. Parkinson observed that people put more focus on the things that are easy, like putting a bike shed in front of a building, when compared to more difficult ones, like purposeful consideration about the atomic reactor inside the building. He wrote ...

“ The time spent on any item of the agenda will be in inverse proportion to the sum [of money] involved. ”

People like you and me are drawn towards the easiest and most trivial tasks and spend more time on them than the actual important issues. You probably have your own examples, but I know that instead of starting my day dealing with emails, I gravitate towards LinkedIn. It's more fun, it's easier, and I don't have to immediately respond to every issue. Of course, I know I pay the price later, because it's the least important part of my day.

The obvious first lesson from Parkinson is that your customers don't want you to waste their time with tasks and messages that aren't applicable to their needs and desires.



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You may be incredibly proud of your new app that took months to develop, but unless it's easy to work with, they don't care. My life is far too

complicated to have to wade through a bunch of non-value-adding trivia.

On the same day I first read about Parkinson's work, I also tried to do some online shopping because one of the retailers had been sending out a ton of promotional material with some seriously good discounts. I eventually found out how to order, picked my stuff, and proceeded to checkout. The app didn't recognise my suburb, even though it was established in the 1950s, and I filled in the street name praying that they'd find my place.

I thought I'd paid because I went through all of the instructions, although it turned out that something mysterious had happened between them and my bank, and it was only a week later when I went back to the app to check what had happened to my order that I discovered there



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was still an outstanding amount to pay. Not a peep from them in the meantime ... the order just waited in my trolley, with no communication.

When it was finally delivered, I discovered that two bottles of whiskey, which was on special, were missing and immediately got stressed that they had been stolen. I had to make a long call to the call centre to discover that they had run out of stock. In all, a really negative experience, and not one I wish to repeat.

You see, as a typical customer I don't really care how much effort goes into making it all possible behind the scenes. I don't need to know how capable the chef is, and how hard she worked on the little details to get my meal on a plate. All I care about is that it is delicious.

It's what I like to call the 'after state'.

Once I've used your business, or ordered from you, what are the benefits I'm getting from them? How do I feel afterwards?

At the back of my mind are the three important questions I consciously or unconsciously ask ...

- How is this going to save me time?
- How is it going to save me money or add value?
- How is it going to make my life easier?



Cyril Northcote Parkinson

Photo credit: Emmanuel College, University of Cambridge. Painting by Sam Morse-Brown



Image courtesy of <https://jrqsanta.com/2022/12/27/la-ley-de-parkinson/>

It's the same with getting in touch with your business. How hard is it to get to have a simple query answered without having to listen to a whole speech about how "this call is being recorded for quality control and training purposes" or how "we are experiencing high call volumes at present"? (Of course, I'm assuming that you have the facility of actually allowing customers to talk to a human being.)

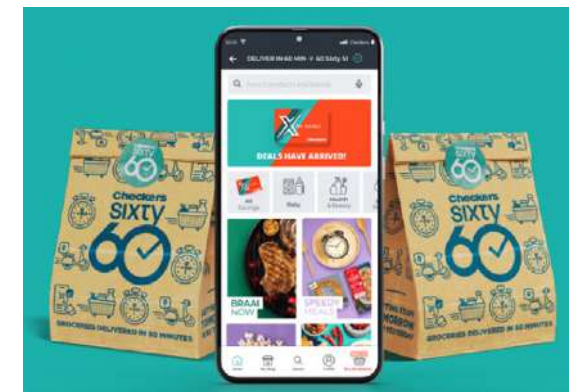
But there is an even deeper level of innovation that you can include to fix the Bikeshedding Law.

Let me go back one step. I had a blocked shower at home and was looking at the choices on the shelf. There were two brands, both of which appeared to have the same stuff inside: some granules that one pours into the drain, followed

by 200 ml. of cold water. One was in a bright pink container, with red letters printed in a small font that made it close to impossible to read. The other was in a lighter container with a white label and dark blue letters, and much easier to read. I didn't even look at the price and bought the latter.

A confused mind will always say no, and I fantasised that I'd end up in the boardroom of the company with the hard-to-read label, stand up in front of the directors, and ask them to read their bottle.

The point is that, unless you can experience what it's like for your customers, actually call your call centre, park your car in your shopping centre, make your way through your store, and stand in the tills, you cannot hope to fix the chronic issues that plague your customers' lives.



To return to the example of the shopping apps, I know exactly which is my favourite (they deliver in an hour) and it's because it's easy to use. It doesn't offer me a hundred options. It's easy to read. Advertising and promotions are rare, and I have a feeling they are based on what I've previously purchased.



So, take advantage of the bike-shedding philosophy and make life as easy as possible for your customers. You can do it at a few distinct levels ...



- Make it physically easy so they don't have to expend energy.
- Make it intellectually or mentally easy so they don't have to think too much, and they can understand how things work.
- Make it emotionally easy by letting them retain their autonomy and independence.
- Give them status by making them feel special and appreciated.
- Reduce the time they need to spend shopping ... live, or online.
- Create certainty so that they don't have to wonder what's going to happen next.

I don't know how to make this more simple ... Just cut to the chase; cut out the fluff. Keep it simple, and don't keep adding more complexity to try and cover everyone. Focus on the nuclear reactor, not the bike shed. **SR**



Image courtesy of <https://www.retailtouchpoints.com>



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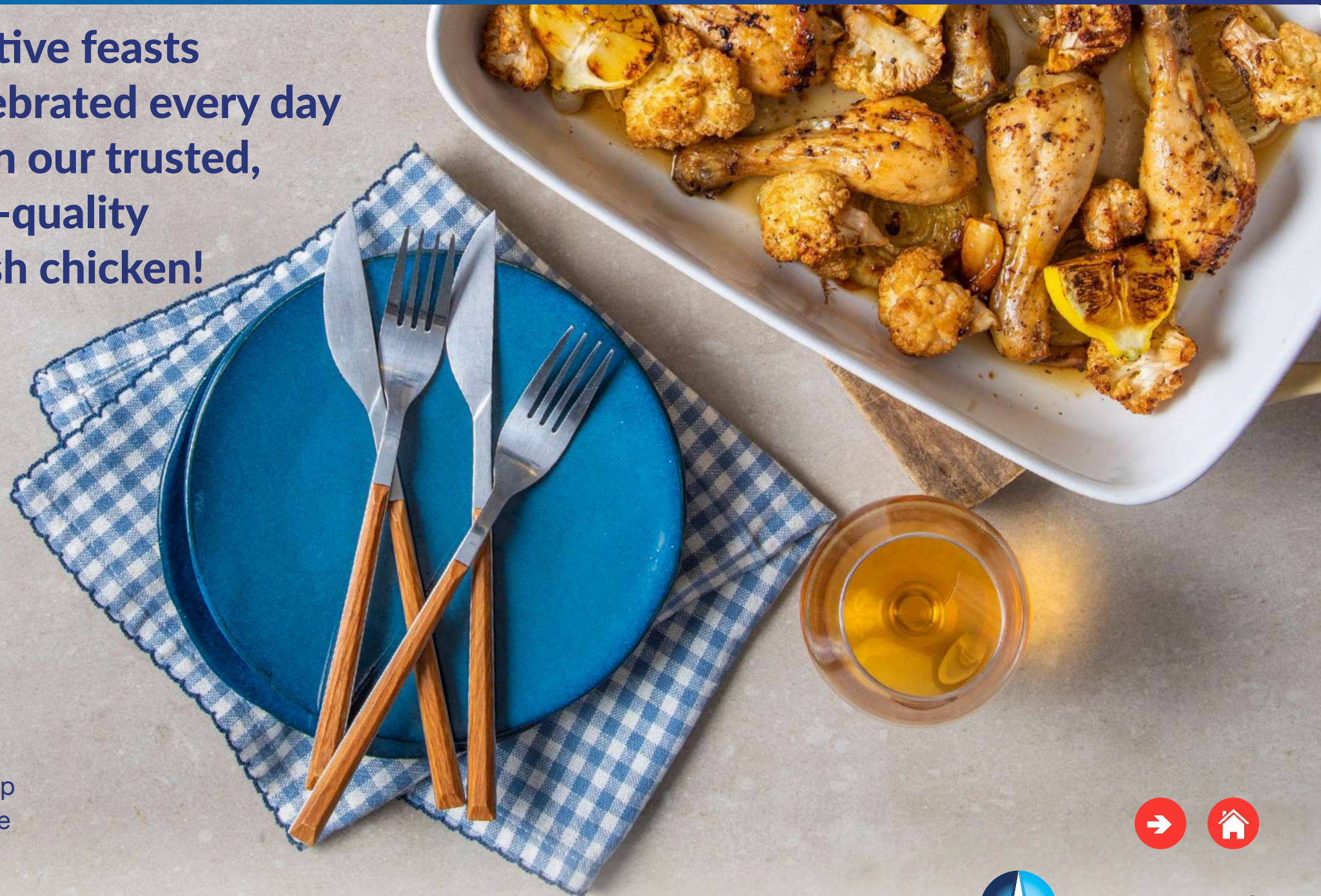
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