

From chocolate cake to checkout

How feelings shape what we buy

How behavioural economics and 'being human' affects your business.

You knew this was just going to be one of 'those days'.



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You didn't set your alarm on your phone properly and need to be ready for your Zoom meeting in 33 minutes. You wash your face, try to look presentable, go to the kitchen and shove a slice of bread in the toaster as you put on the kettle to boil for a desperately needed cup of coffee. Suddenly you smell burning and realise the toaster has just turned your breakfast into a square of burnt carbon. As you open the kitchen window, you scratch your arm on the handle because you were in too much of a rush.

You grab your phone to see if your customer by some miracle has postponed the meeting, and it flies out of your hand onto the tiles. Damn! The screen is cracked! There is a message, but not from your meeting. It's a curt rejection text from a publisher to whom you sent a long proposal who couldn't even bother to tell you why.

just want to crawl back into bed and put the covers over your head, but with around 8 minutes to go you still need to find something to eat for breakfast.

In the fridge there are three possibilities ... leftover pasta from last night, bacon and eggs, and a piece of chocolate cake your spouse and your kids forgot about.

Which one do you choose? It's a no-brainer.

Ever wondered why your customers grab that premium olive oil instead of the store brand? Or why they suddenly add a pint of ice cream to their cart at the checkout? It's not logic – it's emotion.

The Affect Heuristic (horrible term!) explains why shoppers make snap decisions based on how they feel in the moment. That's why a well-placed display, a comforting smell, or a friendly interaction, even a nostalgic song, can mean the difference between a full cart and a lost sale.

It's also important to remember that our emotions carry over from what happened just before to what is happening right now. We can't afford to think that the moment they walk into the door they do a reset and start off neutral. They carry with them a load of other stuff that has happened and, as much as we would like to think we are the centre of their universe, we are not. You need to be aware of this constantly.

You may not be able to change what has happened before they came in, but you can definitely design an experience around what you would like them to feel when they walk out. That is totally in your hands, and it's more simple than you think.

Understanding this psychological shortcut can help you design your store experience that nudges

customers to buy more – without them even realising why. Let’s break it down and explore how you can take advantage of this.

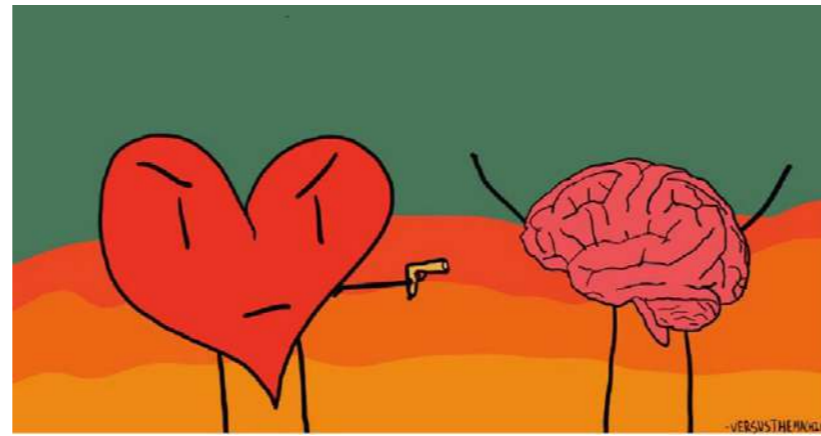
I’m sure you’ve noticed that when you shop you tend to make impulsive decisions – not when you are calm and rational, but rather when you are feeling something. Maybe you’ve just had a bad day, just like the real nightmare day I described. Or maybe you’ve just finished some important project and you feel you deserve a reward. Or you may have read a scary article about the chemicals we find in tap water and you decided to buy an expensive filter.

The Affect Heuristic was first introduced in 1980 by psychologist Robert B. Zajonc. He demonstrated how our emotions influence and impact our decision making. The bottom line? We make decisions and take action based on how we feel. This conclusion has been repeated over and over again. One Harvard professor Gerald Zaltman, in an Inc. article published in 2018 stated that 95% of our buying decisions are based on emotions.

In Zaltman’s book *How Customers Think: Essential Insights into the Mind of the Market*, he shares many examples of how consumers are not as savvy as they think. It’s rare that you and I approach any purchase logically, even the biggest ones. Not only that, but we often even lie to ourselves and others to justify our decisions. And of course that is why you chose that chocolate cake for breakfast.

So what can you do to apply these principles?

Retailers and others have mostly used negative feelings to shock customers into action.



Affect Heuristic

The affect heuristic describes how we often rely on our emotions, rather than concrete information, when making decisions. This allows us to reach a conclusion quickly and easily, but can also distort our thinking and lead us to make suboptimal choices.

<https://thedeclaration.com/biases/affect-heuristic>



Gerald Zaltman

In this column we’ve looked at tactics like scarcity, fear of missing out (FOMO) and even disgust to motivate customers. The traumatic time of when we were in lockdown is still very vivid in most people’s lives, for example, and it created huge uncertainty and fear.

Another example: If they think there’s some horrid stuff in a mass produced pepper steak pie, emphasise how yummy and safe yours are. Let them feel that reassurance. And if you can back it up with science, so much the better.

But you don’t have to stop with negative emotions. If your customers can feel some sense of achievement, or some excitement about something, that can quickly get them on your side. “Because you deserve it,” or “Collect all 10 and you get another three free.”



Robert B. Zajonc

A really underutilised emotion is that of nostalgia, and you can understand why this happens. The majority of people who work in and manage supermarkets and retail stores are young, so remembering the past is not a big priority in their lives.

Yet take a look around and observe the average age of the consumers in your store. What do they remember that made them happy when they were young and beautiful and having the time of their lives? It could be enduring products that have been around forever, or visual things such as adverts from the past, or music from their youth, or even certain smells that trigger feelings of warmth. When people feel the right emotion, the price doesn’t matter anymore. You don’t even have to go back that far: Harry Potter is still incredibly powerful even though the first books were published in 1997.

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you stock. And if you feel brave, you can even tell stories about the future. "Imagine if..." could be a great way to start your future story.

If you are really imaginative, you can look at designing customer experiences that actually cater to their emotional state, or the feelings that they want to feel. I realised this when my wife told me about a hair salon that she went to that had a 'Quiet Chair'. When their clients come to have their hair done, many of them don't want to chit-chat about inane things. They just want to come in, have their hair done quietly, and leave, but they feel it would be impolite to not chat. From one single isolated chair occasionally requested, this salon now has many that are booked in advance.

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In the end, the best retailers don't just sell products – they sell feelings. And just like that irresistible slice of chocolate cake on a bad day, the right emotional trigger can make any purchase feel like the perfect choice.

What emotion will your customers take with them when they walk out your door? SR



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