

The paths of least resistance

BEHAVIOUR CHANGE EDINBURGH INSIGHT

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In Finland, city officials document the routes people take in city parks after the first snowfall of the year obscures the paved pathways. They integrate this data into an iterative trail system planning process which then "paves the cowpaths", the paths of least resistance, to create path networks that reflect the routes people naturally take in the real world.

These 'desire paths' are usually shortcuts and most commonly appear when:

a) urban planners think they know best where a path should be and are wrong.

b) planners suggest a route they want a walker to take and fail to convince them to adopt it.

c) Things change. People need to travel in ways they didn't before.

We often make similar errors in our attempts to change behaviour through marketing. Either we think we know best what people want and are wrong, we suggest a new behaviour but fail to convince people to adopt it, or external factors change and people need brands to fulfil needs they didn't have before.

Our purchasing habits, like any other habit, represent the paths of least resistance in our brains and behaviours. Persuading someone to try or buy something once isn't so hard, persuading them to do so consistently over the long term is much, much harder.

To have any chance of success, you first have to make it as easy as possible for people to adopt the new habit. The fewer steps or decisions you ask people to make, the more likely they are to adopt the new behaviour. What are the barriers, actual or perceived, to the desired behaviour? Knowing what these are, how can you most effectively mitigate for them?

Secondly, what cues or triggers in your target's life can you leverage to prompt re-appraisal? Major life changes like having a baby, getting married, moving house or job all create a cascade of reappraisal which create opportunities to suggest the adoption of new habits.

Thirdly, which existing habits might you be able to piggyback? Making a connection between the existing and the new habit can help people to adopt the new behaviour. Of course, any new habit which conflicts with an existing habit or routine is far less likely to be successful without careful consideration or change to the context.

Finally, as the Finnish have found, observing how people act without the stimulus you might provide, whether that is paved paths or advertising creative, can be a very useful way of understanding what interventions might, or might not, achieve your desired outcome.

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