

Behavioural linguistics: Marketing and the science of language

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Think about the last time you needed to persuade.



Image source: Gallo/Getty Images.

*Was it a sales pitch?
A leads-generation activation?
Driving uptake of a new product?*

As marketers, our main aim is to persuade someone to do something: buy into our brand story, support our products and/or services, and ultimately become loyal ambassadors. And the more authentically we can do this; the better. Being able to compel someone to act in a certain way is an invaluable skillset and having the framework to guide this can be the difference between brand success and brand failure.

Enter Behavioural Linguistics.

New to the world of behavioural science, Behavioural Linguistics is the science-based use of language to persuade. Rooted in nudge theory combined with psychology, sociolinguistics and principles of marketing, Behavioural Linguistics is about nudging responsible action using communication – with the core belief that language can change behaviour.



Love at first sight? Behavioural bias and *The Bachelor*

Leigh Crymble 24 Apr 2019



The decision to choose your brand

Decision-making processes are more intricate than we think, and on any given day we make roughly 30,000 to 40,000 thousand choices. Many of these happen subconsciously (like day-to-day repetitive actions) but others require active thought such as choosing who to bank with, what gym to sign up to, or what movie to watch.

The challenge here is that our modern lives are becoming increasingly 'decision-noisy'. We're surrounded by marketing messages fighting for our attention – from the moment we wake up and scroll through our social media timelines to when we go to sleep at night after a full day of work.

Being able to communicate a message – in ways that break through this noise – is crucial for business success. After all, if people don't pay attention to your 'call to action' and understand what it is you want them to do (as well as why they should do it!); they just won't.

PS: we're lazy.

As human beings, we don't want to work too hard to process information which means we want things presented simply, briefly but with enough context, and timeously. And we're hard to please. If it's not the trifecta of comprehension (easy to understand; short; relevant), we discard it. And the hours spent on that particular communication are instantly lost.

So how can you use language to nudge action?

Here are 7 tips from Behavioural Linguistics that can help with your marketing copy in 2020.

1. Keep it simple

It's old advice but worth repeating and taking seriously. Your marketing should be pitched at a 13-year-old's comprehension level with short sentences, few syllables and accessible vocabulary. This doesn't mean you're "dumbing down" your copy. Instead, it means you're making the effort to frame content clearly and make it easy to understand. This comes across as more credible to your audience and is much more persuasive. Try out the Flesch-Kincaid readability tool in Microsoft Word (in the Spelling/Grammar section) which will help guide you to simpler writing. As a target, you should be aiming for a score of around 65.

2. Use the present tense

The simple present tense is the "naggiest" tense there is. This means we're more likely to follow a call to action if it's presented to us in the 'now'. This is because we have an inherent present bias which is why we, unfortunately, don't save enough, eat healthily enough, or exercise enough (etc.) for our future and instead favour more immediate gratification. Where you can frame your marketing message in the present, and offer a now-based value proposition, you're more likely to convert a sale.

3. Use social proofing

No. We aren't the unique individuals we like to think we are. In fact, we're the opposite – we look for decision validation from others. Social proofing or herding suggests that people adopt the actions of people around them. A great way to use

social proofing in marketing is to frame content through member testimonials or product reviews of your brand. These highlight the value of your product through the voices of satisfied customers and have shown sales increases by as much as 34%.

4. Nudgey numbers

Odd or unusual numbers (like 7, 9, 57) catch attention, are more memorable, and more likely to persuade your customer to engage with your content. If you're trying to show scale, consider writing the number out in words rather than numerals. Helping provide two hundred and thirty-five thousand and twelve meals to the needy holds more weight than 235 012 meals. Why? Because we battle to read this in words so the scale comes across as far greater. A final nudgey number tip is to be specific. If you're selling a service, quoting R43,580 signals an authentic calculation. Too often we round up or down, and lose the persuasive nudge of a real number.

5. Time it right

Did you know that Monday morning is the worst time to send a communication? We're all catching up on mails from the weekend or previous week and so we experience what's known as decision-paralysis – so many decisions need to be made that we end up not choosing anything at all. In an ideal world, you want your communication to land with your consumer at a time where their inbox isn't overwhelmed and preferably within an hour after they've eaten.

Post-meal timelines are hard to judge, but significant in nudge-value. A few years back, behavioural scientists analysed parole proceedings to see if it played any role in favourable parole rulings. The results showed that prisoners seen at the start of each session (straight after breakfast or lunch) were more likely to be paroled than those seen at the end. It seems that everyone, judges included, are susceptible to the biases and imperfections that affect decision-making.

6. Get rhyming

The rhyme-as-reason behavioural bias is a thing of linguistic beauty. Used commonly in ATL communication, the theory suggests we're more likely to believe something is truthful and credible (and therefore more likely to be persuaded by it) if it rhymes. But why? Because it's an inherent behavioural bias linked to the trust figures we had in our lives growing up. Our caregivers often read and sang rhyming narratives to us as children. As a result, we've come to associate rhyming with trust and credibility. With that comes the increased likelihood of us supporting a brand or product where rhyme is used.

7. The perfect pronoun

Make no mistake: pronouns are important. They can be used to signal solidarity and build intimacy (we, us, our) and help a consumer connect marketing copy to their own lives (you, your, yours) making them part of a brand's story. The more human and sincere we can be in our marketing efforts, the better our audience will connect with us. Connection = conversion.

Words matter

The link between language, decision-making and behaviour is powerful. Once you start thinking about your marketing communication in ways that are intrinsically linked to how people think and act, you'll be far more likely to create content that persuades.

ABOUT LEIGH CRYMBLE

Leigh Crymble is a behavioural linguist and language practitioner and founded BreadCrumbs in 2019 - South Africa's first Behavioural Linguistics firm that is rooted in behavioural theory and combines sociolinguistics, psychology and marketing principles to create personalised and persuasive communication.

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