

How To Use Behavioral Science To Improve the Client Experience

By Andrea Belk Olson



Renowned business trainer Kate Zabriskie said, “The customer’s perception is your reality.” This is what many A/E/C firms lose sight of—client perception. Experiences aren’t shaped through individual interactions, but the cumulative view of them.

No matter how excellent you believe you are, or your company is, at service delivery, future success as an organization depends on how good you are in the mind of your clients. Or as John Mackey, CEO of Whole Foods, put it, “For us, our most important stakeholder is not our stockholders, but our customers. We’re in business to serve their needs and desires.”

The key to crafting an unmatched experience is by exceeding your clients’ expectations. But how do you determine those expectations? We know all clients are seeking expertise and performance from any A/E/C firm, but what do they want beyond that? How do we create a client experience that differentiates, surprises, and delights?

While we may believe things like efficient project management, streamlined communications, hitting deadlines, and meeting budgets are the key to amazing client experiences, we’re not looking deep enough. This is what every other organization is striving to achieve and delivering. By examining and addressing the way clients unconsciously perceive, react to, and make decisions, firms can craft more effortless and unique experiences, cost-effectively.

There are four inherent perception tendencies you can influence to improve the client experience.

1. Framing. Let’s say you’re at a casino, and someone asks if you want to play a game of chance. You’re given \$50 and you can either gamble it and take your chances at winning big, or walk away and lose \$30 automatically.

Here’s your other choice: You can gamble the money and risk losing all of it, or you can walk away right now with \$20 for your trouble. Which option do you choose?

Did you notice that both options are the same? In both scenarios, your choice is to either gamble or lose \$30 of your \$50, which means you keep the remaining \$20. But some simple changes to the wording around the question trick you into looking at it in two different ways.

The framing effect is a type of cognitive bias that causes people to react to something in different ways depending on how the information is presented to them. Framing has a lot of power to sway clients. When using framing with your clients, there are two ways to go: Positive framing and negative framing. When using positive framing, you want to focus on what the client is getting. On the other hand, in negative framing, you want to make client afraid of losing out on something. For example, you aim for 95% effectiveness, or only failing 5% of the time.

2. Anchoring. People tend to unconsciously latch onto the first fact they hear, basing their decision-making on that fact—whether it’s accurate or not. This phenomenon, called anchoring, is one of the most fundamental biases of behavioral science.

Take an anchoring bias experiment, where two groups of high school students were challenged to complete a lengthy multiplication problem. One group was asked to solve the following problem: $1 \times 2 \times 3 \times 4 \times 5 \times 6 \times 7 \times 8$. The other group was asked to solve this problem: $8 \times 7 \times 6 \times 5 \times 4 \times 3 \times 2 \times 1$.

The answers to the two problems are, of course, the same. But the experiment was never really about math. Both groups were given insufficient time to solve the problem and forced to estimate their answers. The group of students who solved the first problem (1×2) estimated the answer would be significantly lower than the group that solved the second problem (8×7). The final estimates (on average 512 and 2,250, respectively) were influenced by the numbers with which the two sequences began.

The takeaway here is that each group was unduly affected by the first numbers they saw. Anchoring has a deep



Smith Seckman Reid, Inc. (SSR), headquarters, Nashville, TN. SSR, Gensler, Turner Construction Company. © MKM Build Photography, mkmbuild.com.

impact on a client's perception of value. This makes it an essential tool when considering pricing strategies, concept presentations, and introducing new ideas with your clients. Anchoring provides clients the essential comparison context, which you can directly influence.

3. Sequencing. When people recall an experience, they don't remember every single moment of it (unless it was short and traumatic). Instead, they recall a few significant moments vividly and gloss over the others. They remember snapshots, not movies, and carry away an overall assessment of the experience that's based on three factors: the sequence of pain or pleasure, the high and low points, and the ending.

When gambling, people prefer to lose \$10 first, then win \$5, rather than win \$5, then lose \$10. There's also evidence that people pay attention to the rate of improvement in a sequence—clearly preferring ones that improve faster. And, most intriguing, the ending matters enormously. A terrible ending usually dominates a person's recollection of an experience.

A recent study examined whether the order in which a presentation occurs within a series of competitive sales calls influences a client's choice of the Market Leader and a similarly positioned Me-Too company. The Me-Too company was most successful when they presented last. The Market Leader was chosen more often when they presented first. The Me-Too salesperson was able to reduce the Market Leader's "first presenter" advantage by encouraging the client to directly compare companies and eliminate those that failed to meet minimum criteria.

Consider the sequence in which you present information to clients, in a sales presentation or a bidding situation and use sequencing to your advantage.

4. Defaulting. Defaults are one of applied behavioral science's biggest success stories. They're used across all industries, and there are two reasons for their widespread adoption. First, defaults can be very simple, even consisting of just the one-word difference between, "If you want to be an organ donor, please check here," (opt-in) and, "If you *don't* want to be an organ donor, please check here" (opt-out). Second, defaults are surprisingly effective in a variety of contexts, from retirement planning and health decisions to consumer purchases.

For example, at Walt Disney World, when ordering something to eat, the default choices in kids' meals are all geared toward healthier options. The menu swap soda for juice and French fries for fruits and vegetables. A recent study showed this change led to the consumption of 21% less calories, 44% less fat, and 43% less sodium.

Defaults can vary in effectiveness, depending on their implementation. In some studies, a default was incredibly effective, while in others, defaults didn't alter participants' decisions. Choice architecture—designing how choices are presented—requires thoughtful design and shouldn't be blindly applied across all situations. What matters, then, is understanding how effective defaults can be used as a choice architecture tool for clients, as well as how different types of implementations alter a default's effectiveness.

The best client experiences aren't touchpoints on a journey, but how the outcome makes them feel. By understanding clients' perception tendencies and recognizing how to influence them, you can shape experiences which reduce mental effort, streamline decision-making, and create perceived (and actual!) positive outcomes. ■

📖 Story Behind the Picture

People always bring a photo to life, but due to COVID-19, it's been a challenge. We often have to piece multiple people separately into a shot in order to maintain 6' of separation. It makes for a challenge not only for the photographer, but also for the nonactors onsite. But sometimes laughing at ourselves makes for a better shot.



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