

# Using Behavioral Science To Strengthen Your Brand

By Andrea Belk Olson



Branding is the process of giving meaning to specific organizations, companies, products, or services by creating and shaping an idea in customers' minds, both in a practical (the shoe is lightweight) and emotional way (the shoe makes me feel powerful). Fundamentally, the objective is to attract and retain loyal customers and other stakeholders by delivering a solution that is always aligned with what the brand promises.

It's not just physical features that create a brand, but also the feelings that customers develop toward the company and what it delivers. Those emotional cues get triggered when customers are exposed to the name, logo, visual identity, or even the message communicated. While it may spill over into softer organizational elements, such as language or terminology (venti instead of large at Starbucks), or public gestures (donations or community-oriented support), this is where branding unfortunately often stops.

Historically, A/E/C companies have developed a methodology for "the way we work." This approach is often leveraged as a selling point—deemed as a battle-tested, proprietary method for delivering outstanding results. Yet, this process is consistently designed around the internal workings of the company—how information flows within it—rather than shaping around the experiential needs of the customer to enhance and reinforce the brand.

Behavioral science can help with this. Based on the study of human behavior and decision-making, it can be leveraged to better understand customers' unspoken needs (those more emotionally and subconsciously driven) and shape positive experiences by addressing their innate perceptions and biases.

By streamlining decision-making and reducing the clients' cognitive load (i.e., mental effort), A/E/C firms can create a uniquely differentiated client experience that can't be delivered by work portfolios, traditional marketing, or

educational programs. There are five practical ways to apply behavioral science to improve and strengthen your brand experience.

**1. Anchoring.** Individuals' perceptions and decisions are always influenced by a particular reference point or anchor, which is typically the first piece of information received about a given topic. Anchors can manifest from clients' past experiences, stereotypes, personality, or even mood.

It's important to identify existing anchors up front, especially those established from a client's past experiences with other organizations, to better understand where their expectations stem from. But it's also critical to establish your own anchors as well. One key area to anchor is price, by providing an initially priced option first, followed by a subsequently lower-priced one. This makes the second price more appealing, even though it was the intended sale price all along.

This tactic was used by Serendipity3, a popular New York eatery. It became a *Guinness World Records'* holder for the most expensive hot dog, at \$69. However, the goal wasn't to sell the obscenely priced frankfurter.

The true purpose was to make the next most expensive item seem cheaper. Customers who were drawn by the hot dog's publicity gladly ordered the menu's \$17.95 cheeseburger. Even if \$17.95 was too pricey elsewhere, Serendipity3 customers deemed it reasonable in comparison to the \$69 hot dog.

**2. Peak-end rule.** People judge an experience largely based on how they felt at its peak (or most intense point) and at its end, rather than the sum of all its moments. Consider the last time you were on a rollercoaster. Do you recall every single moment of the experience, or the most intense points of the ride?

The peak-end rule should be applied as a rule of thumb when designing client interactions. For example, when

crafting a proposal presentation, focus on creating a distinct set of highs throughout to establish memorable takeaway moments, rather than simply conveying all information equally. This can include spending more time on unique differentiators, storytelling, or adding interactive elements.

**3. Sequencing or serial positioning effect.** We tend to favor or remember objects because of their position in a list or sequence, specifically items at the beginning and end of a list. A great example of this is remembering a grocery list. You may recall the first few and the last item on the list, but the middle becomes much fuzzier.

Sequencing can be applied strategically to help clients remember pertinent information. Examine your client engagement process and identify those areas where you can reorder information requests to reduce the number of decisions required to be made at one time. In addition, ensure important decisions are requested first or last in a meeting (or your process as a whole), to help clients' recollection of those choices.

**4. Context effect.** This is the influence environmental factors have on an individual's perceptions and decision-making. For example, the comfort of the floor a shopper stands on while reviewing a product's quality impacts their assessment of it, leading to significantly higher ratings if the floor is comfortable, and lower ones if not.

Context can be influenced outside the physical space as well. While your office and conference room space can create a positive environment, think also about how to shape context across client communications. Consider how to fit the client's expectations, including social (group dynamics and norms), cultural (variances in business customs of other countries), and temporal (positioning and timing of a message, governing the mood of a conversation).

**5. Rhyme-as-reason effect.** Also known as the Rosen phenomenon, people judge sayings that rhyme as more accurate and truthful than those that do not. A very well-known example of this can be drawn from the O.J. Simpson trial, where his lawyer, Johnnie Cochran, uttered the phrase, "If it doesn't fit, you must acquit."

While it shouldn't necessarily be overused, the rhyme-as-reason effect can be applied to vital components of your brand messaging or a key presentation to better convince your audience of your position or value. The theory is that rhyming can make concepts simpler to mentally process, in turn increasing their perceived validity.

We all naturally seek ways to think and solve problems in simpler and less effortful ways. By focusing on how you can design the client experience around making decisions and experiences as effortless as possible from a cognitive perspective, you can significantly strengthen their brand experience. While these biases are not all-inclusive, they do provide a starting point for shifting to a more experience-focused mindset.

Keep in mind your clients are not only dealing with their engagement with your firm, but also a myriad of other personal and professional pressures that influence their perceptions daily. Ensure the brand experience also considers your clients' big-picture challenges and needs, rather than just marketing elements that are most visible. ■

#### EDITOR'S NOTE:

Join SMPS on January 27, 2022, for Andrea Olson's webinar, "Creating Proposals That Sell With Behavioral Science," 2–3:30 p.m. EST

[onlinelearning.smps.org/live-and-on-demand-webinars](https://onlinelearning.smps.org/live-and-on-demand-webinars)



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#### 📷 Story Behind the Picture

The social hub serves as a gathering space for collaboration, as well as a café. The Fortune 500 company's four-story glass building provides ample light, and all workspaces have access to windows. The building overlooks a lake and walking trails.