

# Brain Game

Breaking the habit code



Cliché and neuroscience agree:  
Human beings are indeed creatures of  
habit – and that has big implications  
for brand strategies.



“Most of the time, what we do, is what we do most of the time”

This statement from the psychologists Townsend and Bever captures one of the great truisms of human behaviour – and one of the great challenges for marketers. We know that we are, in the well-worn phrase, ‘creatures of habit.’ We know that those habits can shape the fortunes of brands and products. Yet benefiting from a habit is one thing; knowing how to create or change it is something else entirely. As neuroscience reveals more about what habits are, and how they come to direct our behaviour, it’s becoming clear that marketers cannot afford to leave habit-forming to chance.

When they move beyond brand engagement into the habit-forming realm, marketers must set aside many of their natural assumptions about what drives consumer behaviour. They must move from engaging on a rational or emotional level to focusing relentlessly on training. Marketers may first approach consumers in the style of Monty Roberts the Horse Whisperer, but to form habits successfully they must move onto drilling their target audience in the style of dog gurus like Caesar Milan or Barbara Woodhouse. The world of habits is one of behaviour, reward – and rigid consistency.

# Breaking the habit code

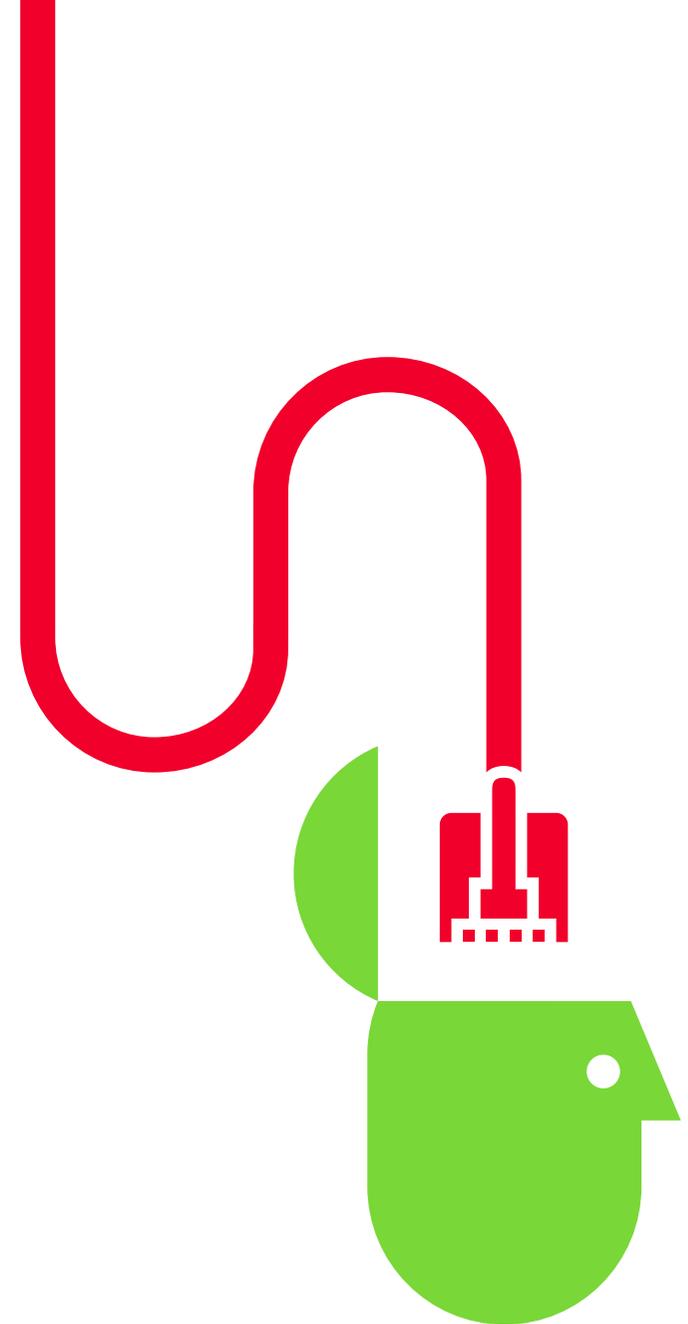
## Features of habit

Broadly speaking, habits can be defined as automatic responses to particular sets of circumstances or 'environmental cues'. And these automatic responses exist for a very good reason: as far as the brain is concerned, they work. They represent learned behaviour that has delivered for us in particular circumstances in the past, and has done so consistently enough to become hard-wired into our mental furniture. Habits become habits when they make the transition from a response initiated by our intentions to one triggered by a contextual cue itself. When they reach this stage, they don't require any thought at all; in fact, it would require a conscious effort on our part not to respond to that particular set of circumstances in that particular way.

Evolutionarily speaking, this makes a great deal of sense. An automatic response is less taxing on our mental resources and leaves them free to focus on the things we don't already know the best response to – less familiar contexts, situations and problems. A fully formed habit isn't a shortcut for thinking or a different

way of thinking; it is a substitute for thinking. Habits are our brain on autopilot. And that autopilot appears to be activated much of the time. According to a study published by Wood in 2002, up to 45 per cent of our behaviour tends to be repeated in the same physical location every single day; a strong indication of habits at work.

Think about the last time a light bulb expired in your home – and you'll have a pretty good idea of how completely our autopilot can kick in. If you didn't happen to have any spare bulbs it may have taken you a day or two to change the light. Throughout that period, every time that you walked into that particular room, you flicked the switch to turn the light on. You did this even though you knew perfectly well that the bulb was out. You hadn't forgotten that the light didn't work; instead your brain was simply following a set pattern that it had learned to activate every time that you walk into that room. It would have taken a considerable conscious effort to override this pattern; a conscious effort that it didn't make sense for your brain to devote its resources to.



# Affective refers to cues and triggers that reflect the way something resonates with us personally

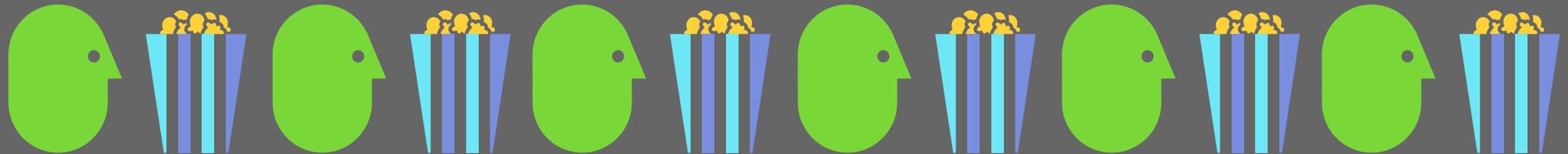
The contextual cues to which we develop habitual responses can be as simple and familiar as walking into a particular room or along a particular supermarket aisle, but they can also take the form of 'affective' stimuli, such as impulses, moods and memories. The word 'affective' refers to cues and triggers that reflect the way something resonates with us personally such as eating a chocolate bar when you're feeling down (mood) or ordering a Corona after thinking about a beach holiday (memory).

### **The habit's journey**

Not every action that we repeat becomes a habit, but every action that we repeat consistently in the same context has the potential to do so – especially if it is an action that aligns closely with our motivations and intentions at the time. The journey towards becoming a habit involves the brain chunking the entire sequence of our habitual response together with the context that triggers it, as a single memory. When our brain recalls the context, it cannot help but also recall the

response; mentally speaking, the two have become indivisible. Many habits start life as heuristics, simple rules of thumb that we consistently follow to help us make decisions more efficiently. Others first form as rituals, routines that we at first follow consciously because of the emotional effect that they create. In the case of decisions about products or brands, one of the heuristics we often use is to look at our own past behaviour and repeat it. When a heuristic results in our following exactly the same behaviour in the same circumstances (as it often does), it stands a strong chance of developing into an automatic response. And once this happens, the brain no longer needs to refer to the rule of thumb at all. It deactivates alternative responses in favour of what is now an automatic sequence of actions, triggered whenever those circumstances occur. If heuristics sketch out an approach to help us reach decisions and respond to the situations that we encounter, habits inscribe it in permanent marker. Once the autopilot is fully engaged, it doesn't consider any other possible course of action.

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## Well-trained popcorn-munchers

In November 2011, the researcher David Neal published the results of an experiment that demonstrates just how rigidly habits can direct our behaviour in well-defined circumstances – and how illogical this behaviour can sometimes appear as a result.

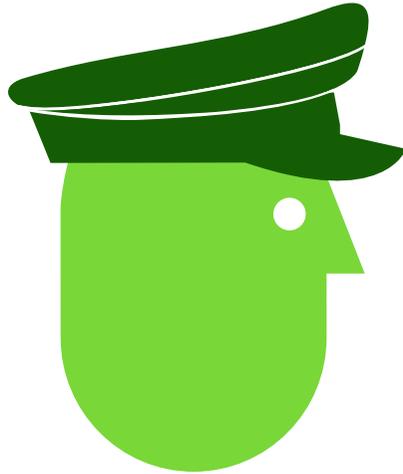
In the experiment, moviegoers were given a free box of popcorn whilst they sat in a theatre watching trailers. Unbeknownst to the audience, some were given freshly popped popcorn whilst others received

week-old, stale popcorn. Those previously identified as having strong popcorn-eating habits were found to have eaten significantly more stale popcorn than others who received the week-old boxes. Interestingly, they were well aware of how bad tasting the popcorn was – and told researchers as much – but they weren't able to modify a habitual response that told them that, when in a movie theatre, they enjoy eating popcorn.

To confirm what was causing the stale popcorn-munching, the experiment was then repeated –

but in a well-lit room with a small-screen television. In this context, the habitual popcorn-eaters wanted nothing to do with the stale popcorn. It was only the specific sights and sounds of a cinema (darkened lights, surround sound, excitement-inducing environmental factors) that triggered the response. The habit of eating popcorn had nothing whatsoever to do with how good the popcorn tasted – but everything to do with the context of sitting in a cinema.

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## How habits determine the destiny of brands

This is all great news for a brand that happens to form part of the habitual response that a consumer develops – that becomes the popcorn in the cinema. It's a potential disaster if another product has got there first. Circumstances may move on, better products may become available, better ways of dealing with situations may become apparent; but habits do not respond to such changes. Their automaticity is their great value as far as the brain is concerned, but it can also be a great source of frustration to marketers. Habits aren't interested in the logic of today; they are too busy following the logic of yesterday.

Marketers can spend a great deal of time and money seeking to convince consumers that their brand or product represents the most appropriate response to particular circumstances – a better way to celebrate success or comfort themselves when things don't go well; a better way to achieve their goals; a better solution to a problem. If those consumers have already formed habits around rival products or solutions then such efforts are most likely wasted. The response has already been defined and locked down; the conscious brain is no longer listening – and will only start to do so again if marketers can find a way to interrupt the autopilot.

The brain's autopilot is immensely difficult to reprogramme – but that does not mean it cannot be overridden. Habits are an automatic response to very specific sets of contextual cues. And this means that the most effective strategy for changing consumer behaviour often lies in changing the context for that behaviour, rather than battling to change a habit itself.



In 42% of cases, people don't actually buy their preferred brand

## How to train your consumer

Training your consumer is an important aspect of habit formation. It is about helping them be more efficient in getting things done by using your brand, product or service. In fact, the less they think about you, the better: a paradox that marketers steeped in the value of brand engagement and affinity sometimes find it hard to come to terms with.

Focusing on context, environmental cues and reinforcers of behaviour requires a new approach to developing brand and marketing strategies – one that looks beyond stated needs and motivations to explore hidden triggers that may well appear inconsequential to consumers themselves. It requires marketers to learn how to identify habitual behaviour, how to distinguish this from conventional consumer loyalty, and how to develop the right strategy in response.

Mixing up loyal consumers and habitual ones can have serious consequences for both acquisition and customer retention strategies. A change in website or product design might renew engagement amongst loyal customers but could easily interrupt habitual customers' behaviour and drive them elsewhere. Brand-related promotions might prove highly effective amongst loyal customers whilst passing over the heads of habitual customers whose brains are not focused on the brand at all. In similar ways, knowing how much of your competitor's market share can be attributed to habits, loyalty, and situational circumstances (TNS research has shown that, in 42% of cases, people don't actually buy their preferred brand) is crucial for formulating an effective approach to increasing your own.

In Quantitative research, identifying the presence of habits involves being alive to discrepancies between behavioural intention and actual behaviour – and seeking explanations for these discrepancies amongst our automatic, unthinking responses. Identifying repeating patterns of behaviour (for example, purchases at the same time, in the same location or in the same context) can help to pinpoint habits at work – and help marketers to apply the right strategies.

Qualitative research holds the key to revealing the specific contextual cues driving consumer habits – but can only reveal them when patient interviewers are prepared to look beyond consumers' stated needs and motivations. Techniques such as cognitive interviewing, which seeks to recreate the context for behaviour in the mind of the consumer, have proven particularly

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successful in identifying hidden cues in existing contexts – and revealing how brands can use different cues to supplant them.

In order to do so, a brand may seek to create a new context for itself – or make use of new contexts as they naturally emerge with changing circumstance: new motherhood, teenage years or leaving home to attend college, for example. Whichever approach it adopts, its success at becoming the habitual response to that context will require a departure from conventional marketing approaches. Rather than advertising a specific product or brand benefit, it must focus instead on advertising a specific behaviour, on persuading consumers to repeat that behaviour in the right context, and on ensuring that they are rewarded for doing so.

## Staying on cue

Contextual stability is the key to successful habit forming. It is not enough simply to persuade a consumer to repeat a certain action frequently; for a strong habit to form, they must repeat the action in the same physical or affective context, enabling the behaviour to be linked closely to relevant contextual cues. In Brazil, Danone took just such an approach to establishing a contextual link for the consumption of its Actimel product. Danone distributed free toasters with packs of the drinking yoghurt – but these were toasters with a difference, branding the words “Have u had your Actimel today?” on every morning slice. By persuading consumers to drink Actimel as an automatic response to making toast in the morning, the brand ensured that its product was regularly consumed – and regularly restocked.

## The right reward

When a stable context has been established, the second challenge for a would-be habit is to ensure that the behaviour it promotes delivers the right reward. This reward must not only encourage the repetition of the behaviour; it must also persuade the brain that this behaviour aligns so thoroughly with intentions and motivations that it should become automatic – literally a ‘no-brainer.’

Not every reward is up to the task. In fact, the business of aligning reward to behaviour and contextual cues in the right way is where many marketing tactics fall foul of our habit-forming mechanisms. Repeatedly discounting prices in order to persuade consumers to trial products can be particularly self-defeating in this regard. Here, the behaviour that is being encouraged

is to expect to buy the product at less than full price; the reward is saving money. Marketers that rely too heavily on discounts succeed only in training their consumers never to pay full price for their products. A better approach to encouraging habitual behaviour would be to offer promotions that help set a rhythm (e.g. weekly coupons for a set period of time) or using coupons to reinforce behaviour rather than making the coupon itself the cue to shop. Some brands have succeeded by rewarding people who use one coupon, by sending them another one.

At the onset of habit formation, rewards are at their most effective when they follow behaviour immediately, and align with affective factors within the brain. This reinforces that a behaviour is the most effective means of meeting our intentions and aspirations, and encourages the evolution of that behaviour into a habitual response to relevant contextual cues. One of the common weaknesses in marketing strategies is a failure to reinforce behaviour that's just been adopted. Long delays between behaviour and reward won't help habit formation. Just ask Caesar Milan.

### How Oreo invented a habit

Oreo provides arguably the most complete example of a brand creating and owning a context in all of its physical and affective dimensions, and therefore becoming the default habitual response. In Oreo's case, the context is a father returning from work to spend time with his daughter; the habitual response that it has successfully created is ritually to share milk and Oreo cookies; the reward that it offers is precious quality time with one's family, an emotive concept with great affective power. And everything about the way that Oreo advertises its product appears designed to reinforce links between the three.

Oreo ads focus not on the benefits of the product or why people should eat it – but instead on how they should eat it. They relentlessly advertise the behaviour that the brand seeks to promote and they do so in very specific and very consistent detail. The father always wears his suit; he has always just returned from work; the cookies are always consumed with drink of milk; the top of the cookie is always removed; the cookie is always licked; and of course, the cookie is always dunked in the milk. As a lesson in how to form habits



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through contextual stability and a laser-like focus on cues and associated behaviour, Oreo is hard to beat. And by sidestepping discussions about the benefits or otherwise of eating Oreos, this global communications strategy has avoided potential barriers such as rational concerns about fattening biscuits – or irrational reactions to the cookies' unusual colour.

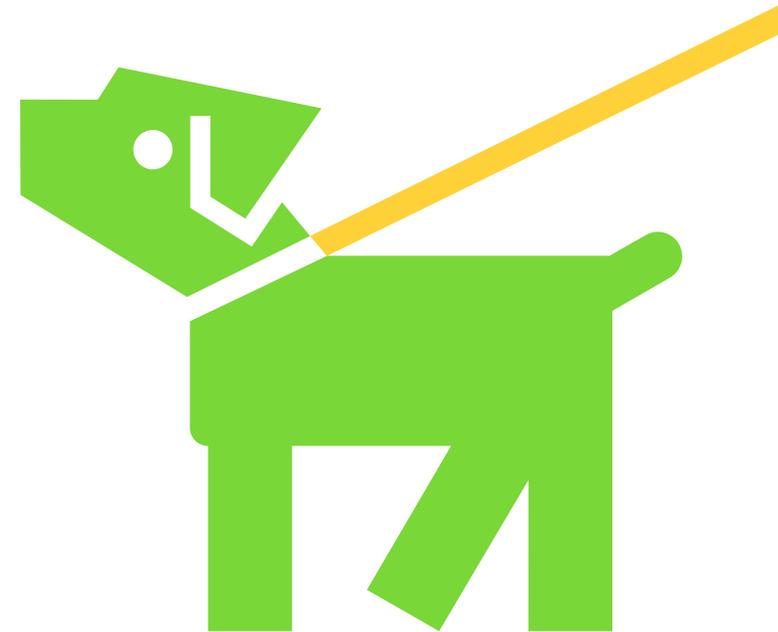
## **Beyond branding: the challenge of habit**

Oreo's approach shows how the business of building a habit can be very different from that of building and marketing a brand. Establishing brand awareness, building perceptions and driving engagement are often essential precursors for habit formation, aligning products themselves with a consumer's intentions and needs. However, they will not in themselves lead to habits forming around those products – and if rival habits already exist they are not in themselves enough to supplant them.

Incorporating habit forming into strategies turns existing marketing paradigms on their heads. Once, we invited audiences to first 'think' about a product, then 'feel'

something towards it, and as a result 'do' something about it. More recently we have shifted to an emotional paradigm, where 'feel' increasingly comes first, appealing to consumers on an emotional level before they 'think' about taking action and eventually 'do' so. However, to form habits successfully, a far more radical shift is required: advertising not a rational argument or an emotional appeal, but a specific set of actions. Training consumers to 'do' something is the most important element of habit forming, and the basis for those consumers to later construct positive feelings and thoughts about the behaviour they have been trained to follow.

The specific strategies required to form habits mean that even successful, high-profile brands cannot take them for granted. As competition for a place in consumers' routines intensifies, brands armed with precise insight as to those consumers' existing habits, and their potential for developing new ones, have a distinct competitive advantage. The ability to teach dogs new tricks has always been a prized one, after all.





## About the authors

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Prior to joining TNS in 2012, Franck held roles with Procter & Gamble and Synovate, as well as working in brand consulting, delivering high profile global research projects. Franck is an expert in psychoanalytic research and uses this expertise to build brands.

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