WHY PEOPLE

DON'T DO THINGS

Exploring reasons why audiences may not be taking action or changing behaviors after seeing your messages.

brooketully

ABOUT BROOKE

Brooke Tully trains practitioners to design outreach plans that motivate action for the planet. She brings together best practices from her work in commercial advertising, insights from the behavioral & social sciences, and her first-hand experience in international conservation programs. Brooke focuses on designing effective and cost-efficient behavior change communications that will spark real and lasting conservation movements.

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WHY PEOPLE DON'T DO THINGS

It's our tendency to jump to solutions. After all, time is of the essence and we need people to take action for the environment TODAY.

But it's important to first understand why people aren't doing these things now, and why they may not do them at all, so we can figure out the best ways of motivating them.
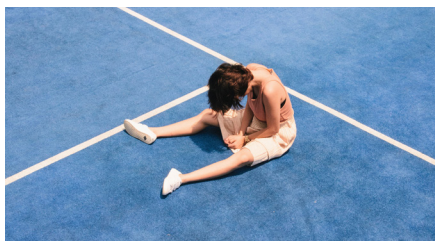
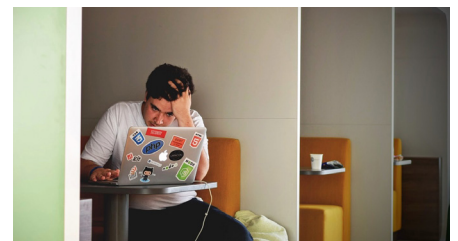This booklet covers 4 big-picture reasons why people don't do things.

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It's easier and safer not to do anything

The act of doing anything different or new – no matter how big or small – is inherently difficult.

There are two behavioral science concepts behind this reason why people don't do things:

Status Quo Bias: Status quo bias is evident when people prefer things to stay the same by doing nothing (see also inertia) or by sticking with a decision made previously (Samuelson, & Zeckhauser, 1988).

Loss Aversion: It is thought that the pain of losing is psychologically about twice as powerful as the pleasure of gaining. As people are more willing to take risks to avoid a loss, loss aversion can explain differences in risk-seeking versus aversion.

What I want to focus on here is status quo bias. This can be most simply explained as:

it's easier to NOT do something than it is TO do something.

Of course, right!?!

It's easier for me to stay at home (where I work) than go to the gym.

Look at all the steps it takes to go to the gym: gotta change my clothes, figure out what exercise I'm going to do, drive/commute to the gym, check-in and find a space to exercise, and so on.

How many steps does it take for me to NOT go to the gym? ZERO!

It's easier for me to accept the plastic straw that was given to me at the coffee shop than bring my own or remember to say "no straw" when I order.

It's easier for me to use the grocery store's plastic or paper bags than to remember to bring my own bags and lug them into the store with me.

It's easier for me to do things exactly the way I've always done them than to do them differently – or worse, to do something entirely new.

But we need people to do things

It's important to recognize and "own" that success in our work and missions requires people to do things that makes their lives a bit more difficult.

Yes – those things are beneficial to the planet, to the individuals themselves, and could actually make their lives easier and more enjoyable. ››

But the act of doing anything different or new – no matter how big or small – is inherently difficult.

It may not be as hard for us to do these things

Many of us have gone through these transitions ourselves; yet as conservationists, we are likely more persistent, determined and resilient to make the change.

We've all adopted behaviors that are better for the planet but a bit less convenient for ourselves:

- carrying around reusable water bottles AND coffee mugs in our bags;
- storing plastic bags somewhere in our house to deposit at the grocery store during our next trip;
- packing our cars and bags full of reusable grocery bags;
- keeping food scraps in our kitchen to compost even though it can attract fruit flies;
- and this list goes on.

None of these things have been all that easy for us to adopt either and as we learn about new ways to live more sustainably, we will continue to make these changes to our daily routines and habits.

But let's be real – it would be a lot easier to not think about these things and, certainly, a lot easier to not do them.

Don't isn't the same as won't

It's quite possible that at this point in the article I've created a feeling of hopelessness and I'm sorry for that.

Digging into the underlying reasons for inaction is always a bummer, which is why we prefer to focus on solutions.

There's no reason to despair.

Just because inertia means people don't do things, doesn't mean people won't do things.

We have amazing methods at our disposal for jolting people out of their status quo bias and into the world of slight inconvenience with lots of global benefits.

We can make our requested actions and behaviors more social, more fun and even more personally meaningful so they don't feel like it's something they "have" to do but rather something they can't do without.

Just because inertia means people <u>don't</u> do things, doesn't mean people <u>won't</u> do things.

Because
they can't

When we're asking people to do a new or different behavior but they cannot access the required equipment, tools or resources needed to do that behavior.

I'm not talking about "can't" in terms of a mindset; meaning, the belief in your own ability to do or achieve something (also known as self-efficacy).

Self-efficacy: refers to an individual's belief in his or her capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific performance attainments (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997).

A lack of self-efficacy is another reason why people don't do things (and the top reason why my trainer makes me do 3 more reps when I tell her I can't do anymore)… but it's not the one I want to talk about today.

Today, I'm talking about situations where we're asking people to do a new or different behavior but they cannot access the required equipment, tools or resources needed to do that behavior.

What CAN'T can look like

Typically, these situations occur when a behavior change program doesn't take into full account what's needed to do the behavior and the audiences' real-world circumstances.

To bring this to life, I will create a hypothetical example based on a real behavior change campaign.

During a workshop I conducted, I learned that Zoos Victoria in Australia is leading a behavior change effort to have people use bubbles instead of balloons at their outdoor events.

This shift in behavior is important as fly-away balloons may end up in oceans and waterways, causing great harm to sea creatures and birds.

This campaign has a very straight-forward behavior change ask (and super kudos to Zoos Victoria for that!), which makes it a good campaign example to highlight how it may not be possible for an audience to do what we're asking.

(Reminder, the below is all hypothetical.)

So, we're asking people to use bubbles instead of balloons at their outdoor event, but… ››

Promise to blow bubbles at your next outdoor event and help save seabirds.

What if bubbles aren't available to purchase anywhere in Australia?

What if bubbles are available, but people have to drive a long distance to get them (whereas balloons are located just nearby)?

What if bubbles are way more expensive to purchase than balloons?

What if bubbles were available near them but stores have run out and don't have any when people go to buy them?

If any of the above are true, then your audience IS UNABLE TO do the desired behavior.

No matter how much they want to or intend to, they simply can't.

There are actually countless examples of our programs doing this, even if we don't realize it:

- We ask people to drive less but there are no public transportation options for them.

- We ask people to recycle but their buildings don't have the infrastructure for it.

- We ask people to not litter but there are no garbage bins anywhere nearby.

- We ask people to use different hunting or fishing gear but they don't have the money to purchase them.

- We ask people to adopt different livelihoods but there are no other forms of work available to them.

Barriers not included

Most often, you will hear this reason for not doing the behavior referred to as barriers.

If your audience cannot access the required equipment, tools or resources needed to do the desired behavior, then no amount of marketing, communication or outreach about doing the behavior is going to overcome those barriers.

The best way to address barriers is to first identify them – all of them – early in the project design and development phase so you have a clear picture on why your audience may not do what you're asking them to do.

Then, find ways to remove as many of these barriers as possible. Or at least remove the most substantial barrier preventing people from doing the behavior, either through your program or by partnering with others who are great at it.

And if it's not possible to remove those barriers, then explore alternate behaviors you can promote that your audience can readily act upon.

These situations occur when a program doesn't take into full account what's needed to do the behavior and the audiences' real-world circumstances.

They tried to, but it got too difficult

When our audience shows up, we have to deliver a seamless, efficient, welcoming, and reinforcing experience that allows them to easily follow through. We can't afford to turn them away.

These are situations when we've made all the right steps to motivate people to do something, overcoming status quo bias and all, but then presented our audience with a cumbersome process for following through on their desired action.

Most commonly, this takes the form of either:

- **Choice overload:** When too many choices are available to consumers, they may stick with their default choice or make no choice.

- OR, **hassle factors:** Seemingly minor inconveniences that prevent one from completing a task or taking action.

I've previously covered the topic of choice overload in this article, so today I will focus on hassle factors.

For that reason, I'm out

Too often, we call bullshit on hassle factors being a real reason why people don't follow through on their actions.

We default to an assumption that if someone is truly motivated, then they will jump through hoops to get it done. But this contradicts what we looked at in the first reason why people don't do things: because **it's easier not to!**

This reason still applies even once someone feels motivated and compelled to do something.

Think about the moments when you've been jazzed about something but bailed at the last minute because it got too difficult:

- That one item you were going to buy at the store but then ditched it because the check-out line was too long and moving too slowly.

- The membership group you were going to sign-up for online but it asked for too much information and you decided it wasn't worth the effort (especially the need to create another password!)

- That time you were going to attend a community event but there was no parking available, so you drove on.

- The charity you were going to donate to on Giving Tuesday but the website was too clunky, required too many steps to give, and wasn't mobile friendly.

These may seem like small, minor, insignificant obstacles.

But the reality is that any difficulty – any resistance – one feels when trying to accomplish something can very quickly lead to them abandoning the mission.   ››

And hassle factors become an even bigger reality when someone is attempting to do something completely new and out of their comfort zone.

Recognizing the finish line

This reason for why people don't do things is probably the one that upsets me the most. Because these issues are on us.

It happens when we believe that getting our audience to the website, to the sign-up page, to the event is the end game. The finish line. Job done.

Just getting people to those places does take a herculean effort. It can be exhausting. But it's actually just the starting line.

Once they show up – interested, enthused and motivated – we have to deliver a seamless, efficient, welcoming, and reinforcing experience that allows them to easily follow through. We simply can't afford to turn them away.

Doing better

The key to doing better with reducing hassle factors is to consider the user experience. To continuously ask:
• How can I make this process simpler?
• How can I make this experience more welcoming and intuitive?
• How can I make them feel good about taking this action?

This may mean reducing the amount of information required to give a donation, or volunteer, or become a member (do we really need their phone number and mailing address?)

It may mean spending a bit more to have a PayPal button so donors can give with 1-click.

It could involve providing instructions and directions early and frequently to prepare your attendees on what to expect, whether it's volunteers showing up to an activity, community members showing up to a town hall or workshop, or guests attending an event.

It could include having greeters – if it works for Wal-Mart then it'll work for us!

All of this comes down to efficiently and smoothly converting "showing up" into "getting it done".

The key to doing better with reducing hassle factors is to consider the user experience. To continuously ask: How can I make this process simpler? How can I make this experience more welcoming and intuitive? How can I make them feel good about taking this action?

They don't "get" why they should

To move people away from "why should I?" and towards "I can and I will", we need to offer them a series of compelling reasons why it's worth their time and energy.

Our audiences receive hundreds of messages from cause-based organizations asking them to take better care of their own health, their finances, their families, their community and their environment.

On top of that, they receive messages from international organizations asking them to support people, animals and places far away from them.

Getting bombarded with all these messages creates a natural cynicism. An understandable stance of **"why should I?"**

And it's often coupled with skepticism on whether or not doing something will really make a difference for the cause.

To move people away from "why should I?" and towards "I can and I will", we need to offer them a series of compelling reasons why it's worth their time and energy.

It's our job to provide the "why"

I want to be clear on this point: providing "compelling reasons" does NOT mean inundating them with facts!

Our field has been relying on facts for decades and it's not getting us far enough, fast enough.

I'm not going to write too much about how

to provide the "why" here, because I really want you to watch the below video instead.

It's an assessment of a Sierra Club direct mail piece I received and I believe it's worth your time to watch the whole thing (that's obviously not an unbiased statement).

In this video, I describe several tactics Sierra Club uses to provide compelling reasons why their audience should protect the honeybees.

Such as:
•   Creating a sense of belonging.
•   Making the donation feel like it's not a big trade-off.
•   Increasing belief and empowerment that their support can make a difference.
•   Providing freebies that prompt "giving back".
•   Making the action easy to do.

Yet, this same direct mail piece also went seriously **off the rails** and ended up de-motivating the audience by ending on doom & gloom messages.

Which makes this marketing piece a great example for showcasing how it IS possible to excite and motivate our audiences.

While also reminding us that when we include the wrong kinds of reasons in our messages, then our audience won't do the
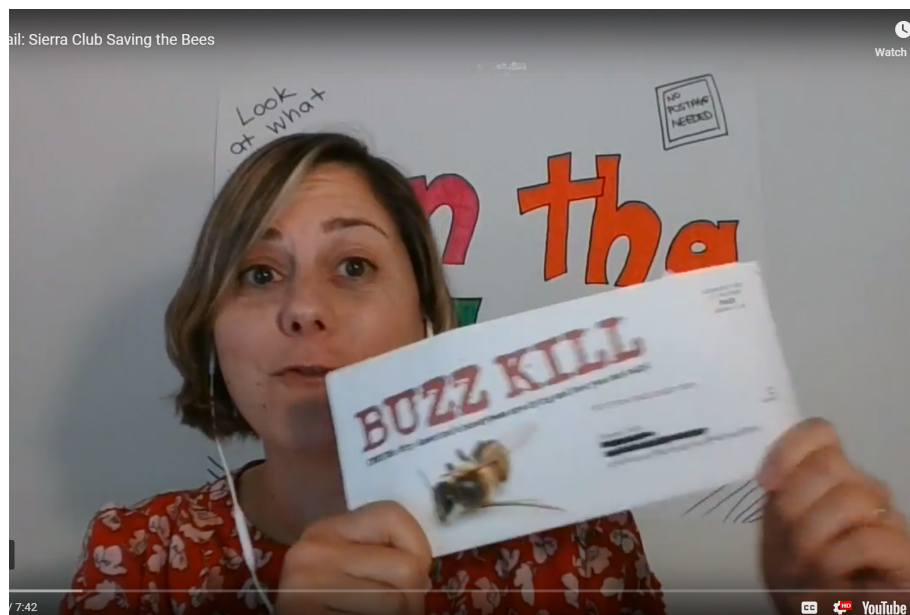
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