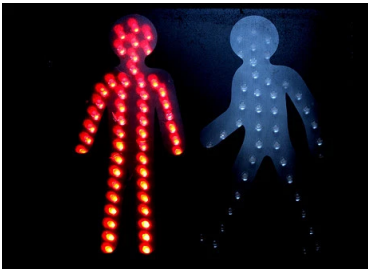


Why Behavior Change Apps Fail To Change Behavior

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Editor’s Note: Nir Eyal writes about the intersection of psychology, technology, and business at [NirAndFar.com](#). Follow him [@nireyal](#).

Imagine walking into a busy mall when someone approaches you with an open hand. “Would you have some coins to take the bus, please?” he asks. But in this case, the person is not a panhandler. The beggar is a PhD.

As part of a French study, researchers wanted to know if they could change how much money people gave to a total stranger using just a few specially encoded words. They discovered a technique so simple and effective it doubled how much

The turn of phrase has been shown to not only increase give, but was also effective in boosting charitable donations in voluntary surveys. In fact, a recent [meta-analysis](#) of 42

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participants concluded that these few words, placed at highly effective way to gain compliance, doubling the likelihood of “yes.”

What were the magic words the researchers discovered free to accept or refuse.”

The “but you are free” technique demonstrates how we are persuaded when our ability to choose is reaffirmed. The technique works during face-to-face interactions, but also over email. The article directly look at how products and services might use this technique provides several practical insights for how companies can change behavior.

Wanna and Hafta

[Dr. Jesse Schell](#), of Carnegie Mellon’s Entertainment Technology Center, studies the psychology behind why people play. In addition to being a game designer at studio, Schell has poured over decades of research to find out why we spend countless hours entranced playing Angry Birds or Farm Heroes while at the same time dreading doing other things, like their daily work.

At this year’s D.I.C.E Summit, [Schell said](#) the difference between “wanna” behavior and “hafta” behavior is a “wanna” versus a “hafta.” The difference between things you want to do and things you have to do is, according to Schell, is “the difference between play ... slavery and freedom ... efficiency and pleasure.

Furthermore, Schell believes maintaining a sense of autonomy is key to an experience. Schell points to the work of Edward Deci and his [Self-Determination Theory](#) identifies a belief in one’s own autonomy as a requirement for sustained motivation.

Unfortunately, too many well-intentioned products fail because they focus on things people are obligated to do, as opposed to things they want to do. Points to neuroscience research showing “there are different brain pathways for seeking positive consequences and avoiding negative consequences.”

When faced with “haftas,” our brains register them as painful. We use shortcuts, cheat, skip-out, or in the case of many apps

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click away in order to escape the discomfort of feeling

Why Choice Works

So why does reminding people of their freedom to choose work? A French bus fare study, prove so effective?

The researchers believe the phrase “but you are free” d of being told what to do. If you have ever grumbled at y on a coat or felt your blood pressure rise when your bo have experienced what psychologists call “[reactance](#),” threats to your autonomy.

However, when a request is coupled with an affirmation reactance is kept at bay. It appears emancipating peop “hafta,” opens them to viewing it as a “wanna.”

But can the principles of autonomy and reactance carry change behavior and form new habits? Here are two ex they do, but of course, *you are free* to make up your mi

Counting Calories

Take for example establishing the habit of better nutritic Store for the word “diet” returns 3,235 apps, all promisi pounds. The first app in the long list is [MyFitnessPal](#), w 350,000 people.

When I decided I needed to lose a few pounds about a and gave it a try. MyFitnessPal is simple enough to use what they eat and presents them with a calories score l goal.

For a few days, I stuck with the program and diligently i everything I ate. Had I been a person who logs food wit MyFitnessPal would have been a welcomed improveme

However, I was not a calorie tracker prior to using MyFi app was novel at first, it soon became a drag. Keeping my daily routine and was not something I came to the e

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lose weight, and the app was telling me how to do it with calories in and calories out. Unfortunately, I soon found made it impossible to get back on the program – the reward wash.

Soon, I began to feel obligated to confess my mealtime. MyFitnessPal became MyFitnessPain. Yes, I had chosen despite my best intentions, my motivation faded, and I quit. Adopting a weird new behavior, calorie tracking in my case, the only choice was to either comply with what the app wanted or quit.

Making Friends

On the other hand, another health app called [Fitocracy](#) works very differently. The goal of the app is similar to its competitors: to establish better diet and exercise routines. However, the app encourages “wanna” behaviors instead of “haftas” to keep people coming back.

At first, the Fitocracy experience is similar to other health apps: members track their food consumption and exercise. What differentiates itself is in its recognition that most users view fitness as a social activity. Just as I had with MyFitnessPal, unless the app taps into the social aspect, it fails.

Before my reactance alarm went off, I started receiving encouragement from the site after entering-in my very first run. Curious to know if virtual encouragement, I logged-in. There, I immediately found “mrosplock5,” a woman looking for advice on what to do about running. Having experienced similar trouble several years ago, she wrote, “Running barefoot (or with minimalist shoes) eliminated the pain. true!”

I haven’t used Fitocracy for long, but it’s easy to see how it works. Fitocracy is first and foremost an online community. The app mimics real-world gym jabber among friends. The rituals of the gym-minded people [existed long before](#) Fitocracy, and the app encourages the behavior by making sharing words of encouragement, encouragement, and receiving praise, easier and more rewarding. In fact, [a recent study](#) found that social support is a key factor in successful behavior change.

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found social factors were the most important reasons people recommended it to others.

Social acceptance is something we all crave and Fitocracy taps into the need for connection as an on-ramp to fitness, making it more available to users as they develop new habits. The choice is therefore between the old way of doing an existing behavior and a tailored solution.

Conclusion

To be fair, MyFitnessPal does have social features intended to keep users engaged. However, as opposed to Fitocracy, the benefits to the community come much later, if ever.

Clearly, it is too early to tell who among the multitudes of consumer technology companies will emerge victorious, but the fact remains that for many of the consumer technology companies of our age, those who succeed in changing the behaviors of hundreds of millions of people, are the ones who succeed in sneaking in a few minutes of pure autonomy. Perhaps part of the appeal of sneaking in a few minutes of pure autonomy on ESPN.com is access to a moment of pure autonomy, not being told what to do by bosses and coworkers.

Unfortunately, too many companies build their products the way they should or have to do, instead of what they want to do, to change behaviors because they neglect to make their services easier to use, often asking users to learn new, unfamiliar actions instead of making it easier.

Instead, products that successfully change behavior provide a choice between their old way of doing things and the new way, and they do so in a way that is consistent with existing needs. By maintaining the user's freedom to choose, they facilitate the adoption of new habits and change behavior.

TL;DR

– When our autonomy is threatened, we feel constrained and often rebel against doing the new behavior. Psychological

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– To change behavior, products must ensure the user *want to* use the service, not feel they *have to*.

– Attempting to create entirely new behaviors is difficult. Products that make users feel like “haftas.” For example, unless someone already eats a lot of calories, a diet tracking app can feel alienating, telling them to provide opportunities to get back on track if they slip.

– However, by making an existing behavior easier to do, products are more likely to be accepted. By making the existing behavior more rewarding, products give users the choice between the old habit or adopting their habits to the better, new solution instead.

– By catering to existing routines, products stand a better chance of changing behavior as they move people to increasingly complex tasks over time.

Thank you to [Steph Habif](#), [Ryan Hoover](#), [Max Ogles](#), [Joanna Williamson](#), for reading early versions of this essay.

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