A/B Testing: The Most Powerful Way to Turn Clicks into Customers
By Dan Siroker, Pete Koomen and Cara Harshman

CHAPTER

5

Words Matter: Focus on Your Call to Action

How a Few Words Can Make a Huge Difference

The wording on your site represents an area where there are virtually inexhaustible opportunities for experimenting with variations. The variations can be crafted with just a few keystrokes, and often the slightest change can have a major effect. Because language is so easily tweaked (compared to art or images, which require careful design work) and its possibilities are so vast, it represents a major opportunity to test variations at the speed of brainstorming itself. The words on a site are some of the most powerful and potent elements a user sees. The right combination can be leaps-and-bounds more effective than the rest.

Reconsider "Submit": The Clinton Bush Haiti Fund

After we had been able to dramatically increase the donations per pageview at the Clinton Bush Haiti Fund by removing two of the form fields, we next considered the call-to-action button itself, and asked ourselves if the word "Submit" was really putting our best foot forward.

Instead we tried the label "Support Haiti," hypothesizing that making the button reflect the purpose of their action would make the *meaning* of their clicks more immediately clear to users (Figure 5.1).

The difference was enormous. The effect of the change from "Submit" to "Support Haiti" was on the order of several dollars per pageview, and this small change, together with our optimizations to

FIGURE 5.1 Original donation form call-to-action copy versus variation.

the form and several other quick, simple tests, managed to bring in an additional million dollars of relief aid to Haiti. It's a testament to the power just one or two words can have.

Find the Perfect Appeal: Wikipedia

While the content on Wikipedia is the result of a vast collective effort, the Wikimedia Foundation is a team of just 157 committed employees who keep it all running behind the scenes. Hosting the fifth most popular site on the Internet isn't cheap, and online donations are the foundation's biggest source of income, so choosing the right combination of words to drive donations is a task that Chief Revenue Officer Zack Exley takes seriously. To brainstorm ideas for new banner appeals, the team will go to the park, a nearby bar or coffee shop, or their absolute favorite spot: San Francisco restaurant Eddie Rickenbacker's. Why does the Wikimedia team love Eddie Rickenbacker's so much? Because they have paper tablecloths.

Armed with pens, pencils, and crayons, the small team would venture down the block to Eddie's for a brainstorming session. By the end of the session, their tablecloth would be covered with words, phrases, and sentences. "They got used to us pushing the plates and stuff off and taking the whole tablecloth back to our office and putting it up on the wall," recalls Exley.

For a big fundraising push, Wikipedia's team comes up with dozens of variations to test. Finding the most effective words among the essentially endless options is a huge task—one that takes a lot of creativity and a lot testing. "You have to have a rule that if anybody feels strongly about testing something, you test it," Exley says.

There's one test in particular that stands out in Exley's mind.

There was a fundraising appeal that had done well as part of the site's landing pages: "If everyone reading this donated $5, we would only have to fundraise for one day a year. Please donate to keep Wikipedia free." One of the Wikimedia team members suggested testing what would happen if they replaced the last third of their fundraising banner with this line, and Exley agreed to a test (Figure 5.2).

This variation was a bit of a gambit, because setting the bar so distinctly at $5 had the potential to "anchor" users' minds at a lower level than the one suggesting "$5, $20, $50, or whatever you can." On the other hand, the logic of the appeal—and perhaps the very absence of higher dollar values—might persuade more users to give.

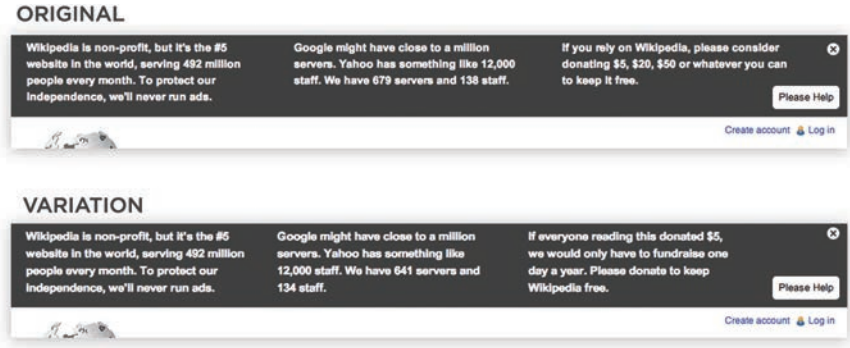

FIGURE 5.2 Original Wikipedia fundraising banner versus the "five dollars" banner variation.

The outcome: even though the five-dollar appeal lowered the average donation amount by 29 percent, the *rate* of donation went up by a whopping 80 percent, resulting in a net increase in overall amount raised of 28 percent.

Why versus *How*: Formstack

Deciding what to include in a site's main navigation, and how to arrange it, is key to establishing the flow of traffic and the focus of the site—and it can provoke strong differences of opinion. While redesigning their site, the team at online form builder Formstack sat around a table, considering their navigation. They all agreed on highlighting the form types, features, examples, and pricing, but were not sure what would be the best page to use as a lead.

The team settled on using *Why Use Us* as the lead navigation item because they suspected it would help persuade visitors that Formstack is a better choice than the competition. As analytics on the new site design filtered in, they noticed that visitors weren't clicking on "Why Use Us" as much as they had expected. That prompted a follow-up test: they tested whether naming the page *How It Works* would prompt more visits (Figure 5.3).

Although "Why Use Us?" was the question the Formstack team ultimately wanted to answer for their visitors, they decided to try the header "How It Works" because, their thinking went, it would invite visitors to investigate on their own without the obvious self-promotion. "How It Works" also helps a user unfamiliar with web form builders get his or her bearings on what it is that Formstack does as a company, whereas "Why Use Us" might suggest an explanation of how Formstack *differs* from its competitors, rather than what its product does in the first place.

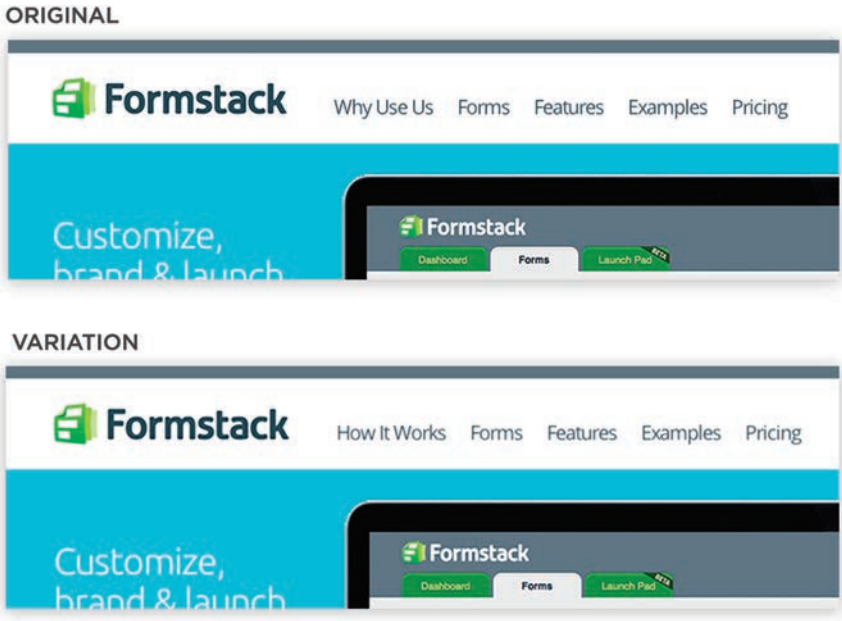

FIGURE 5.3 Original Formstack navigation, "Why Use Us," versus variation, "How It Works."

In an A/B test pitting "Why Use Us" against "How It Works," the winner was clear. Naming the lead navigation item "How It Works" increased traffic to that page by nearly 50 percent, and also lifted two-week free-trial signups by 8 percent.

"Instead of getting bogged down in disagreements, we moved forward," says Jeff Blettner, a web designer at Formstack. "We knew that we would be able to come back after launch and test our hypotheses."

Nouns versus Verbs: LiveChat

LiveChat sells software that allows businesses to talk with their website visitors in real time. In order to figure out how to

maximize the company's product sales, LiveChat visual designer Lucy Frank evaluated the steps most people take in signing up for the service. She found that most visitors sign up for a free trial before becoming paying customers, and so she hypothesized that increasing the number of people in free trials might result in more sales downstream.

Since the first step to starting a free trial is clicking the big shiny button on the homepage, Frank began her experimentation there. She decided to simply change the call-to-action text on the button from "Free Trial" to "Try it free," and see which version enticed more users to register (Figure 5.4).

The team hadn't expected to see much of a variation in terms of results from making such seemingly small changes. Yet the difference of just two words increased click-through rate by 14.6 percent.

This experiment is a great example of what we've seen again and again across a wide range of businesses. We usually give folks some pretty straightforward advice when they ask about how to improve their calls to action: *verbs over nouns*. In other words, *if you want somebody to do something, tell them to do it*.

Framing Effects

There are endless possibilities for any call to action, and it's not feasible to test them all. So, how do you focus your tests on only the possible alternatives that are most likely to have an impact? Having a good hypothesis of why a change will be effective is a crucial step, and one powerful theory to help you formulate it is called *framing*.

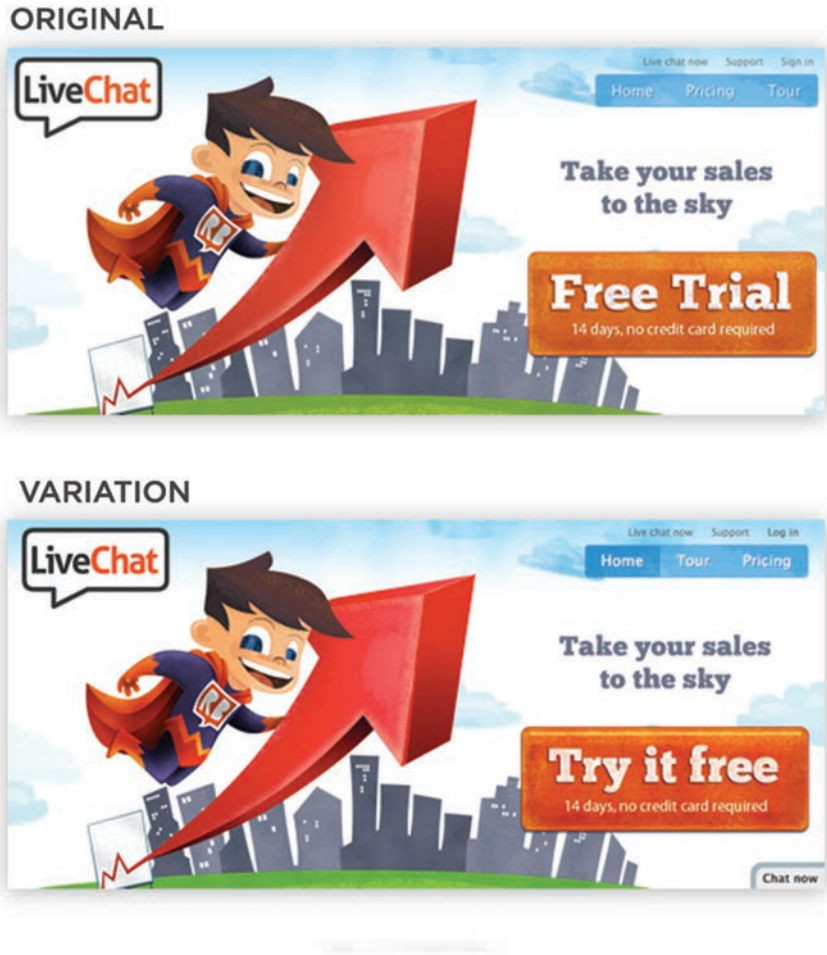

FIGURE 5.4 Original LiveChat call-to-action "Free Trial," versus variation, "Try it free."

Framing is the simple idea that different ways of presenting the same information will evoke different emotional reactions, and thus influence a person's decision. For example, as Nobel laureate psychologist Daniel Kahneman notes in *Thinking, Fast and Slow*:

> The statement that "the odds of survival one month after surgery are 90%" is more reassuring than the equivalent statement that "mortality within one month of surgery is 10%." Similarly, cold cuts described as "90% fat-free" are more attractive than when they are described as "10% fat."[1]

Framing an idea in order to produce a desired emotional outcome in your reader has tons of applications, many of which fall outside of a traditional sales pitch. Any organization working to spur people to action, volunteer for a cause, sign a petition, donate money, and so forth, can make use of this technique to great effect.

A famous 1995 study by psychologist Sara Banks et al.[2] involved showing two groups of women videos on breast cancer and mammography in an attempt to convince them to get screened. The first group's video focused on *gains*, that is, it espoused the benefits of having a mammogram. The second group's video was *loss*-framed: it emphasized the risks of *not* having one. Though the two videos presented the same information, only 51.5 percent of those who saw the gain-framed video got a mammogram in the next year, whereas 61.2 percent of those who saw the loss-framed video did so.

There are no one-size-fits-all rules about message framing, and it's still important to test variations. However, an awareness of framing helps to define the scope of possibilities. You might, for instance, choose to avoid testing more equivalent phrases and

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[1] Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).

[2] Sara M. Banks, et al. "The effects of message framing on mammography utilization." *Health Psychology* 14.2, 178–184 (1995).

consider strikingly different ways you can frame your value proposition and test each of them. Try asking yourself:

- Is the language *negative* or *positive*? Do you, for instance, advertise what a product *has* or what it *doesn't* have?
- Is the language *loss-framed* or *gain-framed* (e.g., the mammography study)?
- Is the language *passive* or *action-oriented* (e.g., LiveChat's "Try it free" button)?

TL;DR

- There are endless word combinations to use on your website. Don't be afraid to **brainstorm and think broadly**: a testing platform **lowers the "barrier to entry"** of ideas, minimizes the risks of failure, and enables quick and potentially huge wins.
- Decisions around messaging and verbiage can easily lead to contentious debates on a team. A/B testing is a way to **put opinions aside** and get concrete feedback on what works and what doesn't. (We'll revisit this idea in Chapter 8.)
- If you want someone to do something, **tell them to do it**.
- Different ways of **framing** the same message can cause people to think of it in different ways. Play with alternative ways of framing the same information and see what differences emerge.