CHAPTER

8

The Cure for the HiPPO Syndrome

Getting Buy-In and Proving Value

There is a practical side to the success of A/B testing at your organization, and success depends not only on the tests themselves, but equally on the *adoption* of testing as a cultural practice in your organization.

The HiPPO Syndrome Has a Cure

Many companies, even in an increasingly data-driven market-place, still unfortunately succumb from time to time to what we call the "HiPPO Syndrome": allowing decisions to be made according to the Highest Paid Person's Opinion rather than the data. What this means for the would-be A/B testing hero is that sometimes you may find yourself encountering various forms of passive and/or active resistance to adopting a testing-driven methodology. Here are a few ways to start curing the HiPPO Syndrome at your own workplace, and to move your organization toward an openness and eagerness for experimentation and a willingness to take the numbers seriously even when they're most surprising:

> DAN: I learned an important lesson about experimentation during my first year working at Google, when my mentor explained how I could convince my boss's boss to let me try something. Even at a fairly data-driven company like Google it was hard to convince the higher-ups to do something potentially risky or radical, and it's always a challenge to

get people's support to launch a new product or create a new feature since there's always the concern that perhaps nobody will use it. The key phrase in receiving this higher-up's blessing, my mentor explained, was to say, "Let's just run an experiment." In that context, the idea became an irresistible investigation into whether it would be worth their time and money—not a hard-and-fast decision of whether to make a permanent change.

A/B testing neutralizes the ideological and replaces it with the empirical. Instead of, "I *feel* we should do X because that's what I feel," a culture of A/B testing encourages both curiosity and humility, where people say, "I hypothesize that X is better than what we have right now. I don't have the data today, but let's run an experiment and test it." After that process is complete, A/B testing then offers the much stronger claim: "I *know* we should do X because of the evidence that it's the right thing to do."

Many features and functions take longer to prioritize than they do to build. In the time you've fully debated whether to develop the feature, you could have already had someone implement it and gather data from an A/B test on how it works. With the data in hand, you can then make an informed, data-driven decision about how to move forward with the project.

There are two things we would say to anyone in a position of decision-making authority who might be fearful of giving up his or her HiPPO status in the face of a more data-driven culture: The first is simply that, ultimately, data-driven companies win because they've made listening to and understanding their customers a basic component in their decision-making process. You have a competitor somewhere doing the same thing you do—but in a more data-driven way. And they will beat you, because they're listening to the numbers.

The second is that eliminating the need for a HiPPO can be liberating for an organization because it eliminates the requirement that everyone involved in a decision be a know-it-all. When people feel comfortable saying "I don't know, but let's run an experiment," they're more inclined to take risks by trying things outside the norm. The value in each individual then derives not only from their ability to make decisions but also their ability to generate hypotheses, and these can come from all levels in your org.

Another benefit of a more data-driven culture: *fewer and shorter meetings*. Former Senior Product Marketing Manager Jarred Colli describes the cultural shift he witnessed at Rocket Lawyer since he and a colleague began their first A/B experiments:

> Where previously, people would argue over what kind of headlines you use or what kind of picture, and you would spend hours drilling down on some stupid detail, now we don't have those conversations anymore, since we'll test all that stuff. We'll figure out whatever is best.

"You have to take egos out of the equation," agrees Netflix Experimentation Platform Manager Bryan Gumm. "And the only way to do that is to be empirical."

Winning Over the Stakeholders

It's also important, particularly in large organizations, to understand which key stakeholders you need to win over throughout the organization. To do this, identify some experiments you can run that will give you early wins and allow you to make the case for a continued investment. You don't want the first test you run to be

contentious with the people whose buy-in you're trying to win. It's critical that this initial test clearly prove value *without* pissing people off.

"What I really like to focus on are good tests, tests that you know are almost like slam-dunks or very quick wins," Scott Zakrajsek, Global Web Analytics Manager for Adidas, advises. "What that does is help you understand how the platform works and how to use it. You can identify it as a win, pat yourself on the back, communicate that to the organization, thank everybody involved, and get everybody on board with a success."

When starting out, it's just as important to know what *not* to do as what to do. One thing to avoid at the outset: running a really complex test that involves deep technical integrations. If it doesn't work, the stakeholders may lose patience with the testing platform, or with testing itself.

Whereas the homepage is frequently (and naturally) the first area of the site that comes to people's minds for optimization, this thought is worth reconsidering, especially if your organization holds the homepage sacred. It's typically a highly visible (thus highly scrutinized) part of the site; what's more, the homepage is typically far from the ultimate goal for which you're optimizing. We often recommend starting with a *product page*, for two reasons: it's less visible, and it's closer to checkout. Take some time to establish a clear case study here to prove to the folks who control the homepage that it's worth investing and continuing to expand.

"There used to be some kind of 'sacred cows,' that you can't mess with this, you can't change this," Jarred Colli explains. After Rocket Lawyer saw an approximately 50 percent improvement in the conversion rate over a year's worth of tests, that attitude changed completely: "Now," says Colli, "we'll try everything."

Leading human capital solutions provider CareerBuilder decided to give A/B testing a grand entrance within the company.

"When we came onboard, we actually brought several of the product owners in and had a daylong competition," explains Senior Internal Business Systems Analyst David Harris. They paired each product with a developer and had them spend a day coming up with ideas for tests to run on their respective parts of the site. It wasn't simply an exercise: the tests each team brainstormed went live within the day, and then the group reconvened the following day to see which teams saw overnight results and what those results looked like. It was important, Harris says, to impart not only a sense of familiarity but also a sense of ownership: "This isn't just a training. We are going to have you spend the rest of the day going in and applying this to your business, to your area of the business."

Communicate Findings and Value to Your Team

Communicating A/B testing's findings and value to the team, whether it be large or small, is an important part of month one—and every month. Consider weekly, monthly, or quarterly results-sharing meetings with key stakeholders. Let them know what you've been up to. It will help the organization, as well as your career, because you've *quantified your value* in a way that may be difficult for roles that don't use testing.

"Stakeholder support and buy-in only happens if you do a good job of communicating and sharing things that you are learning," explains Nazli Yuzak, Senior Digital Optimization Consultant at Dell. "Making sure that we are communicating our wins, communicating the learning, and sharing those large-level trends with the rest of the organization actually becomes an important part of the culture, because that's where we are able to showcase the value we bring to the organization."

You want to let others in on what you've learned from your first tests. You can't always predict who within the organization will turn out to be an evangelist for testing. We've seen companies handle this communication many different ways. Having built a testing culture at three large e-commerce sites—Staples, Victoria's Secret, and Adidas—Scott Zakrajsek suggests sending straightforward emails with subject lines like "A/B Test Completion," or "A/B Test Results." Include *screenshots* of the variations and results in those emails: images are likely to be more memorable than just the results alone, as they give a clear indication of the evolution of the site over its optimization—"where we were" versus "where we are now."

Evangelize and Galvanize: Lizzie Allen at IGN

It's one thing to get people excited about A/B testing; it's another thing entirely to encourage people to make it an integral part of their daily practice. This is what it takes, though: making the testing culture at your organization contagious.

This might seem like a daunting task. But if an entry-level data analyst can single-handedly turn a 15-year-old, 300-person company into a shining example of A/B testing prowess, you can do it, too.

When Lizzie Allen joined the gaming news site IGN as a data analyst in 2010, the company had never heard of A/B testing. Allen was astounded that such a prominent content website did not use this approach to test its assumptions, especially when making editorial decisions. So she took on the challenge of introducing the company to A/B testing, and helping to establish a culture where decisions would be rooted in data. "When you tweak any sort of process in a large organization, you have to throw your weight around. When you're entry-level, you don't

have a lot of weight to throw around. I had to use some untraditional and somewhat ballsy methods in order to promote A/B testing," Allen says.

In month one, she introduced the company to testing through training sessions. She worked with folks on the editorial team to educate employees throughout IGN about the practice. These sessions specifically centered on the value of testing two different headlines to see which one garnered more clicks. When the early buzz and excitement started to dwindle, Allen perceived that people saw A/B testing as an extra step in an already established, already functioning process. "There wasn't a foundation of data-minded people to support it, and I needed to cultivate that," she says.

Her strategy, then, was to shock people—a lot of people—to prove why A/B testing was so vital to business. Allen *gamified* A/B testing by turning the site's tests into a competition. (IGN is a gaming site, after all.) The "A/B Master Cup" was born. Inspired by the website whichtestwon.com, Allen would once a week send out a test that IGN had run that week and ask people to choose which variation they thought had won. She used the company's internal chat tool (Yammer) to send out screenshots of the different variations. At the end of each month, she would crown the person who picked the most test winners correctly as the "A/B Master."

She found that, overwhelmingly, *everybody failed*. In fact, some months went without a winner at all, because people guessed wrong so often. The contest started a lot of conversations, and began to instill a sense of humility, and also of intrigue. One week at a time, Allen built a groundswell of data-driven thinkers who were curious and eager to "figure out the puzzle that is the Internet user base for a video game content publishing site."

When asked for advice for building a testing culture at a company, Allen puts it simply:

> Be obnoxious. Question assumptions. Be that jerk in the back of the meeting who raises her hand and asks, "All right, so why are we doing this?" when everybody is going, "Fine." That sometimes stops people in their tracks. You do that enough, and [people] will actually prepare. [They'll start to] think about gathering metrics and data.

"You are probably going to be a little bit annoying," Allen says. But that's okay, because even though others might not be aware of it yet, you're changing things for the better. "Now, I walk through the halls and hear 'Oh, we should test this, we should test that,' she explains. "It's almost like I need a long couch in my area so people can sit back and talk about their hypotheses. That's the beautiful place that we're in."

TL;DR

- In some workplaces, and to varying degrees, the **HiPPO Syndrome** holds sway, but often all it takes are a few humble tests and a curiosity and interest in testing begin to take root.

- Allay the wary with the reassurance that you're not proposing sudden changes: it's "**just an experiment**."

- In month one, run a test that is politically palatable and easy enough that it can show a **quick win**. Product pages can be a great place to start.

- **Share wins** not only with your immediate boss but, if possible, with the company at large. Communication is key in getting people to care about testing.

- Get creative with how you **introduce stakeholders and co-workers** to A/B testing.