



Time Pressure: Behavioural Science Considerations for Mobile Marketing

Written by
Dan Ariely

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When consumers don't have a lot of time to make a decision, they tend to focus on a few key criteria or product attributes. Behavioural economist Dan Ariely explores what this principle means for mobile marketers.

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There's a certain, and quite common, mobile on-the-go mindset that's about executing something immediately under time pressure. Because of this, some of the well-studied social science phenomena related to time pressure are particularly applicable in helping to understand mobile decision-making. This consideration is key for marketers who are trying to reach and influence us in these moments.

Let's start with the obvious: The fact that we can—and often do—use mobile devices while on-the-go is a huge differentiator between our online behaviour on a laptop versus on a mobile device.

From a social science perspective, these on-the-go mobile moments, which Google calls [Moments that Matter](#), are interesting to consider. In these situations, we're often making decisions while multitasking, while looking for something on the way, or by gathering information to shape what we're seeing in front of us in that moment (e.g., in a shop aisle).

To think about the mobile mindset in a concrete way, let's consider two scenarios of booking a hotel room. One involves Robert, who is on his mobile phone but not under any time pressure, and the other involves Tom, who is using mobile on-the-go and feeling time pressure.

Robert is sitting on his comfy couch at home. He knows he's travelling on business next week and while watching TV and playing with his dog, he reaches for his phone to decide on a hotel. He has time while browsing to toggle back-and-forth among different hotel options, considering and contrasting the benefits of different hotels to weigh the convenience of location near his meeting versus the ability to earn hotel points at his preferred chain, with a guaranteed king-size bed, nonsmoking room—and also a gym.

Tom is also on his mobile phone and needs to book a hotel room, but he's at the Luton airport. He had a late connection and just missed the last flight out for the night. He needs to book a hotel room for tonight! He's hoping to get one of the last available hotel rooms while calling his wife

to rearrange child care drop-offs for the morning, and postponing his next morning's team meeting because he won't be there in time. Tom is experiencing one of the typical impacts of time pressure—the so-called "narrowing effect"—and as a consequence he pays attention only to the hotel's proximity to the airport. He is more likely to hone in on location and choose one of the first hotels he finds that fits his criteria.

Understanding time pressure in customer experiences

Time pressure, a situation in which our need for time exceeds the amount of time currently available to us, can be seen as a type of stress. To help us manage stress, we often experience a narrowing effect, where we channel or tunnel our focus toward a main task and ignore or filter out certain cues.

Consider the following study: People were given descriptions of 30 hypothetical car models and were asked to give the likelihood that they would purchase a car.¹ They were given five different attributes for each car. Those who were put in a time-pressure condition were more likely to narrow in on the negative attributes, which they weighted far more heavily in their selection process. In essence, time pressure encourages individuals to rule out products based on the one attribute they don't like rather than optimise based on the many attributes that they do like.

Time pressure narrows the consumer's focus, giving the marketer only a brief moment to grab their attention and direct their choices.

A related study showed the same narrowing effect when people were asked to choose a flat.² Among all the different elements to consider about a flat (such as size, quality, and distance from work), people who were put under time pressure focused primarily on the distance from work and underweighted all other criteria.

In another example of attention narrowing, a study of military personnel under time pressure showed that they examined less information, which led to reduced ability to detect submarines.³

Time pressure and mobile decision-making

To continue applying these ideas to mobile in particular, let's look at another example for Robert and Tom. This time they're both in the market for a new shower head. Robert, who seems to get off easy in our examples, is back on his couch planning out the bath remodel that's three months away. He's on his smartphone, browsing shower heads with a massage spray option, in a satin nickel finish, with different wall mount options. He's able to check the reviews and availability of the models that meet his criteria. He's not yet sure if he'll buy online or go to the shops, but he's collecting nuggets of useful information to influence his ultimate decision. Given his state of mind, his decision is thoughtful and deliberate. He's looking for thorough and reliable information that will help him make the best choice.

Meanwhile Tom is standing in the shower fixtures aisle at B&Q and feeling some time pressure. His builder is plumbing his master shower this afternoon and Tom needs to finalise his fixtures selection. There are two different shower heads with a side mount in the chrome finish on the shelf in front of him. Because of the narrowing effect, it's likely that Tom would hone in on one particular functional attribute to make his decision, without considering other, more complex, criteria. In Tom's case, he cares most about water pressure and turns to his phone for reviews on which of the two products has stronger water pressure. Tom is also likely to spend less time on the shopping process and would likely enjoy it less than Robert. And once Tom starts leaning toward one of the options, it's unlikely that he will revisit his decision and change his mind. He seeks quick, decisive information to give him confidence so he can get things done and move on.

What does this mean for mobile marketers?

It's critical today that marketers think about the context of their customer on the path to purchase: where they are, what device they're on, what their likely mindset is in that given moment. Time pressure is an important factor for marketers to consider in this mix. This is particularly true when it comes to decisions made on mobile devices on-the-go since time pressure narrows the consumer's focus, giving the marketer only a brief moment to grab their attention and direct their choices.

Given that time pressure creates a narrowing of attentional focus, people are less likely to consider a larger array of options and product attributes. Marketers should take this into account and aim to help people define the choice criteria and the key factors for their decisions.

The move to mobile also means that it's becoming more and more important to be top of mind with a simple and clear offering. That's why it's critical for marketers to continue to invest in brand building and subsequently be there with their product or message when people are making decisions.

Dan is the James B. Duke Professor of Psychology and Behavioural Economics at Duke University, a founding member of the Centre for Advanced Hindsight, co-creator of the film documentary (Dis)Honesty: The Truth About Lies, and a three-time New York Times bestselling author. His books include Predictably Irrational, The Upside of Irrationality, The Honest Truth About Dishonesty, and Irrationally Yours. He can be found at www.danariely.com.

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