

Behaviour Change:

Can your strategy remain the same when so much is different?

How to refocus behaviour change strategies



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A few years ago, we did some work with a Cemetery Trust – they wanted to better understand how people think and feel when making decisions in relation to funeral arrangements for a loved one. With most of their client interactions occurring at quite a difficult and emotional time, they wanted to gain more insight into what influenced their decision making however perhaps more importantly how they could best support their clients to make decisions they didn't later regret.

We found that grief in effect exaggerates existing attitudes and beliefs. That one's values which influence their view of the world, are more deeply felt and faithfully upheld when it comes to their decisions and how they behave during times of stress and strain. This is particularly the case if it is the first time dealing with a situation that is largely unknown.

The same could be said for what is happening now – it's a "first" (dare we say unprecedented) and the level of stress and uncertainty around COVID-19 and what it means longer term creates an environment where Australians are tapping into their values to determine what's important and how to behave.

So the key question we have is, given this is a new situation and we expect that we are on the precipice of a new normal that we all need to start getting our head around, is all of our knowledge about behaviour and behaviour change now "out of date" and do we need to start again? Do we need a new benchmark of how people think and feel now? Do we need new strategies? Will our usual behaviour change models and theories work just as effectively post COVID-19?

The answer is NO.

Well, no to the first few questions and then YES to the last one! No we don't have to start from scratch and yes our models and theories are absolutely relevant. This is an opportunity to look at where we are, understand how people are thinking and feeling and apply our knowledge and experience to our strategies to move forward.

In this e-book, we'll do two things:

1. Share insights from a recent interview with Alison Earl, a Mindset Resilience Expert and regular guest lecturer in Behavioral Economics at the Harvard School of Public Health. Alison provides valuable perspective on how people manage in uncertain situations like the one we're in now. (You can hear the podcast [here](#)).
2. Give you some tips on how you can use what you know now to help refocus your behaviour change strategies given so many people are in quite a different headspace today compared with pre-Corona.

In times of uncertainty...

In her interview with us, Alison says that we have always experienced uncertainty, that things are changing all the time, however COVID-19 has definitely created a unique situation of uncertainty. She said there are three things that make people feel uncertain and these are clearly present right now:

1. It's novel – something is happening that hasn't been experienced before;
2. It feels uncontrollable – it's something we're not in charge of and feel unable to control;
3. It's unpredictable – it's something that we can't see how it is going to unfold... just yet.

So what do we do in times of uncertainty when, as Alison says, “Most people are in self-preservation mode, which isn’t good for progress.” She goes on to say, “This environment is creating an extremely strong stress response, and this stress response is there to drive behaviour. Now a stress response is not good or bad, it is the energy or fuel for driving behaviour. And sometimes that makes us behave irrationally and erratically – see the toilet paper situation. The opportunity is to minimise that sense of uncertainty, that sense of threat.”

So given there is no short term solution to COVID-19 and the expectation is that for some time, there will be a level of uncertainty and sense of threat even as social distancing and restrictions are relaxed, we asked Alison if she believed we needed to establish a new benchmark for our behaviour change programs – that if what we knew before COVID-19 about how people think and feel is no longer relevant?

“Some things never change – what motivates us and what drives our behaviour, those fundamental responses never really change but it is the way that they manifest and the way that we are being stimulated by that outside environment is the thing that changes,” she said.

Alison notes two things will be important to consider in terms of deciding how to proceed with longer term behaviour change programs:

1. **Values will become more important than ever.** Where we have uncertainty around what something will look like, values offer a level of certainty. As does a sense of purpose and why we are doing what we’re doing.

Alison refers to 5 stages of dealing with uncertainty:

1. Surviving – when you’re exhausted, feeling overwhelmed
2. Coping – when you’re just getting through
3. Managing – when you’re feeling stretched but feeling ok
4. Leveraging – when you’re starting to feel empowered
5. Thriving – when you’re starting to feel fulfilled

She notes that the opportunity for people to thrive comes from having values and a purpose so that, even if they don’t have the answer, they understand how they fit into the environment around them and they can find meaning and make decisions accordingly.

2. **It’s hard to imagine what one’s “future self” will look like.** Any behaviour change that requires someone to sacrifice a short term benefit for a long term gain, needs them to prioritise their future self. The problem is that when we are in times of stress and uncertainty, it’s hard to imagine what their future self will look like so they are much more likely to prioritise their current self. And this is relevant when we think about scarcity – most people are going to be financially impacted and so with less, we’re more likely to see a triggering of the current bias. They’re worried about what they have and may think that they may have even less tomorrow so “I may as well have what I want today”. In times of uncertainty, people are much more likely to choose the short term benefit and just enjoy right now.

Alison agrees it is a time when we need to reconsider how our product, service or behaviour change program might work in this new world of post COVID-19. “I think this is a massive opportunity to rethink our underlying assumptions about the way things work, the way we engage with our consumers, our employees and ask why are we doing these things in this way? To ask how are we going to show up in this world?”

Alison was great to talk to – she’s in her prime at the moment, working with a range of organisations to help them thrive from a business perspective but more importantly as a group of individuals all going through the same tough times.

Refocus your behaviour change strategies

So while funding for behaviour change strategies may be on hold or redirected, clients are still asking “What do we do now?” We offer the following 5 tips:

1. **Review your research.** Look for ways in which you can link attitudes and behaviours identified in previous research to how people might be thinking and feeling now. If we know that values and beliefs remain the same and characteristics and attributes are exaggerated during times of uncertainty, interrogate your research findings and data with this in mind to identify what might be happening now. There may be a need to undertake further primary research to confirm your thinking however we expect that most questions can be answered if you’ve done good relevant research in recent times.
2. **Investigate a potential new journey map or decision making tree.** With social distancing expected to continue in some way until 2022, people are adjusting their behaviours accordingly. The behaviour you are seeking to change may be affected or the journey and decision making relevant to your behaviour may be different. A map comparing the previous pathway to the potential new pathway could identify the ideal point of intervention towards the desired behaviour – a point not previously accessible.
3. **Consider the opportunity for behaviour change within the context of the current situation.** As Alison says, in times of uncertainty people are prioritising differently. The concepts of “future self”, short term sacrifice and current bias are all relevant when deciding whether the behaviour we are seeking to change is important now. It may well be that it is more important now than ever to influence the desired attitudes and behaviours or you may be working on a social issue where efforts to persuade based on the current strategy are likely to prove ineffective.
4. **Identify what you need to be doing differently.** Now is not the time to “wait to see what happens”. Those who spend time reviewing their strategy now to identify what they can do next within the context of this new normal will yield results. There is a degree of certainty now – we know that some form of social distancing will be in place for up to 18 months – and while we won’t know the specifics of the restrictions, we’re pretty confident most of our clients won’t be able to wait to implement strategies. There is a need to do things differently however there is incredible opportunity in that.

But we also know that this is easier said than done. Thinking outside of the box is hard and it’s often harder when you’re feeling the pressure. We have a process called What If Scenario Planning which uses critical lines of inquiry that force the consideration of alternative scenarios. A What If framework enables clients to think about a range of future contexts and how they would respond – no matter how crazy or seemingly unlikely (wonder how many disaster recovery professionals brainstormed a potential response to a virus that takes over the world???!).

5. **Be careful about the “usual response”.** Many campaigns have taken to the airways seeking to respond to the globally acknowledged sense of uncertainty and offering empathy, understanding and reassurance. In fact there is a formula that has evolved – see [here](#) for a collation of current television ads which appear eerily the same. There is an opportunity to stand out and do something different to address social issues and behaviour change.

So they’re our 5 tips for how you can refocus your behaviour change strategy in this new world in which we’re all working. We know that we can’t go back to what we’ve always done yet at the same time, no-one should be starting from scratch.