

**INCREASING RESULTS ONLINE:  
THE FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE USER BEHAVIOR**



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## Executive Summary

### Introduction

Online results are driven by user behavior. Simply put, the more you understand a user's thoughts and how they will behave online, the more effectively you can influence them to take action.

While it is unrealistic to know what each individual is thinking, a thorough User Analysis can uncover trends and characteristics of the audience as a whole. That audience can then be segmented into target groups that share similar characteristics.

When analyzing a user group, there are certain factors that will have a more significant impact on strategic decisions than others. These factors, which are psychological in nature, influence the behavior people will exhibit and the actions they will take online.

This white paper provides an overview of these psychological factors and how, by discovering them for a specific audience, you can dramatically impact your bottom line results.

### Definitions

For simplicity, the following terms are used in this document to describe topics that are similar in nature.

- **Website or Site** - Because any interactive medium is affected by user behavior, "website" or "site" is used to describe any online initiative used to attract, convert or retain customers. This could be anything from a website, email, banner advertisement or a search engine marketing campaign. The concepts in this white paper can also be applied to intranet or extranet applications where there are specific actions you wish users to accomplish.
- **Customer or User** - Used to describe anyone whom you are trying to get to take action. This can apply to consumers of products in B2C industries as well as B2B clients. These terms can also refer to the user of an intranet or application, when there are specific actions you wish them to accomplish.
- **Action** - "Taking action" primarily refers to the business objective(s) you are trying to get users to commit to. This could be purchasing a product, submitting a quote request or opting into an email list.

## What is "Online Behavior"?

"Online Behavior" describes the actions and tendencies that users demonstrate while using the web. This includes general behavior (i.e. the types of websites a user visits), as well as very specific behavior (i.e. filling out a form or clicking a link).

Whether the actions users take online are made consciously or sub-consciously, they are triggered by several factors. While there are other factors that influence the decisions people make online, the following is a list of the most influential in terms of the causing users to take action.

- **Intent** – What the user is planning to accomplish during the current visit. More specifically, their intent to take the action(s) you are hoping they will take.
- **Information Sought** – The information a person is seeking and questions they will have while using your site.
- **Motivations** – Hot buttons or reasons why someone would justify taking action.
- **Obstacles** – Reasons preventing someone from taking action or making a commitment.

By discovering these factors as they relate to a specific set of users, you can design tactics that directly address them and influence the actions that you want the users to take.

## Is this Usability?

Not necessarily. Usability is an important component in designing a website focused on online behavior, but it is only one piece of the puzzle. Usability refers to the layout and flow of the interface itself and designing elements to help the user accomplish their goals. A strategy rooted in online user behavior, however, is an all encompassing approach that incorporates tactics designed to influence the decisions and actions made by a user. It is more about guiding a user to take action versus merely creating a positive experience.

## Laying a Foundation

So you want to start discovering the factors that will influence your audience? Before diving right into a strategic plan and brainstorming sessions, it is important to set some goals and do some homework first. **Why is this important to understanding online behavior?** The goals you have and the information you collect will determine how you prioritize the factors and behaviors that will ultimately produce the greatest impact.

## Setting Goals

Determining measurable goals at the outset is critical to the success of any interactive project. Not only are these goals important from an overall business perspective, but they will help determine the areas of user behavior you need to focus on the most.

For example, if your primary goal is to increase conversion rates from 3% to 5%, then you will focus on the behaviors that most relate to conversion, such as preventing the obstacle of procrastination. If your goal is to drive 20% more traffic to your site, then you would focus more on the users' motivations, such as the problem they are trying to solve.

Goals should be established at the start of the project, prior to performing any research or brainstorming. Whenever possible, these goals should be in the form of **KPIs (Key Performance Indicators)**, which are quantifiable measurements that reflect the critical success factors of the website. Every organization is going to have their own definition of what will make the campaign successful. Examples of KPIs include:

- Increase in the number of registered users
- Increase conversion rate by X%
- X% or X\$ increase in sales
- X% increase in leads

All KPIs should be benchmarked, documenting the current state of each metric. This will help to determine a realistic goal for the project and a reasonable timeframe in which to achieve it.

## User Research

Research is a significant component of understanding online behavior. Too often speculations are made by project stakeholders about "who" the users are and what their needs are. While some of these opinions are based on actual customer feedback, many rely on assumptions that are slanted by a person's personal stake in the success of the project (i.e. IT may want a certain technology so they are willing to sacrifice elements that are important to the user). Unfortunately, these are not always correct and can negatively impact the success of the project.

In order to understand which factors will make an impact on your specific audience's user behavior, it is important to develop a strategic plan that has a strong foundation of facts to support your ideas. Even if you don't have the resources for extensive research, there are some very quick and inexpensive methods that you can use. In fact, you may already have the information you need at your disposal.

So before diving into research, perform a quick audit of the information you already have. Your organization may already have access to primary research or you may simply have emails from customers. You may also want to have a meeting with the project team to discuss what you already know about the user. You are looking for gaps in the information you have and trying to identify any assumptions being made that may need clarification. This will help determine the amount of information you need, or if research is even required before proceeding.

The extent and type of information you require will dictate the type of research method you use. The following are some basic types of research methods that can be employed:

- Primary Research
  - o Online Surveys
  - o Stakeholder Interviews
  - o Customer Interviews
- Secondary Research
  - o Review of prior primary research
  - o Review of subscription based research sources (i.e. Jupiter Research or industry sources)
  - o Review of applicable online articles, white papers, etc.
  - o Data from an existing CRM system
  - o Web analytics review of the current website

Unless you are positive that you need primary research, you can save time by performing secondary research first and then identifying where you may still need information. Is there critical information still missing that will have an impact on decision making? If so, then some primary research may need to be performed to fill in the gaps and clarify assumptions.

## Factors that Influence Online Behavior

Once you've established a clear direction and have collected enough information about your users, the next step in developing a user-focused strategy is to create a User Analysis. This document is a compilation of the data you've gathered and provides insight into how the users' needs and behaviors will drive the user-experience.

To create this document, you should meet with the project team to discuss the facts you have gathered and brainstorm on additional user characteristics. The purpose of this brainstorming is to identify all of the possible factors that will influence your particular users' behaviors.

As mentioned previously, there are other factors that can be considered when developing a user-focused strategy; however, the following factors will have the biggest impact and influence on the actions someone will take online.

### Intent

Intent is probably one of the most overlooked, but most powerful psychological factors that influence behavior. The definition of intention is "something that somebody plans to do or achieve". Simply put, "intent" is the reason they are visiting your website; their purpose for being there.

More specifically, intent can be looked at as the intention of making a commitment. The "commitment" is dictated by the business objective(s) of the website. For example, does a user visiting your site intend on buying a product during their visit or are they simply browsing? If they are planning on making a purchase, great! That just means you have to make your site easy enough to use in order to facilitate the purchase. But what about those who are interested, but didn't intend to make a purchase during this particular visit? They must be treated according to their level of intention.

Understanding the stage each visitor is in with regard to their intent will dictate which tactics are used to convert them and where on the site these tactics are most applicable. Intent can be broken down into three stages:

1. Not ready to commit
2. Almost ready to commit
3. Ready to commit

## Information Sought

One of the most simple and direct ways to provide a user-focused experience is to take the time to research and formally document the information that users are seeking and the questions that you anticipate them having when they are using the website. By listing these out ahead of time, you can ensure that their questions are addressed at strategic locations throughout the website. By providing answers to questions without the user having to search for them, you will be communicating to the user that you understand their needs and are focused on their best interests. At the simplest level, you can put yourself in the shoes of your audience and list out the possible types of information that they might be looking for. However, this information should ideally be validated by performing primary and/or secondary research.

If you are unable to find secondary research that provides this information, a great way to find out what people are looking for is through an online survey. An example of this is a survey Spunlogic implemented for one of Atlanta's top automobile dealerships. The secondary research that was compiled indicated the type of information car buyers were looking for online, but it did not relate that specifically to dealership websites. We felt that it was important to ensure we had an accurate picture of the information users were looking for, so we placed a link to a brief survey on the homepage of dealer's website. One of the questions in this survey was:

What type of activities did you intend to conduct **during this visit** to our site? (check all that apply)

- Compare vehicles
- General information about different makes & models
- Read vehicle reviews
- Configure a vehicle
- Searching for pricing information
- Submit a quote request
- Find dealership location information
- Search available inventory
- Research financing options
- Research insurance options
- Schedule a service appointment

Based on the number of times each choice was selected, we were able to prioritize the impact that each piece of information would have on generating sales leads. This type of prioritization affects decisions regarding the location of content throughout the website. For instance, information that was reported to be sought by 65% of all users is a good candidate for premium real estate on the homepage. It is important to note that providing the information itself (whether it is in the form of text or an interactive presentation) may not always directly cause a visitor to take action. However, providing this information adds to an overall positive user experience and will move a user closer to commitment (possibly even shifting their initial intent).

## Motivations

As mentioned previously, there are three basic stages of intent that a user will go through mentally before finally committing to an action. They are: 1) not ready to commit, 2) almost ready to commit, and 3) ready to commit. In order to move from one stage to the next, the user will have a reason or reasons they moved closer to commitment. This could be because they were provided the information they were looking for, the product they wanted was at a great price or they were pleased with the design of the website. Whatever the reason, there are going to be motivations that are unique to your customers and your industry.

By understanding what motivates your particular set of users, you can strategically place calls-to-action throughout the site that capitalize on these motivations and aid in moving the user toward a commitment.

## Obstacles

Just as motivations are the reasons why a user would move from one stage of commitment to the next, obstacles are just the opposite. These are the reasons preventing a user from moving through each stage. Overcoming obstacles is one of the strongest ways to increase conversion rates. A good e-commerce site might have a 4% conversion of visitors to buyers. That means that 96% of the visitors found some reason NOT to purchase during that visit. 96% represents a large opportunity for improvement. By understanding some of the reasons why that group of users did not commit to action, you can design tactics that directly address those obstacles and get people moving toward a path of commitment.

## Additional Factors

### Personality Type

While some of the other factors mentioned primarily influence *what* tactics should be included on the website, understanding the personality type and other psychographic or attitudinal characteristics the audience has will primarily dictate *how* those tactics are implemented.

For example, if you know your audience is primarily made up of technology executives, there is a good chance they are more analytical than an audience of creative designers. You would communicate to the technology executive with statistics and facts, as opposed to images and creative headlines.

There are four personality types to consider as they relate to all people, based on the Social Styles model of personality categorization:

- **Analytical** - Logical, fact and task-oriented
- **Expressive** - Verbally adept personality, engaging, accommodating, supportive of others, persuasive, socially adept, and relationship oriented
- **Amiable** - Devoted, consistent, dependable, and loyal. Amiables are hard workers and will persevere long after others have given up
- **Driver** – High achiever, extroverted, strong-willed, direct, practical, organized, forceful, and decisive

For most websites, it is important to communicate to all types of personalities. However, when drilling down to the different levels of detail within a website, certain personality types may gravitate to different types of information.

### The Role of Demographics

While demographics play an important role in how a website is developed, they are not the focus of this white paper. It is important to mention, however, that demographics have a direct influence in determining the psychological factors that are addressed above. For example, women are typically more concerned than men with internet security & privacy. The concern about security is an Obstacle that can prevent them from taking action. If you know that a large portion of your users will be women and you are collecting information from them (i.e. personal information, credit card number, etc.), you should implement tactics that will address their concerns and put them at ease.

## Creating Tactics that Align with Behaviors

At this point, you will have completed the User Analysis and identified several characteristics about your users. The next step is to develop the tactics that will influence users to take action. Tactics can be in the form of content, an offer, a flash presentation, an email or anything used to move users closer to a commitment.

Since this white paper is focused on the factors that influence online behavior, there are many details about developing tactics that are not included. However, to help get you started, tactics can be thought of in three categories based on what actions you are trying to influence:

- **Attraction** - Attraction focuses on the act of gaining site visitors. This is the beginning of the life cycle for site users. Without initial site visits, a website will never succeed to meet its objectives. Depending on the organization's goals, a focus can be placed on gaining a high quantity of visitors or on optimizing the quality of the visitors. A higher quality visitor will ultimately produce a higher conversion of users.

Attraction tactics can be implemented with the following types of projects:

- Search Engine Marketing (optimization and pay per click)
- Online Advertising
- Affiliate Marketing

- **Conversion** - Conversion is the act of getting site visitors to commit to some form of action. This represents the second stage of the site customer lifecycle. This action will depend on your ultimate objective, but is usually in the form of purchasing, requesting a contact/quote or registering for a program. Once visitors have taken this action you can label them into a new category such as “customer” or “registrant”.

Conversion tactics can be implemented with the following types of projects:

- Web design and development
- Microsites
- Landing pages

- **Retention** - As the name implies, retention tactics are used to keep loyal customers and ensure that they become repeat customers.

Retention tactics can be implemented with the following types of projects:

- Email campaigns
- Email newsletters
- Online loyalty programs

## About Spunlogic

Spunlogic, formed in 1998, is an award-winning interactive marketing and technology company that uses an in-depth understanding of online behavior to help companies attract, convert and retain customers. The company, which provides a full range of solutions including online behavior strategy, interactive design, web development, email marketing, online advertising and e-commerce applications, boasts a roster of both local and national clients including the Atlanta Convention & Visitors' Bureau, Dirt Devil, Georgia Pacific, The Honey Baked Ham Company, Penske Truck Rental, Simmons Bedding Company and The Weather Channel. To learn more about Spunlogic's capabilities, contact Spunlogic at [sales@spunlogic.com](mailto:sales@spunlogic.com) or call 404.806.6970.

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With 8 years of marketing experience and 6 years in the interactive industry, Donovan heads up online strategy initiatives for Spunlogic and its clients. His core role is to understand how people behave online and to develop strategies and tactics that capitalize on those behaviors. Donovan created Spunlogic's proprietary methodology for understanding the factors that influence online behavior and crafting a user experience that gets users to take action.

He has successfully consulted on a wide range of interactive marketing & technology initiatives including e-commerce websites, creative and marketing focused websites, email & search engine marketing, intranets and other database driven applications. His experience ranges from Fortune 500 clients to small and medium sized businesses, both B2C and B2B. Experience of note includes the HoneyBaked Ham Company, Penske Truck Rental, Mazda, Porsche Cars, Georgia Tech, Rhodes Furniture and Simmons Bedding Company. Donovan graduated with a BBA in Marketing from Georgia State University.