**The application of behavioral insights to B2B market research**

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**Abstract**

Behavioral sciences have made significant contributions to informing us about human decision-making. In this study, we recount our experience from incorporating these insights into B2B market research. We share the insights gained from this endeavor, particularly how we deal with the obstacles encountered. The most significant obstacles are the overwhelming quantity of behavioral insights in the literature, the lack of practical guidelines for their use, and the problem of communicating their added value to clients. Our solution is to simplify the overall process. First, we merge individual insights into broader behavioral mechanisms. Second, instead of testing for the existence of these mechanisms, we focus on identifying conditions that enable them to influence decision-making. This approach allows us to provide actionable recommendations for clients while avoiding great expense and excessive complexity. We believe that our experience will be helpful to others who aim to translate behavioral insights into practice.

**The text**

At our B2B market research agency, we frequently encounter unexpected and counterintuitive findings. When researchers at the agency came across several nonfiction behavioral economics books (specifically, Ariely, 2010; Kahneman, 2011; Thaler, 2016), what caught their attention were the explanations of the frequently irrational decisions that people make. Could behavioral sciences explain the counterintuitive findings in our market research studies? To explore this promising area, we teamed up with behavioral scientists from academia and began to work on a methodology for applying behavioral insights to B2B market research.

We soon encountered several problems. First, in describing human decisions, the literature identifies hundreds of heuristics and biases. However, there is no systematization of these concepts. They work on different levels (individual, team, etc.) and overlap with each other. This lack of systematization is even more pronounced given the absence of guidelines for applying behavioral concepts to B2B market research practice. While behavioral sciences offer many guidelines, they have almost exclusively been applied in laboratory conditions with large samples of respondents answering lengthy questionnaires or undergoing in‑depth interviews. None of these approaches are feasible under normal budget constraints in the B2B context, where decisions are made by a small number of busy managers. We also lacked guidelines on how to apply behaviorally informed findings to marketing in general. Although certain guidelines exist (e.g., the EAST model, Behavioural Insights Teams, 2014; and the BASIC Toolkit, OECD, 2019), they are arguably intended for people with a background in behavioral sciences. Their design thus makes them too abstract for people without such a background, such as our clients.

Second, it proved problematic to communicate the added value and increased costs associated with using behavioral sciences to our clients (usually marketing or sales directors). Clients usually have one of two extreme attitudes toward behavioral sciences. Some clients are skeptical about the benefits of behavioral sciences, as marketing (implicitly) works with many similar concepts. The lack of a “wow factor” combined with hindsight bias prevents clients from perceiving the added value. Other clients expect behavioral sciences to provide solutions to all their problems. However, the ambiguity in human decision-making and the complexity of the B2B context make it impossible to satisfy these expectations.

To overcome the abovementioned problems, we initially selected individual biases and heuristics. This approach was not very fruitful. Although it was simple, it created a constant pull to add yet another bias or heuristic. In addition, it led to a fragmented set of recommendations, as the concepts were not systematized. Later, we radically changed direction in attempting to systematize the behavioral concepts by creating a classification that also provided rules for the practical use of behavioral insights. However, this proved to be too complex for both us and our clients. It became clear that the path forward lay between these two approaches.

A crucial element in our final approach was the realization that our clients were ultimately interested in using behavioral sciences to understand the factors underlying changes in the behavior of their customers. We distilled 12 behavioral mechanisms, i.e., general behavioral factors in decision-making, that lead to changes in behavior: anchoring, change aversion, complexity aversion, framing, loss aversion, personalization preference, preference for the present, reliance on context, selective perception, self‑confidence, social influence, and story‑checking. As is evident from the list, these mechanisms are not new to behavioral sciences. They are only scattered among other heuristics and biases that, in fact, stem from these mechanisms.

For each behavioral mechanism, we prepared our own case study to show its applicability in the B2B context, accompanied by other relevant applications that we found. We then wrote a short theoretical introduction to each case study that included selected biases and heuristics related to the behavioral mechanism (e.g., hindsight bias for story-checking). Finally, we curated a set of specific recommendations on how to use each mechanism in B2B marketing.

Another important aspect of our final approach was the decision not to focus on testing for the presence of the 12 behavioral mechanisms in market research. Such testing is time-consuming and thus costly. Instead, we analyzed the decision-making environment to determine whether the context promotes or inhibits individual mechanisms. The context can usually be derived from desk research, workshops with clients, or “classical” research with respondents – sometimes including one or two extra questions to cover uncertainties. Our analysis indicated the probable role of behavioral mechanisms in certain situations. Importantly, it directed attention to the most prominent mechanisms and related recommendations for B2B marketing practice. For example, when market research focuses on decision-makers who lack the experience to decide (e.g., non-specialists buying complex equipment), story‑checking is important. A related recommendation is to repeatedly reassure the decision-maker that (s)he has made the right decision.

For those interested in applying behavioral insights in practice, one major finding stands out: “Simplify, but in a knowledgeable way”. To do so, one needs to avoid information bias and understand what is truly needed. In our B2B case, it is behavioral mechanisms influencing change and recommendations that are actionable but do not require expensive in‑depth research. Our experience thus far indicates that this approach brings sufficient added value. However, the trade-off might differ in other cases. Applying behavioral sciences is like cooking: there are an enormous variety of ingredients (individual concepts) to choose from, but before you can do so, you need to know what you want to cook. There are also recipes that you can use (tools and guidelines), but they may not correspond to your tastes (needs). If this is the case, you have to come up with your own recipe.

**References**

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