

How 'nudge theory' can help shops avoid a backlash over plastic bag bans

July 21 2017, by Daniela Spanjaard And Francine Garlin



Undoing shoppers' engrained behaviours is a tricky job. Credit: AAP Image/Julian Smith

On your way home tonight, you might stop at the supermarket to grab some ingredients for the evening meal. If you're like many shoppers, you'll pass through the self-service checkout, scan your items, and hurriedly place them in the conveniently waiting thin, grey plastic bag before finalising the purchase.

At home, the purchases are packed away or lined up for immediate preparation. The plastic bag is scrunched into a little ball and stuffed away with others in your collection, to be used as bin liners or otherwise thrown away. All of these behaviours are, by and large, done without a great deal of thought.

One of the most challenging tasks for marketers is to bring about changes in consumer behaviours that have become habitual, routine and "low involvement" – why spend time stopping and considering various brands of laundry detergent, for instance, when you can just quickly grab the one you've always used?

The very nature of habitual behaviour means that responses to the same situational cues happen automatically and with little conscious thought. Habits are powerfully ingrained. One [study](#) estimates that around 45% of our daily actions are habitual, and most of our purchases and consumption is of the low-involvement variety.

Repetitive consumer behaviour is a tough cycle to disrupt. And it is the very nature of these habitual responses that make many standard interventions relatively ineffective.

But this is the task facing supermarkets in taking away customers' access to free plastic bags.

Banning the bags

The recently announced plans by supermarket giants Coles and Woolworths to ban single-use plastic bags seem admirable enough, but the environmental benefits will only be fully realised if the ban drives a permanent change in shoppers' behaviour.

Many countries have tried a variety of strategies to get rid of single-use

plastic bags, including bans, educational campaigns, and levies. Most have had mixed results. There is no overwhelming evidence to suggest that any of these approaches has fully broken shoppers' disposable bag habit.

Even where use has been dramatically reduced, the environmental impact has been mitigated by [unintended consequences](#) such as a 65% increase in the purchase of bin liners, and the disposal of re-usable bags. And despite a general shift in attitude towards environmentally sustainable consumption, this "intention-behaviour gap" still prevails.

Breaking the habit

Here is where some behavioural psychology can be brought to bear on the problem. We know that habitual behaviours are learned and reinforced through repeated responses to particular situations. Theoretically, if these behaviours are learned, they can be unlearned by providing different situations.

One potentially useful technique is called "nudging". A nudge gives people a gentle prod to change their behaviour, through encouragement rather than coercion. This sometimes controversial subject is most familiar in terms of behavioural economics – a classic example being the small refunds offered by drink bottle recycling schemes – but nudges can be [purely behavioural as well as economic](#).

Behavioural nudges aim to make people stop and think about what would otherwise be an unconscious behaviour. Often this takes the form of a short, simple message. Electricity providers have been known to use this method of nudging. Power usage by their customers will drop when they are shown that the usage rate of a similar-sized household is more efficient than their own.

But it can also involve a minor adjustment to the environment in which the [behaviour](#) occurs. Such a strategy could be applied in supermarkets where "footprints" could lead to reusable bags that are available for purchase. Repeating this over time could result in consumers associating the footprints with a reminder to bring their own bags. Varying the location of the footprints, or even their colour or shape, might encourage shoppers' curiosity and thus increase the likelihood of consciousness about the plastic bag ban.

Economic nudges can also be used to help shoppers quit plastic bags – as in the case of Toronto, which introduced a [5-cent levy on plastic bags](#). There are many ways to gently encourage shoppers to make better decisions.

Australia's big shopping brands

Given that much of the problem involves challenging current behaviours, it stands to reason that the big brands' responses to this question will hinge on what their customers are already used to.

Retailers such as Bunnings and Aldi have never provided their customers with free, disposable plastic bags. Their customers learned quickly from the outset to use alternatives, such as the stash of old cardboard boxes typically found behind the checkouts at Bunnings.

Woolworths and Coles, on the other hand, face a tougher challenge. They are taking something away from shoppers, and some customers may be resentful and resistant to change as a result.

To avoid a repeat of Target's aborted effort to remove free bags in 2013, Coles and Woolworths might find that the best way to avoid a similar customer revolt is to use in-store cues as behavioural nudges, alongside the economic incentive of offering durable [plastic](#) bags for a price.

Many consumers will be willing to pay for [plastic bag](#) alternatives during the transition phase. Combining this with gentle reminders such as in-store "footprints" will aim to gradually change those low-involvement, highly habitual shopping patterns.

Whether economic or non-economic, messages to [shoppers](#) need to be as pervasive and repetitive as the ingrained behaviours they are trying to change.

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