

MAIL IN THE MIDDLE

How Mail Influences
the Messy Middle
of Decision Making





OVERVIEW

In today's noisy and competitive marketing environment, it's time to look beyond first and last touch marketing and focus on the middle.

The middle is where brands drive emotional connections and compete for relevance and consideration. It's the place where **16x more sales** can be attributed by marketers, as discovered by Google.

As behavioural science shows, 90% of our decisions are emotionally led, it's the tricky middle part of decision making that is influencing purchase, conversion, and consumer behaviour.

Many of the customer journeys that marketers are charged with are now bigger, more complicated, 'messy' and as difficult for the consumer as they are for us.

We know that mail is a powerful response channel, but our evidence shows that mail is often influencing behaviour earlier in the

journey (brand perception, consideration, discussion, validation). This paper demonstrates the unique abilities of mail to help guide the consumer through the tricky middle ground of decision making – the critical sweet spot between 'Hello' and 'Thank You'.

As the answers are deep-rooted in the world of behavioural science, Marketreach has partnered with human behaviour expert and pioneer of the application of behavioural economics to marketing Mark Earls, AKA the HERDmeister, to bring a perspective on shaping decisions overall and mail's role as a physical and tactile influencer.



Mark Earls



BACKGROUND

Being a marketer today is harder than ever.

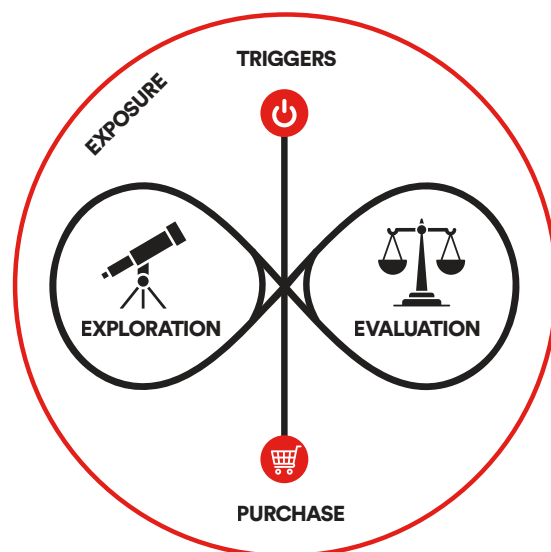
Outside, the competitive pressure gets notched up every quarter; the channels are more and more fragmented, and customers are more and more demanding. Inside, the consumer data hosepipe continues to deliver more and more data that's supposed to turn into actionable insights faster and the financial pressure from shareholders to deliver growth never lessens. In addition, there's no shortage of helpful opinions and advice about what to do and what not to do, on conference platforms, trade magazines, social media, and websites of the great and the good – everyone seems to be an expert now. As playwright Tom Stoppard put it:

“...It's all very noisy out there. Very hard to spot the tune.”

While it remains critical to perform well at the top and bottom of the marketing funnel, it's now clear that the middle of the funnel, the 'Messy Middle' – as Google and The Behavioural Architects call it in their landmark research in 2020¹ – is where the next opportunity lies for marketing to drive longer-

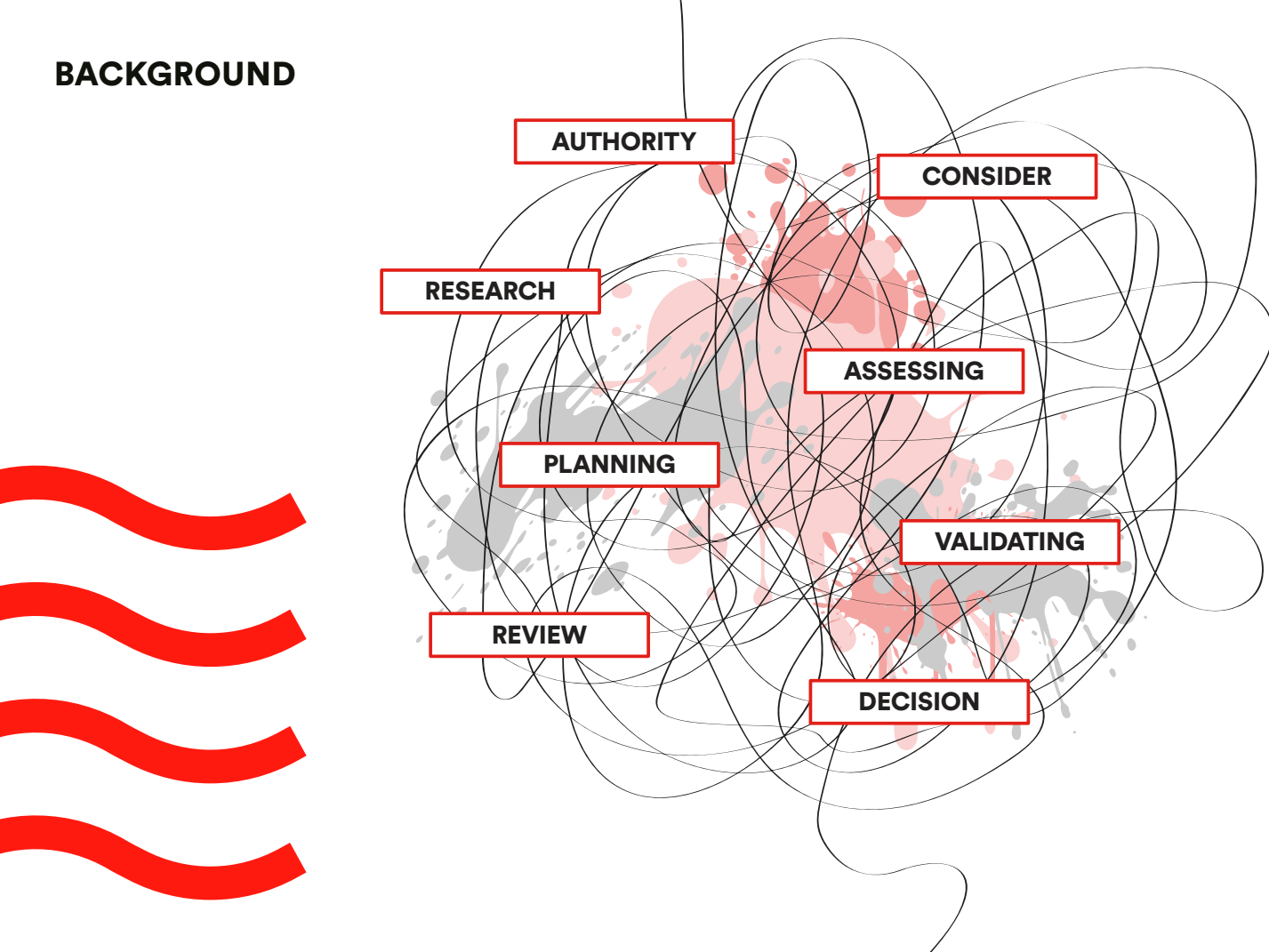
term business growth and significant business performance, and build competitive advantage.

Consumer decision making was historically viewed in simple, even perhaps simplistic terms – as a rational and linear choice: see an ad, go to the store, and buy something for example – but many decisions today are bigger, demanding more thought, more choice, complexity, and risk for an already time-poor consumer. The quick-quick-slow towards a final decision can be a confusing whirl, rather than a stately procession.



Google's Messy Middle

BACKGROUND



The journeys so often described as straightforward paths to purchase can often more closely resemble the game of Snakes and Ladders.

Just as there are now many ways to buy, there are also just as many ways not to – to procrastinate or go back to the beginning of the decision making process.

This paper collects what we know about these kinds of decisions, empowering marketers to make it easier for consumers by reducing their friction points to achieve the right behavioural and commercial outcomes.

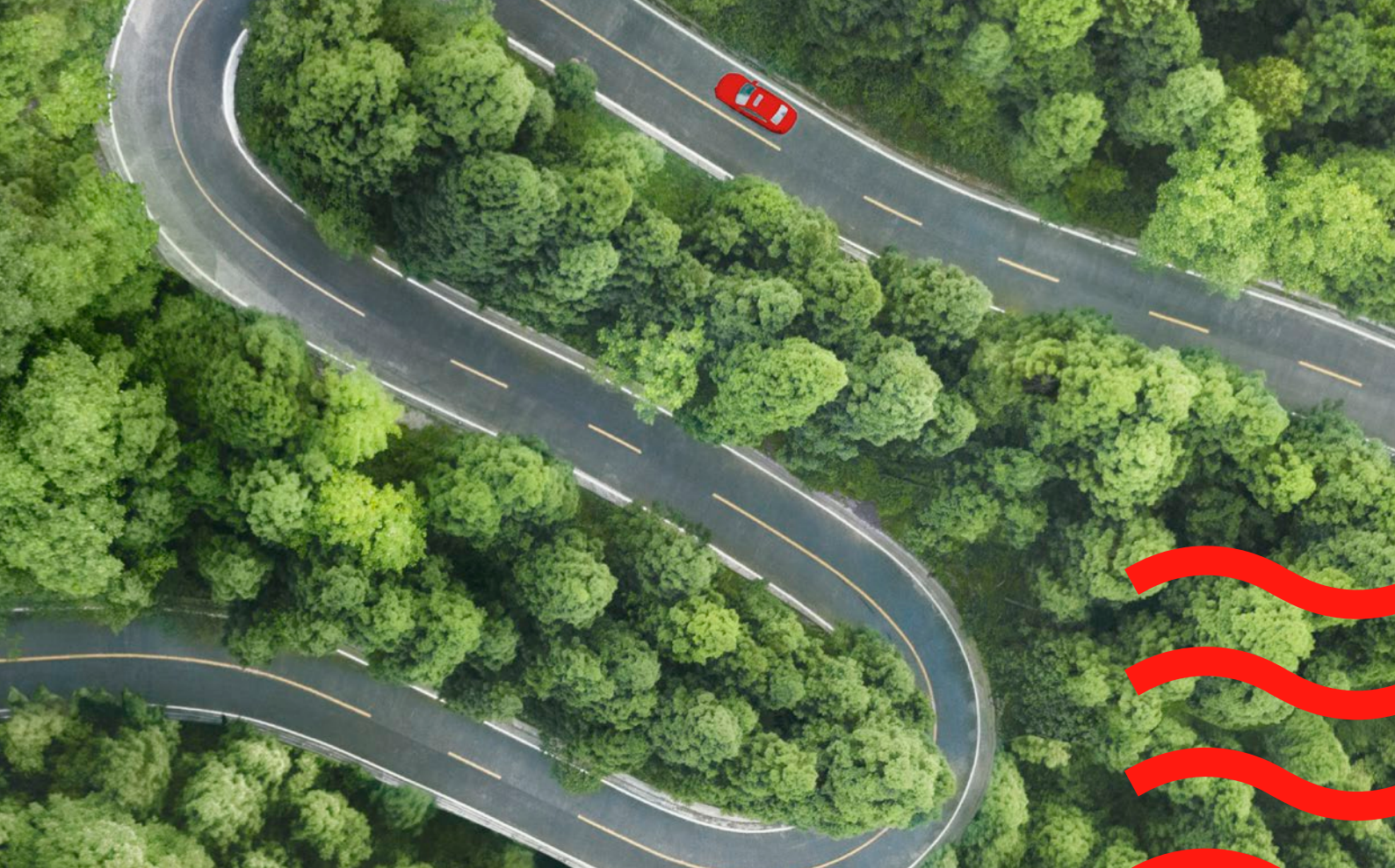
It then looks deeper into the evidence for mail as a unique, paper-based physical media channel, an essential channel for marketers tasked with managing complicated customer journeys. As we become more immersed in a digital world, there's a breadth of research which proves that paper has an unmatched power for engaging consumers and doing something special.

In the words of behavioural scientist Richard Shotton “if you want your message to be remembered, put it in print”.

We wanted to explore how mail's physical qualities help consumers navigate the challenging middle.

To do this we've drawn on:

1. A broader understanding of decision making science and how it relates to these types of bigger decisions
2. The published evidence for paper and specifically mail as a tool to shape bigger decisions
3. Illustrative case studies that give tangible examples
4. A recent comparative impact test which shows how mail impacts these crucial middle phases of bigger, more complex decisions.



01 THE FUNNEL IS DEAD: LONG LIVE THE MIDDLE

We marketers can be a fickle bunch: we like declaring sweeping changes – things over or dead – and we herald new ages and strikingly different paradigms.

The truth is, things shift more slowly than we imagine – emphasis changes, priorities evolve and our practice follows. So when someone declares that the marketing funnel ‘is dead’ we should perhaps pause before jumping on the bandwagon. In fact the ‘funnel’ is widely regarded as the first proper bit of theory in marketing (actually it dates to the late 19th century). And as Professor Mark Ritson observes, it remains an essential tool to help us distinguish between “strategy, ...working out what the stages are that a customer goes through and which ones to focus on in order to increase sales, and tactics, the various actions I will invest in to execute the strategy”. It’s a conceptual discipline that helps us make better

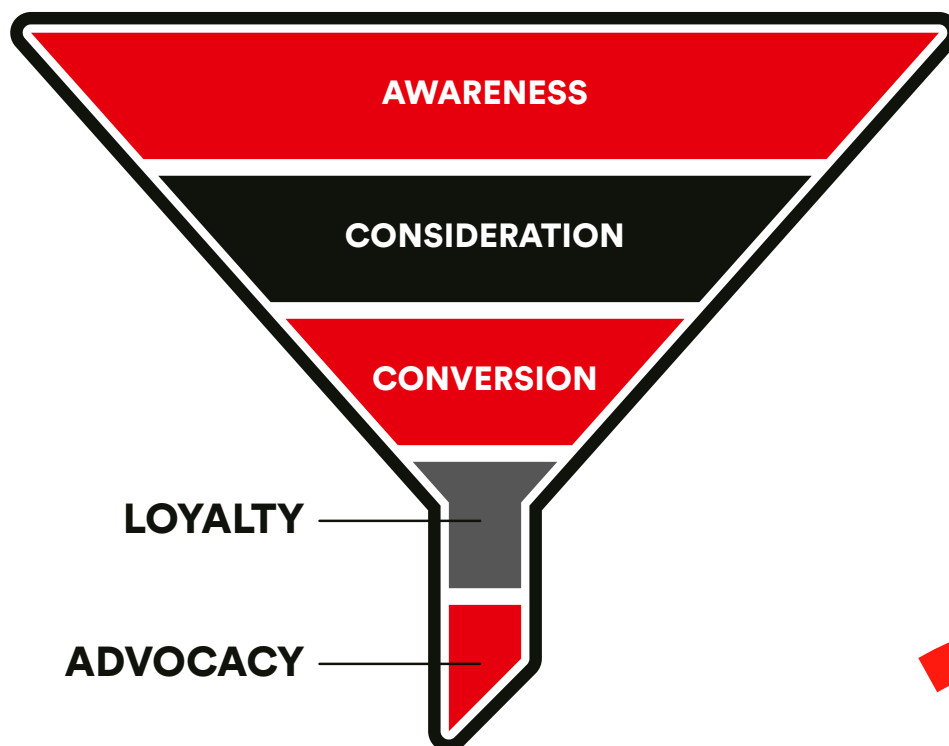
decisions about when and how to intervene best to influence customer decisions to our benefit.

That said, whether you call it a funnel, a path to purchase or a journey, most customer purchase histories will always have a beginning and an end. But there is also almost always a middle of some sort. Or, as English author and poet Philip Larkin said of the modern English novel, “there is likely to be a beginning, a muddle and an end”. And the larger and more complex a decision, the more likely the importance and complexity of the middle is likely to prove. While buying a bar of chocolate is a relatively simple decision (notwithstanding the often deep psychological effort that marketers make to understand how to influence it), choosing a holiday or a new mobile phone contract are both inherently more complicated and harder to shape.

01 THE FUNNEL IS DEAD: LONG LIVE THE MIDDLE

Marketers have long polished their abilities at the beginning and the end of their engagement with customers and consumers; for example, the distinction that Les Binet and Peter Field make between 'brand' and 'activation' is widely accepted. Organisations are constantly sharpening their marketing toolkits to get attention and cut-through on the one hand and measure response and the moment of closing the sale on the other.

The digital world has helped us see more and more of the kind of repeated challenges consumers face in the distance between these two points, particularly for bigger, more significant purchase decisions, such as automotive, energy, and healthcare, where a lot is at stake. Equally, in markets where well-worn habits need to be disrupted and new behaviours established, such as creating savings habits in financial services, it's become clearer that the middle is rarely a simple progression as the old funnel model suggests.

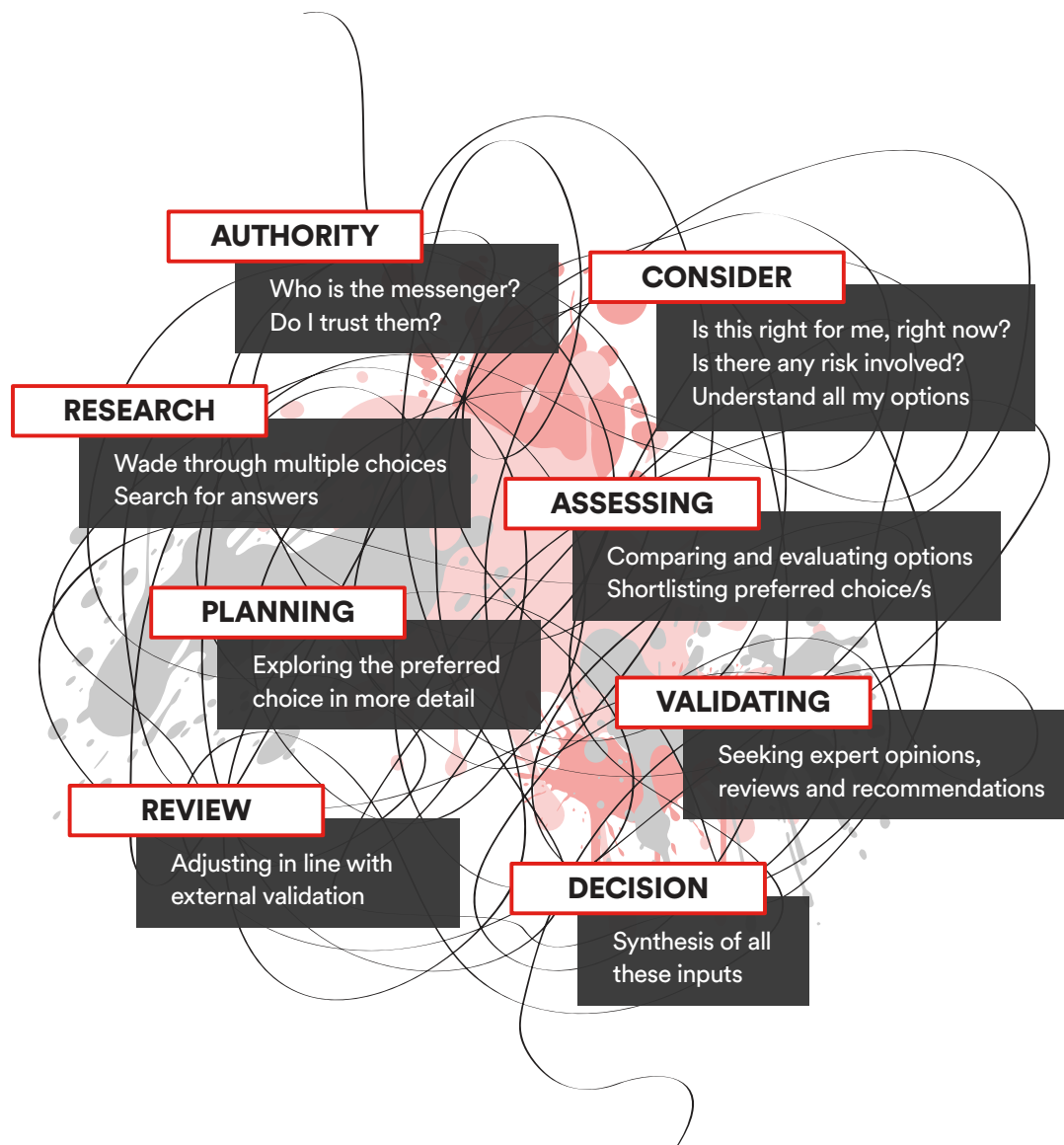


01 THE FUNNEL IS DEAD: LONG LIVE THE MIDDLE

The recent study by Google and The Behavioural Architects describes eloquently what we have long known: the middle is 'messy' especially for these bigger decisions. For the consumer trying to make a purchase in many categories, this is a world full of trips and traps, of difficulties and challenges, of what the service design world calls 'friction'.

Leading market researchers and customer experience gurus Fiona Blades and Stephen Phillips (CEOs of MESH Experience and Zappi, respectively) coined the phrase 'snakes and ladders' to describe the real experience that would-be buyers have in many different categories that we might think of as bigger and more complex.

If the path to purchase for these bigger kinds of decisions is more bumpy, twisting, turning and looping back on itself rather than a straight line, our role as marketers will need to shift to reflect this: to become more like facilitators – a helping hand through the noise and the chaos, so the middle makes sense to our prospects, rather than making it harder. Behavioural science has proven to be an unmatched and powerful tool for understanding the barriers consumers face and how to help them get over them. The better we marketers understand the psychology of the messy middle, the easier it is to identify and appreciate practical interventions that help the consumer move through the mess.





02 BEHAVIOURAL INSIGHTS INTO DECISION MAKING

In recent years, the application of behavioural sciences to marketing and advertising (particularly that collision of economics and psychology that we call ‘behavioural economics’) has created a lot of insight, both to explain the oddities we see in consumer behaviour (why aren’t people picking the best product?) and pointing us to better solutions than we might otherwise have chosen.

In thinking about decision making for these bigger decisions, there are three insights from behavioural economics that seem particularly useful rules of thumb for marketers to keep in mind.

1. Thinking, swimming, cats and maths

Despite what we tell ourselves, we humans don’t think nearly as much as we think we think. Or as much as we tell ourselves – and those observing our behaviour – that we do. To put it bluntly, the human mind is what the late Nobel-Prize-winning Professor Daniel Kahneman called “lazy”. We are approximate and intuitive, even for the major decisions in our lives – in experiments, doctors are no better at calculating probabilities than their patients. It’s not that we don’t think at all, rather that our minds are efficient in the way they use mental shortcuts based on our experiences to process things faster.

“
Despite what we tell ourselves, we humans don’t think nearly as much as we think we think or as much as we tell ourselves that we do
”

Most of the time, in most human lives, this 'lazy' thinking is enough. By contrast, when we're forced to focus our thinking in a considered way, most of us find it very heavy going, and we tend to avoid it. Humans are to thinking as cats are to swimming – we can do it if we really have to, but have learned to avoid it if at all possible.

What does this mean for marketers?

Put simply, many of the bigger decisions we ask consumers to make require more cognitive effort than they might like.

The smart marketer makes it easy for consumers in these situations, by reducing the thinking work the consumer has to do – offering two options instead of five, making comparisons clearer, doing calculations for them, reassuring with expertise and reducing jargon.

2. Thinking about tomorrow – rational and emotional

Physicists and clockmakers aside, humans have a very flexible relationship with time. We can bend and stretch it: the Coca-Cola Christmas call of “the holidays are coming, holidays are coming” expresses how anticipating something special can warp our experience of the straight line of time.

Where this subjective experience of time becomes important is when decisions involve thinking about the future and what we might need.

Prospect theory has revealed the mechanisms behind the adage of ‘a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush’: we literally discount future value of what we might gain to reflect what we have now. More specifically, we find it hard to think of our future selves (which is one reason why we keep doing things we know are bad for us, like smoking).

**“
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if at all possible
”**

What does this mean for marketers?

First, it means that we can't assume that decisions taken today about behaviour in the future will be rational, and take the factual evidence literally or logically. 90% of decisions are influenced by emotion, so potential savers need more than being told how much they will make in the future to commit to the new saving behaviour. Second, don't imagine that the consumer has a clear view of what they will need in the future – financially or in any other way. They need help from marketers to engage with tomorrow – sometimes in the form of inspiration and seduction, sometimes in the form of social norms that help them do what others are doing.

Evidence repeatedly shows that interventions that engage our emotional side tend to outperform those that speak to our (dubious) rational thinking prowess.

3. Super social apes

The rise of social media in the last two decades has revealed to many marketers what behavioural scientists have long known: that humans have evolved as social creatures whose lives are lived with and shaped by the behaviour of others (real or imagined).

“

In the real world, the kinds of things consumers find difficult in bigger decisions are universal

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As a character in *When Harry Met Sally* put it, “I’ll have what she’s having.” This is a popular rule of thumb when any of us makes a decision (and not just about what to order at the diner!). ‘Social Learning’ (as the science calls it) is a mechanism that appears early in children’s development (as soon as an hour after birth). We now know that this mechanism is the central mental tool in many categories – in fashion, in music, in drinks, but also in a rather more critical decision: the names we give our children.

What does this mean for marketers?

In many of the bigger decisions we examine in this paper, ‘I’ll Have What She’s Having’ plays an essential role in shaping decisions.

- **How do you know whether to trust a company?**

Ask other people or search for reviews.

- **How do you know what product is best for you?**

See what other people like you choose.

- **How do you reassure yourself you’ve made the right decision in a category you don’t really have any expertise in?**

Share, phone a friend – literally or figuratively.

Marketers can help consumers at pinch points in the decision making process by letting them see what others think, say and do.

All three of these insights offer opportunities for marketers to ease consumers through the messy middle to purchase. Each can be used as part of the solution to help consumers with decisions that – from an evolutionary standpoint – we humans are not that well suited to making.

In the real world, the kinds of things consumers find difficult in bigger decisions are universal and will be familiar to those who spend lots of time with their customers.

Typically, the friction points in big decisions are both in comprehension and in the effort involved of the decision maker to get to a decision.

- 1. What do I want, really?** Needs and desire specification are often revealed to consumers in the process of the purchase decision, not before it starts.
- 2. What is the offer, really? And how does this compare to what I have now and what other companies offer?** (comparison and evaluation).
- 3. Why do I need to provide all this information? And where do I find it?** (uploading and verifying essential information – e.g. for insurance pricing).
- 4. How do I get the input of others in my family to this decision? And how do I feel I'm doing right by them?** (shaping what I've learned and sharing the information).

- 5. How do I know I'm making the right choice? Who do I trust?** Sense-checking my decision against appropriate sources of authority/expertise – holidays are the perfect example of how we validate against others experiences through reviews, Tripadvisor etc.
- 6. How much longer do I have to wait before I can decide or purchase?** Seems I'm stuck here? (boredom/frustration or pressure of a timed offer).
- 7. What will happen if I don't buy it?** FOMO which could lead to regret and dissatisfaction.
- 8. Is the decision reversible?** Can I get a refund if I change my mind?

Putting ourselves in the mind of the consumer is always critical. The questions above can occur at any moment in the journey and may well recur. Rather than pretending the decision process is a rational progression, if we acknowledge and serve this reality, we can make a huge difference to how far and how fast consumers move through the middle and reach the end of the decision making process.



03 MAIL IN THE MIDDLE

Mail is a powerful response mechanism, so a highly effective channel at the end of the funnel.

It is often used to close the sale – a catalogue with an offer, holiday brochure with free kids' places, charity mailing that explains the impact of a donation through images and stories. Indeed, the evidence for mail as a decision closer is strong: 19% of people bought something, made a payment or donation after receiving direct mail.²

And while mail works exceptionally well in this role, it also stands out as a marketing channel in today's media world because it offers unique benefits to guide consumers through the messy middle.

Mail is a different kind of medium from the rest. It is tangible: despite humanity's amazing intellectual, artistic and scientific achievements, we humans are tactile creatures (our skin is our largest single organ).

There is considerable evidence that consuming information on paper not only engages more but does so more deeply than digital consumption can. Put simply the brain responds differently to print media than it does to digital.

Reading a printed piece creates more emotional engagement than reading the same material on a screen. It also activates the creation of more long-term memory formation (deeper semantic coding) which marketers know is essential to influencing future choices³.

“Mail stands out as a marketing channel because it offers unique benefits to guide consumers through the messy middle”

2. TGI March 2023 – February 2024

3. Middle-schoolers' reading and processing depth in response to digital and print media. Froud et al, Columbia University, 2023



Thanks to these unique and distinctive characteristics, mail can address precisely the kind of barriers and pressure points that are typical of the messy middle as follows:

Brand in the hand

We've long known that having something real in your hand changes decision-making.

"Human touch...plays a fundamental role in daily life, touch has the power to shift the brain into a deeper level of engagement, one more conducive to building lasting knowledge. This has significant implications – touch can make a stronger impact than sight or sound alone.

Several studies have found that communication through physical media, particularly paper, is more likely to lead to knowledge than communication via digital media".

David Eagleman

– Expert on the science of touch

50%

of those receiving direct mail say they feel very or somewhat more positive about the brand⁴

60%

enjoy sitting down and looking through catalogues in their own time⁵

53%

find browsing for items in a print format more enjoyable than on a screen⁵

4. The Attention Advantage, WARC/Marketreach, 2023

5. Catalogues: Connecting with consumers, converting sales. Marketreach with Retail Week, 2023



RSPCA CASE STUDY

Background

During the cost of living crisis, RSPCA's supporter base was struggling: research revealed weakened satisfaction and trust, potentially impacting donations. Unfortunately, this came at the very time that demand for RSPCA's services was spiking, driven by a surge in abandoned animals.

Solution

RSPCA and its agency Join The Dots responded by developing a targeted programme that reversed the logic of most hard-pressed charity campaigns: they thanked supporters without seeking donations.

The envelope was understated yet overtly said thank you. Inside the letter came from the CEO to show the degree of RSPCA's gratitude. It included regional facts for relevance. The absence of a donation ask enhanced the impact, prompting recipients to respond with a 'Message of Support,' which served as both a deeper emotional connection and a measurement mechanism. A pre and post-email survey was used as an additional measurement of loyalty.

Results

Over 15,000 personal messages of support were received, generating an unsolicited £70k income. Loyalty and trust scores rose post campaign.

03 MAIL IN THE MIDDLE



Mail is trusted

71% of people completely trust the mail they receive.⁶ Having a physical expression of your message brings much-needed trust to difficult and complex decisions – for decisions that are complex and significant, the degree of trust and authority that the consumer feels in the sender and its messaging is crucial in making the consumer feel that they are making a good decision.

Mail raises consideration and inspires over time

It stays in the home and is therefore repeatedly useful in nudging decision making along. 16% of mail interactions made people actively consider the company. People spend time with mail and revisit it, often to review information. It has longevity in the home, with more than 50% keeping it for an average of eight days and

referring to it four times⁷. Mail attracts more attention time than other media. People spend three times as long with the average mail piece than they do with a 30-second TV ad (11.8 seconds –Thinkbox)⁸, and more than 50 times as long as they spend with the average digital communication.⁹ They also share mail pieces extensively to validate their decision.

52%

Showed or talked about something from a catalogue with a family member or a friend¹⁰

6. Customer mail – The physical connection that transforms customer experience. Accenture/Marktreach 2022

7. The Attention Advantage, WARC/Marktreach, 2023

8. TV Vision/ Lumen 2023

9. TV Vision/ Lumen 2023

10. Catalogues: Connecting with consumers, converting sales. Marktreach with Retail Week 2023



CUNARD CASE STUDY

Background

When Covid-19 stopped travel, all cruise plans naturally went on hold. Reigniting the guests' joy of sailing and driving advance bookings were key to Cunard's business recovery. How to do this in a way that spoke to a premium audience with hugely diverse mindsets was a challenge.

Furthermore, with a worldwide travel pause behind them, Cunard knew the market was going to be flooded with travel reactivation communications. This campaign needed to cut through and secure that business-crucial booking.

Solution

Cunard knew its audience were not digital natives, preferring mail to other campaigns. Working with its agency Armadillo, it refined the target audience for this campaign as a mixture of past bookers, warm prospects and those who had cruises cancelled. So, the task seemed simple enough.

Until Cunard spoke to guests.

They heard loud and clear that the pandemic had stirred a wide range of feelings towards cruising and travel in general. From concerns around safety, apprehension about future cancellations, frustration from previous cancellations and worries about an altered experience, to those who just couldn't wait to get back on board again – there were so many

different and conflicting mindsets that were impossible to segment on a database.

However, one universal truth united them all. In the wake of the pandemic, guests were looking for permission to daydream. 'Permission to daydream' became Cunard's powerful strategic platform. No matter what mental barriers Covid-19 had put up, Cunard knew it could connect guests with their love of luxurious travel and innate sense of adventure, whilst navigating them through a sea of concerns.

The next step was to create a piece of communication that would seduce them back to their love of sailing with Cunard and help them remember why they fell in love with it in the first place. It needed to work hard to calm the troubled waters of their minds that Covid had created without being able to predict what their specific attitude and fears were, all whilst standing out on the doormat.

Delivered through their letterbox was Cunard's *Invitation to Exploration*. Gilt-edged and on heavy stock, it was worthy of a place at the Captain's Table. This beautiful brochure inspired guests to look ahead with positivity. It reminded them of the reasons they loved to travel with Cunard and encouraged them to start dreaming about their next voyage. Once they dived into the luxurious brochure, layered with tissue, 20 pages of stunning destination photography awaited.



The whole package was held together with a branded belly band. Carefully considered layering ensured a slow reveal as recipients unwrapped each layer. Full-bleed photography created a sense of vast space and adventure, which contrasted evocatively with the sense of 'small' that lockdown created. The tone of voice was reassuring yet inspiring, and the attention to detail throughout echoed Cunard's service ethos. It served as a reminder of the brand's reputation for exceptional quality and luxury.

The result was something they could hold firmly in their hands and pore over with a partner giving them the time and space to indulge in their daydreams of their next voyage whilst reassuring themselves that Cunard had everything taken care of.

A clear and concise CTA left guests with no doubt that Cunard wanted them back on board.

Results

Connecting guests with their love of travelling the seas with Cunard and giving them permission to daydream saw the mail campaign deliver £2.1m of incremental revenue in the four weeks following the launch, measured against the no mail control group, adding up to an impressive ROI of 25:1.

As well as a high volume of bookings and significant revenue boost, Cunard also saw a positive impact from the campaign on driving bookings direct to [cunard.com](https://www.cunard.com), improving revenue per booking and harvesting valuable first-party data. This led in turn to a new guest segmentation and Test and Learn programme.

The fact that this mail pack captured the hearts of the Cunard audience enough for them to share it on social media was the icing on the cake.

Source: DMA Award Winner 2021. Travel and Leisure. Gold



A direct mail piece can get hard-hitting behaviour change messages where they really matter and drive action – into the household and the conversations its members share. A mail piece can become what the social scientists call a social object.

THAMES WATER CASE STUDY

Background

How getting into the home unblocked London's drains. London was suffering from an epidemic of blocked drains.

Wet wipes. Cotton buds. Make-up pads. Cooking fat. Put them down the loo, or the sink, and you could have a blockage on your hands. Worse still, that blockage could force sewage back into your home. And it costs you and every other household real money: £12m on customers' bills.

Solution

A bright blue mail piece dramatised the result of these kinds of actions and the cost to the area and to each household with a blocked drain. This simple, shareable mail piece not only helped households have the conversation but also showed simple solutions to stop it happening – for example stopping pouring any cooking fat down the drain.

Results

Thames Water's 'Bin it, don't block it' campaign had a huge impact, with targeted areas seeing a 26% reduction in sewer blockages and 70% of residents saying they had changed their behaviour when it came to disposing of cooking fat and wet wipes.

03 MAIL IN THE MIDDLE



Mail and other media in the messy middle

Mail clearly has many strengths in the middle but there's power in the media mix and mail's relationship with other channels.

Mail and digital are very effective partners. By creating the different effects discussed above to help the consumer through the ups and downs of the journey, mail is amplifying the effects of other media.

If a consumer receives a mail piece from your brand, they will look at a social media ad you serve for up to 30% longer and are 44% more likely to remember it¹¹.

Mail is also the catalyst for driving consumers online more generally, often to move further along the journey by finding out more detail or seeking reassurance from other people (the 'I'll Have What She's Having' effect).

13% of all mail drives people online¹² and 44% of people agree: "When I'm doing something online, it's handy to have a letter, leaflet or catalogue to refer to".¹³

11. How Mail Cuts Through. Marketreach 2018

12. JICMAIL 2023

13. IPA Touchpoints 2023



04 NEW INSIGHT FROM A COMPARATIVE CHANNEL TEST

To understand more about the way mail impacts audience decision making, Marketreach commissioned new experimental research through the neuroscience based research agency, Walnut Unlimited. The findings add further insight into how mail impacts consumers, particularly in the messy middle.

In this research, we wanted to understand the real impact of mail as a tangible medium and compare this to the impact of digital media that might otherwise be used to guide consumers through the messy middle – specifically email or mobile ads.

We were inspired by a joint American-Chinese study which explored the effect of messaging in different media channels on what the academics called ‘virtuous choices’ (volunteering for a charity, choosing books to read from the college bookshop etc).¹⁴ The research found that paper has an advantage over screens in driving more virtuous decisions. Clearly ‘virtuous choices’ represent only a small subset of all the use cases for which marketers use mail, so our study explored a broader range of categories and themes (detail in appendix).

We designed our study carefully to ensure we captured the true impact of the communication channel: mail or digital.

- We standardised the creative material across media: the same creative, for the same fictional messaging using mostly fictional brands, across six consumer categories, appeared in all the media.
- We equalised the exposure whose impact we wanted to measure across mail, laptop and mobile by forcing open rates in digital alternatives so that they matched the high open rates that mail enjoys.
- We used a state-of-the-art neuroscience technique in our questionnaire design to avoid overclaim and give us confidence in the consumers' answers.

All in all, we measured the specific strengths that exposing an ad in a mail format makes over the equivalent exposure in alternative digital media (email and mobile ads). This means we focused exclusively on the impact of the moment of exposure, not the long-lasting effects that we know mail has.

This would show us more about what the unique physicality of mail has to offer advertisers in the messy middle, and how it might specifically address the challenges consumers face there.

These findings support what mail in its physical paper-based format does particularly well to allow marketers to help consumers in the messy middle. The following examples – selected from a wider set of findings – point to some compelling benefits that mail can bring advertisers.

04 NEW INSIGHT FROM A COMPARATIVE CHANNEL TEST

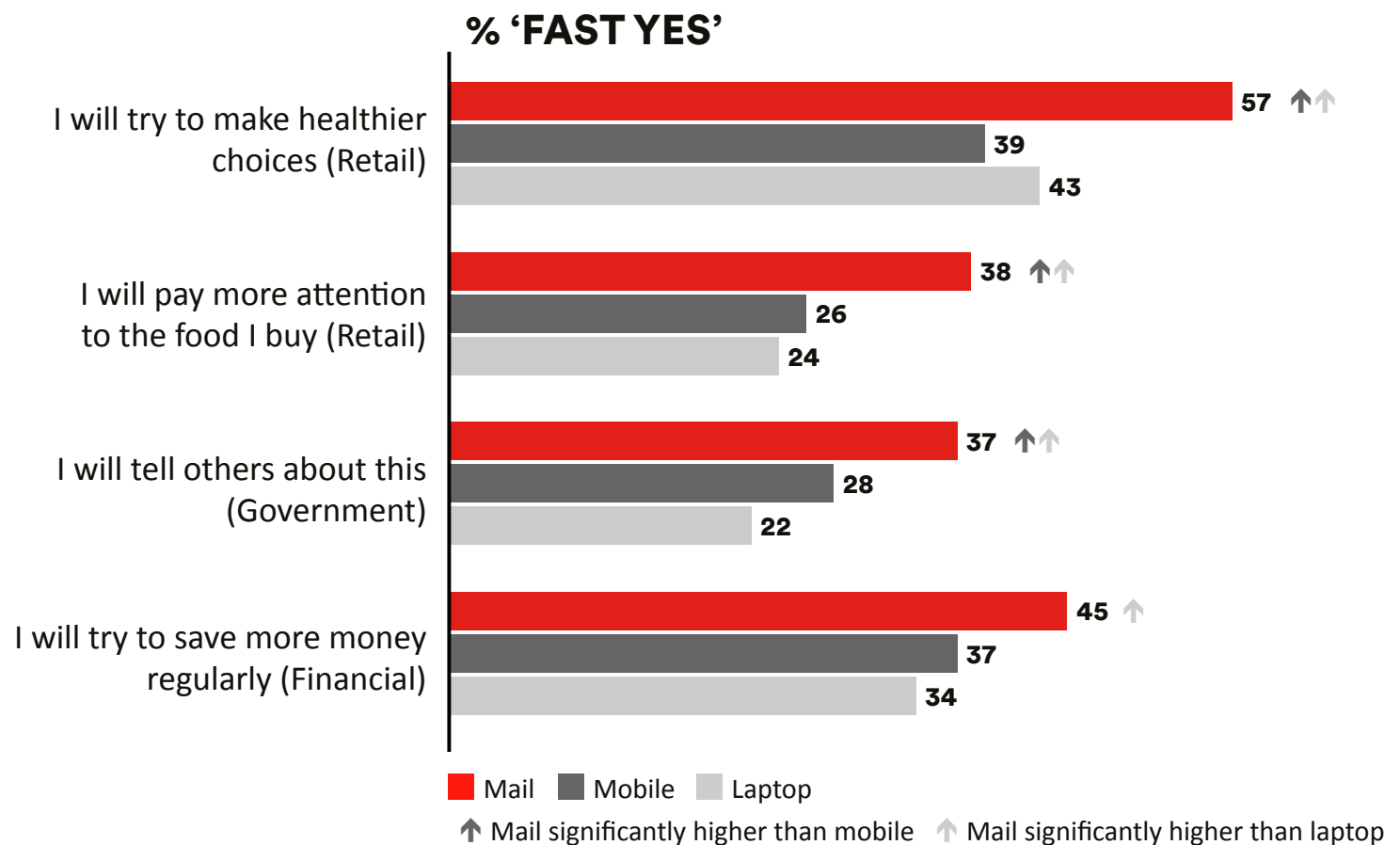
Mail plays an important role in building early associations that may influence or directly lead to consideration in the middle of a purchase decision.

Mail appears to be particularly strong at driving early signs of consideration in a way that alternative media don't. Winning this kind of consideration is the necessary first stage of driving bigger decisions, later on.

The chart compares the percentage of consumers exposed to mail, mobile ad, and laptop (email) who agreed with certain

statements. These are "I will try and make healthier choices" from a retail communication promoting healthy food swaps; "I will pay more attention to the food I buy" from a retail communication promoting healthy food swaps; "I will tell other people about this" from a government mailer promoting participation in an NHS health survey; and "I will try to save more regularly" from a bank promoting a savings management app.

All of these illustrate consumer openness to future action and are all conveyed more strongly by mail than by digital – in most cases, significantly so.



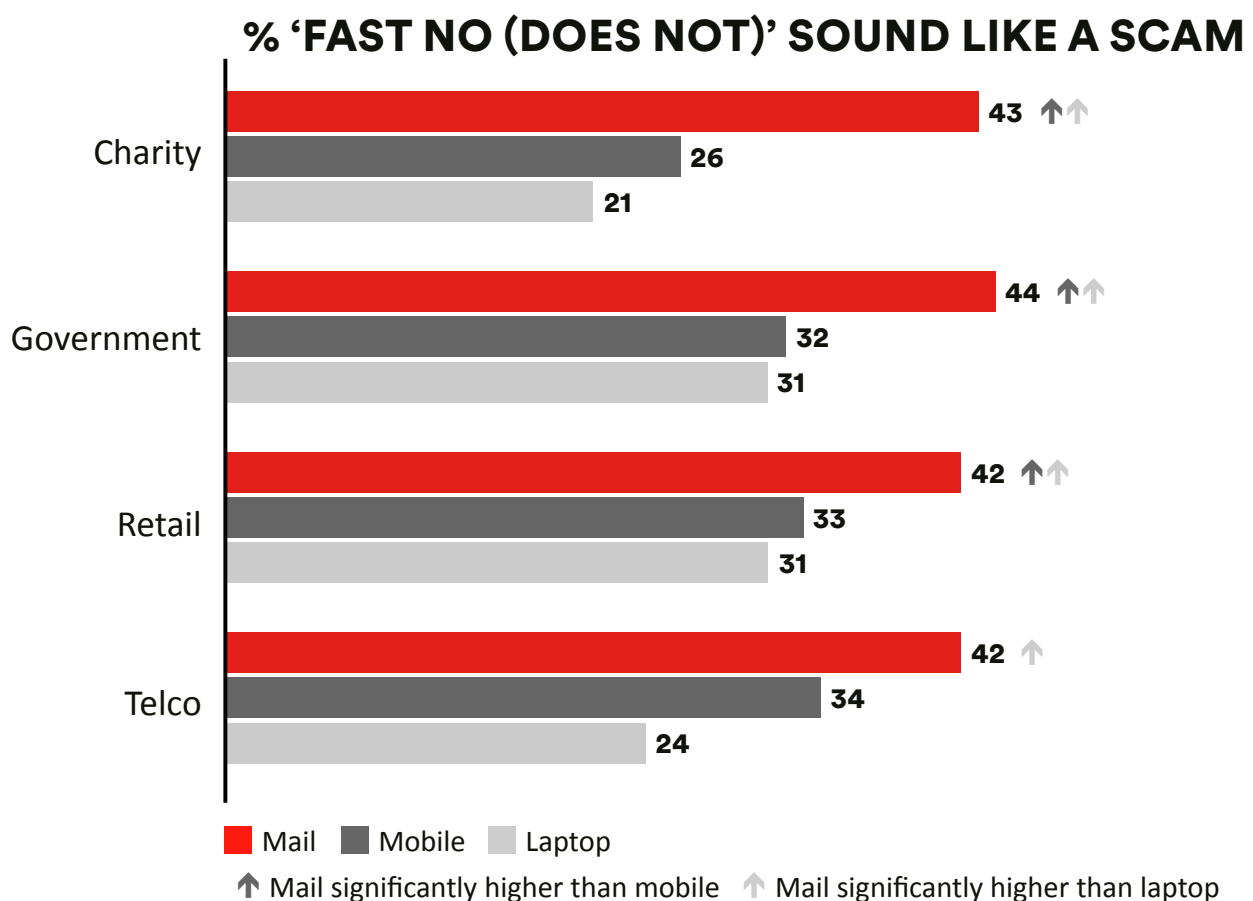
04 NEW INSIGHT FROM A COMPARATIVE CHANNEL TEST

Mail can build trust – the essential precondition to accepting and acting on key messages in bigger decisions.

The tangible nature of mail helps overcome key perceptual barriers among audiences. Doing so is crucial to ensuring a message is engaged with and acted on. This is most obvious in relation to the perception of trustworthiness

(or otherwise) of the messenger and the message.

The statement “this does (not) sound like a scam” was endorsed significantly more in relation to mail messages than mobile or email (laptop) for four categories – Charity, Government, Retail and Telco. This is despite us using fictional brands in our research (with the exception of the Government messaging).

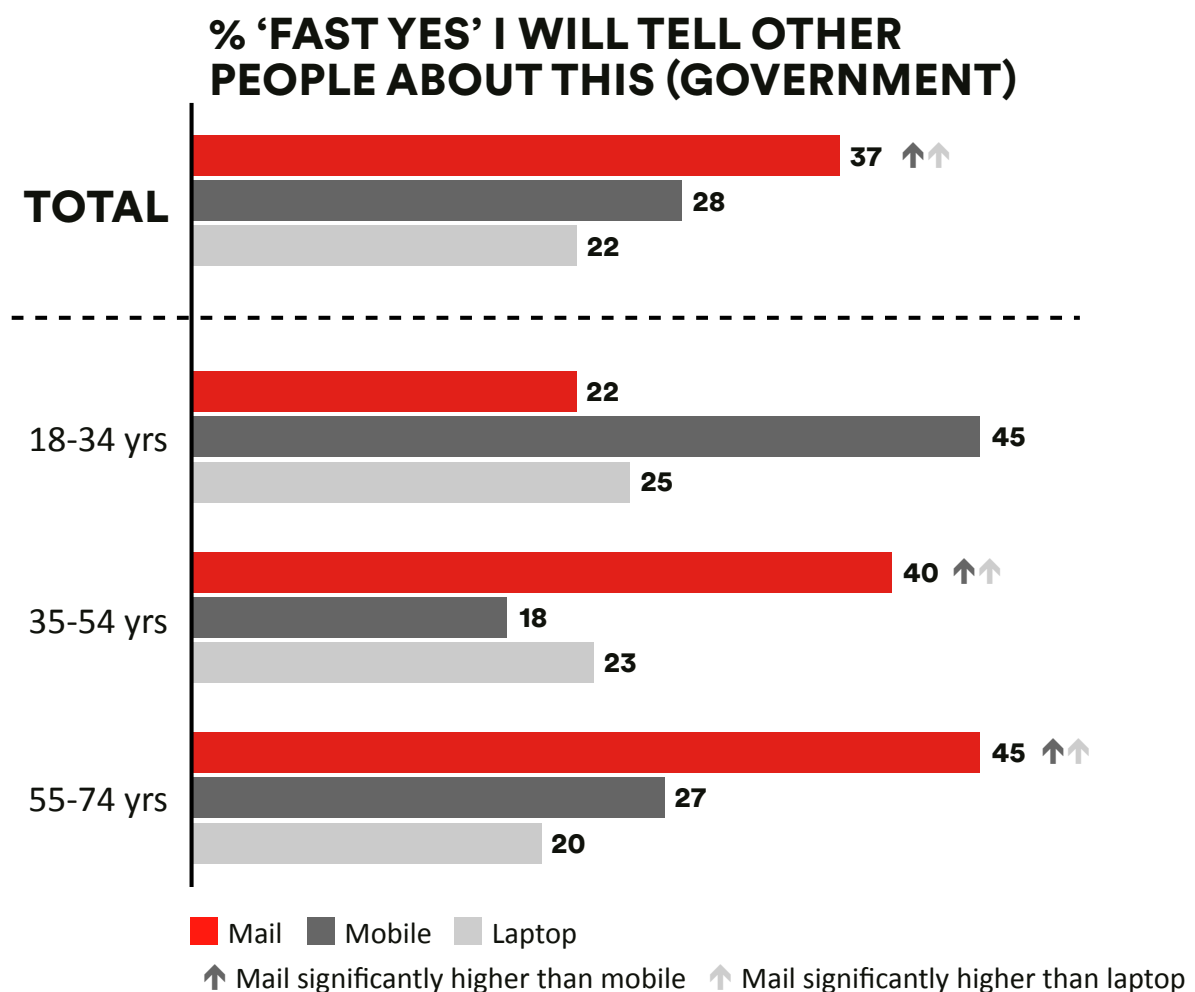


04 NEW INSIGHT FROM A COMPARATIVE CHANNEL TEST

Mail can activate crucial word of mouth and social influence.

Mail encourages sharing and advocating to others – fuelling the social influence, recommendation and ‘I’ll Have What She’s Having’ behavioural economic effect that we know shapes so many decisions. The key research statement here is “I will talk to others about this”. Mail’s tangible nature makes it perform strongly across many categories we

researched. The chart shows the findings for Government, but a similar pattern was also seen for Charity and Telco. As we might expect, the overall sample scores are brought down by the preference of younger respondents (under 35s only) for digital media and the ease with which they share messages digitally. However, mail’s performance across all other age groups is striking.

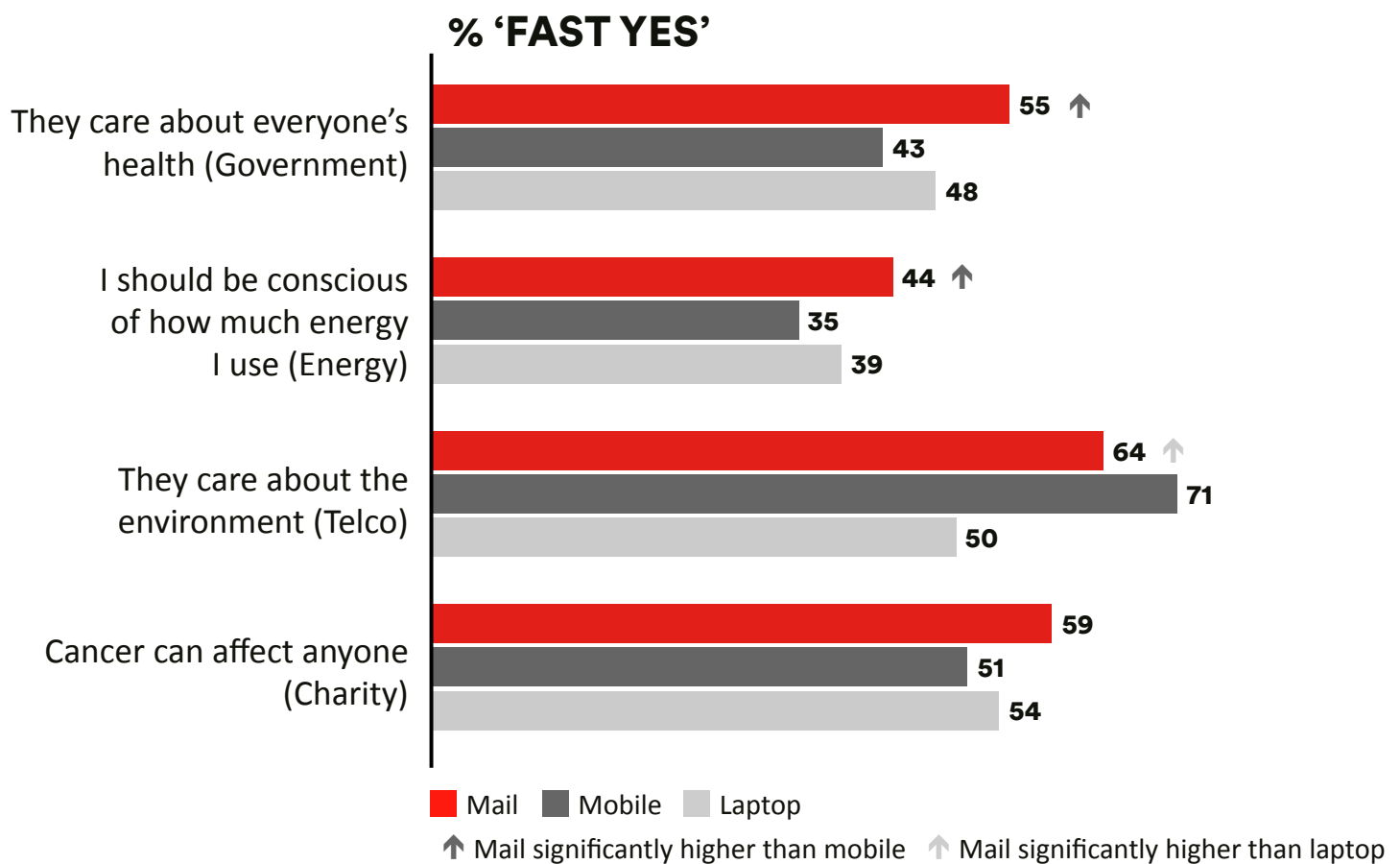


04 NEW INSIGHT FROM A COMPARATIVE CHANNEL TEST

Mail's tangible nature makes it particularly strong in engaging audiences with messages around things that matter to society at large.

In many different contexts, mail more effectively lands statements that communicate conscientiousness and having a wider societal impact e.g. with regard to the statements “they care about everyone’s health” (related to a Government mailer about a health programme), “I should be conscious of how much energy I use” (for an energy supplier communication encouraging lower energy use),

“They care about the environment” (related to a telco communication about phone recycling). In a similar way mail was more effective at communicating “Cancer can affect anyone” in a communication from a fictional charity brand (though the advantage over digital on this statement does not quite reach statistical significance). This and other findings demonstrate mail’s strength as a physical medium which emotionally engages by giving people space to pause and consider the benefits of choice.





05 SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper focuses on a new battleground for marketers: in today's noisy and competitive environment, it's the tricky messy middle ('muddle'?) of bigger consumer decisions that needs our attention if we are to guide consumers to the ultimate actions and decisions we seek.

Many of the bigger consumer decisions that we are charged with shaping are complicated, messy and as difficult for the consumer as they are for marketers. There's a lot going on between 'hello' and 'thank you', between attention and purchase. As Blades and Phillips put it, there are as many snakes as there are ladders.

“
Mail's unique powers make it a critical tool to guide consumer decision making in a noisy environment
”

Our job as marketers is to recognise how complicated decision making has become and to understand how to guide consumers through this middle phase – helping them overcome the barriers (real or imaginary), helping them sort multiple pieces of information and make choices (and feel they are making them well).

05 SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Mail has a unique, physical nature which gives it the power to cut through, it is opened and read, the mail piece is valued, kept and reread a number of times. Mail's very physical nature does something special to our brains that helps us with decisions that evolution has not equipped us for. It creates emotional engagement and trust. It can help us dream and inspire us. It gives us something to share. And ultimately, it pushes us further along the decision making process, however messy that path might be.

“

Mail occupies a unique place in our hearts, minds and homes

”

Our new comparative impact study uses the first exposure to mail and digital ads to get a deeper understanding of what aspects of the messy middle roadblocks mail is particularly effective at clearing. It suggests that mail's physicality impacts consumer thinking in specific critical areas:

Mail builds the early associations that may influence or directly lead to consideration

Mail builds trust – the essential precondition to any audience accepting and acting on key messages for big or difficult decisions

Mail can activate the word of mouth and social influence that shapes so many big decisions

Mail's tangible characteristics make it particularly strong in engaging audiences with messages around things that matter to society at large

If you want to help your customers through the messy middle, ask yourself this: what are the barriers and pinch points in the middle of your customer's journey that, if overcome, might move the customer forward? All the while remembering the unique power of mail to help you to do so.

We're here to help

To learn more about how to make the customer journey work better for you and your customers, please contact us here at Marketreach. We're experienced in working with brands and agencies to plan and maximise your direct mail investment and help you win in the messy middle. **Contact us at www.marketreach.co.uk**

APPENDIX

WALNUT UNLIMITED RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research used a monadic design, where separate matched samples responded to the same stimulus presented as a mail communication in the form of a letter or leaflet; an email communication viewed on a laptop; or a mobile carousel advertisement. Each participant was shown a number of different communications from different sectors in the same channel, with order of presentation randomised.

Fieldwork was conducted using a combination of face-to-face and online interviewing between November 2023 and February 2024.

Each communication was shown to a minimum of 200 participants per channel. Exact sample sizes were between 211 and 236 per cell. The samples were matched for age, gender, social grade and Smartphone usage.

The stimulus was created specifically for the research, using fictitious brands (other than Government, where NHS branding was used). Participants were informed at the end of the interview that all communications were fictitious. Details of the six sectors covered were:

Energy

'Alpha Energy' giving advice on how to save on heating costs and offering a free guide on how to do so.

Government

NHS invitation to take part in a national health survey which will help prevent diseases across the population.

Retail

'Freshline supermarket' encouraging healthy eating, suggesting specific healthy 'swaps' and providing money-off vouchers on healthy alternatives.

Charity

'Family Cancer Foundation' inviting donations which will help support families impacted by cancer.

Telco

'Konnnect Mobile' encouraging recycling of mobile phones and offering money off a new phone if the old one is recycled.

Financial services

'Wainhouse Banking' offering a free tool to calculate how much you should be saving on a regular basis.

The detailed messaging was constructed using Walnut's proprietary behavioural model EMMA (Emotion, Motivation, Meaning, Action) and this model was also used to develop a set of around 15 short statements per sector. After exposure to the communication, participants answered 'Yes' or 'No' to express whether they thought each statement applied to the brand they had seen.

As well as the explicit 'stated' answers the interview used an established reaction time measurement framework to determine the implicit, truer response. In reporting the percentage giving a 'fast yes' response was used as the metric on which the stimuli were compared.

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