



university of  
 groningen

faculty of economics  
 and business

customer insights center

# Subtle influence

When mindless choices result in positive effects

S.J. Salmon, MSc.  
 Prof. dr. B.M. Fennis

Report RUGCIC-2014-02  
 ISBN 978-90-367-6952-5





## Table of contents

- ✓ Management summary: Subtle influence page 3
- ✓ Daily influence, effective influence techniques in a world full of stimuli page 12
- ✓ Why stimulating ‘responsible behaviour’ appears to be so difficult page 20
- ✓ How self-control helps resisting temptations page 29
- ✓ How we could use low self-control page 36
- ✓ Subtle influence under circumstances of low self-control page 65
- ✓ Side notes, sensitivity for ego-depletion page 71
- ✓ CV of the author page 73
- ✓ Main references page 75
- ✓ Customer Insights Center page 81



university of  
 groningen

faculty of economics  
 and business

customer insights center

# Management summary

Subtle influence





# Stimulating responsible behaviour

- › **Convincing** people of what should, or should not do, could be **counterproductive** in influencing behavior. When telling people what they should do, people may feel limited in their sense of freedom to make their own choices, or may feel threatened by the message, and as a consequence avoid the message.
- › And even when people agree with the message, **the step from intentions to actual behaviour** is often **big**.
- › In daily life there are several seductions that could lead people away from the 'right' path...







# Self-control

- › To **resist temptations** on the short term and to make choices that are beneficial in the long run, people need to exert **self-control**. When people have a sufficient level of self-control, they are able to make deliberate choices, in which they take long term consequences into account.
- › Unfortunately, **many choices** are made under **mindless conditions**, in which people are unable to exert self-control. In these instances, choices are often based on **impulses**.





## Subtle influence

- › Mindless conditions of low self-control can be exploited!
- › With a **low level of self-control** people are **more sensitive** to be influenced by superficial cues in their environment, like attractive products and influence techniques. Think for instance of the use of experts in advertisements.
- › We could influence people to make responsible choices in a **mindless way** by linking these responsible choices to external cues, using **subtle influence techniques**.



## Subtle influence

- › The impulsive way in which many choices are made, can be exploited by the use of subtle influence techniques. With these techniques, people can be steered mindlessly towards certain choices.
- › People **do not need self-control** to make a responsible choice when the option is promoted by a subtle influence technique.
- › Examples of subtle influencing techniques are heuristics and nudges.



# Heuristics

- > Heuristics are **simple decision rules** that reduce the difficulty of making decisions.
- > Examples are the heuristic of **social proof** ('follow the majority'), **authority** ('when the expert says it...') and **scarcity** ('scarce, so valuable').







# Nudges

- > Nudge = a **subtle push** towards the **‘right’ direction**, by a simple adjustment in the environment.
- > Example: some secondary schools place healthy products in front of the cashiers at the school canteen, to make the healthy choice an easy one.





## Positive effects of mindless choices

- › When we link responsible choice options to heuristics or nudges, people can be steered towards making responsible choices in a mindless way.
- › So, in this way the **impulsive** choice becomes the **responsible** choice!
- › These techniques are relatively easy to apply, for example by putting a slogan in a point-of-purchase setting, or on an website that says ‘Most sold!’ (heuristic of social proof) or ‘Limited edition’ (scarcity heuristic).



## Bad side of marketing?

- › It is important to apply heuristics and nudges in a responsible way!
- › When we try to influence people to buy more expensive or even bad products, this will only show an extra sales effect in the short term, but after that customers may not return and may not be loyal anymore.
- › It is important to take ethics into account: in which direction do we want to steer customers, is this direction ethically justified?





university of  
 groningen

faculty of economics  
 and business

customer insights center

# Daily influence

Effective influence techniques in a world full of  
 stimuli

