

# Targeting motivations

Using the COM-B model to target specific motivations.

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## Practice points

1. Consider messaging that gets the audience to change their behaviour because they want to, rather than just thinking that they should. Involve the target audience in developing different messages and explore which ones evoke genuine feelings of desire to do the behaviour.
2. Consider messaging that causes the audience to stop and reflect on their actions.
3. Connect the desired behaviour to the audience's existing values and identity, rather than trying to reshape their identity.
4. Consider messaging that helps the audience to set up routines for themselves in which they always perform a particular action when they encounter a particular scenario.

When targeting motivations, focus on what is important to the audience to generate genuine desire to act in a certain way and, in the case of unwanted habitual behaviours, to prompt reflection.

## About motivation

Motivation consists of all the mental processes that energise and direct our behaviour. It is not limited to our reasons for doing things or the conscious decisions that we take. It includes our choices, intentions, values, desires and habits (West and West, 2019; Brown and West, 2013).

Some important insights about motivation are as follows.

## Intentions

Our beliefs about what we should do will only drive behaviour if, at the critical moment, there are not competing behaviours that we want or need to do more. For example, we might intend to challenge sexism and believe it is the right thing to do but, when faced with the reality, we may feel that we most need to avoid confrontation and avoid feelings of awkwardness. The gap between what we intend to do and what we actually do is often called the 'intention-action gap' (The Decision

Lab, 2023).

It is crucial that messaging encourages people to not only think they should do something, but to also want to do it, as this makes it more likely they will take appropriate action in the moment.

## Habits and impulses

Much of what we do involves little or no thought – we act out of habit and impulse. Breaking these habits and building new ones involves getting people to stop and reflect on their behaviour consistently and often.

Messaging can play a role in this. For example, we often have the impulse to laugh when we hear other people laughing (even when, on later reflection, we might realise the situation wasn't funny), or to respond defensively when threatened (for example, in response to perceived criticism).

## Self-identity

This is an extremely important driver of what we want and need, and consists of all the thoughts, images and feelings we have about ourselves. Self-identity also includes the rules we set for ourselves, including how we behave towards other people (for example, 'when people are in need, I will help them').

Most people have a generally positive self-identity and think that, while they might not be perfect, they are good people who are competent at things that are important to them and do what is right as they see it.

This means that messaging is more likely to be successful if it harnesses the audience's existing positive identity, rather than trying to reshape it.

## Social identity

This is also extremely important. It refers to how we perceive and feel about the social groups that we feel we belong to, such as being a police officer or police staff.

Identifying as police might be associated with a shared purpose, such as 'we protect' or 'we carry on in the face of adversity'. This can then be aligned with the behaviour you are seeking to change.

Being part of a competent, highly professional organisation or team that we feel proud of can be an important driver of behaviour, as long as this is brought to consciousness at the right moment.

## Promoting genuine desire

People generally want to do things that we think:

- will meet an immediate need (for example, supporting a colleague in distress)
- will achieve a goal (for example, creating an inclusive team culture)
- are morally right (for example, being fair and just)
- fit our self-identity or social identity

Messaging designed to create genuine desire must consider which of these factors to target for the audience in question, as well as how to activate those desires in situations where sexist behaviours are likely to occur. To that end, it will be important in audience research to find out what features of self-identity and social identity are most important to the target group.

## Promoting reflection

Encouraging people to stop and think is an important goal of messaging to prevent unwanted behaviours. The challenge is achieving it when, in the moment, their emotions, desires and habits are crowding out reflective thought.

One way of achieving this is to provide visual cues during the message that will come to mind when people are in the scenario where feelings and habits are dominating. With enough repetition, these can trigger the reflective thought that connects people to positive aspects of their self-identity and allows them to take control of their actions. This is not an easy task, but it can be a useful messaging strategy.

For example, a video campaign may show a first-person perspective of a commonly encountered scenario unfolding, where the video is stopped abruptly just before the person behind the camera makes a sexist remark.

## Promoting new habits and routines

Habits do not have to be fully automatic. In fact most of the behaviours we refer to as habits involve at least some form of conscious thought. It is better, in these cases, to think of them more as routines (behaviours that have a significant input from habit mechanisms but that we are fully aware of as we are doing them).

We can also use messaging to help people build new routines. This may involve encouraging the audience to look out for triggers and to set themselves specific behavioural tasks that they will always perform when they encounter these. What start out as reflective rules that they set themselves can turn into semi-automatic routines.

The way that this has been done in other areas has been to get people to set up very specific 'if-then' rules (Gollwitzer and Sheeran, 2006). For example, 'if I am in a group and someone makes a sexist remark, then I will always visibly shake my head'. The idea is that this eventually becomes more automatic and not something that the person has to think about.

## References

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- The Decision Lab. [Intention-action gap](#) [internet]. [Accessed 1 November 2023]
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## Tags

Violence against women and girls