**What the behavioral sciences are telling us about the difficulty of changing habits and why you should read this before making any important changes for 2019.**

We often fail when we want to create a new behavior for ourselves. No matter whether it's more sport, less tweeting or eating healthier food. According to a Study[1], an incredible 92% fail in their good intentions. Why is this so difficult? And why don't the great "tricks" of the editorial staff work? And why can't we as marketers do better since we understand human behavior in such a deep-dive way?

Because our automatic habits are rooted in System 1 and are therefore beyond our notice. But we want to change consciously - and do not notice when System 1 delivers an automatic action again, when we are in a familiar context. That is why the typical advice does not help to make the goal as concrete as possible. Goals are like high heels, exciting but taxing. Habits are like sneakers, we don't notice they are on.

Writer James Clear immediately made a New York Times bestseller with his book published in October 2018: Atomic Habits: An Easy and Proven Way to Build Good Habits and Break Bad Ones. He summarizes the latest scientific findings in a convincingly manageable model. I would like to present the most important principles as an appetizer. You can also find another good overview in an interview with the author on The Psychology Podcast 144[2].
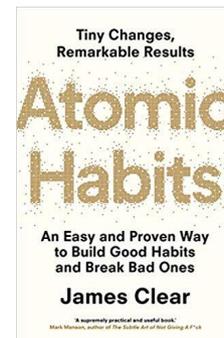
He sets up four laws of behavior change:

1. Make it **obvious**: What are the situations/contexts where a new behavior is desired?
2. Make it **attractive**: The more we consider the behavior to be attractive, the more likely we are to stick to it.
3. Make it **simple**: The behavior must be made as easy and frictionless as possible.
4. Make it **satisfying**: Rewarding behavior is gladly repeated.

And then of course, when it comes to breaking bad habits, it works exactly the opposite way: Make the context go away, make it unattractive, make it difficult and make it dissatisfying.

It is all based on the model of how human behavior works and how our brain learns:

a. We perceive data/contexts/events. For example, entering a dark room.
b. We assess the situation and define a need. For example, being able to see things or preventing a sense of fear.
c. We react to the situation. And we reach for the light switch.
d. We make a mental note of the result.

This process occurs in milliseconds - and many others without interruption. So, our routine behaviors are the solutions of everyday problems that our brain has automated.

Usual suggestions focus on the symptoms (untidy desk) and not on the cause (delayed filing). And we underestimate the "compound interest effect" that comes from the sum of small actions. People focus on the upcoming decision: Burger with fries or is it better to have salad buffet? However, this makes no difference in weight at the end of the day. It is only the persistence of relatively small actions for years that results in the desired success. And for that, you must know how to "program" them.

There are three levels of behavior change:

I. **Result** (Here, we start out intuitively: Losing 15 kg, getting more relaxed, learning a language)
II. **Process/Plan** (Going to the gym three times a week, meditating every day, reading Italian news twice a week)
III. **Identity change/Self-image** (Rather implicit: If I am slim/relaxed/multilingual, I am the person that I really want to be).

You will recognize this. People automatically start with Level I and decide on Level II, Level III will then somehow follow. James Clear does it the other way around. First think about the changed identity: Which type of person can lose weight?

For example, someone who won't skip any workouts. And how can you reinforce that self-image? By doing at least five push-ups even after an exhausting day - and thus strengthening your self-identity! If you hadn't gone to the gym, you would have been a loser. But this way, your self-image has been strengthened a little, and you stay motivated. Health is a marathon, not a sprint.

Every single time I sit down and write at least one line, I confirm my self-image as a writer. Such small actions don't seem to hold any value, but they reinforce the identity you want to create. It is the difference between "I want that" and "I am that". The focus is not on changing behavior, but on the behavior that is appropriate to the desired identity.

Let's say you feel that you are too introverted and want to become more extroverted. If you have a new challenge ahead of you, then ask yourself whether you would do it if you were just a little more extroverted. This is a step that is much more likely to be taken than just planning to act more extroverted and hoping that your personality will follow.

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Fake it till you make it. It's often recommended. The only problem is that our brain naturally senses the "fake". A better way is to take small steps and develop your self-confidence continuously.

That is why Clear recommends concentrating on systems instead of goals. Goals are essential for clarifying what you ultimately want to achieve, but we overestimate the significance of the result and underestimate the significance of the process. If we clean up a room for half a day, we have achieved our goal - but over time, the room will look the same as before. We can only make it to a permanently clean room by changing our habits. Unfortunately, social media puts more pressure on us to focus on results. We see the fit bodies, but not the effort and we fail more quickly because of the role models. The group "Ketogains" on Facebook[3] is a nice counter example.

We need to understand that our habits are always linked to contexts. Let's say you want to read more again. You sit on the couch in the living room. But with the couch, the TV on the wall and Netflix are connected. You automatically reach for the remote control. You can also read later.

It is easier to embrace a new habit when it is connected to a new context. For instance, you could buy a new armchair and then only read on it. Or you could make Netflix less frictionless. To do this, always put the remote away - and maybe take the batteries out. You will be surprised how effective small obstacles can be. Suddenly, it becomes much more convenient to reach for the book next to you. Oh, and please leave your mobile phone in the hallway.

Do you want to check your cell phone less often in 2019? Not a chance, if it's right next to you. However, if it's somewhere else, you will be able to concentrate on the things that are really important. No worries, you can still hear the calls. But with this, you have successfully deactivated a mental candy.

Clear shows nice examples of how to motivate yourself to improve continuously with this system. Through many small steps, becoming closer to the desired identity over the years. For example, steadily improving your expert status. He also makes use of the FLOW principle. If our challenge is a few percent above our previous capabilities, we will be most motivated. That is when we give our all. Even with video games. They are programmed in such a way that they challenge us more and more bit by bit - and if things don't go any further, they motivate us with additional strength or help. Clear says, the secret to achieving sustainable results is never to stop making continuous small improvements. "It's impressive what you can achieve by simply not stopping".

We are currently witnessing this principle at K&A. We have a strong method with our Psychodrama to understand the drivers and barriers of human behavior. We were so happy with this performance that we have not been actively advancing this method over many years. Until we set up a process that makes continuous improvement possible in small and often experimental steps. And now, many small steps have led to a remarkable improvement of our Psychodrama. For example, a couple of years ago, we understood the significance of behavioral contexts better and recently, saw the impact that efficiency motivation can have in these contexts more clearly. I am excited to see what we can achieve in the years ahead.

What self-image do you desire for the future? Which habits in which contexts will help you do this? What will you do to make the contexts obvious? How will you make your new habits attractive? And how can you make it all as frictionless as possible? You can look forward to success. I wish you a satisfying 2019, or even better, many satisfying years with small habits.

Sources:

1. https://www.statisticbrain.com/new-years-resolution-statistics/

2. https://itunes.apple.com/de/podcast/the-psychology-pod-cast/id942777522?mt=2&i=1000422094848

3. Ketogenic nutrition is a recent trend in the US that appears to make amazingly sustainable changes in obesity. The closed group of Ketogains on Facebook presents astonishing progress with a sufficient focus on the process: https://www.facebook.com/groups/ketogains/

   If you are looking for more information on Keto, I would gladly send you a couple of good links

Book recommendations

by Ralph Ohnemus:

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