IRRATIONAL LABS

The 3B Framework

Designing for Behavior Change

Find actionable paths to behavior change using the latest behavioral science research

Behavior change is hard.

If it wasn't, we'd all be trading our Netflix subscriptions for a Kindle and a Peloton.

Good news?

Thousands of companies are working to help us improve our health, wealth, and happiness.

Bad news?

They often fail for predictable reasons. We humans don't always act in our best interest.

The 3B Framework

Enter the 3B framework. It distills human psychology into a model that can help designers, marketers, and managers build better products.

There are 3 key elements to behavior change:

BEHAVIOR

BARRIERS

BENEFITS

- By studying the environment of decision making, identifying these core elements and designing your product around them, you can achieve real behavior change.
- The 3B framework draws on Irrational Labs' experience driving product success through behavioral economics principles.
- It incorporates key insights from psychology into a playbook for daily design and strategy decisions.
- We've taught it to hundreds of product managers at companies of all sizes and industries, like Google, the World Bank, and Aetna.

Questions You'll be Able to Answer Using the 3B Framework

- How can I increase uptake of a new feature or program?
- Why are people dropping off midway through the sign-up flow?
- How can I increase the chances that someone will engage with my product or service?
- People say they want this thing, but then they don't use it. How can I change that?

> *For product managers, designers and researchers, behavioral science is a shortcut to building successful solutions. It unlocks the psychology behind why our customers act (or don't act) and gives us the roadmap on what to build and test.*
>
> - **Kristen Berman**, Co-Founder of Irrational Labs

Partner with Irrational Labs

What's the real reason your users aren't taking action? Every product challenge hides a behavioral puzzle waiting to be solved. Using proven science, we diagnose root causes and design solutions that actually work. Our approach has helped tech giants, healthcare leaders, and global banks achieve breakthrough growth by changing user behavior. Curious to explore? Let's chat.

Reach out: https://irrationallabs.com/contact/ or hello@irrationallabs.com

Behavior | **Barriers** | **Benefits**

STEP 1:
Identify ONE Key **Behavior**

The first step consists of defining the exact behavior you want someone to do and when in the flow they should do it.

For the best results, be uncomfortably specific—if you're not a little uncomfortable, you're doing it wrong! See examples below.

Ask Yourself

- What one action do you want your users to take?
- Is this the single most important behavior for them to do to meet business goals?
- How often do you want the user to do this behavior? (Some only need to happen once, but others require habitual engagement.)

Examples of Key Behaviors

- Open a savings account during a first visit to the credit union.
- Complete two-factor authentication setup during first login.
- Add at least three items to cart before checkout.

As managers, we're great at aligning our work to outcomes. You're probably already tracking conversion, active use, and retention!

Now go a step further.

What action is needed to drive your outcomes? Track it rigorously.

The most important step to behavior change is tracking the behavior you seek to change!

Mistakes to Avoid

Designating 'Log-in' and 'Sign-up' as behaviors to design for.

Don't optimize for these behaviors. Instead, define what you want users to do after logging in or signing up. For example, you might want them to send a message, complete an onboarding quiz, or engage in two pieces of content.

Not aligning with all stakeholders on an agreed-on behavior.

People within the same organization often don't align on the same behavior, at least initially. Make sure everyone is on the same page from day one. Engineering might want to optimize for performance, Product might want to optimize for new features, Design might want to optimize for ease of use. Align on ONE key behavior with all stakeholders.

Not being specific enough.

'Use the app more' won't cut it. Aim for the clearer 'Open the app and complete one exercise every weekday morning'.

Tip: Add timing. When should someone do this behavior?

Mistaking an outcome for a behavior.

An outcome is 'reducing acquisition cost below $16' or 'increase retention by 20%'. What behavior will help produce the outcome? An example would be "have users complete their profile within 3 days of signing up".

What if I don't know the key behavior?

A key behavior is the most important part of behavior change. So it makes sense if you're not 100% sure on day one what that behavior is! But, if you design for the wrong key behavior you won't drive your outcomes, so getting that behavior right is critical.

For example imagine you wanted to help your customers lose weight and you identified a key behavior to walk for 10 minutes a day. While this may benefit health, it won't take off the pounds.

Unsure what the behavior is? Prioritize a few hypotheses that are informed by:

1. data on how people behave today
2. academic literature on the domain, and
3. a behavior map outlining the steps you think your customers are taking.

Now that you've prioritized your hypotheses, decide on your key behavior and outcome and list them here:

The key behavior I'm designing for is: _____

The outcome I want to achieve is this: _____

STEP 2:
Reduce **Barriers**

Barriers are the things that stand in path of achieving our key behavior. The thought process of deciding where to go for dinner is a psychological barrier. Walking or driving to a restaurant is a logistical barrier but also involves a decision.

To create the path of least resistance for any key behavior for your user or consumer, remove or simplify as many barriers as possible. The path of least resistance in your product should lead to your desired key behavior. Humans often take the path of least resistance—the easiest action is the one we're likeliest to take. To design for behavior change, reduce or remove barriers entirely.

> **TAKEAWAY:**
> Barriers are points of friction! They slow us down.

While there are countless psychological barriers (also called cognitive biases) that may be at play, we've listed some common themes here along with questions to ask to get at your true list of barriers.

Common Barriers and the Questions to Ask for Each

- ### Attention Bias

  People have limited attention spans and it's easy to miss key details. Ask these questions to see if attention bias is a problem for your key behavior.

  - Do people remember it? (Availability bias)
  - Do people see it? (Saliency Bias)
  - Do people want to see it? (Information Avoidance)

> ***Example:*** *You're trying to get people to use a new budgeting feature on your banking app, but people don't actually want to know how much they are spending each month.*

- ## Cognitive Overload

We're wired to limit our cognitive effort. When given higher levels of decision difficulty or more complex choices, we often procrastinate or opt out of taking action. Is cognitive overload a problem for your key behavior? Ask these questions to find out:

- Is the best option clear? (Choice Overload)
- Do people lack time/energy? (Scarcity, Depletion)
- Do people lack the confidence to decide now? (Procrastination, Decision Paralysis)

Example: *Your enterprise SaaS offers 5 pricing tiers with dozens of features to compare, making it difficult for customers to decide what's right for them. They decide to "review later" but then never return.*

- ## Status Quo

We have a natural bias toward keeping things the way they are. We often view a change from the status quo as a loss. Is status quo bias a problem for your key behavior? Ask these questions to find out:

- Do people realize the opportunity cost of staying in the status quo? (Opportunity Cost Neglect)
- Are there potential losses from moving away from the status quo? (Loss Aversion, Regret Aversion, Sunk Costs)
- Is it easy for people to switch? (Cognitive Overload, Decision Paralysis)

Example: *You're designing a way for people to re-sell their old clothing. People don't know the value of that old dress in their closet. The status quo behavior is to not do anything.*

- ## Mental Models

Mental models are our preconceived notions about how something should work. These mental models are often based on incomplete facts, visible norms, past experiences, and even intuition. They influence what people pay attention to and how they problem-solve. Are they a problem for your key behavior? Ask these questions to find out:

- How do users think about solving their problem today?
- What do users expect to do based on competitors products?
- What analogies or metaphors can help make it easy to understand what you're offering?

Example: *Users expect an AI meeting summarizer to capture everything perfectly like a human assistant would, so when it occasionally misses context or nuance, they abandon it entirely rather than seeing it as a helpful first draft.*

Mistakes to Avoid

- **Forgetting that decision points are barriers.**

  Every time a user has to make a decision, it adds friction that could decrease completions of your key behavior. That may not be bad (see below), but all decision points should be documented nonetheless.

- **Dismissing all friction as bad.**

  In some cases, friction serves an important purpose. It allows people to carefully consider an action, or provide a sense of progress towards a larger goal. Use friction wisely to nudge users towards the path of least resistance.

Now that you've learned about some psychological barriers, write down the largest ones that are preventing your key behavior.

Barriers to completing the key behavior that my users might face:

Now that you've identified the barriers, prioritize them. Take your top barriers and brainstorm how you could:

REMOVE them entirely	-- OR --	SIMPLIFY the decision
Any small step is a barrier. We often include steps that can be done at a later time (i.e. after sign up), or include actions that don't really need to happen (i.e. filling out separate billing and shipping addresses). Removing choices and decisions can really shorten the path of least resistance. *For example, we removed an open text field from a sign-up form that asked people about their business. The question seemed simple, but required customers to think a little. It wasn't critical to onboarding, so we removed it. Result: page-over-page conversion went up 40%.*		If you can't remove choices, or if a little choice is useful, consider helping your users decide: • Recommend an option. Set a default choice that users can change if they need to. • Share what other people are choosing (e.g. a 'Most Popular' or 'Recommended' tag). • Add brief, helpful information describing the option in a relatable way, like a 'Best if you come 3+ times/week' tag on a fitness class package. • Reduce options. Instead of 5 choices, give 3.

Behavior | Barriers | Benefits

STEP 3:
Amplify **Benefits**

Where barriers add friction, benefits add the motivation to complete a key behavior. But not all benefits are created equal. Given two similar rewards, people tend to prefer the immediate one and discount the later one's value. No matter how much we may *want* to help our future self, in the moment we generally pick what's immediately most enjoyable.

Just think about your current Netflix library.

You've probably saved documentaries and arthouse films to watch later. When you need to relax after a long day, you're much likelier to watch a light-hearted rom-com or guilty-pleasure reality show.

So what does this mean for you as you try to change behaviors?

You need to make any existing benefits of your product salient and immediate or create new ones, and make sure they outweigh the costs/barriers. To drive longer-term benefits, focus on creating a perceived immediate one from a non-immediate one.

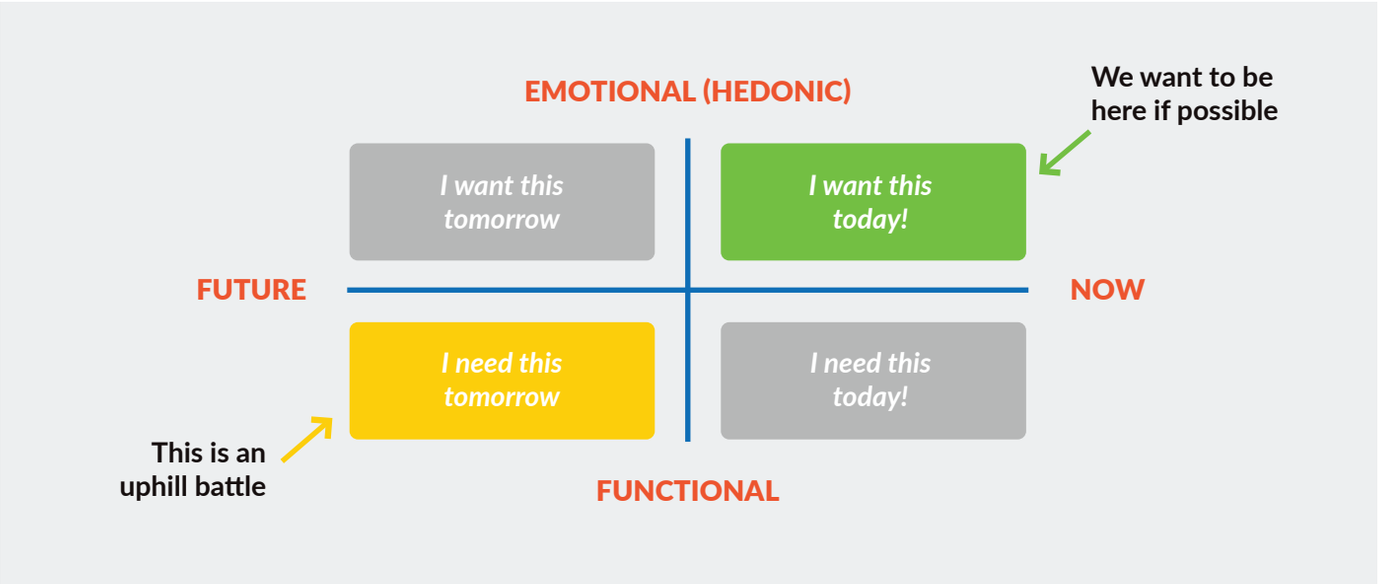
What are we talking about?

Good dental hygiene is a long-term benefit, but is that why we brush our teeth? Of course not. We do it to have fresh breath *now*. Brushing our teeth gives us an immediate and tangible reward, the main driver of consistent toothbrushing, while also contributing to the long-term goal of dental hygiene.

> **TAKEAWAY:** Sometimes we need to reframe our product and give people the right choice for the wrong reasons.

Remember

'Benefits' need not always be literal, like money or goods. Psychological benefits (like following norms, reputation, and altruism) can also serve as motivating benefits. In fact, psychological benefits are often the most powerful ones!



Common types of benefits

Concrete Benefits

People are motivated by clear, tangible improvements. Ask these questions to identify functional benefits:

- Does it save time or reduce effort?
- Does it improve performance?
- Are users getting more for less?

Example: *An AI meeting assistant doesn't just transcribe calls - it immediately surfaces action items in your task manager and shows you how many follow-ups it automatically created versus what you'd have to do manually.*

Social Benefits

People are heavily influenced by others. Ask these questions to identify social benefits:

- Does it provide recognition?
- Does it foster connection?
- Does it leverage social proof?

Example: *An enterprise software training platform shows a team leaderboard of completed certifications, turning individual learning into friendly team competition.*

Emotional Benefits

People make decisions based on feelings more than logic. Ask these questions to identify emotional benefits:

- Does it provide immediate satisfaction?
- Does it boost confidence?
- Does it increase trust?

Example: *A personal finance app celebrates when users check their accounts daily, making them feel accomplished about building good habits, rather than just showing their balance.*

Timely Benefits

Benefits should be felt immediately as opposed to only in the future. Ask these questions to help ensure you are being timely:

- Can you quantify future value now?
- Can you celebrate a win for your user right away?
- What's immediate proof that something is working?

Example: *We have a new ergonomic keyboard that improves posture. While people know better posture is good for them, the immediate benefit is faster typing.*

Mistakes to Avoid

- **Ignoring psychological benefits.**
  As mentioned above, psychological or social benefits, like fitting in or feeling good about yourself/your reputation, are often stronger than more tangible benefits.
- **Overdoing it.**
  People will respond to urgent deadlines, social recognition. But if you make everything urgent or social, they will catch on and you'll lose trust and customers. Use benefits authentically and tastefully to augment your product, not replace it.

List your existing benefits. How can you make them more concrete, emotional, social or immediate?

Brainstorm new immediate benefits you could create. What would motivate someone to take action now?

3Bs

BEHAVIOR

We can't solve problems without identifying the behavior that needs to be changed.

BARRIERS

Barriers add or decrease friction to completing a behavior. TL;DR: make it easy for me to do!

BENEFITS

Benefits add or decrease motivation to completing the behavior. TLDR: make me want to do it!

Time to start building new behaviors!

You're on your way to impacting behavior change for good! Your understanding of these principles will help you create more effective solutions to improve your key behavior's uptake. Product managers are choice architects. We believe you have a responsibility to educate yourself on the human psyche. This is just a peek into the world of behavioral design.

If you're looking to learn more, check out our online 8-week Behavioral Design course, where you'll learn and apply the 3B framework to your specific business challenge. Learn more: https://behavioraleconomicsbootcamp.com:

If you're looking to solve your biggest challenges hand-in-hand with our team of experts, work directly with us. We work deeply with companies, organizations and governments to diagnose behavioral problems, design and validate solutions and bring them to scale.

Reach out: https://irrationallabs.com/contact/

About Irrational Labs

Irrational Labs is a behavioral product design consultancy. We have helped top companies incorporate behavioral design in their workflow. We have run 100+ experiments to identify effective solutions that drive business and customer metrics and conducted hundreds of trainings inside big and small companies.

Email: hello@irrationallabs.com

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irrationallabs.com

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