

**MRS Awards 2024**  
New Consumer Insights  
**Finalist**

**Google**  
**The Behavioural Architects**

## **Surpassing Expectations in the Messy Middle: Decoding Decisions Research Programme**

### **Summary**

Google and The Behavioural Architect's latest Decoding Decisions research breaks new ground by exploring how brands can leverage behavioural science and first-party data to thrive in a rapidly evolving, AI-driven future. We went beyond traditional research methods, creating fully functioning websites for invented brands and even hiring actors to simulate customer service interactions. Our unique methodologies, which included re-surveying respondents two weeks after the study to assess lasting impressions, provide revealing insights into the enduring impact of brand experiences.

Our findings demonstrate the remarkable power of personalised and relevant brand experiences. We discovered that enhancing the relevance of marketing messaging and personalising purchase and service interactions using a combination of first-party data and behavioural science can dramatically shift brand preference, improve key satisfaction metrics and create lasting memories that drive brand loyalty.

This research provides a roadmap for brands navigating the evolving marketing landscape. By leveraging the findings and using best-in-class expressions of behavioural science and first-party data, brands can not only meet but surpass consumer expectations, driving lasting engagement and building powerful brand advocates in an increasingly competitive environment. This research delivers actionable insights that can help brands thrive in this new era.

### **Synopsis**

**The Challenge:** The marketing landscape is rapidly evolving. With the growth of AI and rising consumer expectations for personalised experiences, brands face a critical challenge: how to deliver truly relevant and engaging experiences across every touchpoint.

**The Solution:** Our Decoding Decisions research program tackles this challenge head-on. Our latest research, "Surpassing Expectations in the Messy Middle," goes beyond our previous findings to examine how brands can leverage behavioural science and consented

first-party data to win share and build brand loyalty. We explore strategies for success in the "messy middle" – where consumers actively explore and evaluate their options – as well as during the crucial purchase and checkout phases and those challenging post purchase help experiences. Furthermore, we delve into how behavioural science impacts customer memories and perceptions, shaping ratings, reviews, and ultimately, future purchasing decisions.

## **Our 2024 Research: A Deep Dive into the Power of First-Party Data and Behavioural Science**

### **Surpassing Expectations Utilising First-Party Data in the Messy Middle**

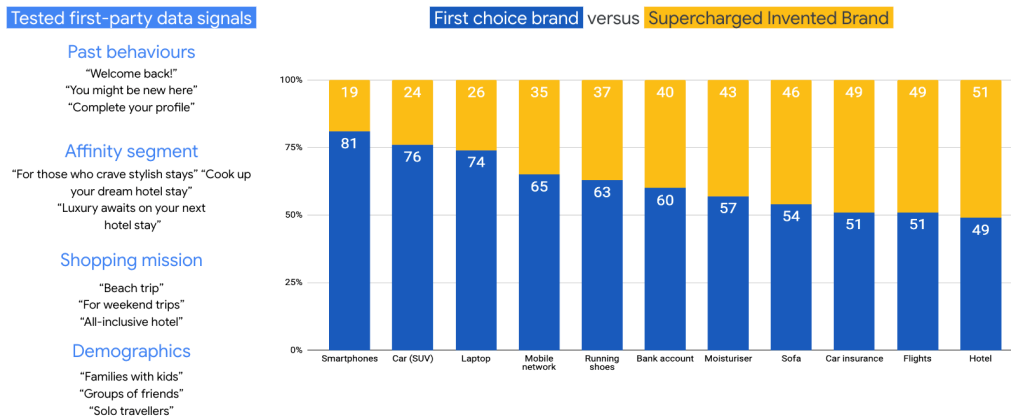
In our previous Decoding Decisions research, we presented information to consumers without personalising it based on their individual preferences. This time, we explored the potential of leveraging first-party data to tailor messaging in the 'messy middle' of decision making, when consumers are exploring and evaluating what to buy.

Before participating in our simulations, we collected information about each respondent's interests, shopping mission, and past brand interactions. We then used this data to power a conjoint design, presenting respondents with a decision-making simulation within which we customised the information presented to each individual, including:

- **Personalised Category Heuristics:** We tailored category heuristics to match each respondent's preferences. For example, if a respondent expressed a strong interest in a hotel with 'a breakfast buffet', our invented brand included those features in its messaging.
- **Demographic and Behavioural Relevance:** We also included messaging on a more personal level, tailored to past behaviours, affinities and hobbies, their current shopping mission, and demographics.

The results were striking [Figure 1]. Across 11 different categories, a significant portion of consumers – from 19% of smartphone buyers to 51% of hotel buyers – expressed a willingness to switch from their first-choice brand to a brand they had never heard of when that brand's proposition was personalised with behavioural science, heuristics, and signals infused with collected first-party data.

Figure 1: With first-party data and behavioural science, invented brands can win significant share of preference



Source: Google/The Behavioural Architects, First party data in the messy middle, Apr 2024, n=5500, in-market shoppers, UK

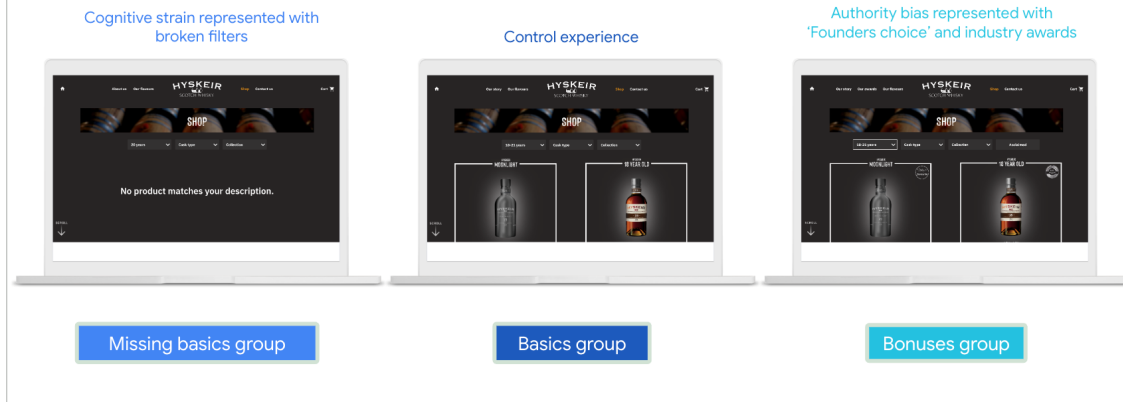
This compelling evidence demonstrates the immense potential of first-party data to drive brand preference and create a competitive advantage in the "messy middle" where consumers are actively exploring and evaluating their options.

### Surpassing Expectations at Point of Purchase

To understand how behavioural science and first-party data influence perception at the point of purchase, we created fully functioning websites for invented brands in the sofa, car insurance, and whisky categories. We then divided shoppers into three groups [Figure 2]:

- "Missing the Basics" Group: This group encountered a frustrating online shopping experience. They navigated a website with annoying loading wheels, sold-out products, broken filters, and even a simulated website crash during checkout.
- "Basics" Group (Control): This group experienced a website with basic functionality, including autofill payment details and delivery information, simulating the use of some first-party data.
- "Bonuses" Group: This group experienced a website enhanced with behavioural science "bonuses," including industry awards, star ratings, customer reviews, and a low-cost "free gift" for new customers, simulating the ability of the brand to leverage first-party data and identify and reward new customers.

Figure 2: three website experiences for invented Whisky brand “Hyskeir”



## The Results:

The "Missing the Basics" group had significantly lower agreement scores than the "Basics" group for statements like "the payment and checkout process was easy" and "the website was easy to navigate." Importantly, these negative perceptions lingered, even two weeks after the study when we re-surveyed respondents.

The "Bonuses" group, on the other hand, showed significantly higher scores for statements like "reviews from consumer watchdogs and magazines helped me choose" and "customer reviews helped me choose." These positive impressions also remained two weeks later, with some respondents even remembering the awards and reviews more clearly than they had immediately after "completing the purchase."

This experiment highlights the enduring impact of website experiences on consumer perception and the significant potential of behavioural science and first-party data to enhance brand perception at the point of purchase.

## Surpassing Expectations Post Purchase

To understand the impact of post-purchase help experiences, we created a controlled environment where actors played the role of customer service agents. After purchasing a respective sofa, bottle of whisky, or obtaining a car insurance quote, we presented our respondents with a problem (a ripped sofa, a broken whisky bottle seal, or expired car insurance claims) that required them to contact customer service.

We designed three distinct help experiences:

- "Missing the Basics" Group: Shoppers experienced a frustratingly inefficient help experience. They were placed in a virtual queue, told agents were busy, and required to repeatedly state their name, postcode, address, and order number – information

that could have been readily available with proper first-party data capture at purchase.

- "Basics" Group (Control): This group experienced a streamlined help process that used information collected during the purchase journey to speed up the interaction and reduce friction.
- "Bonuses" Group: This group received personalised and empathetic service. Agents apologised for the issue, used the customer's name throughout the conversation, and offered a free gift at the end of the call – leveraging the "peak-end rule" to create a positive final impression.

### **The Results:**

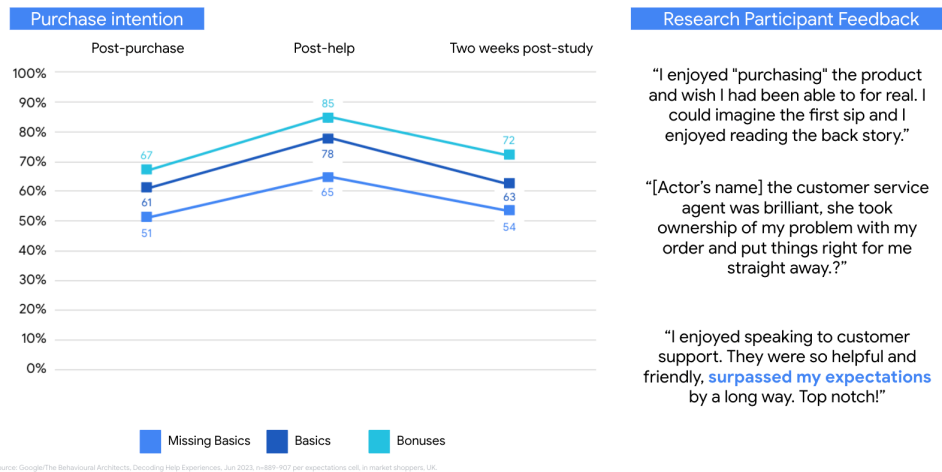
The "Missing the Basics" group experienced double-digit declines in key satisfaction and NPS metrics compared to the "Basics" group, highlighting the detrimental impact of frustrating customer service experiences. Businesses invest heavily in improving these metrics but can easily undermine their efforts with poorly designed help experiences.

The "Bonuses" group, on the other hand, demonstrated significant improvements in key metrics, showcasing the power of personalised, empathetic, and efficient customer service in driving positive brand perceptions. This finding underscores the crucial role that post-purchase interactions play in shaping brand loyalty and advocacy.

Our Decoding Decisions research consistently demonstrates the strength of social proof as a behavioural science principle. While a smaller percentage of customers may require customer service, these individuals are disproportionately likely to leave ratings and reviews that influence other potential buyers.

Surprisingly, even when we intentionally provided a negative customer service experience - across both purchase and help journeys - we saw a remarkable outcome. Despite experiencing a poorly designed website experience, and a poorly resolved problem, respondents consistently reported a more positive overall impression of the brand than they had at the start of the study. [Figure 3]

Figure 3: Any resolved help experience results in positive increases in purchase intention



This suggests that engaging with a brand, even through challenging touch points like customer service, can have a surprisingly positive impact on brand perception. Our respondents expressed genuine enjoyment during the experience, highlighting the emotional impact of customer interactions.

This reinforces the notion that purchase and customer experience are emotional journeys that can significantly influence brand perception and loyalty.

### Conclusion:

Our latest Decoding Decisions research consistently highlights the powerful potential of ethically sourced first-party data and behavioural science to deliver real brand value.

In today's crowded marketing landscape, where capturing attention is increasingly difficult, these strategies offer a powerful way for brands to differentiate themselves. However, to truly scale the impact of these insights and deliver the right message to the right consumer at the right time, we believe artificial intelligence will play a critical role.

These findings showcase how brands can leverage AI to unlock the next chapter of personalised, engaging customer experiences, powered by behavioural science and first-party data.

### Impact:

Whilst we originally piloted all 3 studies in the UK, demand from Google partners and customers has meant we have already scaled the research globally. The First-party data in

the Messy Middle study has been scaled to 10 countries, and there is incredible demand for a way to leverage AI to scale the purchase and post purchase research.

And the activation of the research is only really beginning. Since May we have presented the combined findings of the research at over 15 events with customers and industry peers across the region, including Google Marketing Live EMEA (Google's flagship advertising event in Dublin, >300 F2F audience), Think Travel (Google's premier event for travel customers in Barcelona, >360 FTF audience), and the 2024 MRS Behavioural Science Summit, with a strong pipeline of 1:1 customer and large scale in-person and digital events planned for the rest of the year and into 2025.

We intend to publish our ebook "Surpassing Expectations in the Messy Middle" in early 2025 on Think with Google, and hope that it will generate as much global interest as its predecessor "Marketing in the messy middle" (>26k unique viewers, >15k downloads) and "Making sense of the Messy Middle" (>1m unique viewers, >100k downloads)

*"This research is incredibly fascinating, and it's re-shaped my thinking in how we approach our customer service scripts. There are so many optimisations we could leverage and aren't." CEO large travel company*

*"My final (and probably favourite) highlight [From GML] has to be the talk from [Google] about the importance of leveraging heuristics and behavioural science to surpass consumer expectations throughout the 'messy middle'. I look forward to reading their 3rd report when it's released soon." Founder of Paid Media Agency*