

Inside the FP Story Podcast

Listener Questions - Episode 2: Behavioral Economics

[Intro to Q&A Episodes]

I'm Sarah Harlan, Partnerships Team Lead with the Knowledge SUCCESS Project.

Welcome to our second question and answer episode for *Inside the FP Story*. While we work on Season 4 of the podcast, which will launch in late September, we are responding to some questions from our audiences.

Do you have your own story to share about a challenge or experience working in family planning? Write to us at info@knowledgesuccess.org with your questions, comments, or stories—and your entry may be featured on the podcast.

This episode we're addressing questions about user design and behavioral economics. During our Knowledge SUCCESS storytelling presentations, we often get questions about how to best create content to apply to a range of audiences. So we've invited our Knowledge SUCCESS colleague Maryam Yusuf from Busara Center for Behavioral Economics to talk to us about this topic. Here's the conversation I had with Maryam.

[First Question: Learning Preferences, Designing Quality Content Products]

Maryam Yusuf

Thank you, Sarah. It's great to be on this interview with you. So thank you for having me.

Sarah Harlan

Thank you for joining me. So you work in behavioral economics. Can you briefly explain to our listeners what that term means?

Maryam Yusuf

Yes, I can. So behavioral economics is just the merging of economics and principles of psychology. So just to break it down [for] people who are familiar with economics and for those who are not, economics just teaches us about how the world works and how people make decisions in different markets and different systems. It really just helps us to understand how the world works on a granular and more high level perspective. And economics is pretty much based on many different types of theories and principles on how people make decisions and how people demand and supply goods and services. But over time, we have seen that, you know, people don't always comply to the

hypotheses that we have. People don't always comply to the theories of economics that we hold in such high esteem and behavioral economics is just breaking down economics from a human centered perspective, really, to help us understand how people behave in reality. So beyond the principles of economics and the theories of economics, how do people actually behave in real life? And I think that's what behavioral economics stands for at its core. It's really to understand human decision making—the practicality of human decision making and how people actually interact with one another in a real world setting. So I would say behavioral economics is like a melding of psychology—so understanding human thinking and human behavior—and principles of economics. And from that, from behavioral economics, we also have the discipline of behavioral science, which also stems from many disciplines including cognitive psychology, social psychology, anthropology, consumer behavior. It really is understanding human behavior through the process of observation and experimentation. When thinking of behavioral science, think of “behavior” as the outcome and “science” as the process in achieving the desired behavior. The process involves observation and experimentation.

Sarah Harlan

That was really helpful. So this podcast is geared towards those who work in family planning. Why is behavioral economics important for this work, particularly related to knowledge management and information sharing for family planning?

Maryam Yusuf

That is a great question and I'm glad that you brought that up. So behavioral economics or behavioral science—I'll speak mostly about behavioral science, which is an aspect of behavioral economics. So behavioral science is really about understanding human behavior and decision making— and family planning, what really is the importance of the value of family planning is that it really empowers individuals and couples to take control of their reproductive health and to build sustainable families and to make the right choices around the number of children they want to have that is sustainable for themselves. And if we think of behavioral science as the tool to drive behavior change, the link between the two is that behavioral economics or the principles of behavioral science can now be applied to really help both policymakers and end users—number one, understanding, you know what the barriers and enablers are to the uptake of family planning. Then understanding how we can improve information sharing and knowledge and understanding around family planning so that it's more accessible so that it's more social and people understand the options that they have around family planning and also enable policymakers and program managers to implement successful and efficient family planning programs that meet the needs of the different audiences that they work with.

Sarah Harlan

Thank you. That makes a lot of sense and it's clear that we need to be using behavioral science in all of our family planning work. And on the Knowledge SUCCESS project. As you know, we work with Busara and with FHI 360 and with Amref on knowledge management. And in knowledge management, we create a lot of content. So when we're

creating content, whether it's written audio, visual or something else, how can we account for the different ways that people absorb knowledge and how would behavioral science help us in this process.

Maryam Yusuf

Yeah, wonderful. I mean it's something that a lot of, you know, organizations and different professionals across different sectors and fields have to deal with how do they communicate effectively with their audiences? How do they create solutions that are well received? And I think the beauty of behavioral science is that, as I said at the beginning, it is the process of understanding human behavior through, number one observation, and then through experimentation. And that in itself just means an iterative process of design, an iterative process of understanding the audiences that you're working with. So as you try to develop platforms or dissemination platforms or programs or solutions for different audiences that have different learning preferences or different preferences in the way they want to engage with information, it's an iterative process and it requires observation. So continually having your hand on the pulse or the heartbeat of the audience that you're engaging with across different continents. Because we understand that context is very key when it comes to designing solutions, so the preferences and the learning styles that work best may be in East Africa or or West Africa may not necessarily work best in Southeast Asia for example. You know, the certain context of how people engage with one another in Southeast Asia or the cultural dynamics or just what is accessible in certain areas of the world really speaks to the kind of solutions that you can design.

So I think the first step is really observing the audiences. And that can be done through engaging them directly—qualitative studies speaking to certain segments of the audience that you're dealing with, really understanding their perspective. What is accessible to them, what is feasible and what is easy for them to engage with? And then contextualizing the information that you're providing. So providing local contextual, local context, infusing local context in how you're presenting information, providing local examples, using local testimonials, adapting information to what is accessible within those communities, what is accessible within a particular region. And then, you know, I think we'll talk about this a little bit more, but you know, there are lots of great frameworks that have emerged out of the discipline of behavioral science that really helps us to develop knowledge management solutions that are more effective. And one of those frameworks is called the EAST framework. But I'll just hold off now and maybe we can talk about that a little bit later.

Sarah Harlan

Yeah, that sounds great. We can definitely explore the EAST framework more, but it's clear from what you just said that we really need to get to know our audiences. And so I think that's a really key point. So from your perspective, what are some best practices that you've seen in user design that can help us reach our audiences with the information that they need in the format that they most prefer.

Maryam Yusuf

Great. Thanks, Sarah. And I think this ties in nicely to what we were discussing. So I think that there are many different you know as the discipline of behavioral science continues to grow and a lot more research is being done across different sectors and fields where we're seeing a lot of interesting recommendations and frameworks that can help in refining how solutions are being created and also refining how we can make more human centered solutions. But I think one of the frameworks that I was going to talk about is the EAST framework, and the EAST framework came out of the behavioral science, the Behavioral Insights team, which is a very leading, I would say, a well established behavioral science consulting firm. It started off in the Cabinet Office of the United Kingdom and eventually branched out to become an independent consulting body. But they kind of curated or coined the EAST framework, which is E-A-S-T. And it stands for easy, attractive, social and timely. It's pretty much become a staple in the behavioral science community to really help shape how solutions are designed or how we think about the process of catering to an audience or designing or helping drive behavior change for different audiences. And I'll just talk through very briefly [about] how this could apply to knowledge management and the family planning community in general.

So the first being EASY—easy is just self-explanatory. When you're trying to drive behavior change or when you're trying to encourage people to take up different solutions or engage with information you want to make it as easy as possible. That means simplifying the process, simplifying the content that you're trying to share. How can you break it down to its core component so that it's easy for them to digest? This could be through visuals, removing hassle factors that they have to go through to engage with this information. And then also defaults, so making it easy for people to access and make the decision to use whatever solution that you're designing. So I'm sure we're all familiar with the opt out pension plans we're all familiar with subscriptions that sign you up and then you have to be the one to sign out. So making things defaults helps to take out that hesitation that people kind of face, when they have to make a decision that they're not necessarily sure of. When they're enrolled into something and then they experience it rather than having to make the decision on whether to enroll or not. And then you have just making things more accessible. So what's the reach? If you find that you're working with a within a community of practice where engaging with information through live engagements or in-person engagements is not really efficient because people can't make it there, they they can't transport themselves there or it's very difficult for people to get from one end of a town to another end of a town. So how can you make knowledge sharing it and engagement with knowledge management activities more efficient for them, and more accessible for them? So thinking around defaults, simplification, and accessibility helps to make things easy.

And then making things ATTRACTIVE—so personalization really works well. And I guess the twin of personalization is context, so contextualizing and personalizing

information making it relevant to the specific audience group that you're working with, rather than just generalized information really helps. And then trying to think of how you're framing the information—how is it framed? There are many different ways that you can present information. You have to think about how the audience is receiving it? And this is why we—you said it earlier, Sarah, that observing and interacting with the audiences and knowing your audience very well is really key. And one of the things that you can do is just have focus group discussions and see how these audiences are receiving the information? Is the way the information is being framed, is it framed in the best way to attract the attention of the audiences that we're engaging and then also rewards and incentives can also really help to mobilize engagement and get people you know active. And actively seeking and participating with the information that you're sharing. So that's one aspect of making things attractive.

And then SOCIAL—what we mean by making things social is just social proof. Showing people that it is a norm. Showing people that whatever behavior that you're trying to encourage or whatever action that you're trying to encourage is socially acceptable. It's being done by other people. So there's some kind of social proof either through testimonials, sharing feedback from their peers, their community reminding people of their social identity and how the behavior changes that you're trying to drive is being driven by people with similar social identities.

And then finally, just making things TIMELY—really being sensitive to when the best time is to introduce new solutions, when the best time is to engage people, engage different audiences, and then how to leverage and maximize the time that you have with different audiences.

Sarah Harlan

Great. That's very helpful. So easy, attractive, social, and timely. We can keep that in mind as we design our family planning content for our audiences. I think that's a really helpful acronym and framework. So thank you for talking us through that. So just to give an example of how we might use this framework, what are some things we should keep in mind if we're designing something like a web page versus a podcast like this. Are there examples of things that we should be looking at and how can behavioral science help us?

Maryam Yusuf

Thank you. Sarah. I think that's a great question. I would say with websites, when you're dealing with any kind of interface where people have to navigate themselves, it's really important that you reduce the hassle factors and you reduce the burden that they go through when they engage with content. So with a website, the audience has the responsibility of finding the information they need. They are the ones that have to navigate, sift through the information, go through the various tabs and the menus to find what they're looking for and to really connect and engage with your content. And you can't hold their hand whilst they're surfing the Internet and guide them to the nuggets

and the great pieces on your website, so you need to make sure that those great pieces are featured up front. And you want to reduce the hassle factors. You want to make it as easy as possible for any audience to navigate through the website that you present or the online interfaces that you present to them. And one of the most important things is reducing whatever hassle factors may be in the way. So for example, if there are layers and layers of filters that people need to go through to find what they're looking for, if the structure and the way the the website pages are organized isn't intuitive and it's not very obvious where to get the information that they're seeking—so very complex structures and how information is organized on the website pages really diminishes the interest and the attraction that people have in engaging with content on such websites. So those are examples of how you can reduce hassle factors.

And then another thing that we try to look into is how can we reduce choice overload. So choice overload just simply means that, when people are presented with too many options or too much information at one go, they kind of switch off, they disengage. And this happens a lot. I'm sure you've gone on to websites and you know, there's so much going on, you know, you're just distracted and there's a lot of things coming at you and you just don't know how to take it all in. Or even when you're at a grocery shop and you know you want to get some toothpaste. But you're in this aisle with thousands of different brands, different packaging, different uses, different flavors. And you're just wondering, OK, which toothpaste do I get? It's the same feeling when you're overwhelmed with a lot of information at any particular site or or any particular online platform. So you want to reduce that process, that mental fatigue, you want to reduce that internal decision making that people have to make of what do I choose? Where do I go? How do I navigate? What do I do? You want to make it as direct as possible. And that means limiting the content that you're putting on each screen. So drawing their attention to the most important pieces of information on every screen page is really important. And making sure that you're catching their eye for the right reasons, catching their eyes for the most important content that they need. And you can kind of work backwards and think, OK, what are the different groups of audiences that I'm trying to appeal to? And what does each audience, what do you think each audience wants to gain from this web page? What is it that they're most likely coming to get from my website and then kind of work backwards from there and try and make sure that you are designing it in such a way that it is intuitive, it's easy to access the information they need, and the barriers and the number of hoops that they have to go through to to get what they need are minimized. It's difficult when you know, a very comprehensive website that has a lot of different pieces of information. But that's just one step that you can take to make sure that it's easier for people to engage with the websites and they get whatever it is, whatever information that they need.

And then secondly for podcasts or for forms of information dissemination or platforms which don't require as much navigation. So for example, for a podcast or a live stream where all they need to do is just log in and listen, you're less focused on the hassle factors and more focused on visibility. So how can you get people aware that this is

happening? How can you raise people's interest in logging into these podcasts and listening? How can you raise the level of engagement so that people can participate in these podcasts? And that just means leaning more towards the attraction. How can you build attraction, build interest—make it social for example, showing other people that their peers are engaging with these platforms, giving social proof, creating a sense of social norms around engaging in these kinds of podcasts and participating is really important. And then also thinking about what kind of features discourage people from engaging with podcasts or live interactive events, and what are the features that encourage people? So as part of the work that we did with Knowledge SUCCESS, we tried to mimic the current fail fests in one of our experiments by inviting a group of professionals to share some of their professional failures in a live session. So in a live online session. And we randomized the professionals into two main groups. One of the groups they could join the session and volunteer to share their failures, and in the other group, not only did they have to share their failures, but they also had to participate in a live Q&A where after sharing their failures, people could ask questions about the failure, kind of put them on the spot and make them answer, make them kind of defend what they've said around the failures. And we found that most people were less likely or or less willing to engage in that live stream or live podcast if they knew that they had to have a Q&A afterwards and they would be put on the spot and have to answer questions about their failure. So as minor as that detail was, it did make a difference between the number of people that were willing to put themselves forward and share their failures and the number of people that were not willing. So just bearing in mind what features or or what, how these podcasts are being structured—is it making it open and and are you making people feel comfortable to engage and participate is really important. And the way you do that is just through interactive engagement. So having small sessions with people, maybe instead of having very large sessions having much smaller sessions and seeing how people engage and then seeing how you can scale that up into more larger podcast sessions or or larger interactive sessions.

Sarah Harlan

Thank you so much and I'm glad that you mentioned sharing failures, because one reason we started this podcast was to make people aware of both what works and what doesn't work in family planning so we can learn and improve from our failures. And as you mentioned, we are doing work around sharing failures in the Knowledge SUCCESS project, including a series of fail fests. And your comments about hassle factors and choice overload—those were also really insightful as well. That's very important for all of our work as we want to make it easy for our audiences to engage with our content, whether it's audio, written, visuals, infographics, videos or interactive content.

So my final question relates to these different content types. You mentioned the term learning preferences earlier. Do you have any information or advice on addressing different learning preferences as we reach global audiences with information about family planning and reproductive health?

Maryam Yusuf

Yes, it's something that we have kind of tried to explore with our engagement with Knowledge SUCCESS. We tried to explore how we can be more sensitive to learning preferences— or how we termed it, learning styles— of different audiences because we want to maximize engagement, we want to maximize the impact of our knowledge management and the information that we're trying to share with different audiences. And here are different learning styles. Some people learn more visually. Some people learn better when they receive information through audio. Some people learn better through just discussion. Some people learn better through written work or written text. Does this mean that we have to create content under each of these learning styles? Not necessarily. But it's important that we provide at least a variety of options for the audiences that we work with. And the most important thing is understanding and empathy. So trying to understand, how do these audiences engage with information? Number one. What is feasible? Number two. So it could be that some audiences engage very well with videos or visual content or watching videos and watching podcasts. But maybe the accessibility isn't that great for them. So Internet connectivity and things like that and access to mobile devices or being digitally connected in that sense. So what is the next best step? Could we create focus group discussions that help disseminate the content that we're delivering at a global scale in a local context. Could it be that if we organize, if we have like sort of these global [or] regional seminars or podcasts, can we replicate this on a more granular level at the different communities of practice that work across the different regions. That's one of the ways that you could start thinking about learning styles, so seeing how we can adapt the learning styles that are most accessible to the different audiences that we engage with. And then how can we make sure that it's still disseminating the same level and quality of content that we want them to receive.

So learning styles, it's important to keep it in mind. It's important to number one, understand your audience, as you've said, Sarah, really dig deep and see what learning styles are not just preferred, but what learning styles are actually feasible and practical, in terms of sustainability and then seeing how you can adapt. What you're currently offer, do we have the budget and is there scope to diversify the way that we present information. And if not, how can we adapt so that the learning styles that we currently do offer are a little bit more accessible or easier for people to engage with? And I guess improve the preference level that people have for the learning styles that are actually available and accessible. But it will be really interesting to know how you're thinking about this, Sarah? Because I know that you and a lot of the other teammates and colleagues that I've been working with are thinking really deeply and intentionally about learning styles and engaging with audiences and understanding audiences more. So it'd be interesting to see your perspective on this.

Sarah Harlan

Yeah. Well, I think about learning styles a lot and I really appreciate your insights and your take on learning styles. As someone who does a lot of writing and content creation

for the Knowledge SUCCESS project, I think about this a lot. I also think about it a lot on a personal level because I really learn best when I hear things, which is why I work probably on this podcast and why I listen to a lot of podcasts.

I also really enjoy webinars and videos because I can both watch something and take something in by listening. However, I know that not everybody learns that way, and so what I have realized working in knowledge management for so many years is that it's important to have the same information, or similar information, presented in many different ways so that people can take it in. People who might prefer more data have the data to go to, people who maybe prefer stories have stories to read or listen to, and that there are different ways of presenting information. So I think that that's something we've been experimenting a lot with on the Knowledge SUCCESS project with a lot of your guidance and insight from Busara.

[music break]

Thank you so much for talking with me today, Maryam. I don't necessarily have any additional questions, but I really appreciate you taking the time to explain these concepts, and I know that the information that you shared will be really helpful to our listeners, particularly those who work in knowledge management for family planning, but also beyond family planning. But before we end, do you have any final words or final thoughts you'd like to share?

Maryam Yusuf

Yes, I'm super happy to be part of this interview. Thank you so much, Sarah. And I thoroughly enjoy working with Knowledge SUCCESS, working with really great people across the team. And we have come a long way in terms of how we're redefining our approach to knowledge management. And it's a really great thing that the team is infusing more and more behavioral science into how they think about designing solutions, optimizing existing solutions, and how Knowledge SUCCESS continues to add value going forward. And I think the core or the major benefit of behavioral science is that it just keeps us on our toes. You never become complacent. Because you know human behavior is not stagnant. Although history has shown that you know we tend to behave in certain ways, and we've kind of been able to pinpoint the different trends in behavior that we can expect. But context changes, circumstances change. We evolve, preferences can change as well to some extent, but it's always important to keep your hand on the heartbeat of the audience to keep your hand on the pulse of the people that you're working with and the people that you're trying to deliver for or improve outcomes for. And that's the whole point of behavioral science. It's just really observing and understanding through empathy and through the science of experimentation. So once we design, we test. That's the most important thing. So we never make the assumption that our ideas are the best. We never make the assumption that our outlook or assessments of how people behave are set in stone. We understand that people and things change and evolve, and in order to continue to add value and in order to continue to be empathetic in the way that we design solutions, you have to continue to iterate and

continue to test. And yeah, I'm looking forward to the future engagements that we have with Knowledge SUCCESS. So thank you, Sarah.

Sarah Harlan

Thank you, Mariam. Those are great final thoughts for the episode. And if listeners have additional questions for Busara about behavioral science, how can they find you? Or how can they contact you?

Maryam Yusuf

Awesome. So we have a Twitter handle and we have. So we have our social media handles and we also have our website, but I would encourage people to go to our website So it's busaracenter.org, that's our website and we have tons of case studies there. We also have a page on medium where we have a lot of blogs that kind of describe the work that we're doing with some of our clients. So it's easier to read the short blog posts and get it like a synopsis of what we're doing. Please feel free to check us out. We are also @BusaraCenter on Twitter. And we're also hiring, so if anyone's interested in working with us in any projects, do reach out.

[Credits]

Inside the FP Story is produced by Knowledge SUCCESS. This episode was edited and mixed by Elizabeth Tully. Special thanks to Maryam Yusuf for joining me for this episode.

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