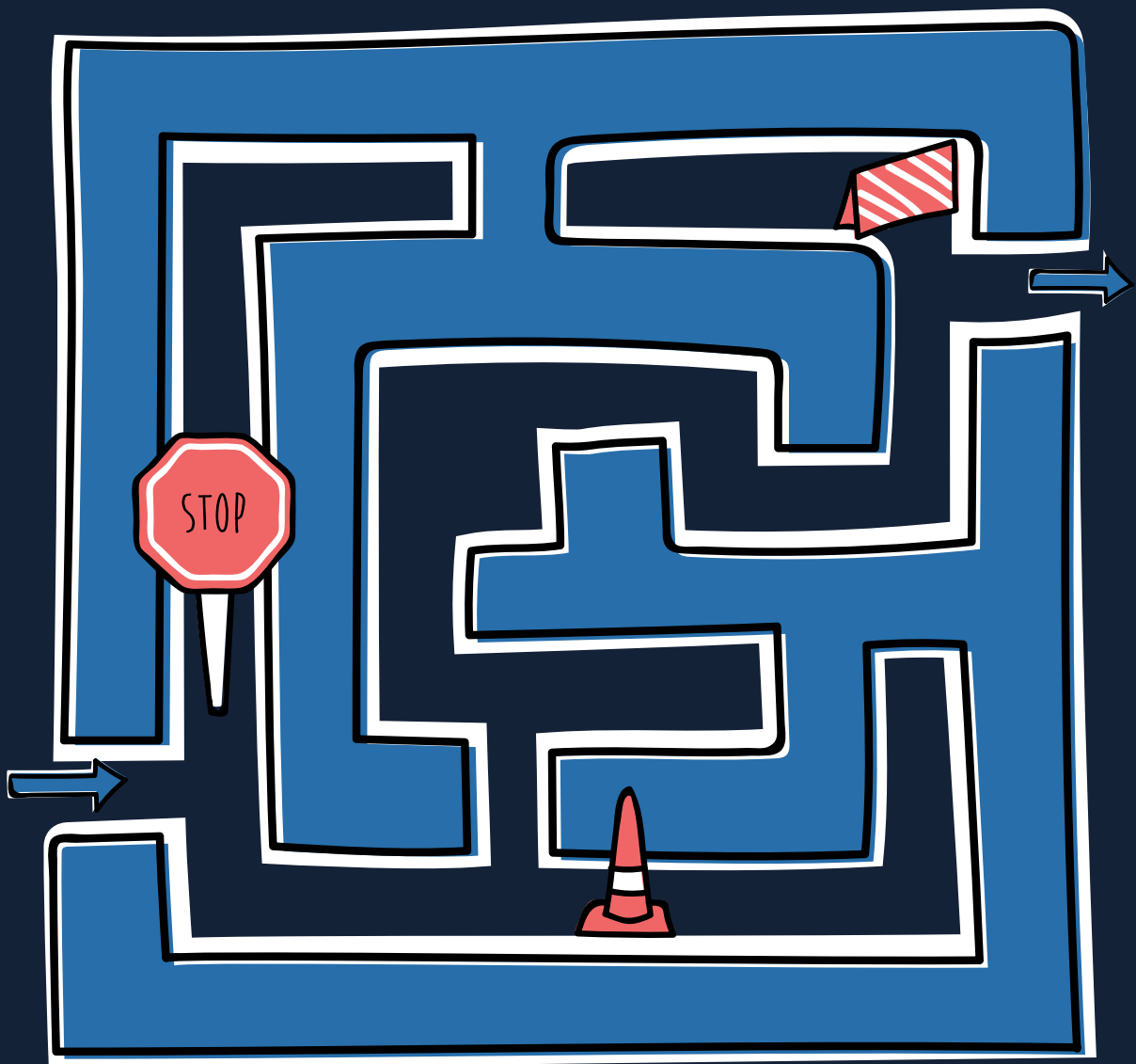**SilverStripe**

# Powers of Persuasion

## Navigate the challenging landscape of public sector marketing and communications.

In this eBook, you'll learn what makes people tick and how you can use simple tactics to respectfully inspire positive action.

If you're working in the public sector, chances are you're working on meaningful projects that positively impact hundreds of thousands of people. Public sector communications and marketing teams are faced with the difficult task of raising awareness of important messages and creating changes in the behaviour of individuals and groups of people. Private sector marketing teams on the other hand, are usually focused on promoting and selling goods and services.

So when it comes to finding marketing resources, its naturally easier to come across material that can be applied to the private sector but rare to find concepts and tips that are suitable for public sector use.

We have put this eBook together to help those of you in Marketing and Communications roles in the public sector, bringing together all the relevant resources and concepts for you to try in your next campaign.

As you already know, it's not enough for people to just hear your message or see it on your website, they also need to believe it. And like most human-centred initiatives, changing behaviour is tricky and requires patience. In this eBook we'll be exploring a few principles you can use to persuade, nudge and influence your audiences. Most of these draw from the areas of psychology, behavioural economics, consumer behaviour or our own experiences as an open source software organisation.
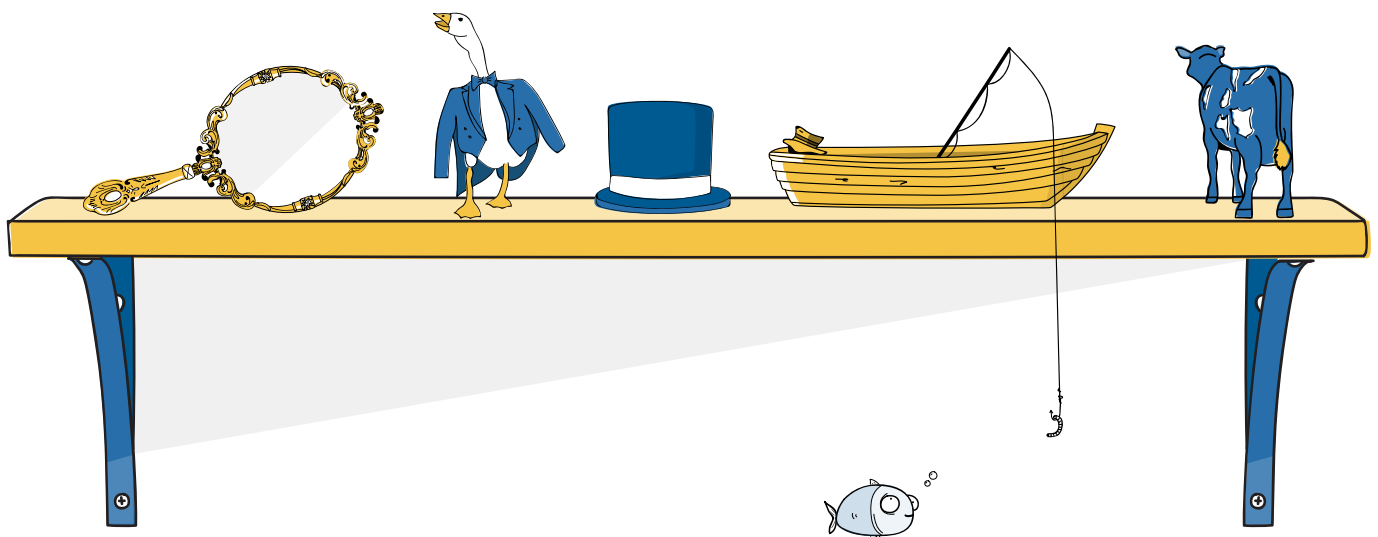
# The principles:

1. The magic of three

2. Using nice clickbait

3. How do I look?

4. Social proof and following the herd

5. Trust me

6. Personalisation

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## Note

We'll be attempting to change behaviour with integrity. There's no magic wand for behaviour change and this is not about forcing or coercing people into change. Instead we'll be looking at ways to facilitate change or 'nudge' behaviour.

# THE MAGIC OF 3

# The Magic of Three

First, second, third. Gold, Silver, Bronze. Learning your A, B, C's. Dialling 111.

Have you ever noticed how many things come in threes? This tactic, known as the power of three, shows up regularly in marketing communications, and with good reason. Look at any popular software-as-a-service website and you'll discover the magic of three showing up again and again. But why always three choices?

## We like choice - but not too much

Consumer behaviour research shows that while we find the thought of many choices appealing, it doesn't actually help us. We don't take action with a lot of choices and we don't buy more.

To demonstrate this, let's look at the **Jam Jar** experiment.[1] Two researchers set up a booth offering jam. On one day they offered 24 flavours and on the other only 6 flavours.

**The results?**

24 favours = 60% of people stopping and 3% buying

6 flavours = 40% of people stopping and 30% buying

Imagine how much jam they would have sold with just three flavour choices! You're unlikely to be selling jam, however you will be offering your audience some sort of choice. It's worth considering that offering too many choices may seem appealing at first, but in reality won't create more action.

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1   When Choice is Demotivating: Can One Desire Too Much of a ... (n.d.). Retrieved from https://faculty.washington.edu/jdb/345/345%20Articles/Iyengar%20%26%20Lepper%20(2000).pdf

## The decoy effect

The second reason the power of three appears so often is a little stranger, and possibly a little sneakier. It's a persuasion principle known as the decoy effect. The decoy effect means adding a third alternative to a set, with the purpose of making the other two choices seem more attractive. Sound odd? Professor Dan Ariely explains the principle in his book Predictably Irrational[2]. He first discovered the principle on a magazine website when he noticed that one of the subscription seemed irrelevant.
Here's what they were:

- Web subscription $59
- Print $125
- Print + web $125

Why bother having the print option when you could get two for the same price? He ran an experiment to find out. First he offered his test group the three different options and no one went for just the print option. In fact 84% went for the print and web. He then ran the experiment again, this time only offering two choices — he took out the irrelevant print option. This time only 32% went for the higher package, the web + print! The print option was the decoy and had the amazing effect of actually increasing sales, just by being there.

## Chunking

The power of three also plays into a concept called chunking. Chunking, in a web context, simply means breaking information down into easily digestible 'chunks'. The nature of how people mostly scan online, means that any efforts to break your information down into small pieces will be valuable (think headings and bullet points).

So even if you decide to go higher or lower than three (rule breaker!) any efforts to simplify or chunk your information will have a positive impact. But why does chunking work? The concept was first introduced by George A. Miller,[3] who believed that our working memory was limited and that we could only hold around seven pieces of information at once. You may have heard of the shorthand version of his work: the seven, plus or minus two rule.

2   Ariely, Dan. (2010). Predictably irrational: the hidden forces that shape our decisions. New York :Harper Perennial,. Chicago.

3   Chunking (psychology). (2018, April 24). Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chunking_(psychology)

# Putting the magic of three to work for you:

Here are a few ways to experiment with the power of three.

### 3 ways to access to information

Provide three ways to access a particularly important piece of information, watch a video, listen to audio, download guide/document.

### 3 ways to pay

We want to make it easy for them to take the desired behaviour, so consider choice overload and make it clear how they can take action.

### 3 subscription options

You may like to create 3 different offers for what information or newsletters they are signing up for.

### 3 pieces of information

Chances are you have a lot of great information that you're imparting. Consider how you could group or chunk this information, perhaps you could have an a beginner, intermediate, advanced.

### 3 easy ways to get in contact

Again sets of three's are easy for people to remember and process. Think of the most important number you'll use in an emergency.

The possibilities of three are endless! I encourage you to test out a few options. Use your analytics and tracking tools to see if using the power of three makes an impact to your website's goals.
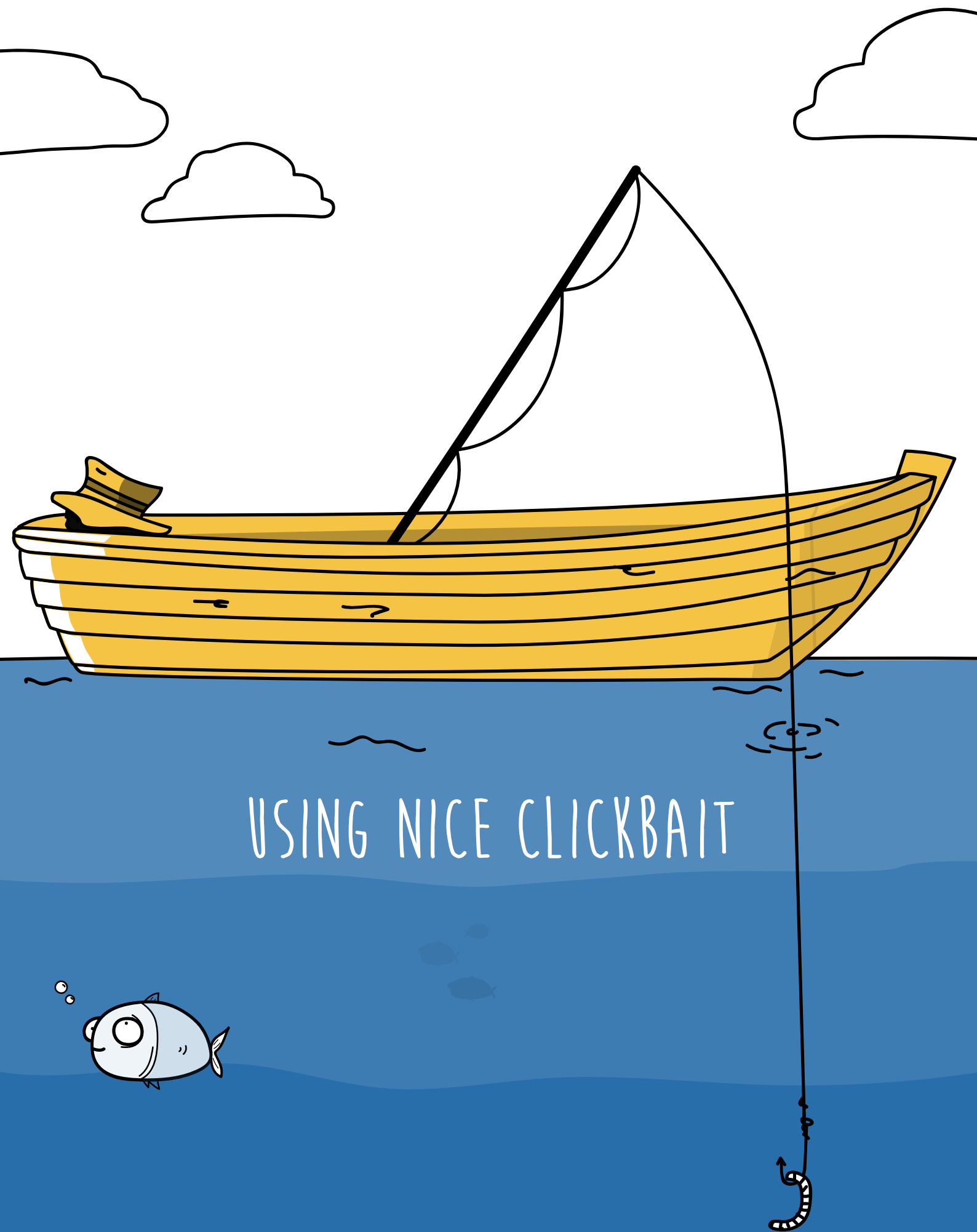
USING NICE CLICKBAIT

# Using nice clickbait

We know what you're thinking... There's no such thing as nice clickbait. It's all awful and misleading.

Give us a chance to explain. We are not talking about spammy headlines or links that you click on because they are in front of something you actually want to click on. We're advocating that you should bring awareness to why some of these tricks work and then using them (as appropriate) to improve your persuasion level. This could be on your sites newsroom, blog or any page title.

It's worth noting that whatever principles and tactics you do try, please make sure they fit your agencies tone, brand and organisational culture.

First, let's consider why the headline of your content is so important.

1. Your audience has zero attention span and this is your main chance to grab it.

2. The headline is a big factor in influencing them to read the rest of the content.

3. If you've enabled sharing on your site or newsroom then it's also what will bring more users.

4. First impressions count and this is yours.

5. You have a lot of competition online. Audiences could be reading your important message, all while having 15 open browser tabs that are competing for attention.

6. It's SEO important. Your page, or blog title is crucial for SEO — think about how much of your heading will display in Google as this is your 'sales' pitch so to speak.

From your own experiences online you're probably already aware of some of the techniques. Headlines often contain numbers, lists, and how-to information. They can also be vague and outrageous - 'find out the shocking truth behind X'.

Why, if so much of the clickbait techniques are intolerable, do marketers continue to use them? They do it because it works. And it's all thanks to our built-in curiosity. While deep down we know that the article is unlikely to deeply shock us we can get swept up in clicking anyway, just to see.

In our quest for nice clickbait we want to deliver on our promises, and not trick people into clicking something completely irrelevant.
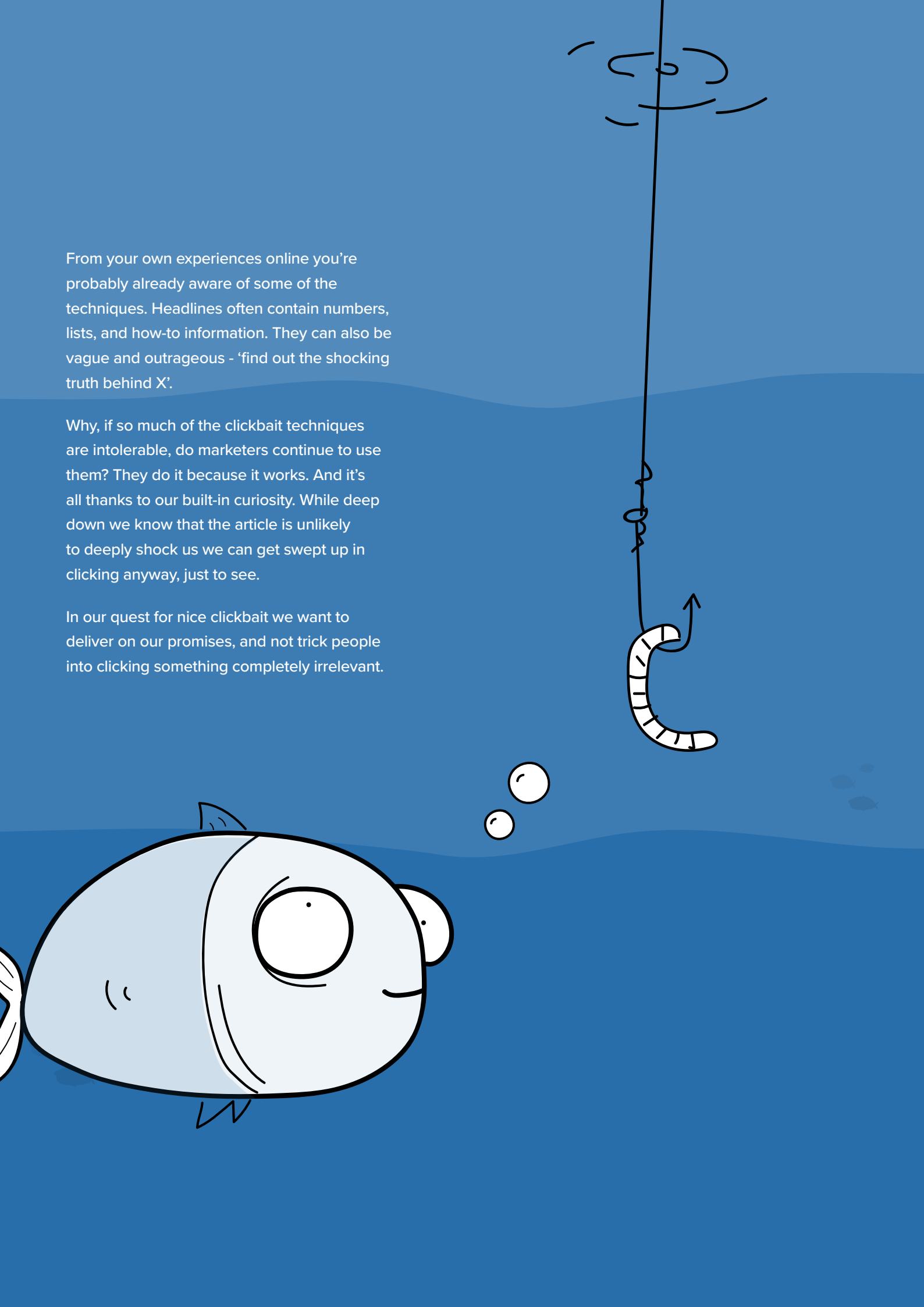
# Techniques we can use, with integrity.

## Trigger words

Your trigger words are adjectives. And here is where you'll want to consider for appropriateness to your brand. Phrases like weird, surprising, secret or mystery might be out. However others may work: useful, expert, first, helpful or latest.

## Posing a question

This can be a really useful one in the public sector. It delivers on our curiosity quirk which will encourage the reader to explore further.

## Deliver on a promise

This is crucial for our integrity principle. We are wanting to deliver on exactly what the audience is seeking. When crafting a headline, think about it as if you want to 'tell them what's inside'.

## Testing

Those clickbaiters spend a lot of energy working on a single headline and you should too. You've put a lot of effort into this content so don't brush off the headline. Write a couple of headlines and then share with the team, getting feedback and asking them which one works.

## Be a little controversial

If it's appropriate, being a little controversial can work. Think about this for your media releases if you have a piece of research or something new to share.

With Google Analytics you'll soon get a feel for what headlines and page titles are working well. You can also A/B test headlines to really start to get a feel for which ones achieve more results.

## The formula

For something different you could try testing out a set formula (or parts of it).

One that Nathalie Nahai uses in her fantastic book, Webs of Influence[4], goes something like this:

**Number + trigger word + adjective + keyword + promise = clickable headline ***

*Of course all five may end up looking a bit spammy so pick out what works for you.

Our final tip is to steal, copy and borrow from others who have experimented far more! Look at websites that are pumping out huge amounts of content and get inspiration from their headlines.

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4   Nahai, N. (2017). Webs of influence: The psychology of online persuasion: The secret strategies that make us click. Harlow, England: Pearson Education.
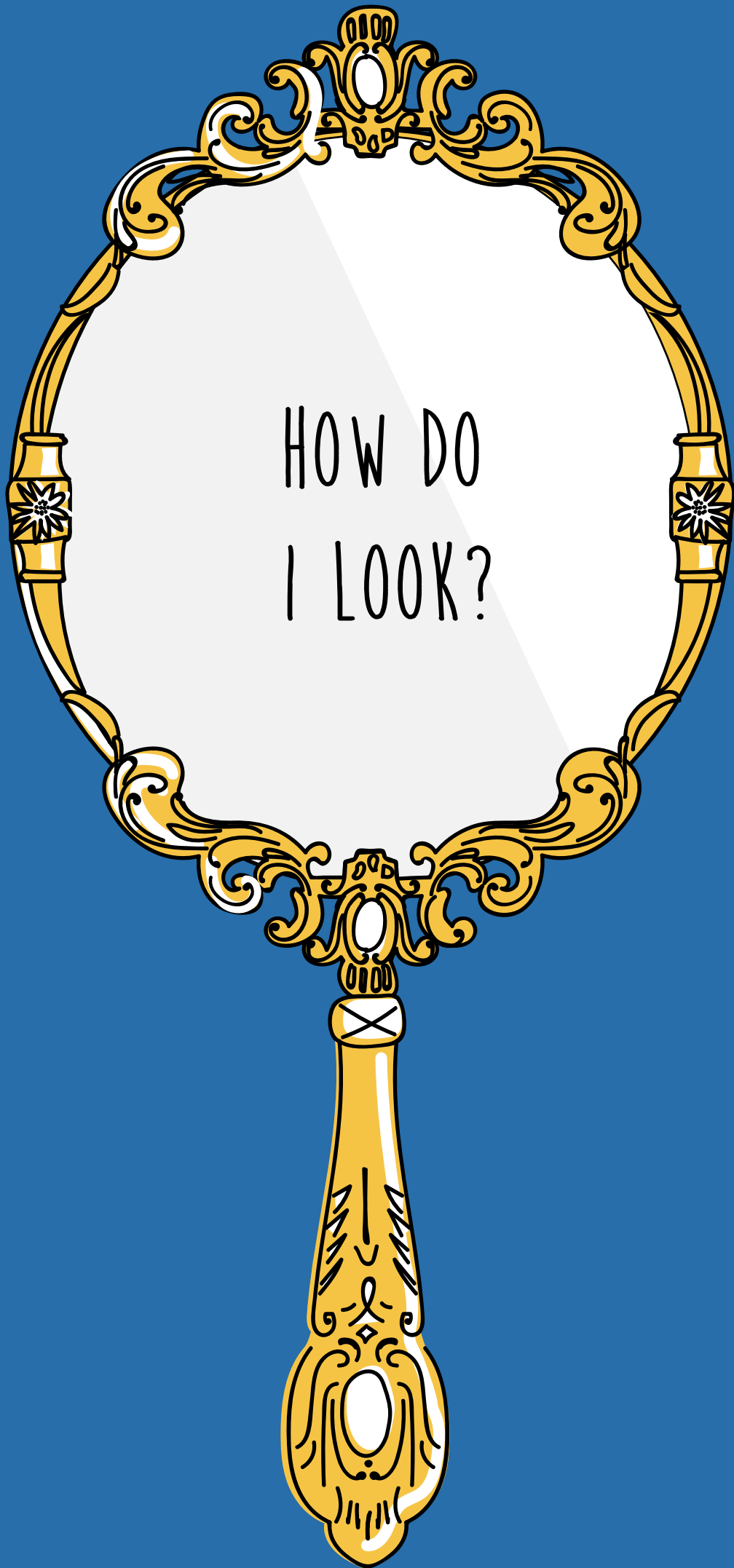
# How do I look?

Do looks really matter? When it comes to your website and ability to influence people, the research says a resounding **yes**.

When we talk about online persuasion (with integrity) we are really talking about good user experience. And an essential part of user experience is the visual design and look of your website.

The first reason why the look of your site matters for first impressions, is that you only get one chance to make a good one given that people's attention is so short. When we say short, we mean short! Some eye-tracking research[5] suggests that it is short two-tenths of a second!

There's more to it than first impressions though. Consider these reasons from Nathalie Nahai[6]:

> *"We are more likely to return to a website if we like its appearance and functionality."*

Research also suggests that simplicity matters. This study which was conducted by Google in 2012 found that websites with low 'visual complexity' were perceived as highly appealing.

## Influence by design

They key to persuasive design will be working with your website agency and investing in user research and design. Here are a few tricks you could consider

**Let them interact** - giving people ways to interact with your site's content is a good way to increase the engagement with your message. This could be as simple as allowing for user generated content. Or even making use of the 'slider' type interactivity that you often see on software sites.

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5   Careaga, A. (2018, March 21). Eye-tracking studies: First impressions form quickly on the web. Retrieved from http://news.mst.edu/2012/02/eye-tracking_studies_show_firs/

6   Nahai, N. (2017). Webs of influence: The psychology of online persuasion: The secret strategies that make us click. Harlow, England: Pearson Education.

**Colour me in** - each colour has its own psychology and set of influences associated with it. For example in Western cultures blue is often associated with calming and trust. Consider carefully your use of colour on websites. And if you are using colour to communicate something, remember that not everyone can see colour. Will colour blindness or a visual impairment impact your viewer's ability to understand the message being communicated?

**Essentialism** - whether it's copy or how many items you need on your homepage, ask yourself what could be removed. Remember, research shows that the less visually complex the more appealing. So get clean and simple — your web designers will thank you for not insisting everything needs to be on the front page.

**Show progress** - there's a nifty psychological principle called the 'endowed progress effect.'[7] It means if people can see progress towards their goal (even if artificial progress) they will try harder to accomplish it. To make use of this principle you can use design and visual markers to give users a sense that a task, such as completing a profile or form, is only partially incomplete rather than not yet started.

**The eyes have it** - many of the insights into how people engage with websites online have come from eye tracking studies. One of the more well-known studies from Nielsen group showed that people commonly scan web pages in an F shaped pattern[8]. This pattern is important to remember for design and ensuring that your crucial information will be seen 'within the F'. If you have the budget you could consider doing your own eye-tracking study to test the results of your site.

**Harness the default** - employ this one with integrity! If you show the popular choices or even pre-select tick boxes (such as add me to your database) then this can be enough to nudge the rate of completion higher. This is due to something called the status quo effect which is our preference for things that are familiar or stay the same.

7   N., C., J., & X. (2006, March 01). Endowed Progress Effect: How Artificial Advancement Increases Effort | Journal of Consumer Research | Oxford Academic. Retrieved from academic.oup.com

8   F-Shaped Pattern of Reading on the Web: Misunderstood, But Still Relevant (Even on Mobile). (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.nngroup.com/articles/f-shaped-pattern-reading-web-content/

> *"Simply stating what options are more popular or preselecting default choices, is often enough to influence a decision, we also tend to stick with it as it allows users to avoid thinking too hard about our choices."*
>
> *- Anders Toxboe, UXbooth*

## Integrity alert: use your powers for good

Before you employ any of these principles let's talk about integrity again. When we consider UX and persuasive design there are sneaky, even awful examples littering the online world. There's even a Hall of Shame dedicated to Dark Patterns.

SilverStripe Principal Designer James Ford covers more about dark UX patterns in his blog post – Little White UX.

When considering persuasive design (or any persuasion) we like to ask this question, which was posed by Anders Toxboe, the creator of the Persuasion Patterns Card Deck:

**Question: Does this help users towards their goal or keep them from it?**

If we all keep asking ourselves this question then we'll be building a better web.

FOLLOWING
THE
HERD

# Social proof and following the herd

When the time comes to make important online decisions, like purchasing a new laptop or signing up for a subscription service, we naturally look to find information to validate our decisions.

Validation can come in the form of customer reviews, comparison charts, forum threads and quotes. Often the validation we find is intentional and hopefully true, used by marketers to leverage the wisdom of collective positive experiences. We call this very powerful tool social proof. Here's why it's so valuable and a few reasons why you should consider using it in your own communications efforts.

## The research

The concept social proof is covered in Robert Cialdini's[9] excellent book on influence, and there are thousands of psychology studies validating its impact on decision making.

The basic concept is this: when we're uncertain on how to behave we look to others for guidance. Think of it as 'following the herd'. Research into social proof shows, whether we like it or not, the behaviour of others guides and influences us far more than we may be aware of.

Here's an example from Professor Cialdini who ran a test using different messages for towel use in hotels. As funny as this sounds, we've picked this example so you can easily see how it adapts to the type of behaviour change messages that might be used in the public sector.

In the results of his test, the message incorporating social proof had 25% better results than all the others. The winning message was: "almost 75% of other guests help by using their towels more than once." Interestingly he also found that if he added the words "of other guests that stayed in this room" it had even more impact!

Along with numerous psychological studies there's market research to back up social proof. One example is the 2015 report from Nielsen Group[10] which showed that despite million dollar advertising budgets, the most powerful form of advertising (especially among millennials) is still word-of-mouth recommendations. In the same study 83% of people said they trust word of mouth recommendations more than any other form of advertising.

9    Cialdini, R. B. (n.d.). Influence: The psychology of persuasion. New York, NY: Collins.

10  Recommendations From Friends Remain Most Credible Form of Advertising Among Consumers; Branded Websites Are the Second-Highest-Rated Form. (n.d.). Retrieved from nielsen.com

## Social proof in the online world

Now that you're aware of social proof, we guarantee you'll spot it everywhere. Particularly if you are a regular online shopper.

Since the very beginning, Amazon has used social proof in it's online marketplace to influence us to buy a book. As a visitor to the site, we might already know the book we want and navigate to that page.

Straight away we can see these things:

Customers who bought this also bought • Editorial reviews • Customer reviews • Stars

And if we're just browsing for books in general then the list gets longer:

New York Times Best Sellers • Non fiction best sellers • Most wished for • Most gifted

What about even weirder and stranger examples of social proof working? Have you ever thought about why canned laughter is used on sitcoms? Same reason.

# Putting it to work on your site

By now you'll be thinking of ways to incorporate social proof onto your website. Here's a few ideas to get you started.

1. Testimonials - while you might not be selling a product you can still share other peoples 'stories.'

2. Social sharing - enabling social sharing on your website or blog can be a great way for others to demonstrate their behaviour and promote social proof.

3. Celebrity or influencer - using a well known person or other influencer to help spread your message.

4. Certificates - if you have any certifications or badges, displaying these on your website can be a way to build trust and recognition with other well known organisations.

5. Showing real time stats - displaying the number of people that have taken a desired action.

6. Case studies - a simple and powerful way of showing social proof. Collect examples or stories of people behaving in your desired way.

7. Membership or club - depending on your work, then creating a way for people to connect with others in similar circumstances can be powerful. This could be an online forum or community.

8. Most popular - consider social proof in your website navigation and design. You could show your 'most popular' or 'most read' pages or blog articles.

## Caution box: Negative Social Proof

A word of caution though for those trying to change a negative behaviour - for example dumping littering or breaking speed limits. The powerful concept of social proof can also work in reverse! Be careful not to create a perception that 'everyone is doing it'. As the unintended message delivery to your audience may just be "if everyone is doing it then it's okay for me too!"
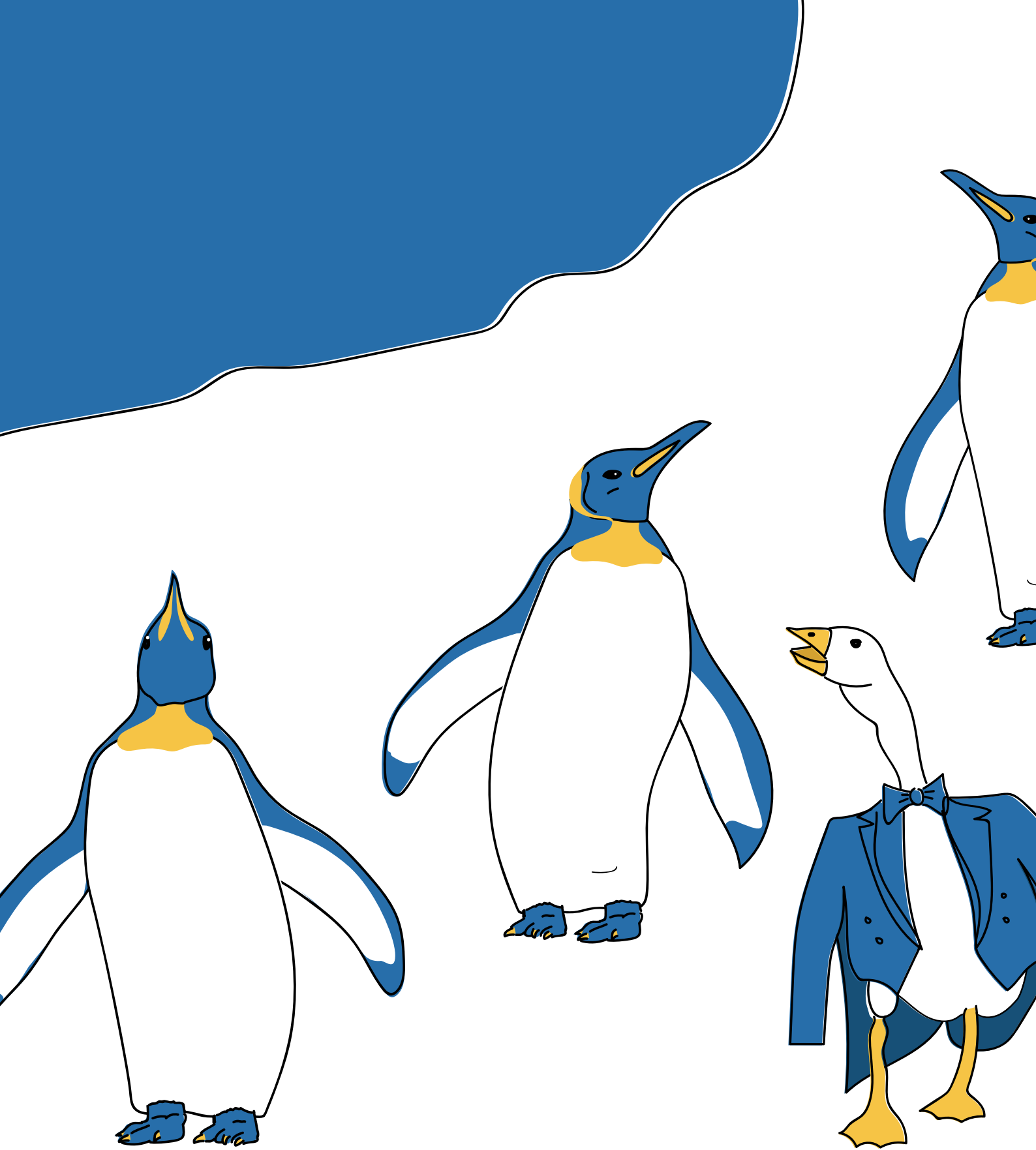
TRUST ME
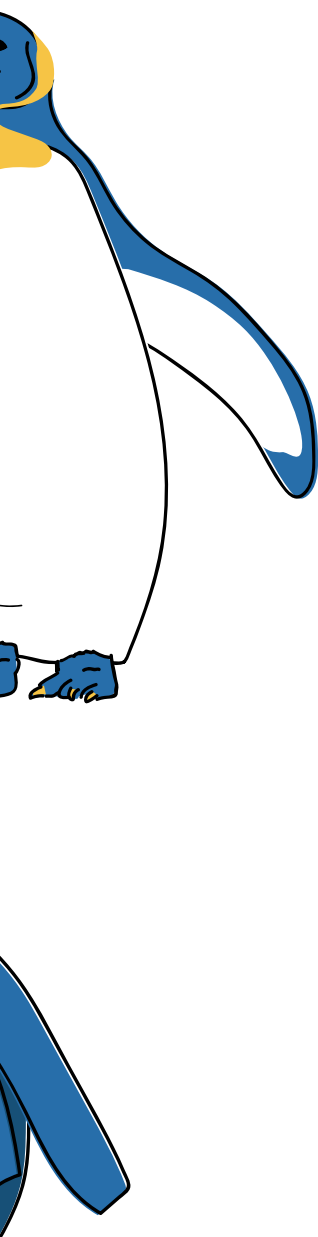
# Trust Me

Ever heard of the saying: birds of a feather flock together?

It means we tend to become friends with people similar to ourselves. And the same principle can be used in our next power of persuasion: building trust.

Just as we are more likely to do a favour for a friend, we are also more likely to respond more positively to brands and organisations we like and trust.

Here's how Nathalie Nahai describes it in Webs of Influence:

> *"Whether through shared values or other perceived commonalities, when it comes to being persuaded by sources of information (such as people or brands), we tend to respond most positively to those we perceive as likeable, credible and similar to ourselves - a principle known as homophily (love of the same)."*

Think about the people you trust — they may have credibility, or expertise or be in a position of authority. All of these examples can be used within your website.

A core component of building trust is being genuine and transparent. We believe users know when they are being 'faked' and can immediately go on the defensive. Most people can spot a stock photo on a website against a 'real' person. Just turn on your TV and you'll be able to spot many attempts to fake trust or authority, like how wearing a white coat suddenly tranforms an actor into a health professional.

Working in the public sector means you have an advantage here. You're not selling cans of coke or shoes. Your organisation will have a positive impact on the world and we need to demonstrate what it is.

# Ways to build trust online:

## Security

Whenever you're handling user's personal and private information and data, demonstrating security is a must. The more personal and the larger the information, the more security is expected. Examples could be displaying any security certificates or badges as visual reminders to the user. Of course if you're offering payment then the use of secure and trusted gateways will be essential.

An essential part of building the users trust, is to tell them what you are going to do with their information, how will it be held and stored? Even if they are only subscribing to a newsletter, make sure you are clear in what they are 'signing up for' and anything else you might be sending them as a result.

## Credibility

Credibility is crucial for trust. If your service helps people in some way then considering showing real stories, facts and numbers. When it comes to credibility size can matter, how many people has this helped? Or another way of putting it — how many people access your services? If you're using numbers and statistics then the authors of the book Made to Stick, Chip and Dan Heath[11] suggest finding ways to make them concrete, and therefore easier to remember. Here are a few concrete examples: this has more fat than a Big Mac, enough paint to fill 20 Olympic size swimming pools or this costs less than a cup of coffee.

To establish your credibility further, look at ways to show your expertise. This could include videos delivered by your resident expert (obviously real) or even blogs and fresh content can be a great way to showing expertise.

11  Heath, C., & Heath, D. (2010). Made to stick: Why some ideas take hold and others come unstuck. New York: Random House Books.

## Non-verbal cues

If you've studied body language principles then you'll know that a huge percentage of the communication we deliver is non-verbal. For example body language experts[12] say gestures such as crossing the arms or closing off the body can decrease the effectiveness of communication. We can use these principles in any visual images. To build trust we'll want to demonstrate people with open postures — no crossed arms! Another handy trick for showing openness is to put your palms facing up. When working online you may want to watch out for arms and hands being hidden for this same reason.

Establishing trust online really comes down to knowing your audience well, something we've already touched on. If people like things that are similar to themselves, then we need to understand what and who they are. Trust then becomes an exercise in designing any of our messages, verbal or otherwise, to match their needs.

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12  Pease, A., & Pease, B. (2006). The definitive book of body language. New York: Bantam Books.
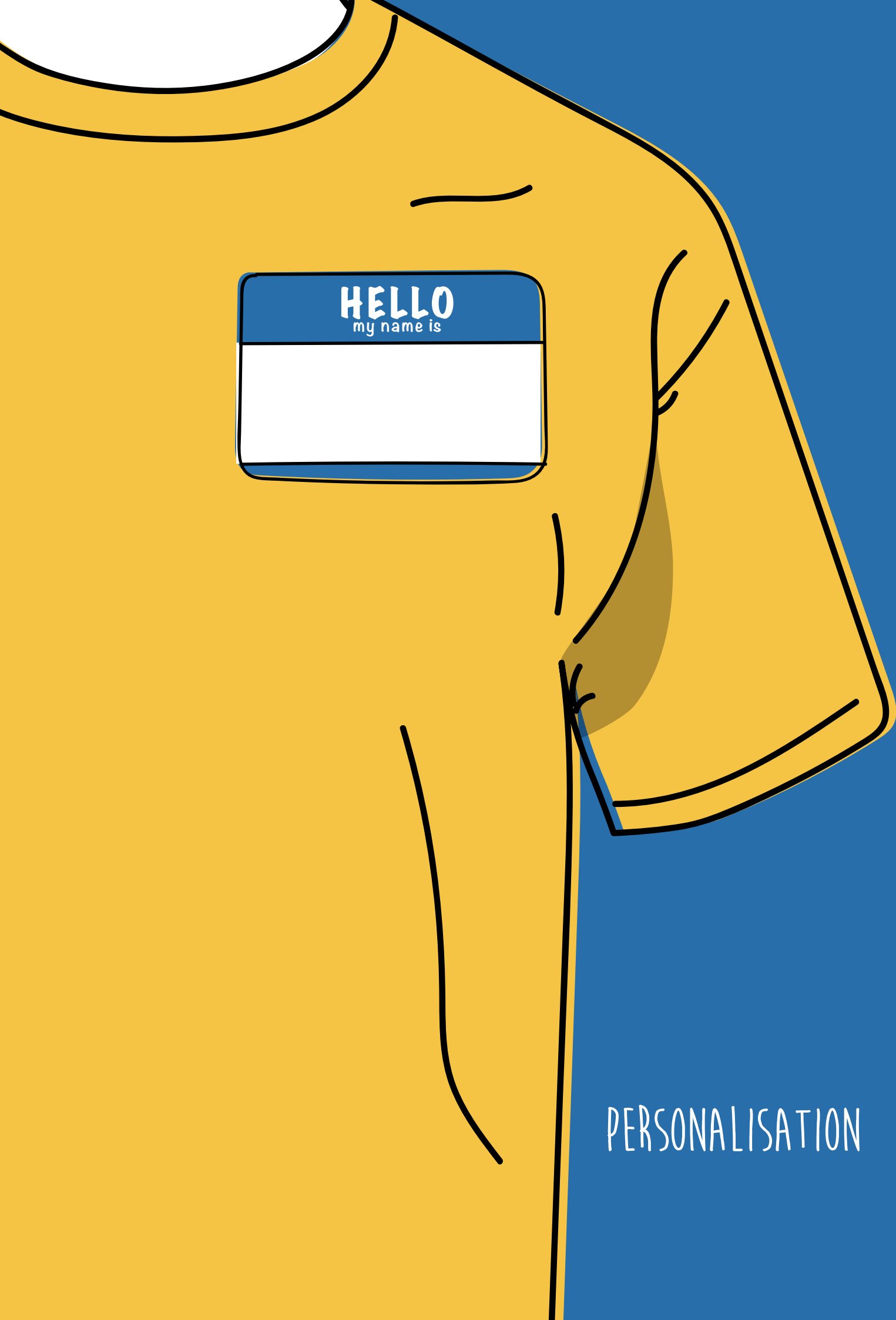
HELLO
my name is

PERSONALISATION

# Getting personal

Dear <Insert First Name>

It was Dale Carnegie who wrote that:

> *"A person's name is, to that person, the sweetest and most important sound in any language."*

While personalising first names in emails has become commonplace, there is a wider world of personalisation to be explored. But why does personalisation work so well?

A study from the University in Texas[13] explains that we love personalised experiences for two reasons:

1. Sense of control – because you're getting something tailored to you, you feel a little special! It's not for the masses and so this gives you a sense of control.

2. Information overload – we all know first hand about the bombardment of information (including advertising) that follows us online and offline. If something is tailored to us, then it reduces the amount of information we're required to crawl through.

Here's where the psychology gets strange though. Even if you're not aware the information is personalised it still works. Why? Because the content is more relevant.

Of course for personalised, relevant content, we need to do personalisation well, not those awful spam emails you get with the wrong name or person!

Let's go behind the scenes for a minute. The main two types of personalisation that you're likely to see working on websites have their roots in one of the following:

1. Rule based targeting to segments

2. Machine learning/algorithmic

Most clients SilverStripe works with are looking at rule-based segmentation as a first step. There are different ways to deliver this type of segmenting, a common one is to use a marketing automation system that integrates with your website. So let's concentrate on that for this section.

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13 Frances, L. (2008, December 01). Consumer control and customization in online environments : An investigation into the psychology of consumer choice and its impact on media enjoyment, attitude, and behavioral intention. Retrieved from https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/18054

# How to do personalisation well

## Know your audience

Good personalisation and relevant content is about knowing your audience. This is the backbone of any personalisation strategy.

If you're operating within a niche (or a particular country) then understanding your segments with the basics of research, personas and testing, will set you up for segmentation success. If you're operating across large markets, or internationally, then there are a few interesting considerations to factor in.

For example, have you thought about if your market is a collectivist or individualistic culture? For example a collectivist culture typically favours groups of family needs above the individual. Less so for the latter. If you're working in a collectivist market then you can see how strategies like social proof may have an even deeper effect.

We see this in practice with many of our clients, both in public and private sectors, who have regionalised web content that communicates their message in a slightly different way depending on their audience. But even one word translated incorrectly can have a disastrous consequences. For a bit of a laugh and motivation to get personalisation right - check out these 11 Foreign Marketing Translation fails.

## Don't be creepy

As the technology behind personalisation advances, things can get, well... a little creepy. As your segmenting and targeting grows more advanced, you'll want to ensure that you don't get too personal. Remember back to our key reasons on why personalisation works — it's all about control. If the user suddenly feels not in control, or like their privacy has been invaded, then personalisation will backfire.
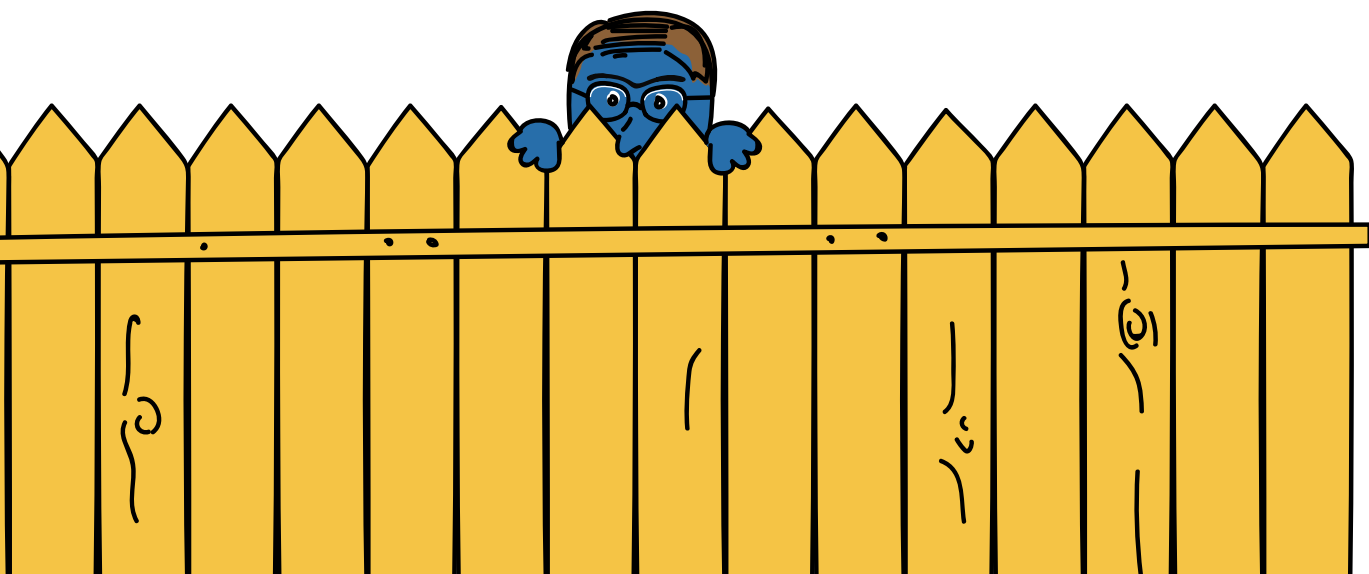
Nathalie Nahai[14] calls this "psychology reactance" and says it is the negative emotional state we get in response to a threat (perceived or otherwise) against our freedom and autonomy. To avoid becoming creepy testing will be essential and so would recommend beginning with larger segments.

Vital to this is, again, understanding your audience and their expectations. In today's world a high level of personalisation in an email is typically expected. However on a website you will need to be a little more understanding.

## Two-step starter checklist

Unsure where to begin with segmenting?

1. Know your audience, do your research and solidify what you want to achieve.

2. Consider how you want to begin segmenting as a starter experiment. Some common ones you could base personalisation on:

- Location
- Demographics
- Pages or content/viewed
- Campaigns or source
- Previous visits or behaviour
- Persona
- Stage of customer journey

14  Nahai, N. (2017). Webs of influence: The psychology of online persuasion: The secret strategies that make us click. Harlow, England: Pearson Education.

These online persuasion techniques are just a small sample of the amazing amount of research and techniques that you can make use of online. SilverStripe or one of our Professional Partners will be able to further guide you on any of these principles.

## Explore further

If you want to learn more about creating compelling web content and access other resources for public sector, visit the SilverStripe resources centre.

**Visit the Resources Centre**  →

Need help managing your content? Talk to SilverStripe.

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