

The Ostrich Effect only applies to humans

– Not ostriches!

This is the next article in a series on how behavioural economics and 'being human' affects your business.

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There's a myth that when ostriches feel frightened, they bury their heads in the ground. According to wildlife experts, this is not true ... but this weird effect does bizarrely apply to us peculiar human beings. When we are faced with uncertainty, embarrassment, possible bad news or even a little bit of fear, we are very likely to avoid it than face it head on.

So, for example, you may see a dreaded text message about an overdraft from your bank, or see an email from the taxman, or get an urgent voice mail to contact your manager and, rather than dealing with it, most people ignore it until the last possible moment. It's just completely who we are. We see this happening with our fitness or trying to lose weight, with our relationships, recycling and taking care of our environment and, of course, our finances. A good psychologist will say we are in denial – and denial inevitable leads to inaction. Sometimes the problem goes away on its own but, more often than not, it escalates.



<https://skeptics.stackexchange.com/>



<https://birdfact.com/>

Where did the myth originate from?

Historians trace the origin of this myth to the Roman writer, philosopher and naturalist Pliny the Elder, who lived from AD23 to AD79.

One of Pliny's most influential works was *Naturalis Historia* which translates as 'natural history'. This enormous work covered many topics in zoology, among various other subjects.

Pliny spent some time in the African Roman colonies. In Book X (book 10), Pliny writes about ostriches ... "They imagine when they have thrust their head and neck into a bush, that the whole of their body is concealed." The modern-day idiom probably came sometime after. While ostriches don't bury their heads in the sand, they sometimes sit on the ground and stretch their necks across the ground when they feel in danger ... probably to give themselves a low profile that blends in with the surrounding foliage.

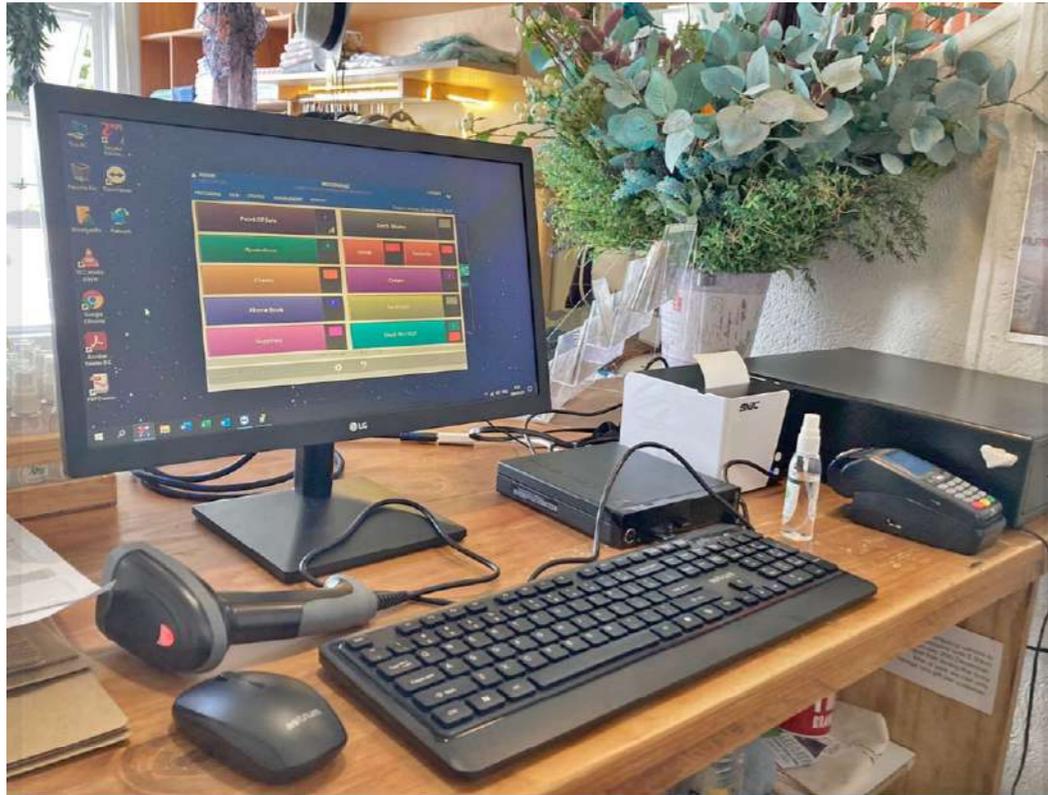
Male ostriches build rudimental nests, which are essentially just hollows scraped in the dirt with his claws. Once the eggs are laid, ostriches periodically reach into the nest and turn the eggs over. This ensures that incubation is even. The ground gets very cold at night and the egg must be warmed up evenly. From a distance, this might give the impression that the ostrich is reaching into a hollow in the ground, or burying its head in the ground.

<https://birdfact.com/articles/do-ostriches-bury-their-heads-in-the-sand>

But, as a business that deals with customers, the good news is that you can use this little psychological quirk to your advantage.

If you think about your customers' lives at the moment, you know that the majority of them are under a lot of stress. Most of us sit with daily worries about finances, power and water failures,

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wars and crime. It seems like every day brings even more pressure. It's enough to make you want to cloister yourself in a monastery for the rest of your life – or, at least, to avoid shopping. No retail therapy possible here.

As far as your customers are concerned, they know they need to take action – but the Ostrich Effect keeps them stuck. Even if you sell things that they desperately need, if you are not strategic in how you communicate your messages, you may accidentally scare them off.

So what tactics can you use to make them more successful in avoiding action – and to help your business thrive?

Firstly, and obviously, identify the hassles in their lives that are overwhelming, stressful or embarrassing for them, and try to understand the emotions that go with that. Then use communication to educate them and point out the positive side of taking action.

For example, you could probably guess that almost every customer is on some form of a diet, and eating chocolates and ice cream is stress inducing. But, if you emphasise that a particular item has less sugar or fat, it makes it easier for them to choose it. Many sweetened carbonated drinks companies don't use the word 'diet' to describe their product anymore. There are just too many bad connotations linked to dieting, so instead they use different words and images.

Another great way to help your customers avoid inaction is to use fun and humour. We all know that having a bit of a laugh lightens the mood and



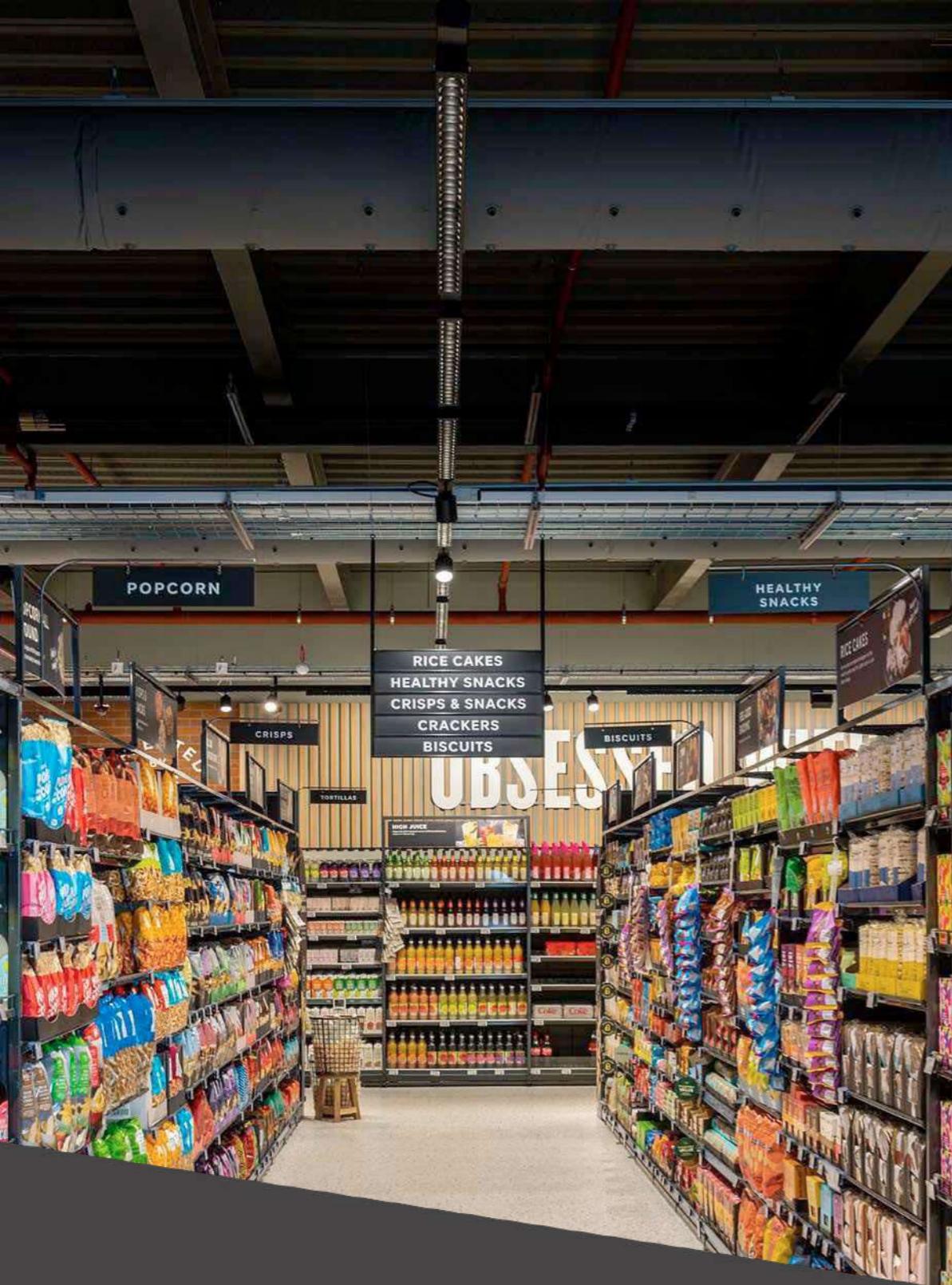
“ Another great way to help your customers avoid inaction is to use fun and humour. We all know that having a bit of a laugh lightens the mood and makes embarrassment much easier to deal with. ”

Nando's restaurant chain transformed a public service announcement into a shot at a close rival. It was a pretty impressive piece of marketing. In its 2020 ad campaign seemingly inspired by KFC's "Finger Lickin' Good" slogan and the need for better hygiene during the Covid-19 epidemic, the company's created ... well, this. <https://memeburn.com/2020/03/nandos-covid-19-ad-campaign/>



makes embarrassment much easier to deal with. It's not about clever slogans – although those could work – but more about bringing a smile to their faces. There are so many beautiful examples in our country at the moment and if you just type in 'funny adverts' into your browser, you will see many, many examples of how companies use humour when a situation can be potentially stressful. We've seen it with courier companies and businesses that help you book an overnight stay in a bed and breakfast.

Another element of fun can be through the use of gamification. This can be very simple ... like giving customers a little sticker or badge, making an announcement, or even a digital award when they have achieved something.



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But perhaps my favourite example is an Indian restaurant in London called Dishoom.

They could offer every customer 16% discount if they finished their meal and paid by 6 pm. But they don't. Instead, what they do is ... when the waiter brings you your bill, he also leaves a big dice. If you throw a six, you get your meal for free. This has the positive effect of not only encouraging customers to actually spend more (because, after all, imagine you skimmed on the meal and then discovered that it was all for free – that would make you feel a little bit stupid). But the practice also immediately creates a great sense of fun and enthusiasm in the whole restaurant and, needless to say, people talk about it to all of their friends and family.

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“ Another tactic could be to move your customers thinking away from pessimism, depression, anxiety and hopelessness into an optimistic and positive future. ”

Finally, another tactic could be to move your customers thinking away from pessimism, depression, anxiety and hopelessness into an optimistic and positive future. The financial services industry, especially with pensions and various policies, tends to use fear to motivate customers to buy their products. But what if, instead of that, they actually painted a much rosier picture? Words are so powerful. Helping your customers see a better future for themselves and their families can be very powerful.

To summarise it all, remember that some customer's struggles and tribulations are difficult for them to deal with and they would rather bury their heads in the sand than face them.

“ It's your job as a manager to understand these emotions relating to your store and to look for openings to reframe their negativity and inaction, to educate them, to lighten up their lives and/or to help them imagine a better future for themselves. ”

And, by the way, it turns out that ostriches don't actually bury their heads in the ground. Instead, they flop onto the sand and remain completely still to avoid being seen. That sounds like a good evolutionary survival strategy to me! **SR**



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