

How to Encourage Clicks  
Without Shady Tricks

# CLICK!



by Paul Boag

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Without Shady Tricks



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To the regulars in the Boagworld Slack channel  
(you know who you are).

You have been a source of support and inspiration  
throughout the writing of this book.

When work gets tough, I know you are there for me.

Thanks.

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# The Dangers of Persuasion

CHAPTER

1





## CHAPTER 1

# The Dangers of Persuasion

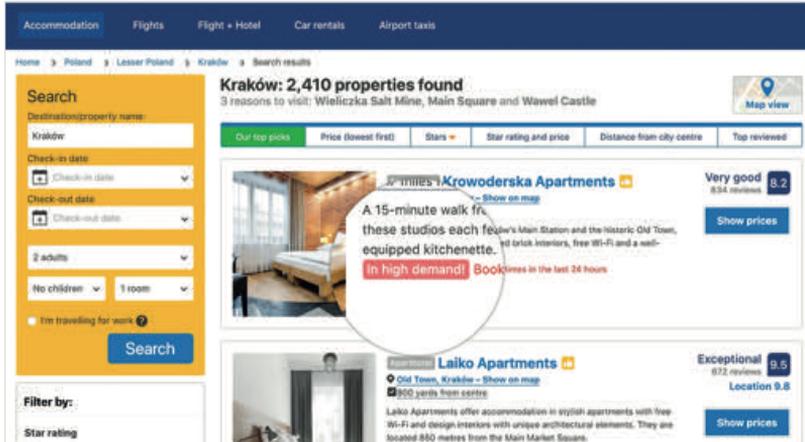
I remember the precise moment I decided to write this book. It is a moment we have all experienced in one form or another on the modern web.

I had an upcoming business trip that involved booking a hotel and flights. But I could have been purchasing almost anything on the web and encountered the same kind of problems.

I went to book the flights. After a somewhat frustrating experience, I eventually found the flights I wanted and proceeded to check out. I reached the payment page before I realized the airline had sneakily added travel insurance to my order. Coverage I neither required nor requested.

Things didn't improve when I went to book a hotel. I eventually found a hotel ideally positioned for my needs, but the site was quick to warn me that only three rooms were still available. Moments later, it displayed a notification that one

of those rooms had gone and that twelve other people were looking at this hotel.



Sites like Booking.com attempt to create a sense of scarcity.

Of course, like everybody else, I knew damn well what they were trying to do. The site was trying to use scarcity to motivate me to book.

The entire experience left me with a bad taste in my mouth. Is this what the web has become? It reminded me of a quote from Obi-Wan Kenobi in the original Star Wars. Has the internet become a “wretched hive of scum and villainy”?

I am certainly not alone in feeling this way, especially about the travel sector. It has reached the point where government bodies are intervening. In the UK, the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) announced:

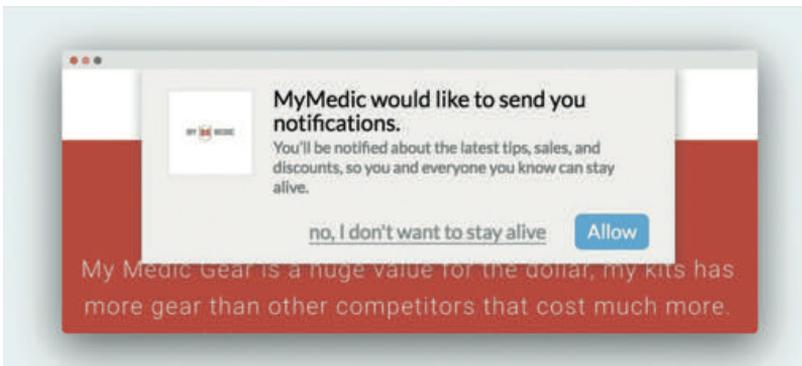


*The CMA has taken enforcement action to bring to an end misleading sales tactics, hidden charges and other practices in the online hotel booking market. These have been wholly unacceptable.<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> <https://smashed.by/cma>

The investigation that followed identified some concerns mainly focusing on the use of psychological manipulation to encourage impulsive bookings; in particular, the tendency of these sites to inflate the popularity of a hotel to push users to act quickly.

And this is not a problem limited to the travel sector. It increasingly feels like most websites set out to manipulate consumers into doing something. These practices have become so commonplace they now have a name: dark patterns. The term “dark pattern” was coined by Harry Brignull and refers to a user interface element that is carefully crafted to trick users into doing things they might not otherwise do.

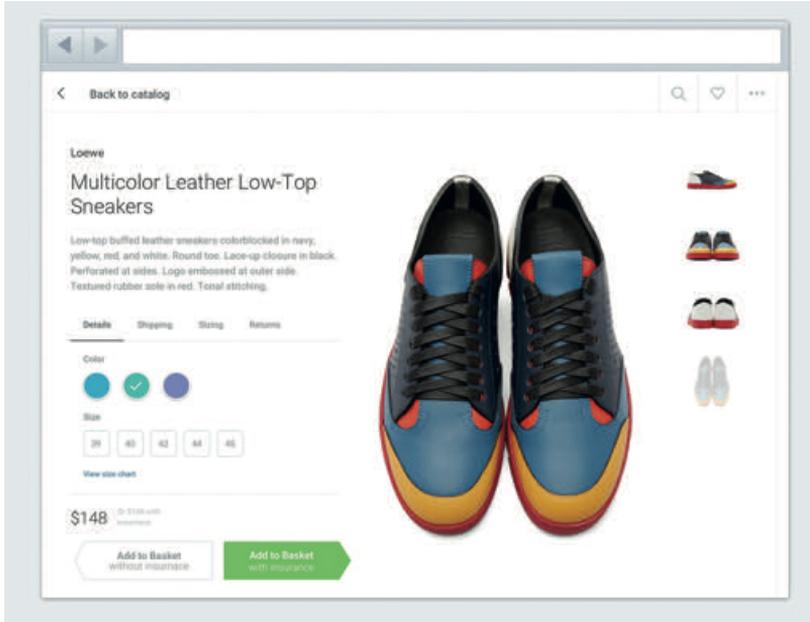


Copy that plays with people's emotions can be used to encourage action.

The thing is, dark patterns work, even when you know a site is trying to manipulate you. I might have known that the hotel site was trying to trick me, but on a subconscious level it would still work, and the company would see an increase in their conversion level because of this dark pattern.

In truth, you can get people to act against their own interests with some effective design decisions and well-written copy.

Imagine for a moment you wanted to sell insurance to go with a user's purchase of a pair of shoes. Surely somebody can't be persuaded to buy insurance for shoes! Believe it or not, it is not as hard as you might think. Just take a look at the mockup below.



Just press the green button to buy. Go on!

Design cues combined with the fact that most users do not read instructions can trick them into taking certain actions. I can pretty much guarantee that the sales of insurance for shoes would skyrocket, not because people wanted coverage, but because I tricked them into it.

Yes, I clearly label which option doesn't include insurance, but all the visual cues encourage users to click the button with insurance. It is highlighted in a bold, inviting color and, most importantly, it looks like an arrow pointing onwards instead of backwards like the button without insurance.



The design takes advantage of the fact that users are often in too much of a rush to read copy properly and instead rely on visual cues to work out what they should do next.

But just because we can trick people into ordering insurance with their shoes doesn't mean we should.

The subject of ethics in web design is hotly championed by many passionate individuals but it's not the topic of this book. I take a more pragmatic attitude toward the whole subject. When the pressure is on, people can convince themselves anything is ethical and justify whatever they feel they need to do.

It is important to remember that many digital professionals are under massive pressure from management to improve online conversion rates. You might even be one of them. In such situations, preaching ethics isn't going to change people's behavior, because people under pressure can convince themselves of anything.

After all, even my example makes it very clear that it adds insurance to an order, so how can it be unethical? I went as far as writing it on the button!

Don't misunderstand me. I am not suggesting we all give in and start using dark patterns. But my objection to dark patterns does not stem from ethical concerns. I object to them because I believe they are bad for business and because there are better options available. That is the topic of this book.

If we are to stamp out dark patterns and make the web a better place, we need to talk about more than ethical considerations. We need to provide management with a solid business argument against their use, and offer a viable alternative. That begins by understanding some fundamental changes in the marketplace.

## The Rise of the Empowered Consumer

The manipulation of consumers to encourage sales is not new. Anybody who has ever watched the TV series *Mad Men*<sup>2</sup> knows it has been around since the dawn of the modern advertising industry. Ethical or not, businesses have been treating consumers as a cash cow for decades. So why stop now?

The reason is simple. There has been a fundamental shift in the power dynamic between customer and company. To demonstrate this point, let me take you back in time an embarrassing number of years to 1990 when I was applying to university. It was a different world then, with no mobile phones and no internet (or information superhighway as we would soon call it!)

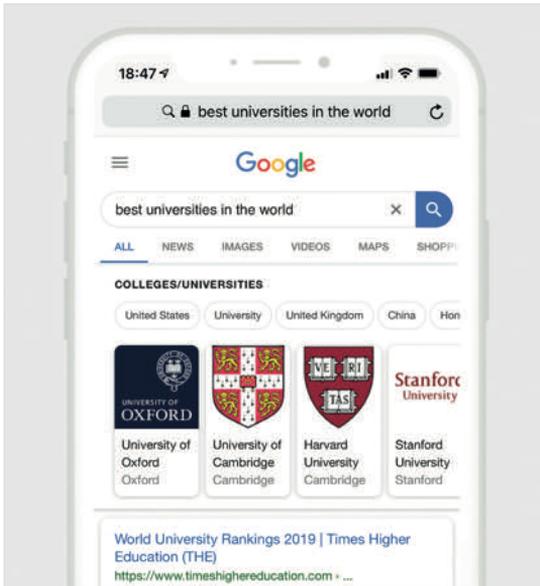
I had to choose where I wanted to study and, to be honest, my choice was limited. My older friends shared their thoughts on the places they were studying, and my tutor at college recommended one or two places, but that was it. I think I saw an advertisement for my local university at the cinema and another one on TV, but that was it.

Going on this rather short list, I then wrote to three or four of these institutions asking them to send me a printed prospectus. I used these to narrow my selection down to two that I visited in person before making my final choice. That decision was made purely on my impressions and those of my parents. I had no information to go on other than what they told me on the open days and in the prospectuses.

Now think about the experience of young people today as they choose a university. They have the names of every university on

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<sup>2</sup> <https://smashed.by/madmen>



We have every option for any purchase in our pockets.

the planet in their pockets, with instant access to detailed information on those universities and the courses they offer.

Not only that, but they also have instant access to everything everybody has ever said online about those universities. While my knowledge was limited to what a university told me about itself, they can access the opinions of students who attend or have attended the university, as well as details of any accreditation and awards they have received.

What a huge difference. A difference that applies to pretty much any product you care to mention and which has fundamentally redefined the relationship between customers and brands. But also, a change that has altered consumer behavior.

Let's take a moment to break down two of those differences: an explosion of choice, and a wealth of information.

## THE IMPACT OF UNPRECEDENTED CHOICE

Consumers love choice – or to be more accurate, consumers say they love choice. In truth, based on countless studies, we often deal with choice extremely poorly. Making a decision becomes overwhelming due to the many potential outcomes and risks that may result from making the wrong choice. We find choosing mentally draining and often fail to make a decision at all.

Hick's law<sup>3</sup> (named after psychologist William Edmund Hick) states that there is a direct correlation between the number of choices and the length of time it will take us to reach a decision.

What does this mean for our businesses and online conversion rate? Well, with every option from all of your competitors in their pockets, consumers are faced with overwhelming choice. Choice we are ill-equipped to handle.

Our response to this overwhelming choice is to reduce our options to something more manageable as rapidly as possible. That leads us to dismiss options based on very superficial criteria. For example, if a website loads too slowly there is no reason why users need to hang around; they move on to the next possible supplier.

Of course, site load time has little to do with the quality of service the company in question is offering. But with so much choice, why wait? Why not just move on to the next one in a plethora of options?

An abundance of choice has led us to prioritize the easiest option over the best, because finding the best is just too time-consuming. Not that consumers are entirely without help in narrowing their options. There has been an explosion of sites offering feedback

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3 <https://smashed.by/hickslaw>



We rely heavily on ratings to narrow the huge number of options available to us.

on companies from other customers. Ratings and reviews have become a critical component in people's decision-making process.

Just think about your own experience of buying something on Amazon. Search for almost any product on Amazon and you see an overwhelming number of options. So how do you narrow those options? Most of us filter by price and, more importantly, rating.

Then, when we click through on an individual product, most of us skip over the product description and go straight to the reviews. We value what our peers say over what the company says about its product.

These kinds of deep and independent insights into a product have led to a savvier consumer, and also one who is considerably more empowered.

## THE RISE OF EMPOWERED CONSUMERS

Not only do consumers have more choice than ever before, they also have a voice. If you go back 25 years, there were very few consequences if a company provided a customer with a poor experience. In most cases it would be limited to the customer moaning about the company to friends and family.

By contrast, today's world is very different. For a start, most people have a far larger social circle and communication to that circle is both instantaneous and spontaneous.

With the average number of Facebook friends at over 150, and Twitter followers over 700, a customer's reach is considerably wider than in the past. And they can inform their entire follower base of their dissatisfaction in seconds, right from the phone in their pocket.

But complaining to friends and followers is just the start. The web also amplifies the customer in three other ways too.

First, it connects disgruntled customers. It is easy for customers who have had bad experiences with the same company to connect and act together. Most famously, one disgruntled Dell customer unified others dissatisfied with the company's customer service by publishing a blog post, "Dell Lies. Dell Sucks."<sup>4</sup> The resulting PR backlash reportedly knocked a third off of the company's share price.<sup>5</sup>

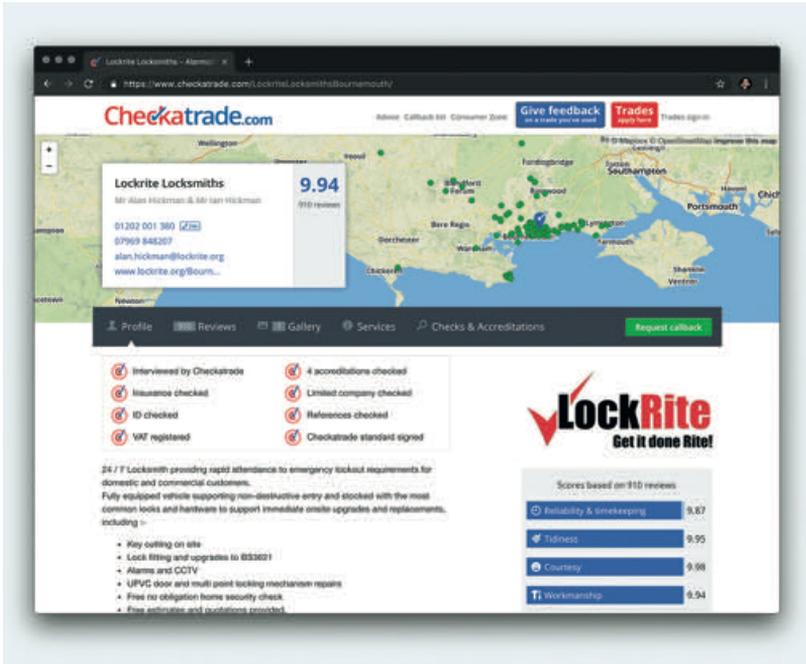
Second, one mistake can go viral, devastating a company's image. The video of a United Airlines passenger being physically removed from a flight quickly undermined the company's already beleaguered reputation and caused some to boycott the airline.

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4 <https://smashed.by/lies>

5 <https://smashed.by/dellhell>

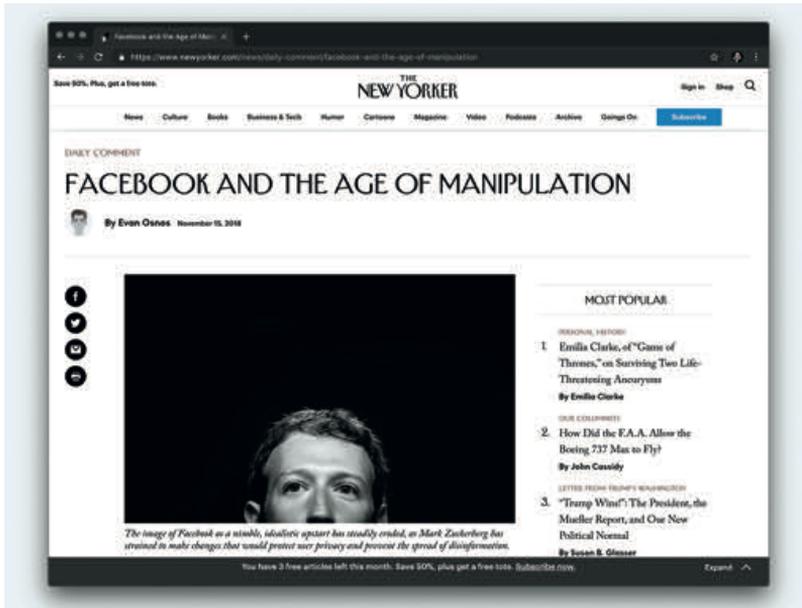
Finally, and most significantly, the web has enabled customers to post negative reviews of companies and these businesses now understand that a bad rating can seriously impact sales. Review sites like Tripadvisor or Checkatrade can make or break a company's ability to secure new customers.



Review sites like Checkatrade can make or break a company's ability to secure new customers.

Although these criticisms of companies have historically been mainly about customer services, that too is changing. We are beginning to see a growing backlash against the dark patterns this book is a response to. For a long time, the criticism of manipulative techniques was limited to design and marketing blogs, but increasingly those criticisms reach the mainstream.

Facebook in particular has come in for a lot of criticism for its manipulative techniques. But the stories around the manipulation employed by tech companies are educating consumers about the broader and more entrenched culture of manipulation that has existed in sales and marketing for generations.



Companies are increasingly facing negative press for their manipulative practices.

We now live in a world where consumers are increasingly aware when they are being manipulated and, now they have a choice and a voice, they are less inclined to put up with it.

Why am I telling you all of this? Why am I repeating something you probably already know, and certainly something I have touched on in my other books? I am talking about this shift in power because understanding changes in consumer behavior gives us insights into how we can persuade consumers to buy without resorting to the failing manipulative techniques of the past.



Of course, to use less manipulative techniques, we first need to persuade our clients or managers that this is a better approach.

## How Manipulation Is Damaging Your Business

Those who propose the use of dark patterns are not bad people in most cases. They are people under pressure to meet targets and keep a business growing. They resort to manipulation out of what they see as a necessity. For them, dark patterns are an answer to the challenges they face. After all, they do work and will indeed increase sales.

The problem is that dark patterns come with costs that are not immediately apparent to a manager or client under pressure. Costs that are ultimately damaging to the business as a whole. Costs that often go unidentified, leaving management under the impression they make sense.

It is not always apparent to the casual observer that there is a link between the introduction of a dark pattern and negative consequences seen in other parts of the business. In part, that is because companies are organized into silos and one department is not always aware of what another section is doing.

What are the business costs of dark patterns? They fall into two areas:

- the enormous impact of buyer's remorse
- the hidden marketing costs of manipulation

The second of those is by far the biggest, so let's address that first. It also demonstrates how there is not always a clear relationship between manipulation and costs.

## THE HIDDEN MARKETING COSTS OF MANIPULATION

Let's be honest: most manipulative sales techniques are driven by sales and marketing departments. Departments under increasing pressure to improve conversion rates and sales numbers. These metrics determine success and so marketing and sales will do almost anything to move these needles. If manipulative dark patterns cause a tangible and immediate improvement in conversion, why wouldn't you use them?

This is especially true when seen against the general backdrop where advertising spend seems to be becoming less and less effective. The need to convert customers is therefore higher than ever. With customers seemingly more reluctant to buy, it leads us to resort to ever more desperate techniques.

But are we actually caught in a vicious circle? Could it be that the very reason consumers are less willing to buy and more resistant to marketing is because we are undermining trust with the manipulative techniques we adopt?

As we have already established, manipulative techniques make customers increasingly distrustful and more likely to complain about a company. Could this be the reason many companies struggle to convert customers at the rate they once did? Could it be that they are reading negative reviews and comments from existing customers?

Think about it for a moment. Marketing and sales rely heavily on goodwill for success. Word-of-mouth recommendation is a significant factor in marketing reach, as well as sales. Equally, trust is a crucial ingredient in any transaction between two people. Manipulation undermines those.



If your company is struggling to attract and convert new customers this could well be because people distrust your brand. If your marketing spend isn't as effective as once it was, it could be because much of that spending power is simply being wasted on overcoming the negative attitudes around the brand.

Another warning sign that something is not right is lifetime customer value.

Is customer turnover high compared to competitors or has it declined since adopting more aggressive sales tactics? If so, this could be due to the adoption of such tactics. Are customers spending less than they used to or below what you would expect? Perhaps they are put off because they don't trust that your company has their best interests at heart.

But surely customers are unaware that a site is manipulating them, so why would they distrust the company? I would challenge that assumption. Do you realize when a website is manipulating you? I suspect you do.

I once ran usability testing on a popular hotel booking website when one of the participants suddenly announced, "I hate all this manipulative crap. I just ignore it." He knew what the site was trying to do, and believed he didn't let it influence him. In reality, it probably did. The point is, however, it annoyed him and left a negative impression.

Of course, when I claim dark patterns are undermining your marketing efforts, I am making a lot of assumptions. There may be other reasons for the decline in sales. But most companies do not know one way or another. They are happily implementing dark patterns without being confident that they do not have unintended

side effects. Dark patterns may generate more sales in the short term but if that comes at the cost of increased marketing spend as the company haemorrhages existing customers, then is it worth it? I would suggest that having a loyal base of customers who stick with the company over the long term and passionately promote the company to friends and family creates a healthier business.

But as I have already said, aggressive sales techniques do not only cost a company in marketing and sales, they also cost the business in other ways. In particular, it gets expensive dealing with customers who suffer from buyer's remorse.

### **THE HIDDEN COST OF BUYER'S REMORSE**

Imagine for a moment you were the poor customer who got tricked into adding travel insurance to a flight. It is possible you would never notice. It is also possible that you noticed, but couldn't be bothered to correct the problem. However, a significant proportion of people will want to get their money back.

The kind of techniques becoming so prominent on the web at the moment are designed to manipulate people into doing something they do not want to do. But sooner or later the user wakes up and regrets their decision. That is the point it starts costing the business.

First, the user will reach out to customer support and it costs the company money to handle that complaint. If an unhappy customer picks up the phone and calls a company it costs on average £3.50 per call.<sup>6</sup> Even if they use live chat or email, an employee needs to read and respond to these enquiries, all of which costs the company money.

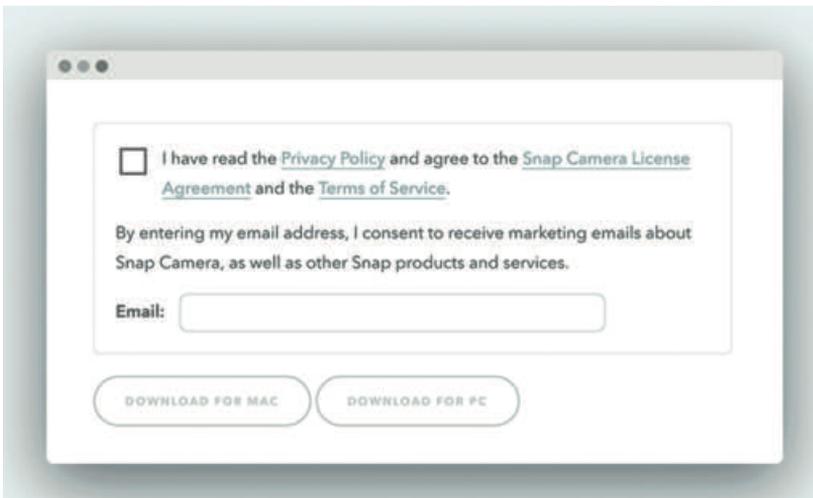
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<sup>6</sup> <https://smashed.by/callcosts>

Then there is the cost of processing returns. For a physical product this can become very expensive as restocking a product can be both time-consuming and in some cases impossible. Even if it is not a physical product, there is still the cost of processing refunds or handling disputes when a refund is not going to be issued.

Not that all manipulative techniques used online are focused on placing an order. Newsletter sign-up is another common area where dark patterns lurk. Surely there is no cost to buyer's remorse there? Wrong!

If someone ends up on a mailing list without granting explicit permission, it can cost a company a lot. Worst-case scenario: a company has to defend itself against a legal challenge. Even the more common response of marking your emails as spam can cost a company. Other emails from your company can be blocked by filters, effectively reducing your marketing capabilities.



Forcing people to sign up to a newsletter can lead to that newsletter being blocked from legitimate subscribers' inboxes.

In short, the cost of unhappy customers can be substantial for a business. Unfortunately these costs are not always visible, especially to those instigating the use of online manipulation.

I worked with one client who perfectly proves this point. Let's call them Acme Electronics. Acme Electronics sold consumer electronics, such as toasters,

kettles and microwaves.

The head of e-commerce had grown sales year-on-year for the best part of a decade but was beginning to struggle to meet the ambitious goals set by

management. Management had seen great success in the past and expected her to improve on that in the future.

**In short, the cost of unhappy customers can be substantial for a business.**

**Unfortunately these costs are not always visible, especially to those instigating the use of online manipulation.**

The head of e-commerce had achieved that growth by fixing the obvious flaws in the old website, and now that work had been done there were fewer opportunities for growth. In desperation she hit upon an idea. She would increase the average order value of kettles by automatically adding a hard water filter to customers' baskets. She reasoned that users could always remove it if they didn't want it. Of course, users often didn't remove it because they didn't spot it. The result was a significant jump in the number of filters sold and the head of e-commerce was one step closer to meeting her end-of-year target.

When I started working with the company, I pointed out that this was a classic dark pattern<sup>7</sup> and was best avoided. She argued vigorously against me, pointing to the increase in sales. The filters were not expensive, but cumulatively had a significant impact on the company's sales because kettles were their number-one seller.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://smashed.by/basketsneak>



Now, I am a pragmatist. If something works, I don't feel it is my place to lecture clients about morality. It is their decision as to whether a practice is ethical or not. However, I suspected the rosy sales figures were not telling the whole story. I contacted the returns department and found out that, sure enough, the company had experienced a massive increase in returns of filters since the change to the website.

In fact, together with the head of returns, we calculated that the cost of processing returns was costing the company money. That wouldn't have been a problem if the number of returns was only a fraction of the sales of filters. But that wasn't the case. It turned out that the automatic bundling of filters with the kettles was costing Acme money.

Why had nobody spotted this? Why hadn't the returns department questioned the spike in returns? Why hadn't the head of e-commerce checked on the impact of her decision as I had? The answer lies in the way most companies are structured.

The chances are that, like Acme Electronics, your company is organized into departmental silos with each silo responsible for its own areas. In that kind of organizational structure, departments focus on meeting their own targets and rarely think holistically about the whole organization.

As long as e-commerce sales were going up, the head of e-commerce was happy. She wasn't responsible for returns and so didn't even consider the broader ramifications. She was doing her job well and that was all that mattered. Similarly, the head of the returns team was not too concerned. He was measured on how efficiently returns were processed and not the number of returns. It wasn't his problem.

I asked him what he would have done if he had realized that filters were being returned because they were bundled with kettles. He answered that he probably wouldn't have done anything. He said that sales strategy wasn't his job and his colleagues wouldn't have appreciated him interfering.

The whole situation at Acme Electronics was a mess, and yet they didn't even know it. They were oblivious to the risks they were taking with their brand and profit margins.

## **Not a Risk Worth Taking**

All of this goes to show that tricking people into taking action on our websites is not only unethical, but it is also simply not a risk worth taking. It has the potential to undermine marketing efforts, cost the company money in returns and support calls, as well as reduce repeat business and customer lifetime value.

So that leaves us with a problem. If we cannot use dark patterns, then what is the alternative? What was the head of e-commerce at Acme Electronics supposed to do? What are you supposed to do if you are in a similar position?

The first step is to reevaluate how we measure success. We need to look carefully at the metrics we use.



The world is a miracle. So are you.  
**Thanks for being smashing.**



Paul Boag has been working in the web since 1993. He is a user experience strategist who helps companies make use of digital to better serve connected consumers. Paul also hosts the award-winning user experience podcast at [boagworld.com](http://boagworld.com). He is a regular speaker at conferences and author of four other books including *Digital Adaptation*.