



From Intention to Action: How Design Gets Us to Follow Through

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The Space Between Intention and Action

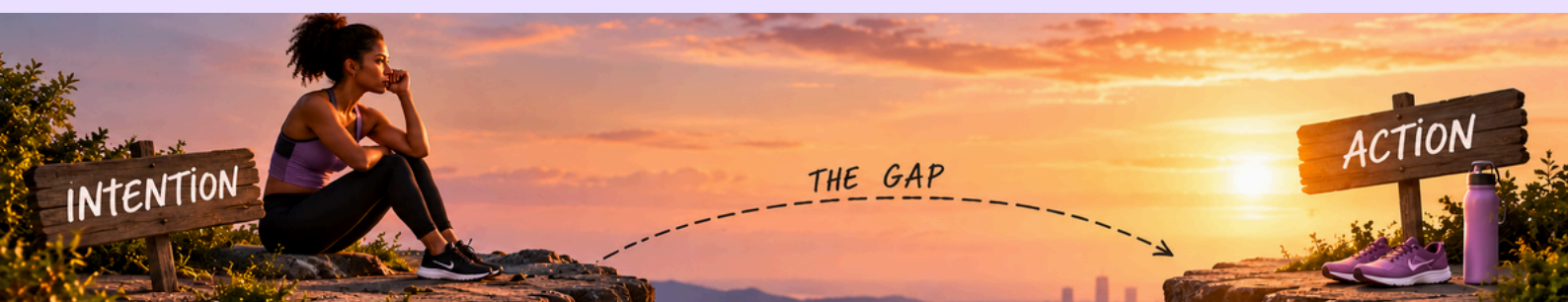
Every night, someone tells themselves, 'Tomorrow, I'm going to work out.' The intention is there; tomorrow comes, but their workout doesn't happen. We see and hear this story every New Year, but what prevents people from following through on what they intend to do?

Designers have helped bridge the intention–action gap of users by shaping environments that make desired behaviors easier to understand, initiate, and maintain. Through visual organization, affordances, reduced friction, behavioral cues, feedback, and personalized experiences, designers can support users in following through on existing intentions.

Creating environments with users in mind became a successful business approach that has been adopted by many. Companies embraced the experience economy once they realized that consumers are not simply purchasing products; they are purchasing feelings, identities, memories, and experiences (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). In the experience economy, good design adds value because it determines not only how consumers interact with a product, but also how that product makes them feel.

User-centered design means that designs must be built on concrete research. Designers research users' thoughts, behaviors, attitudes, needs, and goals. With this information, they create personas that serve as representations of real users (Dykes, 2025).

Designers aren't simply making objects attractive; they're helping determine what people anticipate, notice, feel, remember, and associate with those objects. A product may satisfy a practical need, but design can transform that interaction into a memorable experience that customers want to seek out again.



Why Good Intentions Aren't Enough

Psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky helped establish the foundations of behavioral economics by studying how cognitive biases influence judgment and decision-making. Their research demonstrated that people do not always evaluate gains, losses, and uncertainty through purely rational thought analysis (Interaction Design Foundation, n.d.-a).

Humans constantly make decisions based on impulses, gut feelings, or force of habit (Lupton, 2017). Such decisions can evade deliberate rational analysis. Behavioral economics helps explain these patterns by examining the psychological, emotional, and social factors that influence decision-making. These insights can reveal influences users may not consciously recognize that affect their choices.

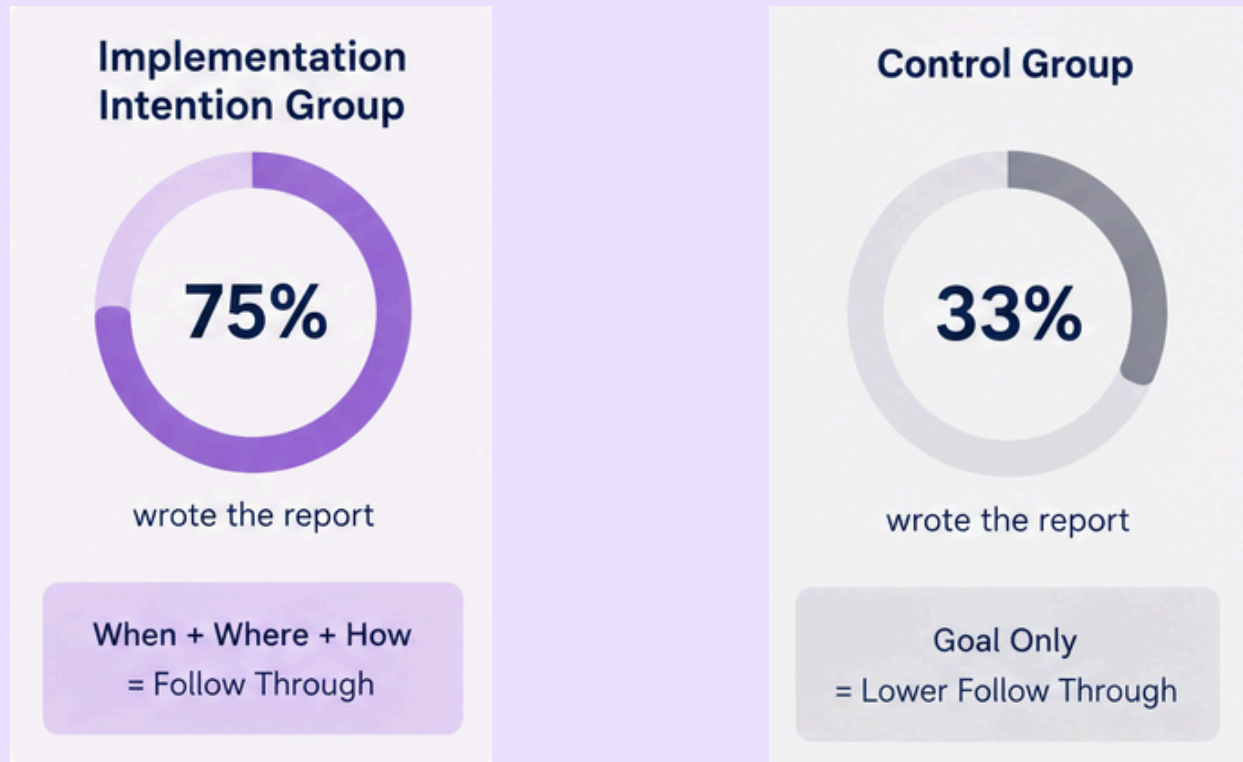
At the heart of behavioral design lies cognitive psychology, which helps explain how people perceive, think, remember, and learn. Daniel Kahneman distinguished between fast, intuitive thinking (System 1) and slower, more deliberate thinking (System 2), providing a useful framework for understanding decision-making. Behavioral design applies insights like these to create environments that account for intuitive choices while supporting deliberate decision-making when necessary (Interaction Design Foundation, n.d.-b).

Gollwitzer and Brandstätter (1999) conducted a study in which participants were asked before Christmas break to write a report describing how they spent Christmas Eve. The report had to be completed within 48 hours of the event. Half of the participants were instructed to form implementation intentions by identifying exactly when and where they intended to write their reports.



Behavioral Economics In Motion

The other half of the participants received no additional instructions. Three-fourths of the participants who formed implementation intentions completed their reports, compared with only one-third of the control group (Gollwitzer, 1999).



The findings demonstrate how connecting an intention to a specific situation can increase the likelihood of follow-through. For designers, this provides a useful framework for considering how environments can support intended behaviors. Design can reduce the mental effort required to understand information, direct attention, and make intended actions easier to recognize and complete.

The SuperAmma campaign was created to reduce child mortality associated with diarrheal disease in rural India by increasing hand-washing with soap.

Research used to develop the SuperAmma campaign identified hand-washing with soap as a habitual behavior often established at a young age by a child's primary caregiver. Based on the research conducted within the communities involved, the campaign focused on mothers as an important mechanism for encouraging behavioral change within households and the wider community (Crawford, 2020).

The campaign framed hand-washing as part of being a “SuperMother,” connecting hygiene with good parenting and teaching children good manners (Crawford, 2020). Rather than simply providing information about disease prevention, the campaign connected the desired behavior to emotions and identities that were meaningful to its audience.

Six months after the campaign, hand-washing with soap occurred during more than 37% of key hand-washing occasions. Among school children, rates increased from 32% to 51%; among women, from 10% to 28%; and among men, from 13% to 31%. The intervention also cost approximately \$1,000 per village, considerably less than many health interventions (Crawford, 2020).

SuperAmma demonstrates that encouraging action does not always require providing users with more information. Designing messages around existing habits, emotions, and identities can also help transform intention into behavior.

The Story of Supermom

When you choose handwashing with soap, you choose progress.



Designed With Love



When you order a cup of coffee, what do you expect from the experience? Think about the flavor you anticipate before taking the first sip. You may expect a familiar combination of flavors, but the experience goes beyond taste. The care taken in preparing the drink, the environment in which it is served, and the emotions associated with that experience can influence how the product is perceived. This illustrates the role emotion plays in experience design: the perceived value of a product can be shaped not only by what the product does, but also by how the interaction makes the user feel.

Personas

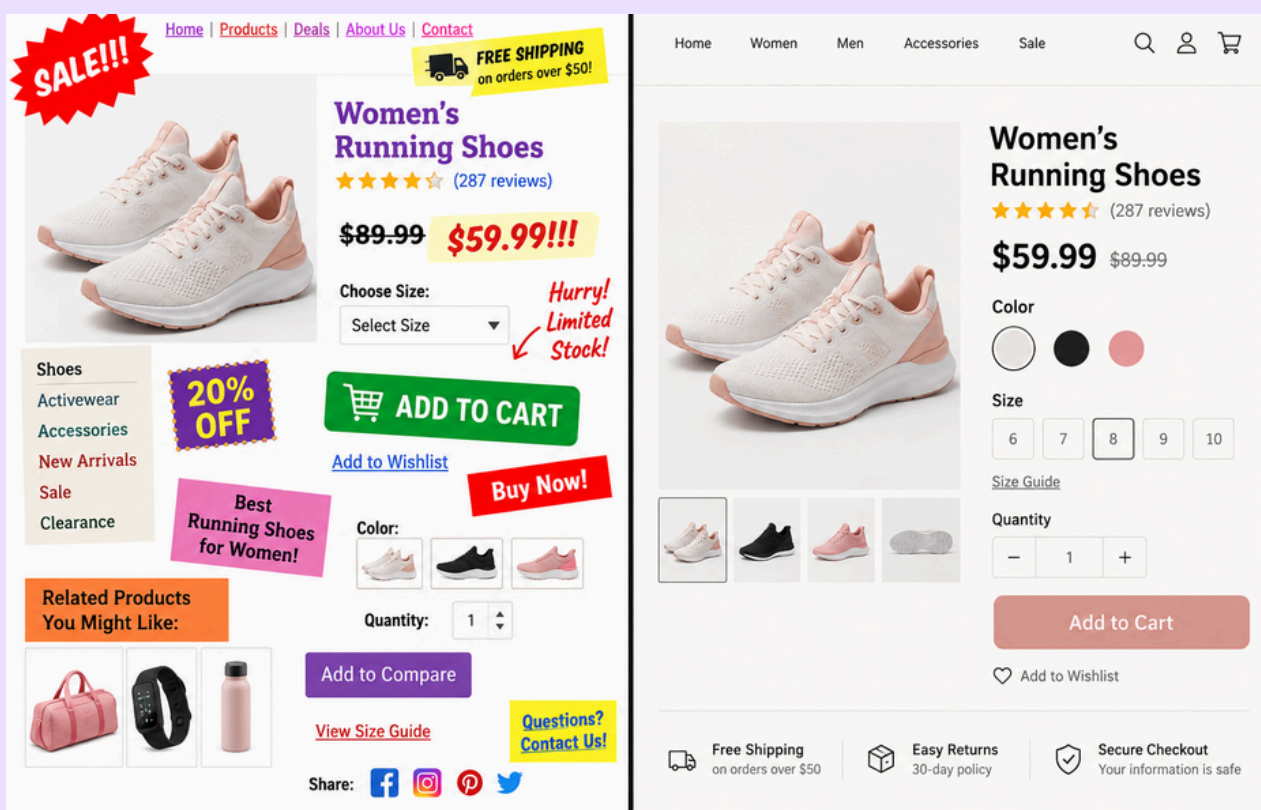
Creating meaningful emotional experiences requires designers to understand the people they are designing for—their behaviors, expectations, needs, and goals. Personas help designers keep users in mind by organizing their behavioral data into tangible visualizations. Making customers real through personas helps companies appeal to their customer base exactly as they want. By giving design teams a clearer picture of the people they are designing for, personas can help keep decisions grounded in user needs.

Personas also create a common, precise vocabulary for describing a certain type of user. In meetings, the persona's name acts as shorthand for the full set of attributes, desires, and behaviors to consider when making design decisions. Instead of every team member having a shifting and unique idea of "the user," a persona gives the team an easily pictured set of users (Dykes, 2025).

Gestalt Principles

Once designers understand who they are designing for, they must organize the experience in a way those users can easily understand.

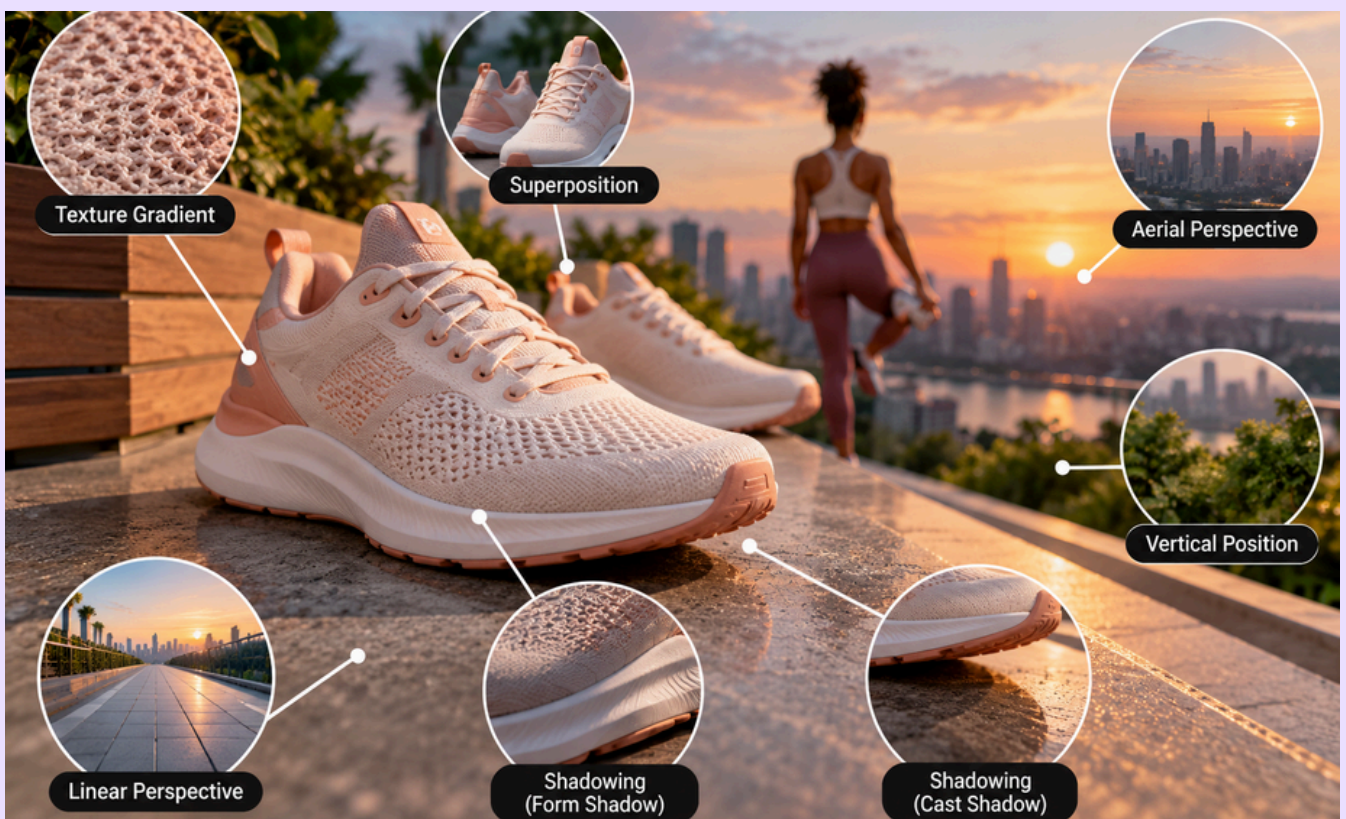
Gestalt principles allow designers to organize information according to how people naturally perceive it. When relationships between elements are immediately apparent, users spend less effort figuring out the interface and can focus their attention on completing their task.



The Gestalt principle of simplicity suggests that people tend to perceive visual information in its simplest organized form (Canva, 2026). On the left screen, multiple elements compete for the user's attention simultaneously; the user must determine where to look and which action to prioritize. The right screen uses Gestalt principles to establish a clearer visual hierarchy. Related information is grouped together, competing elements are reduced, and the layout creates a more obvious path from viewing the product to selecting options and completing the purchase.

Depth Cues

Designers can also influence where users direct their attention through the use of depth cues. While Gestalt principles organize relationships between visual elements, depth cues create a sense of spatial hierarchy by helping viewers perceive which objects appear closer or farther away.



Depth cues do more than establish where the viewer should look. The surrounding environment places the product within an imagined experience. Instead of viewing the running shoes above against an isolated background, the user sees them overlooking a scenic landscape at sunset. The product becomes associated with the experience of going outside, exercising, and enjoying the environment.

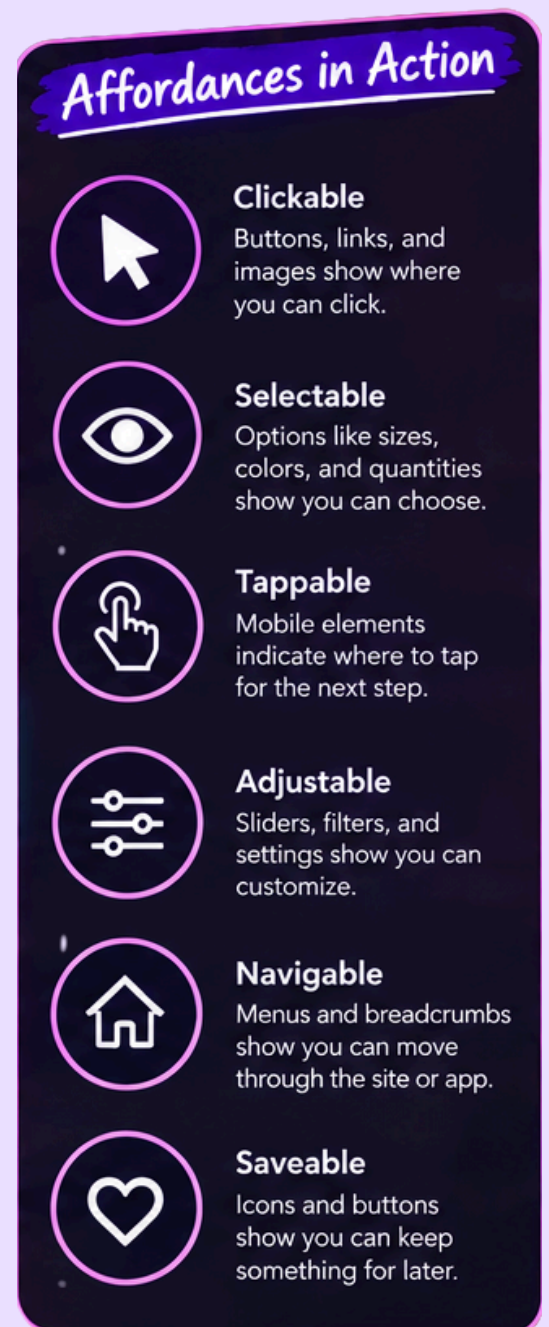
Affordances

Affordances help users understand what actions are possible within a design. In digital environments, designers use familiar visual cues and conventions to communicate how users can interact with an interface.

In the running shoe listing shown above, color circles indicate that different colors can be selected, size boxes communicate another available choice, a heart icon suggests that the product can be saved, and the “Add to Cart” button provides a clear path toward purchasing. This helps users recognize what actions are available. Designers can also influence which of those available actions users are more likely to choose through digital nudging.

Digital nudging is the use of user-interface design elements to guide people’s behavior in digital choice environments (Weinmann et al., 2016).

Many choices are made in online environments. As the design of digital choice environments always (either deliberately or accidentally) influences people’s choices, understanding the effects of digital nudges in these environments can help designers lead users to the most desirable choice. For example, the mobile payment app Square nudges people into giving tips by setting the default to “tipping” so that customers must actively select a “no tipping” option if they choose not to give a tip. Using this simple nudge has raised tip amounts, especially where little or no tipping has been common (Carr 2013).

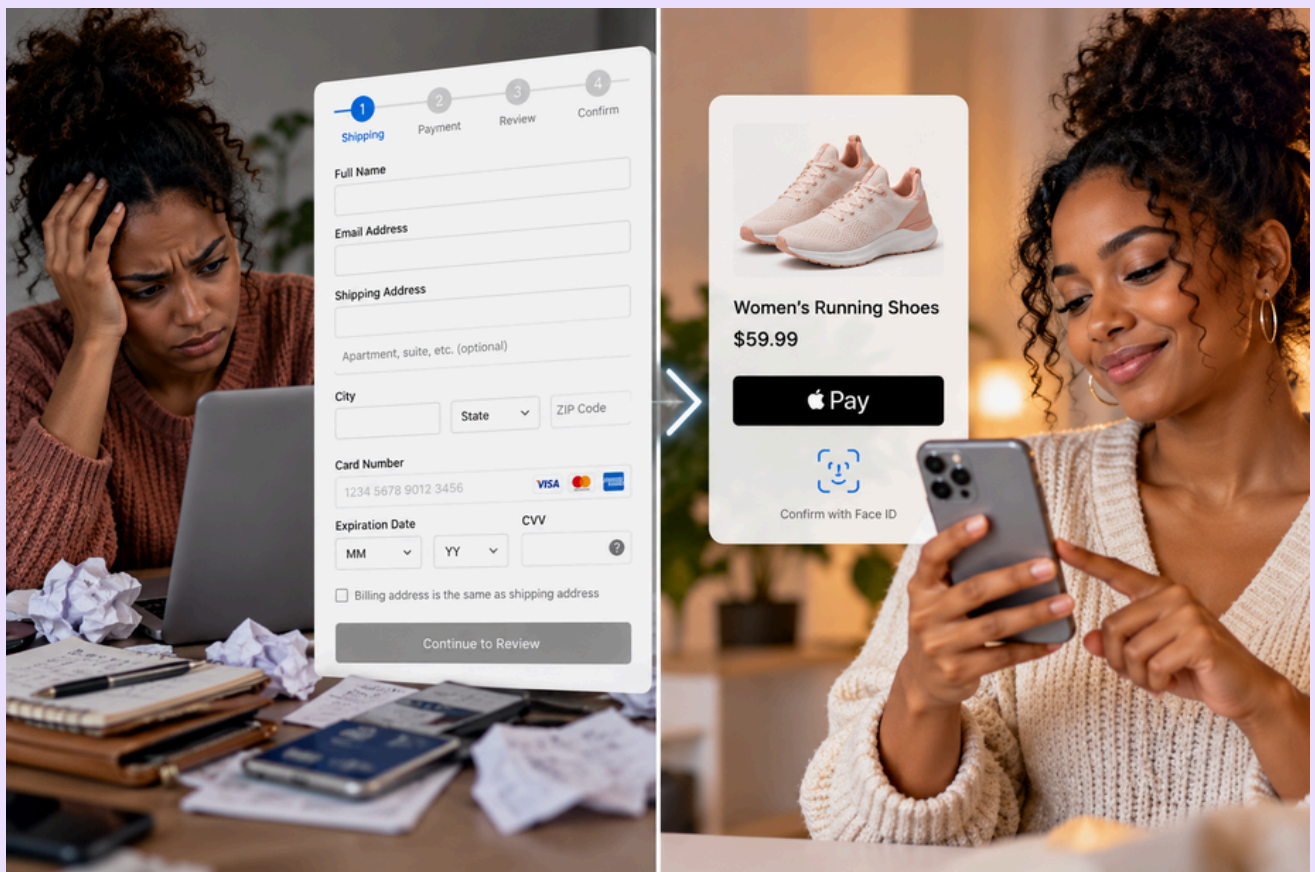


Removing Barriers

Once designers have made an intended action visually understandable and appealing, the next challenge is ensuring that the experience does not create unnecessary barriers to completing it.

Designers can address these barriers by managing friction costs within the experiences they create.

Friction costs are the little “speed bumps” people encounter when engaging with a service (Bridgeable, 2024). Extra steps, repeated questions, complicated forms, or unnecessary decisions can interrupt a user's momentum. When friction becomes too great, completing the intended action may feel more difficult than abandoning it.



Friction

Ease

Amazon's “1-Click” purchasing feature demonstrates how reducing friction can simplify an intended action. By allowing returning customers to bypass repeated checkout steps, the feature reduced the effort required to complete a purchase (Bridgeable, 2024).

Reducing friction does not create the user's intention to purchase; it removes obstacles between that intention and the action required to complete it.

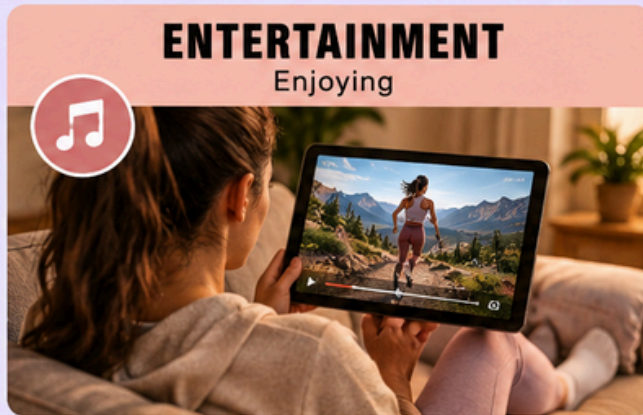
Four Realms of an Experience

(Pine & Gilmore, 1998)

Absorption

Immersion

Passive
Participation



Active
Participation

In the experience economy, businesses use services as the stage and goods as props to engage customers in ways that create memorable experiences (Pine & Gilmore, 1998).

Companies have moved beyond simply providing physical products by creating experiences that customers can engage with and enjoy. A pair of running shoes may begin as a product, but when connected to a fitness app that tracks workouts, provides feedback, and encourages continued participation, the shoes become part of a larger experience. The user is no longer simply purchasing a product; they are engaging with an environment designed to support continued action.

Designing this type of experience requires understanding not only what users do, but also how they participate in and connect with the experience.

Design To Encourage



Initiating an action is only one part of closing the intention–action gap. Maintaining that behavior requires users to repeatedly follow through on their intentions over time. Designers can support this continued action by providing prompts and cues at moments when users are able to respond.

Fitness apps demonstrate how these prompts can become part of a user's environment. Notifications can remind users about scheduled workouts, encourage them to maintain a streak, or prompt behaviors such as drinking water. Rather than requiring users to continually remember their intentions on their own, these cues bring the intended behavior back into attention at relevant moments.

Prompts do not create the user's original goal; they make that goal more visible at the moment an action can be taken. In this way, design can reduce the mental effort required to remember when, where, or how to follow through.

Progress feedback makes gradual or difficult-to-see changes visible by showing users evidence of their continued effort.

When apps are created through emotional design they weave in intrinsic benefits alongside numerical metrics. A fitness app showing strength, energy, sleep, mood and endurance it makes this about how the user feels and not only about weight loss.

These indicators allow users to compare their current progress with their goals and recognize achievements that may not yet be physically noticeable.

By making progress visible, designers can help users recognize the relationship between repeated actions and longer-term goals.

It is generally more effective to learn people's intrinsic motivations to support them in what they already want to do. Otherwise, you waste time and energy convincing them to do something they don't wish to, potentially turning them off your product. UX researchers focus on their users' motivations during the early stages of development to better appeal to users' intrinsic motivations. Intrinsic motivating factors keep users engaging with the product in a meaningful and enjoyable way (Interaction Design Foundation, n.d.-c).



Encouragement Is Better Than Discouragement



Progress feedback can help users recognize their achievements, but not all feedback is encouraging. When people expect information to be negative or uncomfortable, they may avoid engaging with it altogether. This behavior is known as the Ostrich Effect (Bridgeable, 2024).

A user who has missed several workouts, broken a streak, or fallen behind on a goal may begin avoiding the very app designed to support them. Notifications emphasizing missed goals or lost progress can transform feedback from encouragement into a reminder of perceived failure.

Pine and Gilmore (1998) argue that creating memorable experiences also requires eliminating negative cues—details that contradict, distract from, or diminish the intended experience. In a fitness experience designed to encourage continued participation, repeated messages emphasizing failure can become negative cues. Designers can instead consider how feedback communicates setbacks without allowing those setbacks to overwhelm the larger experience.

Designer Introspection Benefits Users



The same behavioral insights designers use to support users can also be used to manipulate them. When design intentionally steers users toward decisions that benefit an organization at the user's expense, behavioral design can cross the line from support into manipulation.

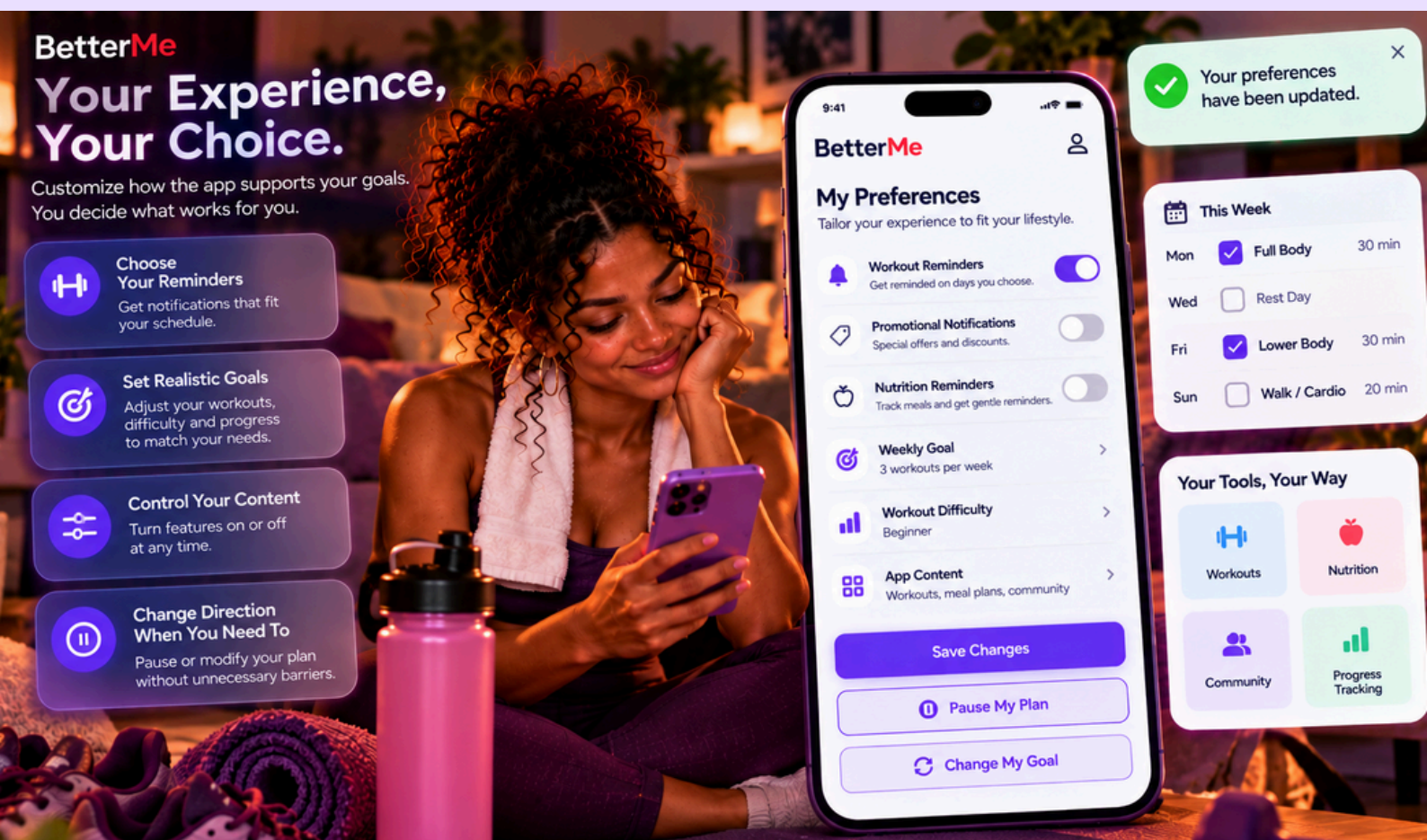
Dark patterns are interface designs that interfere with users' ability to make choices that align with their own preferences or interests (Luguri & Strahilevitz, 2021). These designs may exploit behavioral tendencies such as loss aversion or create artificial pressure through countdown timers, scarcity messages, preselected options, and guilt-based wording.

Research by Luguri and Strahilevitz (2021) demonstrates that dark patterns can influence users' decisions, particularly when multiple manipulative techniques are combined. Their findings illustrate why seemingly small interface choices deserve ethical scrutiny: the way choices are presented can meaningfully affect what users ultimately select.

For example, some European low-cost air carriers present choices of non-essential options in a way that nudges customers toward purchasing these options. While these unethical nudges may lead to short-term gains for the company, they may have long-term repercussions in terms of loss of goodwill, negative publicity, or even legal action (Weinmann, 2016). This is why designers must be aware of the ethical implications of nudges.

When design intentionally steers users toward choices that benefit the company rather than the user, that's when the ethical line has been crossed. It is very important that designers continue to empathize with users to avoid exploiting them through fake urgency tactics.

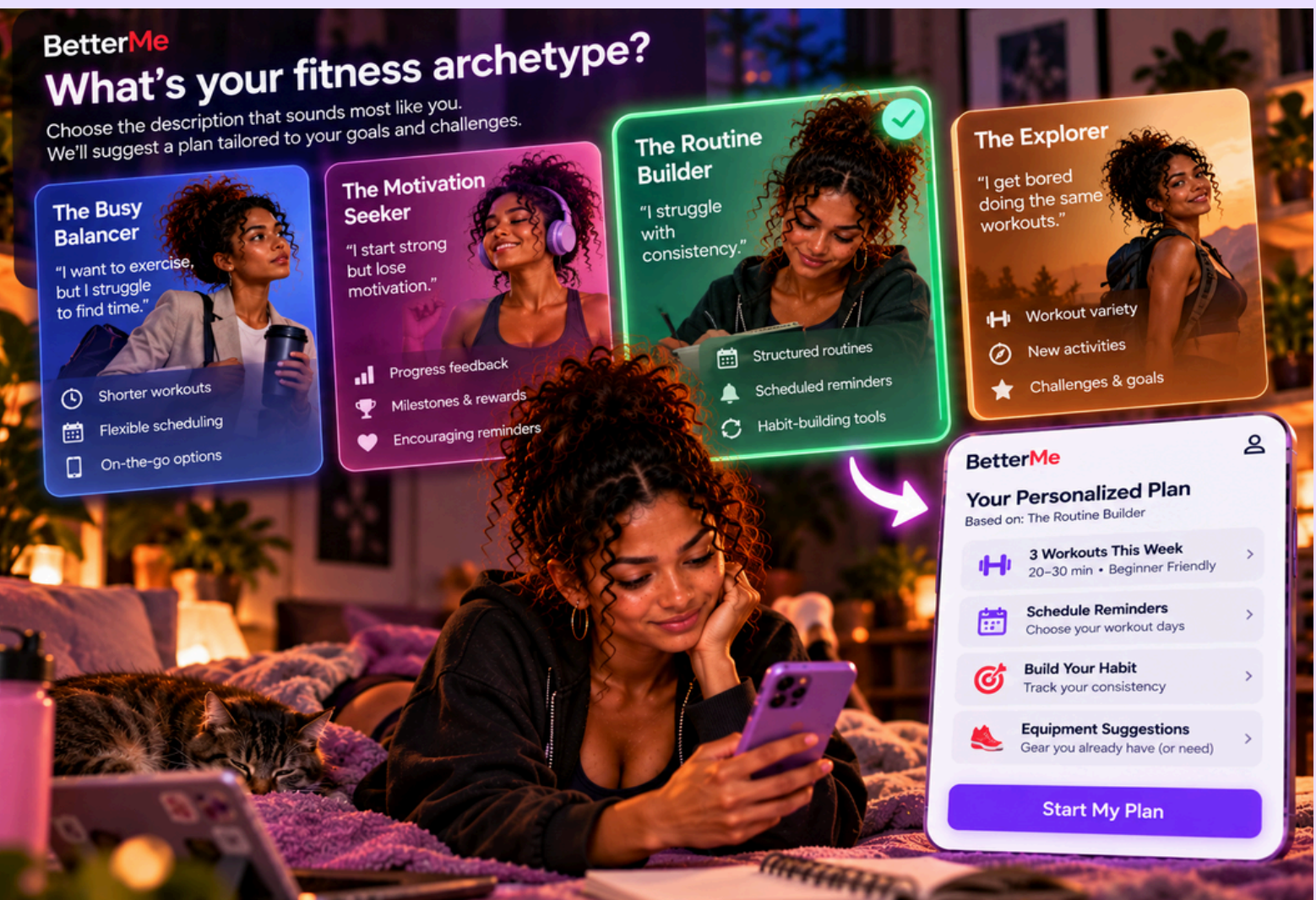
Company integrity is very important for designers to maintain when they design for users. That is why it is important that designers maintain user autonomy.



Autonomy is the ability to use an interface, product, or service in a way that aligns with personal preferences and priorities. Giving users autonomy can often conflict with increasing key business metrics.

Allowing users to make customizations in an interface is the feeling of ownership that tends to follow. Customizations that don't drastically alter workflows or processes are often surface-level, but can bring some users a sense of delight and ownership (Kohler, 2024).

Another example of user personalization would be archetypes. can help identify differences in users' motivations, behaviors, and goals so that experiences can provide support that is more relevant to the individual. However, personalization should support users' goals rather than determine those goals for them.



Preserving autonomy means ensuring that users can understand their options, make meaningful choices, and change direction when an experience no longer serves their needs.

Giving users the option to customize their experience how they want allows design to support their intentions rather than replace them

Conclusion



At the beginning of every user's journey are their intentions. Good design does not replace those intentions, it helps put them into action.

At the behavioral level, design focuses on how effectively a product or experience helps users accomplish what they intend to do. Here, the designer attempts to satisfy or exceed user expectations about the nature of their interactions (Norman et al., 2003).

Throughout an experience, visual organization, affordances, reduced friction, behavioral cues, feedback, and personalization can make intended actions easier to recognize and complete. Individually, these design decisions may appear small, but together they shape the environment in which users decide whether to follow through.

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