

Heuristic Cheat Sheet

Heuristics are any approach to problem solving, learning, or discovery that employ a practical method not guaranteed to be optimal, but sufficient for the immediate goals. In other words, heuristics are shortcuts our brains use to make decisions.

Common Heuristics & Pro Tips

Affect: A mental shortcut that allows people to make decisions quickly by bringing their emotional response into play. They make decisions according to their gut feeling.

Pro tip: As long as you're telling the truth, you should be unafraid to spur your users' emotions—because emotions drive behavior.

Anchoring: The human tendency to rely too heavily on the first piece of information offered (the “anchor”) when making decisions.

Pro tip: When designing a donation form, anchor your users to a large, pre-selected donation amount so the gift they ultimately choose is larger than it would otherwise be.

Availability: People tend to heavily weigh their judgments toward more recent information, making new opinions biased toward the latest news.

Pro tip: Create more content and share it constantly. Stay in your user's line of sight.

Choice Overload: Too many choices might cause people to delay or avoid making decisions.

Pro tip: Decide what you want users to do. Present that option (or options) only.

Commitment: The tendency to be consistent with what we have already done or said we will do in the past, particularly if this is public.

Pro tip: Once a user engages with you in any way, focus on deepening their engagement.

Decoy Effect: People will tend to have a specific change in preference between two options when also presented a third option that is asymmetrical.

Pro tip: Offer a “decoy” option for your users that is close to the option you want them to choose.

FOMO: Fear Of Missing Out - An anxious feeling that can happen when you fear that other people might be having rewarding experiences that you're missing.

Pro tip: Publicly and grandly celebrate your donors—encouraging others to feel they're missing out.

Framing Effect: People decide on options based on whether the options are presented with positive or negative semantics; e.g. as a loss or as a gain.

Pro tip: Describe options in positive terms (e.g., “80% lean” is better than “20% fat.”)

IKEA Effect: A cognitive bias in which people place a disproportionately high value on products they created.

Pro tip: Offer users ways to help “build” something—e.g., donate to a specific program.

Licensing: When people allow themselves to indulge after doing something positive first.

Pro tip: Find ways (esp. offline) to let users have fun. *Then* ask them for something.

Peak-End Rule: People judge an experience largely based on how they felt at its peak (the most intense point) and its end, rather than on the total sum or average of every moment of the experience.

Pro tip: Design experiences that have a highlight and also end on great terms.

Pain of Paying: The pain of paying depends on the mode of payment.

Pro tip: Don't ask for cash. Don't ask for a single donation to be made over multiple payments.

Priming: When people are exposed to one stimulus, it affects how they respond to another stimulus.

Pro tip: Use vocabulary that puts users in the emotional frame of mind you want.

Reciprocity: If someone does something for you, you'll naturally want to do something for them.

Pro tip: Give users something (for free) before asking them for something in return.

Representativeness: People tend to judge the probability of an event by finding a ‘comparable known’ event and assuming that the probabilities will be similar.

Pro tip: Describe new things by comparing it to something users know (and like).