



An important behavioural bias is confirmed: The unused science of less. An opportunity for marketing.

Reading time: 10 minutes

I was recently made aware of the book [Subtract: The Untapped Science of Less](#) by Leidy Klotz and I devoured the book. Even if I was a little disappointed at the end how little Klotz paid attention to the economic opportunities of his findings. But why should you expect that from a professor of engineering, even if his research is very interdisciplinary?



Klotz's central argument is that individuals and societies systematically neglect subtraction as a means of change, and that this leaves a lot of low-hanging fruit for those who are willing to use it.

The book's greatest strength is that it starts off scientifically sound. In a world in the midst of a replication crisis, we should not be reading pop psychology books that pretend to be scientific, to be very sceptical about proving the significance and universality of an (even slightly) counterintuitive phenomenon. Leidy Klotz documents his long and arduous path to establishing "subtraction neglect" as a real phenomenon.

I won't bore you with his many profound thoughts and experiments, with which he proves in various scenarios that people much more often try to solve problems by adding something instead of trying to take something away.

Incidentally, an observation of his son's play behaviour was the starting point for his hypothesis. His two-year-old son wanted to level out the difference in height of a simple Lego bridge. His son added another Lego brick to one side. It would have been just as possible to simply remove a brick from the other side. And of course, we economically educated people realise that this would have been more resource-efficient. Engineers would probably realise that the bridge would have been more stable if it had been subtracted.

Klotz wondered whether his son's reaction might not be a genetic 'programme' that others also have? As is so often the case with professors, his students and colleagues now had to serve as guinea pigs.

To his delight, his hypothesis was confirmed. In over 80% of cases, the participants solved the bridge problem by adding a brick. If Klotz's hypothesis were to be confirmed, then people would obviously simply overlook possible better solutions in many situations.

Subsequently, Klotz and his colleagues developed a wide variety of test tasks and the findings remained stable. People added much more often than they subtracted.



Regardless of whether it was about texts, cooking, building or planning. And even when the participants were explicitly made aware of the possibility that subtraction should also be considered as a possible solution, the majority added something.

It is probably an inner compulsion that makes us instinctively favour additions and not a situational preference.

Only the first chapter of Subtract is based on Klotz's own research. In the rest of the book, he brings together logical evidence from biology, psychology, economics and history, which he interweaves with personal narratives and historical anecdotes to first explain why we neglect subtraction and how embracing subtraction can help us as individuals and improve society.

Ultimately, he applies the principle of multiple logical reasoning here in order to convince us even more. Because the principle is so powerful, it must appear everywhere for Klotz. Some things fascinated me, others made me shake my head. Because it contradicts my life experience. Nevertheless, the book is worth reading, especially for us marketers. A few appetisers from the book:

We humans very much want to show competence. Of course, this is easier through visible addition than invisible subtraction. My house, my car, my boat. My clothes. The tendency to seek happiness in having more possessions is also a good example of the principle of addition and it takes a [Marie Kondo](#) to make us aware of the burden of too much.

A text appears more competent if it is longer. Even if it is easier to understand and more memorable when it is short!

My BrainCandies are therefore too short. I set myself a maximum of 2500 words. But the articles that are shared the most are 7000 words long. Of course, my BrainCandies are often much longer in the raw version and I need a few rounds of shortening to achieve my goal of compact texts. However, I am still pondering the realisation of the attribution of competence in relation to the amount of text....

Societies tend to define ever more complex sets of rules for economic and social coexistence over time. It is easier to add new regulations than to thin out existing ones and thus prevent bureaucratic inefficiency. The current German government promised us something else. But I only ever read about new ideas on what citizens should be required to do, new commissioners and 'democracy promotion' by state-funded NGOs. And I never hear about the abolition of rules, although this would be urgently needed in housing construction, for example. It is much easier for politicians to prohibit something through additional regulations than to open up our freedoms by tearing down obsolete barriers. Politicians are probably only human after all.

Let's look at examples where subtraction has led to better results:

Famously, the introduction of the following checklist as a medical standard has prevented most of the 30,000 annual deaths from catheter infections in the USA:

Wash hands with soap.

Clean the patient's skin with an antiseptic.

Place sterile drapes over the entire patient.

Wear a sterile mask, hat, gown and gloves.



Place a sterile dressing over the catheter site.

These were not new findings. Rather, it was a heavily abridged version of the "Summary of Guidelines for the Placement of Central Catheters [which] ran to thirty-five dense pages..."!!! A heavily abridged instruction has saved many more people than the full instruction, which sought to cover all eventualities.

Anyone who has grown-up children will remember how we tried to teach them to cycle with training wheels from the age of around 4. A very arduous endeavour. Ryan McFarland wanted to enable his two-year-old to get around faster. And thought about what he would have to add to the bike to make this possible. His eureka moment came in 2007 when he thought about what he could remove. And that was the pedals with the entire drivetrain.



What remained was the first balance bike, the 'Strider Bike'. Even two-year-olds could balance, move quickly and slow down on it. McFarland created a new category, rejuvenated the potential for a bike and quickly became commercially successful. (These bikes are also available in Europe:
<https://striderbikes.eu/de/produkt/strider-12-sport/>)

In contrast, I see the principle of addition in brand management as an omnipresent standard. More is more, more is better, more is favoured by the buyer. That's the mantra that seems to drive everyone. And I can't simply exempt myself from it either. I have to think very consciously and deliberately about the potential charm of a reduction. This is a little easier for me because I regularly experience in our studies how annoyed people react to concepts that are full to bursting with great benefit arguments that exceed the processing capacity of the participants. Good marketers sometimes deliberately allow themselves to use the over-calorific approach as a starting point in order to then work out the really relevant core in the next step. Unfortunately, some remain loyal to the Olympics of addition and try a different combination, which again puts a lot of fluff around a hidden valuable core.

For me, one of the best examples of the application of the inventing away principle is the Motel One budget hotel chain.

Founded in Germany with the first opening in Offenbach in 2000. It was the invention of a new category of budget hotels. Through addition and subtraction. As I recall, the inspiration for the concept came from France. What had been subtracted? Typical hotel standards such as wardrobe, safe, minibar, telephone, meeting rooms, restaurant, fitness and sauna. But there were also additions. There was a design that was more in keeping with a design hotel standard. And in the meantime, the hotel bar at many locations also boasts a veritable gin offer. At the beginning of the 2000s, the Motel One case was discussed at every marketing conference. Nevertheless, the addition bias in brand positioning continues to have an effect, with very few new product offers following the subtraction principle. Motel One is now launching flagship hotels as Cloud One, as in Berlin and Nuremberg.



Apple is another good example. The brand is great at eliminating barriers to use before new offerings come onto the market. Of course, this also benefits the brand, as the Apple universe, including the App Store, allows for significantly higher added value.

Many Apple users shy away from a theoretically possible system change. Some prefer to save money by extending the intervals between hardware replacements.

One last case: the launch of the Smart city car in 1998 established a new category of car: the micro compact car. A few things were noticeably removed from the car. A bench seat, the clutch pedal and a significant amount in vehicle length.

It was not only the appearance that caused a wow experience, but also the fact that parking at right angles to the direction of travel was and still is an eye-catcher. The slogan was not 'Reduce to the max' for nothing.

So I encourage you to consciously think more often about whether a business problem can be solved better by taking something away. This can certainly be in combination with an important addition, see the Motel One case.

Yes, I know. It probably won't work anyway. The bias remains, even if you have now understood it. But maybe there is a little hope after all? If the next concept adds too many benefits again?

Text length: 1500 words 😊

Book recommendation

By Ralph Ohnemus, Uwe H. Lebok, Florian Klaus:

Context marketing

The key to consumer behaviour to [order](#).



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