

“Hooked

How to Build Habit-Forming Products”

by Nir Eyal, 2014

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If you want to understand why so many smartphone applications seem to be ‘addictive’ – this book explains, with devastating simplicity how it is done. Nir Eyal graduated from Stanford University Business School. After completing his MBA, he wanted to understand how products could ‘modify’ our actions and ultimately cause compulsions. At that time there was no predictable description of how to achieve this at will. Eyal researched what was happening empirically and identified a core pattern that seemed to underpin all ‘successful’ solutions of this type, which he described and called the ‘Hook Model’

‘Hooked’ describes and explains how this model works: why it is effective and how you can go about deploying it.

“Through consecutive Hook cycles, successful products reach their ultimate goal of unprompted user engagement, bringing users back repeatedly, without depending on costly advertising or aggressive messaging.”

The book follows a simple structure:

- Introduction on habits
- Four steps of the Hook Model
- Ethics of the Hook Model
- Case study of the The Bible App (YouVersion) and
- ‘Habit testing’ – optimising your solutions.

It is written in an accessible style, offering workbook-like questions at the end of each chapter.

“Habits are defined as ‘behaviours done with little or no conscious thought’”.

Eyal describes how to create these habits without our being aware that we are being manipulated.

Chapter 1 – The Habit Zone

In it Eyal explores the nature of ‘habits’ and the kinds of behaviours successful businesses need to create. He blends neuroscience with some psychology and in the manner of a good storyteller he illustrates throughout with examples from life today (well circa 2014). He explores the commercial value of habits – their resilience to external interference and how when fully established, they become increasingly blind to escalating cost.

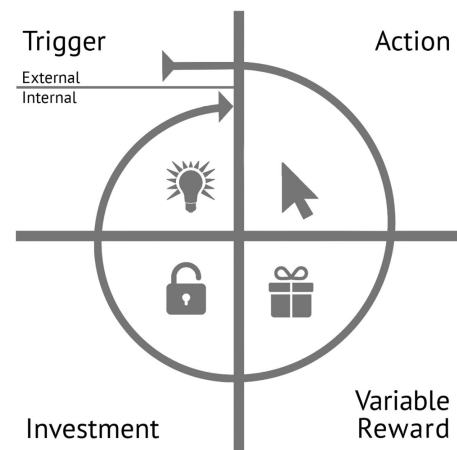


Figure 1- Hook Model (c) Nir Eyal

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"Many innovations fail because consumers irrationally overvalue the old while companies irrationally overvalue the new" (John Gourville). Our old habits are hard to break – and take more effort to undo than many innovators appreciate. High frequency behaviours or high (perceived) utility solutions are most likely to succeed.

The next four chapters explore the Hook Model: Trigger, Action, Variable Reward and Investment.

Chapter 2 – Trigger

'Trigger' begins by describing the perspective of an Instagram user, describing the kind of trigger to action links that application creates. Eyal argues that the most resilient triggers build on top of existing habitual behaviours. Triggers can be internal or external. External triggers could be **paid** (generally unsustainable in the long-term), **earned** (which depend on the platform or product remaining in the limelight ... again difficult to sustain with certainty) or perhaps most potent external triggers are **relationship** triggers. These exploit the primal human need for human connection.

Internal triggers occur when a *"product becomes tightly coupled with a thought, an emotion or a pre-existing routine."* These emotional triggers could stem from either positive or negative emotions. Users who associate a product with resolution of some form of repeating personal tension will establish a strong connection with that product. Eyal advocates that the normal digital design processes like Design Thinking, User Journey Mapping etc. are essential tools to help identify the most important triggers, actions and rewards that should be invoked.

"The ultimate goal of a habit-forming product is to solve the user's pain by creating an association so that the user identifies the company's product or service as the source of relief"

Chapter 3 – Action

When it comes to Action, Eyal refers to the work of B.J. Fogg who established the Stanford Persuasive Technology Lab. Fogg asserts *"that there are three ingredients required to initiate any and all behaviours: (1) the user must have sufficient motivation; (2) the user must have the ability to complete the desired action; and (3) a trigger must be present to activate the behaviour."*

B(ehaviour) = **M**(otivation), **A**(bility), **T**(rigger)

A lot of traditional advertising work addresses 'motivation' often in very sophisticated ways. 'Ability' is demonstrated when the product or service enables a task to be completed far more simply than before. This needs to be coupled with another piece of Fogg's work – six "elements of simplicity":

- Time
- Money
- Physical effort
- Brain Cycles
- Social deviance
- Non-routine

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The goal is for any Action is to minimise any or as many of these factors as possible. Examples of a number of everyday technologies – Google search, Facebook login, iPhone photographs, Twitter homepage are described in terms of Fogg’s models. Eyal also explores the impact of more traditional marketing techniques on perceptions of value.

Chapter 4 – Variable Reward

Beginning with Olds and Milners’ work with mice and moving onto B.F. Skinner’s ‘schedules of reinforcement’, Eyal highlights why we need to maintain a degree of unpredictability in rewards if we are to maintain peoples’ interest.

Building on Deci and Ryan’s self-determination theory *“The rewards of the self are fuelled by “intrinsic motivation” ... “people desire, among other things, to gain a sense of competency. Adding an element of mystery to this goal makes the pursuit all the more enticing”*. Eyal believes that intrinsic motivation is central to effective use of the Hook Model, but while exploiting this, he argues that users must not feel their sense of self-determination is being compromised.

Chapter 5 – Investment

Investment concerns the anticipation of rewards in the future. It is the *“string that pulls users back”*. Each cycle through the Hook Model needs to increase the users’ affinity for the experience; building reliance and ultimately establishing robust habits. Once again, many of these factors are predictable and can be ‘created’. Three key attitudes dominate:

- We tend to overvalue our own efforts irrationally – this underpins models that leverage user generated content.
- We try to avoid behaviours that contradict our previous actions – or to quote Shoshana Zuboff, we are susceptible to ‘psychic numbing’.
- We dislike cognitive dissonance – we tend to manipulate our perceptions of the world to fall in with the ‘crowd’.

Eyal believes that together these three factors lead to rationalization – that we change our attitudes and beliefs to adapt psychologically to something new.

Investment is usually initiated by delivery of variable reward, and investment is less sensitive to effort than ‘Action’ is. This seems to be driven by a form of ‘reciprocity’; which appears to be an innate human tendency in response to perceived act of kindnesses regardless of their origins. Investment needs to prime the next Trigger in the cycle.

Chapter 6 – Ethics

The deliberate design of products and services to trap us in cycle of dependency sounds at least creepy, if not wrong. In this chapter, Eyal asks *“What are you going to do with this?”*. His answer starts with this table:

Manipulation Matrix

Materially improves the user’s life	Peddler	Facilitator
Does not improve the user’s life	Dealer	Entertainer
	Maker does not use it	Maker uses it

- **Facilitators** should be happy to use their solution and be confident they are materially improving the life of their users.
- **Peddlers** almost always believe their idea benefits their users – but there is a disconnect between their belief and reality.
- **Entertainers** can contribute in some way to creating joy or at least enjoyment.
- In Eyal’s view, the **Dealer’s** behaviour is reprehensible – manipulation for the sake of money or ego.

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At face-value, his argument seems to be that if objective is 'good' then it's OK to be manipulative. This feels slightly naïve. He does suggest that companies have a responsibility to monitor usage of their products and services, stepping-in to defend those who are becoming unhealthily addicted.

From a Christian perspective, we would benefit from a more substantive discussion of the ethics of the Hook Model.

Chapter 7 – Case Study – The Bible App

As if to highlight the point that if the goal is 'beneficial' then the means is OK, Eyal uses the story of **The Bible App (YouVersion)** to illustrate the Hook Model in action; implying that building habitual Bible reading justifies behavioural manipulation. YouVersion is one of the most widely used bible applications. According to the Bible App website it has been downloaded on to 408 million unique devices. This is quite extraordinary.

Bobby Greuenewald, the CEO described the journey that he went on to develop and launch the app. It was one of the first digital Bibles in the Apple App Store in 2008. Designed from the start to enable the formation of good habits. YouVersion included curated reading plans, breaking the bible into bite-sized pieces, easily followed. Now there are many different plans focusing on a variety of user needs and circumstances. Each day the app can send one or more reminders (external Trigger) to complete the days' devotion. It can send out or highlight a 'verse of the day'. Completing a day's reading receives a 'reward'. If a user bookmarks or shares a verse then they are 'investing' (but even completing the day's devotion is a form of investment). YouVersion also hosts a social community of fellow readers – and you can connect with your friends through the app.

YouVersion is much more than an implementation of the Hook Model. It is a rich digital platform hosting the majority of available Bible versions in an extraordinary range of languages and styles. It enables easy comparison of different translations of passages or verses. Many translations have audio versions which can run in parallel with your selected passage (for example the NIV UK version includes David Suchet's excellent reading). YouVersion is a wonderful devotional/study aid for Christians. However, I am still uneasy that there are echoes of human downgrading in the intentional manipulation of human behaviour – despite the amazing resource that YouVersion has become.

Chapter – 'Habit Testing'

- Identify
- Codify
- Modify

Entrepreneurs and designers are encouraged to analyse product usage to 'identify' what makes a 'devotee'; to 'codify' those patterns and to 'modify' your product to optimise these capabilities.

Conclusion

'Hooked' is in equal measure a compelling and a disturbing book. It is one that many should read, understand and consider. If the battle for privacy is already lost, as many believe, then perhaps the primary battle lines should be drawn in defence of human freedom. We know that the Ad Men of 20th Century had already systematically undermined aspects of that human freedom – the Hook Model takes this to a new level. We need to decide, individually and collectively in our communities what we believe matters and what we are going to do to defend Society as a whole.

Jonathan Ebsworth