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And now, let's jump into the transcript.

Derek Halpern Interviews Timothy Wilson, author of Redirect: The Surprising New Science of Psychological Change

Derek: Hello and welcome. This is Derek Halpern founder of SocialTriggers.com and today you're going to learn how you can change behavior. Whether you're trying to change your own behavior or your target customer's behavior. It might sound like mind control but it isn't. It's much shadier than that. I'm just kidding.

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And today with me to show you how behavior change works at that professor Tim Wilson who's the Sherrell J. Aston professor of psychology at the University of Virginia, has published over 100 articles in scholarly journals, and has been cited all over the place. Might remember the book [Blink by Malcolm Gladwell](#). Well, Tim's research from one of his books, Strangers to Ourselves, was cited in that breakaway bestseller. In addition to that, he has a new book called Redirect: The Surprising New Science of Psychological Change. It came out this past September and it's amazing. I've read it and Malcolm Gladwell has also said there were few academics who write with as much grace and wisdom as Timothy Wilson. I thought his last book, Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious was a masterpiece; Redirect is more than it's equal. Now, Timothy, are you with me, you ready to get started?

Tim: I am. It's good to be here Derek.

Derek: All right I'm really glad to have you. Now let's really just jump right in.

Learning to Change Behavior

Your book Redirect is all about behavior change, how to get people to start or stop doing something. As a marketer, we're all about behavior change, and as is everyone listening at social triggers. We're all about behavior change because we're just trying to get people to buy products or take actions we want them to take. Now I know in your book you mentioned three ways to change behavior. You quote story editing, story prompting, and the do good, be good approach to changing behavior. Can you give us a quick overview of how that works? Or how each works?

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Tim: Sure. The basic premise is that if you want to understand people's behavior, you have to get inside their heads and figure out what stories they're telling themselves about why they're doing what they're doing, and look at how they view the world.

The trick is to get people to edit the stories in ways that relate to behavior change. And so my book is about various techniques, which I call story editing, that encourage people to edit those stories. Now one extreme of course, when people's stories really go wrong, then psychotherapy is called for which is really just a longer-term form of story editing. But as a social psychologist, I focused on simpler techniques. So we're not at the point where people need therapy, but maybe just a little bit of change in direction. And getting them to edit their stories is one way to do it.

Story Prompting

Well, how can we do that? One, as you mentioned is called story prompting, which is giving people a little nudge to change their story in a way that sends them down a narrative path to their benefit. And I can give some examples of that in a few minutes. There's also what we call the do good be good approach, which is the idea that often the best way to get people to change their stories is to get them to change their behavior first, oddly— that we're very good observers of our own behavior, and that if you can get people to act consistently with a new story, often the story follows. And finally there are a variety of writing exercises that have been developed that help people edit their stories in beneficial ways.

Derek: Okay so let's just break this down for a second. Story editing is the main goal here— how to get people to edit their story, to hopefully get them to take an action that either they want to take themselves, or someone else might want them to

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take. Now, story prompting and the do good, be good approach are two methods to actually help people edit their stories. Am I right there?

Tim: yeah.

Derek: Great. So we got story editing in the overarching goal, story prompting, and the do good be good approach. That's how you can actually change behavior.

Now I know you mentioned there's exercises that we're going to talk about a little bit later so, if you're listening to this, make sure you're getting ready to pay close attention, and get ready to take some notes.

Now let's drill down on story editing a little bit. It's about giving people a little narrative, and the reason why they should do what they do. As business owners, we're always telling people why we believe they should do what we want them to do, but in your experience, what's the best way to provide this narrative? How can we get people to actually want to edit their stories?

Receptive to Story Editing

Tim: Well, I've got to tell you Derek, I'm not a marketer; so you and your listeners are going to have to help me out here. What the research in social psychology suggests is that there are certain points in people's lives where they are open to story editing, because they're really not clear, something happens to them perhaps and they're not exactly clear what's going on, or something has happened to challenge their view of life. And it's at these points I think they can use some prompts from outside to help them out.

Application to the Marketing Industry

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I have examples of research I've done with college students who aren't doing well, and aren't sure why. And we can help them reinterpret their behavior in beneficial ways. To be honest, I haven't done much research with marketing, and in a way I think that's what marketers are trying to do anyways, is to get people to tell themselves a story that encourages them to buy a product, or act in a certain way. I think this is what a lot of advertising does– is creating story to tell people that enhances a product. One thing that comes to mind for example, is commercials for products like Coke and Pepsi. I mean, often, they are not saying anything about the product. What they are doing is trying to create an image, a story, that if you use this product, you can be a certain kind of person; you can be useful, full of energy. So it's trying to steer those narratives in directions that make people want to buy a product.

Derek: Okay, so let's really rehash that quickly. Now, I know you said you're not a marketing person. You said you're a psychologist. Now, I happen to be a marketing person. I know you come at it from, as we talked about in our preliminary call, from that kind of ivory tower approach– where you are really trying to change people's behavior for the better. They might have something that they're unhappy with in themselves. I know Redirect is mainly targeted towards, it's almost like a self-help book that's backed up with real research as opposed to those fluffy self-help books you get on the shelves that have no real research to back it up, am I right?

Tim: Fair enough.

Derek: All right, so I'm a marketer, and I see how you are showing people that they can change their behavior. And as marketers, you know, I don't like to think that we are trying to trick people into buying products. I believe that if you're in a business that is selling a product that truly helps people, it's

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usually in their best interest to take a look at your potential solution.

And I know that in the book [Nudge](#), they called this little nudges in the right direction– not necessarily mind control, but it's pushing people in the right direction they want to take. And I know you kind of agree with that, but I do think that there is a danger that as we start talking about this, people might abuse this. So I'm not saying in any way that anyone should abuse this stuff.

Capturing the Narrative

Tim: I think we should say, this is not so powerful that there is a real danger of mind control here. There's a part of this, which to be honest, isn't really that new. The idea that we all operate according to narrative, and I think often what political parties are trying to do is capture the narrative. You know try to communicate to a voter which narrative of the way the country is going or should go, works best. What's new about this is I think the techniques of story editing, which are fairly simple, but which can have real long-term changes.

Examples of Story Editing in College Students

Derek: Okay. We kind of understand the whole story-editing archetype; let's really drill down into the techniques.

Let's talk about story prompting. Something I have personally used for years actually, and I never realized there was a name for it. But, in your book you talk about college students, and you talk about how you got college students to change their behavior. Can you share the results of that experiment right now with us?

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Tim: sure. This is a study I did many years ago, and we used as our participants, college freshman who were not doing well academically, and they were worried about it. So this wasn't the kind of student who was breezing through college, partying. These were students who really wanted to do well, but were running into some roadblocks.

And what we did was to bring them into a study that they thought was just a survey of their attitudes. But over the course of about a 30 min. session, we showed them some results of a prior survey we had done that found that many college students do poorly at first, but they learn the ropes and they get better later.

We reinforce this with some videotaped interviews of older students who said, "Yeah when I was a freshman, I flunked my first calculus test, but now I'm doing pretty well. And I'm a chemistry major, or what have you." And so the message was really quite simple; that if you are doing poorly, it's maybe not you, this isn't necessarily a sign that your failure and you can't do well. Maybe you just need to buckle down and learn the ropes and study a little harder. Now as simple as that sounds, I think we did catch people at just the right time when they could've gone down that pessimistic narrative path or the optimistic one, and some people were randomly assigned to get this message- Others to a control group who didn't.

And those who got the message got better grades over the next year. And were even more likely to stay in college. Those in the control group were more likely to drop out of college.

Derek: So this is remarkable. You've got students who want to do well in college. They do bad on some tests or in some class and they really hit like a fork in the road.

They can go down one path with a kind of internalizing and think they are failures. Or, they can go down the other path,

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where you show them that yes, other people have done poorly at first but gotten better later. You almost gave the people permission to succeed. So on one hand, the people might have internalized and felt like a failure. And on the other hand, giving people this data backed up with testimonials, gave people permission to succeed. And then once you gave people that permission, they were more likely to do better and were actually more likely to not drop out of college. Is that right?

Credible Sources

Tim: Yeah. This is true. You might ask, "Don't we give each other give this sort of information?" If you're doing poorly, don't we tell each other, "Don't worry, you'll do better"? Well, I suspect it mattered that this information came from a very credible source. We were giving them good data, it was actually real data—real survey results we had from previous first-year students.

I like the way you put it of giving them permission. It was a credible source, it allowed them to recast this in a light that was more optimistic, and I suspect this happened in little steps. Perhaps, when the next test approached for the students, they now thought, "Gee, maybe if I try a little bit harder it would pay off." And once it did, then that gave them even more confidence for the next test. And so it was kind of a self-reinforcing message that cascaded in a beneficial way.

Takeaways

Derek: Now, what I'm gathering from this is two really big key takeaways.

On the first hand, you gave the college students permission to succeed. But it wasn't you. It was a credible source, backed up with hard data, and video testimonials. It was really a persua-

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sive argument that really helped them understand that they are able to succeed if they just take this other path as opposed to internalizing the failure.

But let's talk about how this might apply. And I know you can't really speak about this from a marketing angle, but I want to bounce an idea off you and you can let me know what you think. I often sell products that help people go down a certain path. They might be struggling with their website, they might be struggling with attracting leads, or sales. It might make sense for me if I were to gather some data, just to show the people who are listening to SocialTriggers.com, for example, let's say, "Look everyone struggles in the first six months of starting a website. Or everyone struggles in the first six months of starting a business. It's up to you instead of internalizing the failure, to take this new path and you might be able to see results." And then back that up with potentially video testimonials. Am I right?

Tim: I think that could work. One thing to be clear about is I don't think this is a highly conscious process, so I don't think the students in my study were sitting there kind of scratching their heads, saying, "Hmmm, should I go down the pessimistic path or the optimistic path?"

I think these kinds of narratives often exist beneath the surface. We're not entirely aware of them. And again we gave them credible information and something clicked inside their heads and sent them down the right path.

In your example, I think it's probably important not to be too heavy-handed, so not to spoon-feed people in a way that they catch on to what you're doing. But if you just give them some objective information that allows some reinterpretation from, "I can't do this" to "Oh I just have to try a little harder", that sounds promising.

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Applying Story Prompting

Derek: Cool. Now, I know there's another example of story prompting that you had in your book. And it was a really simple example actually, where if you label a kid or child that they're more likely to be generous or they're more likely to be a helpful person, that could be a story prompt for a child to be a more helpful person later on in their life. Is that correct?

Tim: Yeah. This was some research from another laboratory, not mine, but it was interesting research, that children I think are at a point where they are forming their narratives about life and who they are. They are not exactly sure what kind of self-concepts to have. You know, "Am I a helpful person?" or "Why am I doing this?" And having a parent or a teacher label that child's behavior for them can be really powerful.

One study was done in a school where kids were encouraged to not litter. And just labeling them as helpful people, helped them internalize that to say, "I guess I'm not littering because that's the kind of person I am." And that allows them to generalize to new situations.

Derek: Now that's interesting because have you ever read the book [Influence, by Robert B. Cialdini?](#)

Tim: Yes! I'm a big fan of his.

Derek: This kind of reminds me of that whole consistency principle. People like to be consistent with their previous behavior. Do you ever, in that book, where they talked about that study they had people go around with that petition to make someone sign, like against drunk driving or littering or something like that, and then they came by a few days later and said, "Hey, it looks like you were the person who signed this petition. Would you mind if we erected this big sign on your

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front lawn?" And they were more likely to erect that big ugly sign if they first signed that petition. Do you remember that study?

Tim: I do. I love that study. The foot in the door technique, that's called.

In some ways, I think that's actually a really good illustration of this do good be good approach, because acting in a way, that they got people to act in a certain way the first time by signing this petition. And by so doing, people change their view of themselves a little bit, and said, "I guess that's the kind of person I am." And that made them more likely to say yes for the second thing, where they put this big sign in the yard.

Derek: Yes. That's really interesting. And that's kind of also the petition could be in a sample of a story prompt almost.

Tim: Yeah. They see themselves acting this way, they suggested they were a certain kind of person, and that led to some story change.

Derek: Now let me tell you, I might be looking at this from an online marketing standpoint. I tend to teach people and businesses how to get leads and sales on the Internet.

One of the big things that I'm always promoting is, I'm always saying, "Look, you know you're a hard-working person. You are not looking for the get rich quick button." And just by simply saying that, if people identify with what I'm saying and then subscribe to my e-mail list, they are then going to remain consistent with that whole sales message of me telling them, "You're a hard working person," because they had already agreed to that once.

Tim: I think that sounds right.

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Derek: All right, cool. So now for people listening, write that down. You could actually create story prompts for your audience members, but also for yourself.

Like if you think that you have some behavior that you want to change about yourself or your own work habits, you can work on either creating an outside story prompt, or you can focus on that whole do good be good approach, where you work on doing something first, and then becoming it later because you often become what you regularly do, as they say, right?

Tim: Exactly.

The Pleasure Paradox

Derek: Now let's talk about another thing that you mentioned in your book. I really, really love this. You talk about the pleasure paradox. When people ask you how something is done and why you're doing it, some people tend to satisfy that desire. But based on this whole idea of the pleasure paradox, that may be a mistake. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Tim: There's some research that I've done over the years which suggests that there is a double-edged sword to understanding why something really good happens to us. So if something good happens to us, we make a new friend, or someone works with us say, we really try to understand why that happened because my understanding is, we can perhaps make sure it happens again.

But by so doing we may rob it of a little bit of the mystery—that one thing that makes something pleasurable. It's a little bit of mystery about why something happened, it keeps us thinking about it and running it through our minds and as long as it's a good thing, it adds to the pleasure. But once we understand it, there is a tendency to not think about it anymore—

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put it behind us, move onto the next thing. And so perhaps that robs it of its pleasure.

Derek: So, let's break this down for a second. What you're suggesting is this: when something good happens to you, and you don't know why it happened, you're more likely to enjoy it for a longer period of time than when you know why it happened.

Tim: Well, as a rule I think there's some truth to that. Once we understand something we just stop thinking about it as a rule. We move onto the next thing. So I'll give you one example of this, of a study that a graduate student of mine published recently.

Using Mystery to Your Advantage

There's been a lot of talk about whether people should play hard to get. And if they're just meeting someone and they're interested in dating a person, should they be a little coy and not let their interest be known, or should they just tell the person, "Hey I like you let's just go out"?

The research she did suggests that a little bit of mystery there, a little bit of ambiguity about how you feel about someone, may actually spark their interest because it will keep them thinking about you. And obviously you can carry this too far. You don't want them to be so ambiguous that the person never calls you again, but a little bit of ambiguity may actually spark some interest.

Derek: So, I want to share two quick examples about that.

Just the other week I was on the train coming from New York City back to where I live on Long Island and there was a girl sitting next to me. It was a late train. I was at a business meeting until about midnight. So I was on a late train coming back

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home and the girl next to me asked to borrow my phone. So I lent her my phone and after she gave me my phone back, we started talking for a few minutes.

And she had told me that she just got done with the date. And when she said "date", she kind of dropped her head a little bit low and seemed a little disappointed about the date. And I asked her, "Why are you disappointed? Did it not end the way you wanted the date end?" And she said very clearly, "Well he didn't really tell me if he likes me or not. But he said he wants to hang out again. And I don't know what to think of it. So now I can't stop thinking about it."

So she told me this right on the train ride and that kind of relates to what we're talking about.

Tim: That's great, I love that example.

Derek: And another great example is, I just started SocialTriggers.com over the last few months and I took Social Triggers from a brand-new website to a really popular website in a very short period of time.

Now, I never wrote about how I did it. I never told anyone what I did to build such a popular site. And now I see people writing blog posts about my site, speculating why it became so popular so fast. I've never wrote about it and I plan to never write about it, at least not in the near future. Because people keep giving me this free exposure for getting all this publicity in such a short period of time. Why satisfy that desire when I can keep it with a little bit while they speculate?

Tim: Those are great examples, Derek. Again I think if you want to keep people thinking about you, a little bit of mystery can be a good thing.

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The Exception to the Mystery Rule

Now I should mention one exception to this. Is one of the things you're wondering about is very negative, you don't want people obsessing about that. If that woman on the train, she wasn't sure whether her new friend was a serial rapist or her best friend, that's not good uncertainty because she's vacillating between something very negative and very positive. But as long as the mystery is largely positive then you're in business.

Derek: So that's almost like a bit of a PR tip. Where if you had negative publicity, you have got to address it quickly because you don't want people to speculate. But if you've got positive publicity, you don't necessarily have to address it right away because you want people to keep speculating.

Tim: Good advice.

Best Possible Selves Exercise

Derek: OK, cool. Let's move on to the last thing I want to talk about today. It's a little exercise you talked about in Redirect. And after this particular question, I want to tell people about Redirect—I wanted to talk about your book little bit more.

But you talk about this thing called the best possible selves exercise. And I believe that every single person who is listening to this recording today should use this for either trying to get their customers to do it or trying to get themselves to change their own behavior. Can you tell us about this best possible selves exercise, and we'll talk about how it could potentially work in the marketing world or in your personal development world?

Tim: There is a chapter in my book about personal happiness and well-being and how we can edit our own stories in benefi-

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cial ways. And psychologists have developed a variety of writing exercises that can help us do this. And one was developed by a researcher that she called the best possible selves exercise. And it's really pretty simple.

People are asked to take out a piece of paper, perhaps every night before they go to bed for three or four nights, and just think about themselves in the future, for the person they really want to become, and just write about that. What is my ideal self in the future? And how can I get there?

Now I think this can work the best if people think about how to get there. So not just, "Gee, I want to be a major league baseball star. That would be great." Be realistic about the sort of person you can become and think about the means-to-the-end. What sort of steps you need to take to get there. People who do this show beneficial effects that over the next few weeks they're a little happier. And there are actually some studies that found some health benefits of this.

Taking Away the Mystery

So these little exercises, they also work if there is something troubling us. If there's something preying on us that happened to us that we can't quite get over, taking out a piece of paper and writing about that, what it means to us, our deepest thoughts about it. Doing that for three or four nights in a row can help us reduce the mystery in this case. So here's something bad that we want to understand, and writing about it is an effective way of reframing it for ourselves, finding some meaning in it in a way that helps us get over it.

Derek: All right, so let's really break this down again. You don't think people should write down daydreams, if you will. You think people should write as if they're in a future self and talk

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about the results that they want to have and how they plan on getting those results.

Don't just sit there and write about, "I want to be a millionaire", talk about, "I want to make \$1 million and here's how I plan to get it." And then talk about it in that particular way. Am I right?

Tim: Yeah. I think that will work much better. No guarantees of course, but it should help.

Derek: It's actually funny because I did something similar when I launched SocialTriggers.com. I actually sat down and I wrote out exactly how Social Triggers was going to play out. How fast it was going to grow, how much content I was going to create. And I actually did something similar to this best possible selves exercise to launch a website.

Best Possible Selves Exercise for Project Planning

And I've got to say, I think it helped me stay on track with what I had planned to do in the beginning. So it's almost like this is good for changing your own behavior, but it's also an exercise for project planning almost.

Tim: I think there's something psychologists call implementation goals. That's just being very specific about how were going to accomplish something. And the more detailed we can be about this is steps A, B, and C- the more likely we are to do steps A, B, and C

Derek: The best possible selves exercise resonated with me personally, but you have other exercises that you talk about in your book also, am I right?

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Tim: Yes, and I think this other one I mentioned for negative experiences, for example, expressive writing about something that's troubling us can be very effective as well.

Redirect

Derek: So, I feel like we covered a lot of content today in the show and I want to give you a chance to take a minute to talk about your book Redirect.

And I really want to say that this is one of the first self-help books that I have read in at least the last few years that has really hit home with me as a person. Because I love when there's research to back up claims. And I love that you're giving people hard and fast exercises that they can implement. Can you describe how you kind of went through your book a little bit, where you gave people some data, then you talk about how they can use it? Can you talk about that little format?

Tim: Well, sure. One of the reasons I wrote the book, as you say, is I really wanted it to be research-based. There's a lot of self-help books out there that give a lot of advice, and I'm not saying all the advice is wrong, but we don't know what's right and what's wrong because there isn't much science behind this.

Meanwhile, social psychologists have been doing a lot of research on how to get people to edit these stories in beneficial ways, and in my book I have chapters on different ways that it can work. So one on personal happiness is mentioned. There's one on parenting- how parents can use this to instill good stories in their kids. There's one on various teenage adolescent behavior problems. There're some on how to get us to get along better as groups, reduce prejudice and stereotyping. And in each chapter I talk about some stories and go through the

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research, but then I end with some practical advice about how people can use this in their everyday lives.

Practical Self-Help Advice

Derek: So, you start with the research, you give a little bit of narrative, and you tell people exactly how they can use it.

Tim: That's what I try to do.

Derek: So this book really, and this is why I love the book, because even though I'm coming at it from a marketing perspective and I'm trying to learn how to change the behavior of people I might be selling products to, I'm also a very big self-help guy. I like to read books about how to improve myself.

So even though I was reading this originally with a marketing agenda, I actually learned a lot about how I can change my own behavior. So if there's anything that I am struggling with personally, there's a lot of tips and tricks that you gave in this book can help me improve my current actions. And I believe that anyone listening to this, if you want to read this book with the marketing agenda, that's great. But if you just want to read the book to become a better human being, that's also good too.

Tim: That's high praise, Derek. I thank you for it.

Derek: Professor Tim, really, thank you for joining me today. I'm really happy to have you on this podcast, and I've just got to say, I love all your work. I love Strangers to Ourselves, it was a great book. But more importantly I just read Redirect. That was a great book to read it in like 2 1/2 days. I could not put it down.

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If you're listening to this, make sure you give Redirect a look, and you know what, go order the book. It's going to be like \$20 on Amazon. There's no reason not to just check out. Timothy, thank you.

Tim: Thanks very much, Derek. It's great to be here.

Derek: And everyone else, have a great day and make sure you click the links below this video. Check out redirect, and that's it. See you all later.

Oh, and if you love this edition of SocialTriggers Insider, share it with a friend who needs help changing their behavior. Then if you're not on the SocialTriggers Insider newsletter list, pop over to <http://socialtriggers.com>, enter your e-mail and press 'Get updates'. You'll gain access to other pieces of content that can help you improve your business by taking advantage of proven psychological insights.

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