

# TRA

**BEHAVIOUR  
CHANGE GUIDE**

**#3**

**Following the pack.**



# “When faced with uncertainty and choice, we look outwards, to others.”

Professor Robert Cialdini  
Author of 'Influence: The Power of Persuasion'

## What is social proof?

There's a reason why we have sayings like 'I'll have what she's having' and 'safety in numbers' – humans are social by nature and trust the actions of others. We look to one another to help guide our own behaviour. This is the field of social norms, more specifically – social proof.

Social proof is the demonstration or evidence that people have made a choice or completed a certain behaviour. This evidence or proof can then prompt others to follow suit. For instance, showing that large numbers of people are using a service or doing the desired behaviour, leaving ratings and reviews after using a service, wearing an 'I voted sticker' after voting or having a popular celebrity endorse a product.

## Why use social proof?

Social proof can be used for a range of different behaviour change outcomes. It's particularly useful for building trust and normalizing a new behaviour, product or service that people are unfamiliar with. It's also effective as a final prompt in messaging – tipping well meaning intention and general awareness into action.

## An example in action

The classic social proof example is Professor Cialdini's experiment with hotel guests reusing their bathroom towels. They tested pro-environmental messages that explained the amount of water and energy saved if towels were reused. However, it was social proof messaging (75% of guests reuse their towels) that resulted in significantly greater results.<sup>1</sup>

## A guide to harnessing the power of social proof

There's other ways to show social proof beyond a large statistic. This guide steps through the different options for presenting social proof and breaks the options into both the 'social' and the 'proof'.

**Social** – defining the social group that is being referred to.

**Proof** – defining the different ways we can show evidence or proof of social traction.

<sup>1</sup> Goldstein, N. J., Cialdini, R. B., Griskevicius, V., & John Deighton served as editor and Mary Frances Luce served as associate editor for this article. (2008). A Room with a Viewpoint: Using Social Norms to Motivate Environmental Conservation in Hotels. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 35(3), 472–482. <https://doi.org/10.1086/586910>

# Social

## Users and customers

An existing customer base or user groups. For instance, the number of customers using the product or service, and the number of people who have already taken the desired action.

## Authorities and experts

Experts and authority figures in the industry/area. For instance, experts or thought leaders in the category/industry, authority or interest groups.

## Media

Headlines and mentions in the media. For instance, general news media, industry or category media.

## Trusted and unbiased third parties

Trusted third parties that can provide credibility. For instance, consumer rights organisations, research and public interest groups.

Defining the social group: who we refer to is an important part of social proof

## Celebrities and notable figures

Celebrities, influencers and notable figures. For instance, sports figures, business leaders, TV personalities.

## Specific peer groups

Different social groups that people feel connected to. For instance, friends, colleagues, classmates, online interest groups, sports fans.

## Broader identity groups

Broad groups that people identify with. These could be patriotic groups, cultural groups, generational groups. For instance, New Zealanders, Australians, millennials.

## Proximity groups

Other people that are in close proximity. For instance, people in the same suburb or city, locals catching the same bus, and fellow shoppers in the same retail environment.

# Proof

## Reviews

Product or service reviews, testimonials, comments and reviews.



## Referrals

Referrals, 'tag and share' promotions, past customer or supplier recommendations.



## Scale of use

Showing the scale and volume of customers or users. For instance, 'trusted by over one million New Zealanders for over 30 years', '1000 followers'.



## Engagement

Likes, clicks, mentions, shares, number of actions taken.



## Social approval

Signifying approval, endorsement and feedback to show an activity or behaviour is well condoned and accepted.



Defining the proof point and evidence of social traction

## Visual traces

Visual evidence of action being taken. For instance, stickers, badges, social media stickers, cyclists carrying their helmets.



## Scarcity

Showing that a product, service, action is in demand and running out. For instance, 'limited stock left', '5 left at this price', 'get in quick', 'limited time offer'.



## Trending

Showing a product, service or behaviour is 'on the up', gaining traction and interest, is growing in mentions and appeal.



## Crowds

Showing that a provider or service is popular, full or busy. For instance, a busy restaurant, queues for a new product, a crowd at an event.



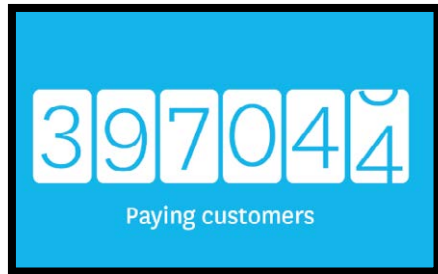
## Certifications and awards

Seals and ticks of approvals, formal endorsements, grades or standards, awards.



● Examples in action

Establishing trust and normalizing a new behaviour, service or product



**Social**

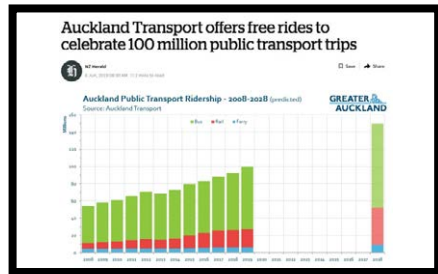
**Users and customers**



**Proof**

**Scale of use**

Accounting software, Xero, uses an impressive number of paying customers to show scale and normalize using their service.



**Broader identity groups**



**Trending**

Auckland Transport celebrated a growing trend in public transport numbers and referred to the broader identity group of 'Aucklanders' using public transport.



**Celebrities and notable figures**



**Reviews and testimonials**

Many people are uncertain and wary about driving long distances in EVs. Musician Tiki Taane took a road trip around the country in an EV and his video diaries served as a testimonial to help bust concerns and normalize driving an EV.



**Celebrities and notable figures**



**Social approval**

'Give Nothing to Racism' campaign uses celebrities, influencers, and notable figures, the proof point is using social approval of anti-racist sentiment and behaviour i.e. New Zealanders do not approve of racism, we approve of anti-racist action.

Converting intention to action – the final prompt



**Social**

**Authorities and experts**



**Proof**

**Review**

Colgate promotes its products with reviews and recommendations from experts in its category – dentists.

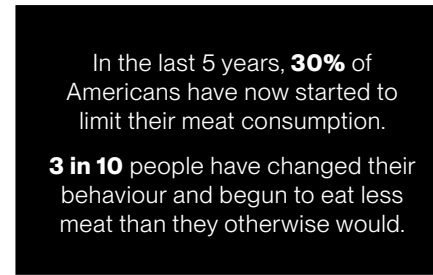


**Broader identity groups**



**Crowds**

Frocks on Bikes host monthly bike rides that draw together a crowd that helps prompt women to take part and start cycling.

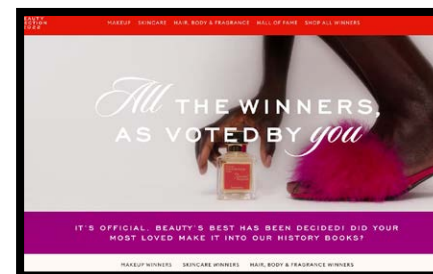


**Broader identity groups**



**Trending**

This message was included in a cafeteria experiment run by Stanford University and resulted in significantly more people opting for meatless meals. The message shows a trend and growth in Americans eating less meat and helps show plant based diets as the mainstream.<sup>2</sup>



**Users and customers**



**Certifications and awards**

MECCA has a top voted award for different products, as voted by its customer base to prompt new customers towards well loved products.

<sup>2</sup> Sparkman, G., & Walton, G.M. (2017). Dynamic Norms Promote Sustainable Behavior, Even if It Is Counternormative. Psychological Science, 28, 1663 - 1674.

# Context is crucial

How to apply social proof to your behaviour change challenge

Experiment with different 'social' and 'proof' options

## 1 Define your audience

Be specific with your target audience. Who's behaviour are you looking to shift?

## 2 Define the behaviour

Be specific about what behaviour you're trying to shift and normalize.

## 3 Map your audience's influence network

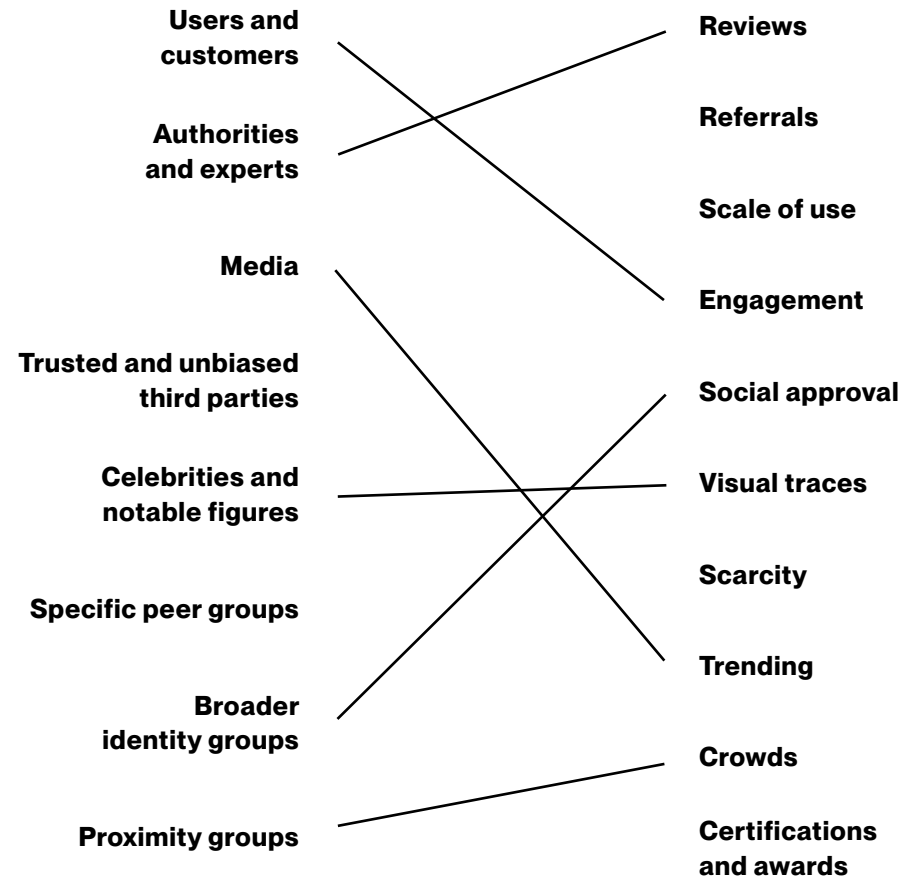
Match your target audience to the social groups who will have the greatest influence. Different target audiences will have different social groups who influence them and it will depend on the behaviour that we're trying to change.

For some target audiences, close friends and family may be the most relevant audience. In another context, having the trusted advice of an expert may be more appropriate.

## 4 Experiment with different 'social' and 'proof' options

Utilise the social groups and the proof points that best suit the context of your behaviour change challenge. Test and measure the impact of different options to understand what social proof options are more effective.

# Social + Proof



# Watch out

When social proof backfires – and how to avoid it

Also known as ‘The Boomerang Effect’, a negative social norm that is intended to shift behaviour can backfire and create the opposite effect than intended.

The classic example is shown in Dr. Robert Cialdini, Steve Martin and Noah Goldstein’s experiment. Arizona’s Petrified Forest National Park had a problem – people in numbers were stealing petrified wood from the park, endangering the park’s unique environment. Placing different signs throughout the park, the team set out to test different social norms messages.

A sign that used a negative social norm “Many park visitors have removed petrified wood from the Park, changing the natural state of the Petrified Forest” resulted in twice as many thefts compared to when there was no sign at all.<sup>3</sup>

Another study by social psychologist Wesley Schultz of California State University looked at providing households with feedback on whether they were using more or less energy compared to others. Those who were using more than average reduced their energy consumption – a great result. However, those who were using less than average ended up increasing their energy use – the boomerang effect had occurred.<sup>4</sup>

**People will adapt their behaviour to what is considered the norm, even if they are doing a positive behaviour in the first place.**

## How to avoid social proof from backfiring

**Target the correct behaviour, not the problem behaviour**

Norms can have a powerful impact on behaviour, but they need to frame the right behaviour you want to promote, rather than normalizing a problematic behaviour.

**Target the right group, with the right support**

The social proof must be relevant to the people you are trying to create a behavioural shift from.

Target social norm messages to the relevant and intended audience you are trying to prompt the behavioural shift from. Using the household energy example, only leverage a social norm message with the households using above average energy.

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<sup>3</sup> Cialdini, R.B.; Demaine, L.J.; Sagarin, B.J.; Barrett, D.W.; Rhoads, K.; Winter, P.L. 2006. Managing social norms for persuasive impact. *Social Influence*, 1(1), 3-15.

<sup>4</sup> Schultz PW, Nolan JM, Cialdini RB, Goldstein NJ, Griskevicius V. The constructive, destructive, and reconstructive power of social norms. *Psychol Sci*. 2007 May;18(5):429-34. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9280.2007.01917.x. PMID: 17576283.

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