

# BEHAVIORAL PRICING AND SELLING

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## ABSTRACT

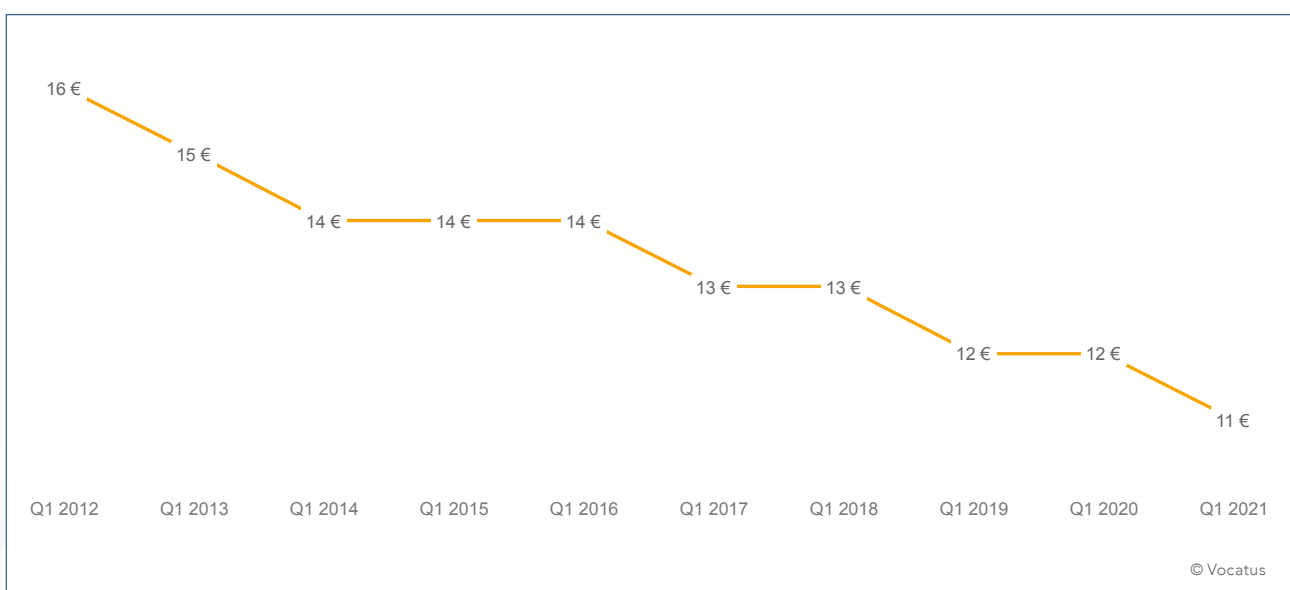
Intelligent pricing becomes a matter of survival for companies in times of high competition intensity and skyrocketing costs. Today, value-based pricing is considered the gold standard of pricing strategy because it aligns prices with the value of an offer as perceived by the customer. However, value-based pricing is based on

a model of human decision behavior that has been disproved by behavioral economics. Taking four facets of pricing as examples, this article shows that value-based pricing can lead to wrong conclusions and that behavioral pricing derives more successful pricing measures.

## MORE COMPETITION, MORE PRICING PRESSURE, MORE COSTS - WHERE IS THE MARGIN?

Nearly all companies in almost all industries today face intense competition. There are many alternatives from the Far East, even for high-tech products made in Germany. In the

battle for market share, suppliers often reduce prices to remain "competitive", resulting in decreasing revenues per customer.

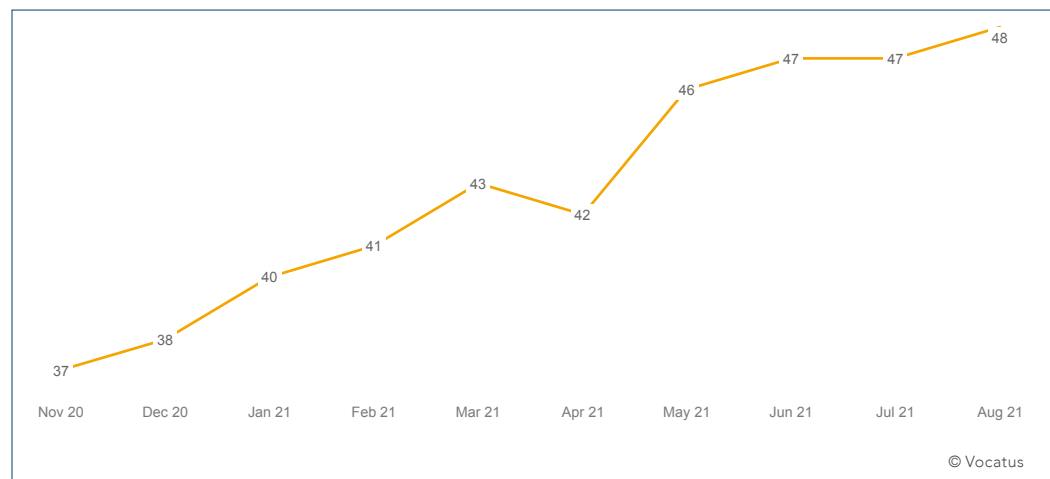


**Figure 1: Average revenue per user (ARPU), mobile service customers of Deutsche Telekom (Statista)**

MORE  
COMPETITION,  
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PRESSURE, MORE  
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business is also a simultaneous rise in costs - and this applies to raw material prices, which are particularly relevant for industrial companies, as well as for personnel expenses, which play a role in all companies.

**Figure 2:**  
**Development of**  
**raw material**  
**prices**  
**(Bloomberg**  
**Commodity**  
**Index)**



This situation puts considerable pressure on margins. Of all the conceivable measures (adjusting offerings, reducing costs, acquiring new customers, etc.), it is pricing that typically has the most direct and significant impact on operating profit:

**Figure 3:**  
**Influence of**  
**measures**  
**on the margin,**  
**a calculation**  
**example**  
**(Marn &**  
**Rosiello, 1992)**

1% improvement in...	...increases operating profit by
...price	11,1 %
...variable costs	7,8 %
...volume	3,3 %
...fixed costs	2,3 %

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When material and personnel costs continue to rise, intelligent pricing is for companies not only nice-to-have but a question of survival.

## VALUE-BASED PRICING AS THE GOLD STANDARD?

There is a general consensus in the pricing community that value-based pricing is the most advanced form of pricing. Compared to cost-based pricing (setting prices based on costs plus margin, which is easy to implement and justify and ensures profit margin) and competition-based pricing (setting prices relative to competitors, which lowers the short-term risk of losing orders), value-based pricing is pricing according to the perceived value of an offer. However, value-based pricing poses at least two difficulties:

First, value-based pricing (and thus traditional economic theory) is based on oversimplified assumptions about how purchasing decisions are made, i.e., to rationally maximize utility:

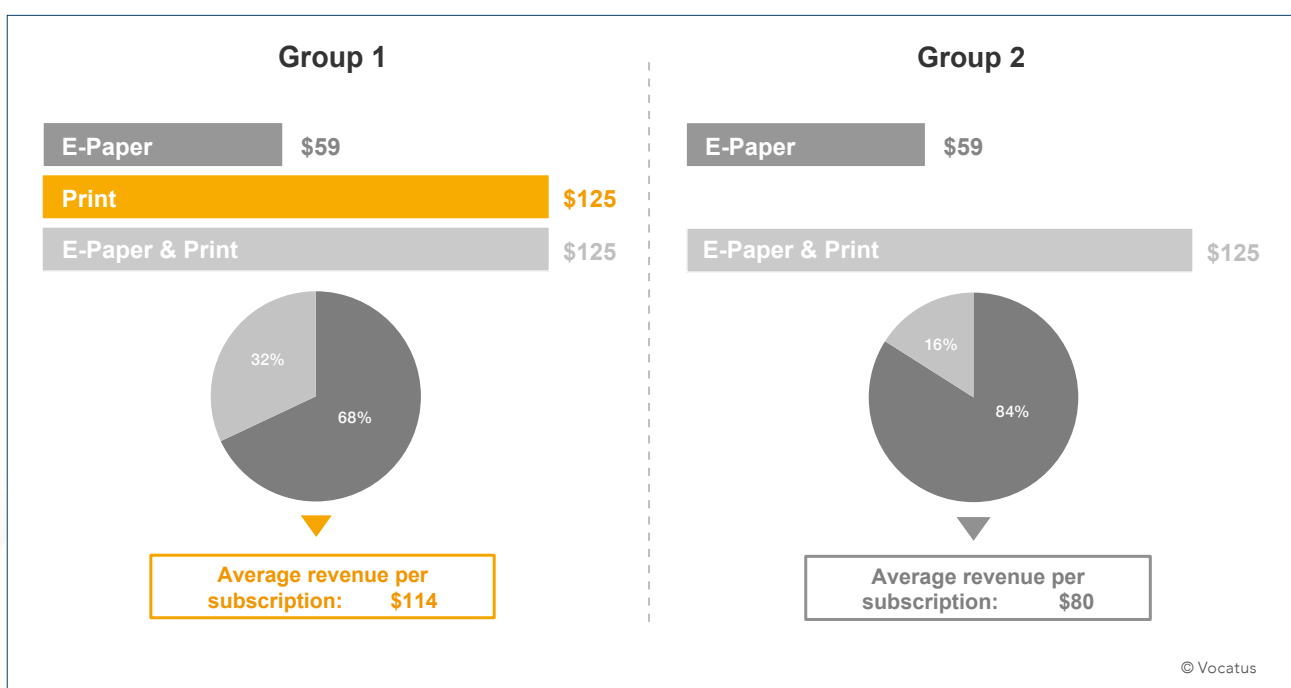
Customers know what they want and what they are willing to pay for it, and

they choose the offer that gives them what they want at the best price.

As simple as these assumptions are, they are often not true in reality. Many customers do not even know what they need, what they want, and what they are willing to pay for it. Think about your mobile plan: Can you tell how many GB of data you will use this month, how many GB you want to be included in your next mobile plan, and how much you would pay for it? And are you sure that you are currently using the provider that offers you the best value for money?

The most prominent invalidation of the assumptions of stable preferences and willingness to pay is Dan Ariely's example for the Economist, the Decoy Effect (Ariely & Wallsten, 1995):

**Figure 4:**  
**Decoy**



## VALUE-BASED PRICING AS THE GOLD STANDARD?

If customers had stable preferences and a willingness to pay, removing an option from the portfolio that no one buys should not affect preferences for the remaining options. However, removing this decoy option changes preferences significantly. In other words: Preferences and price acceptance are not stable but change depending on the choice architecture. Customers often do not know precisely what they want and what they are willing to pay. Both develop dynamically in the decision-making process. And customers do not necessarily choose the option that matches their preferences, but the one they can justify for themselves and others.

There are many more examples of dynamic preferences and price acceptance. You may be familiar with the Thermomix: a costly multifunctional food processor. If you ask random people if they would be willing to pay more than €1,300 for such a machine, most would not. But, in reality, the Thermomix has many enthusiastic users. The difference between users and non-users is that users have experienced a specific situation, i. e.,

the sales demonstration. It is only during the sales demonstration that preference and price acceptance develops. Neither of these is something intrinsic or stable that some customers have and others do not, but instead develop during the demo.

Second - and this is especially true for B2B - value-based pricing is often more difficult to explain to the customer. Explaining to a customer that the price you quoted is what customers are willing to pay is hardly a good reason because it is often not perceived as fair. Justifying the price in terms of cost (i.e., referring to cost-based pricing) is much easier for the customer to digest - even though that may not be the only justification.

Continuing with the example of the Thermomix: For customers to buy, they primarily need a plausible reason to justify the purchase decision to themselves and, for example, their partner. And that is precisely what pricing is all about: Making it as easy as possible for customers to see that their decision is the "right" one.

# ALTERNATIVES TO VALUE-BASED PRICING

The rational benefit-maximizing homo economicus as the paradigm of value-based pricing is often opposed by two alternatives:

The first alternative is based on utility and expands the utility concept to

include, for example, symbolic and social components. While the Apple buyer does not maximize his functional utility (Android can do the same thing at a lower price), he maximizes his symbolic utility (he achieves a certain status as an Apple buyer). In



### ALTERNATIVES TO VALUE-BASED PRICING

this regard, price research primarily employs qualitative research methods to explore the motivations behind price acceptance (Ashford, 2021). In practice, however, such methods fail mainly due to rationalization: On the one hand, the utility concept is merely expanded (from the “hard” functional to “softer” social, symbolic utility dimensions). On the other hand, the results of qualitative research (e.g., personas) are strongly oriented toward consistency and plausibility and thus move away from a reality characterized by inconsistencies.

The second alternative starts with the concept of rationality and opposes it with emotion. Purchase decisions are primarily driven by emotions and thus, for the most part, take place unconsciously. In price research, we mainly find neuroscientific approaches that

predict price acceptance from neuronal reactions towards price information (Müller, 2012).

They replace the rationalizing responses of customers in interviews with direct, unbiased access to the unconscious reactions in the brain. In essence, this approach focuses on the importance of the price in the customer’s decision-making process in terms of pain perception: It merely measures at what price the brain area that is active when pain is perceived is stimulated. However, the role of price is far more complex (it can also be a signal of quality, meaning that a high price has a correspondingly positive connotation). Thus, it requires a much more holistic approach to identify and guide complex purchase decisions and the importance of price for each type of customer.

## BEHAVIORAL ECONOMICS AS AN ALTERNATIVE PARADIGM

Behavioral economics - as a quantitative-experimental field of research - is concerned with how people process information (e.g., price evaluations) and make decisions (e.g., purchase decisions). The primary assumption is that people are not utility-maximizing decision-making machines that make rational decisions but rather have limited cognitive abilities. Thus, they use rules of thumb (“heuristics”; Gigerenzer & Brighton, 2009) to process information, misperceive facts (“biases”; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974), are

not driven solely by selfish motives (“fairness”; Thaler, 2005), and make suboptimal decisions (“predictive irrationality”; Ariely, 2008) that do not necessarily maximize their utility.

In popular science presentation and practical application, behavioral economics is often cut short at two ends:

First, behavioral economics is a negative model in two senses: It is a negative experimental research direction that aims primarily at falsifying cer-

## BEHAVIORAL ECONOMICS AS AN ALTERNATIVE PARADIGM

tain assumptions (namely that of the rational-benefit-maximizing “homo economicus”) and does not aim at developing a positive model (of how people actually decide). This is perfectly fine for academic research, but it is of little help for practical use. Besides, behavioral economics primarily refers to the shortcomings of human perception and decision processes, as suggested by the terms “fallacies” and “biases” (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974; Thaler, 2005).

Second, behavioral economics is often (mis)understood as the “icing on the cake” in practice. For example, once the actual pricing strategy has been developed, a few nice effects are added to the price presentation to increase conversion by a few percentage points. Behavioral economics can thus be branded in the form of easily digestible anecdotes, as is popular in the agency landscape. But there is a risk that this may not stand up in reality, and the entire endeavor of behavioral economics may be discredited (Hreha, 2021; Piper, 2020; Shaw, 2019).

It is worthwhile to trace the origins of heuristics as a central concept of behavioral economics to transform the negative model of behavioral economics into a positive model:

Behavioral economics explains decision-making behavior in terms of the heuristics that people use to process information and make decisions. These heuristics have evolved throughout human evolution: The best-adapted traits to the surrounding environmental conditions (“survival of the fittest”) are most likely to survive. This is not

an active selection or development towards an “ideal” goal but a passive selection. The traits that were an obstacle to survival and heredity in the past have simply died out. For example, we perceive light, sound volume, and many other stimuli not in absolute terms like a physical measuring instrument, but in relative terms: The brighter the light, the more additional light intensity we need to notice a difference. While this is not optimal in the sense of “objectivity,” it is efficient because it allows us to handle a much wider range of differences in brightness. This is why our ancestors were able to see the saber-toothed tiger at dusk and in bright sunshine and run away in time. The distorted perception of brightness has evolved into a survival advantage and passed on to the next generation.

Just as our perception is not designed to be optimal, our decision-making apparatus is not designed to maximize utility but to function “well enough” in most situations (“satisficing” rather than “optimizing”; Simon, 1956). These decision-making rules are stored as “heuristics” and can be considered conscious or unconscious rules of thumb. They enable us to make decisions even with limited capacity, skills, time, and energy. Heuristics, as described above, may have evolved evolutionarily and been biologically hard-wired into our perceptual apparatus (as a “gene” in the sense of Darwin; Darwin, 1859), but also as cultural beliefs and behavioral patterns (as a “meme” in the sense of Dawkins; Dawkins, 1989).

Decisions made based on such heuristics are thus irrational because



### BEHAVIORAL ECONOMICS AS AN ALTERNATIVE PARADIGM

se they do not maximize any kind of utility. But they are highly efficient and can only be made with the help of these heuristics. For example, the Goldilocks effect (i.e., the tendency to choose the middle in multi-level options) does not necessarily lead

us to select the most beneficial plan in a mobile service portfolio. But at least we decide at all: a decision that reduces the risk of making the wrong decision because - generally speaking - a mid-range plan is neither underperforming nor too expensive.

## APPLYING BEHAVIORAL ECONOMICS

Applying behavioral economics to influence purchase decisions involves two steps:

First, we need to predict which heuristics a customer is likely to use in a purchase decision. They generally are the result of an experience in a past purchase decision. Meaning, we need to understand how a customer has made past decisions and which heuristics have proven effective in making those decisions. For example, a mobile customer who has chosen a very cheap plan in the past and then repeatedly ran into data throttling is more likely to use the "Goldilocks heuristic" mentioned above (De Ridder, 2008) because the decision heuristics that minimize the risk of bad decisions have worked for him.

Second, we need to understand how to activate these heuristics in a way that makes a particular customer decision more likely. For example, if a service provider wants to sell a premium plan and knows that potential customers will avoid the risk of making a wrong decision by applying the Goldilocks heuristic, he can add a third plan to the two-tier plan

portfolio to make the choice of the second plan more likely.

What seems trivial in this example becomes more complicated for other situations. For example, suppose an advertising agency pitches for a deal with a new client. What would be the best price?

Value-based pricing is barely feasible because the value of the collaboration for the customer can only be determined, if at all, retrospectively. Even if the ROI that the consultant achieves for the customer can be precisely calculated, the customer will not accept a six-digit figure for a few days' effort (even if this price corresponds to the achieved value) because he cannot justify this to his superior. Worst case scenario: The agency only deals with the purchasing department at the point of negotiation, which turns a deaf ear to all value arguments.

Behavioral pricing would start by looking at how the customer has made and justified decisions in similar situations. For example, is the purchasing department dominant enough

APPLYING  
BEHAVIORAL  
ECONOMICS

always to pick the cheapest provider? Does the managing director have the final say, and has he made the experience that only prestigious and expensive agencies deliver results that are also accepted and implemented in the organization? Or can the project manager decide independently? Is he new in his role, and must he prove himself not to make a wrong decision?

Based on this, the advertising agency should consider how it can make it as easy as possible for the customer to decide, i.e., what arguments it should provide so that the customer can justify the decision to himself and others (e.g., his supervisor). The price level is important but not the only starting point.

## STARTING POINTS OF BEHAVIORAL PRICING

### PRICE LEVEL - WHY €0.99 IS NOT THE ANSWER TO EVERYTHING

Value-based pricing considers the price level primarily as a pain point. It should be chosen in such a way that the subjective value of the offer barely justifies the price, meaning that the price should be just below the absolute limit. Since price sensitivity is not linear but assumes a staircase function, price points below thresholds (ending with 99) are typically recommended. Behavioral economics as the "icing on the cake" also indicates that the subjective difference between 0.99 and 1.00 is greater than between 0.98 and 0.99 (e.g., because customers ignore the last digits).

Serious behavioral pricing approaches the right price level by asking which price level makes the decision easier for the customer. If the decision fails due to lack of attention (for

example, the customer is not thinking of buying chocolate at the supermarket), a .99 price can attract his attention and make the purchase more likely.

However, in B2B - remember the example of the advertising agency mentioned above - the order will hardly fail because the customer overlooks the offer or the offer is 1 cent more expensive than the competition but rather because the price is perceived as unfair. And this risk certainly exists with psychological pricing ("€99,999.99 for a project? That is an unrealistic price that has nothing to do with the actual costs!"). A price just above a threshold can make sense in such a situation because it seems more tightly calculated ("€104,980 – They really tried to get

### STARTING POINTS OF BEHAVIORAL PRICING

below 100k"). And it anchors a possible negotiation at the next lowest threshold (€100k), allowing both parties to agree on €100k in good conscience.

We proved this effect by measuring how the transaction price deviates from the sticker price (the first price mentioned by the dealer) in used cars sales.

	Group 1		Group 2
<b>Sticker price</b>	€ 31,000	+0,1%	€ 31,035
<b>Transaction price</b>	€ 28,217	+6,1%	€ 29,952

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**Figure 5:**  
*Influence of round/odd prices on discount expectation and transaction prices for car purchases*

## PRICING STRUCTURE - WHY OPTIONS NOBODY BUYS DO MATTER

The pricing structure defines how many options should be offered and how they differ in price.

Classical value-based pricing assumes that the pricing structure should reflect different customer segments' needs and willingness to pay. This means that if there are two segments - customers with low demand/willingness to pay and customers with high demand/willingness to pay - there shall be two options (a small, inexpensive option and a large, expensive option), ensuring consistency between value and price for the respective customer segments. Determining the right price structure is thus a classic segmentation problem.

Behavioral pricing complements this approach by asking which price structure facilitates the decision for the respective customer segment.

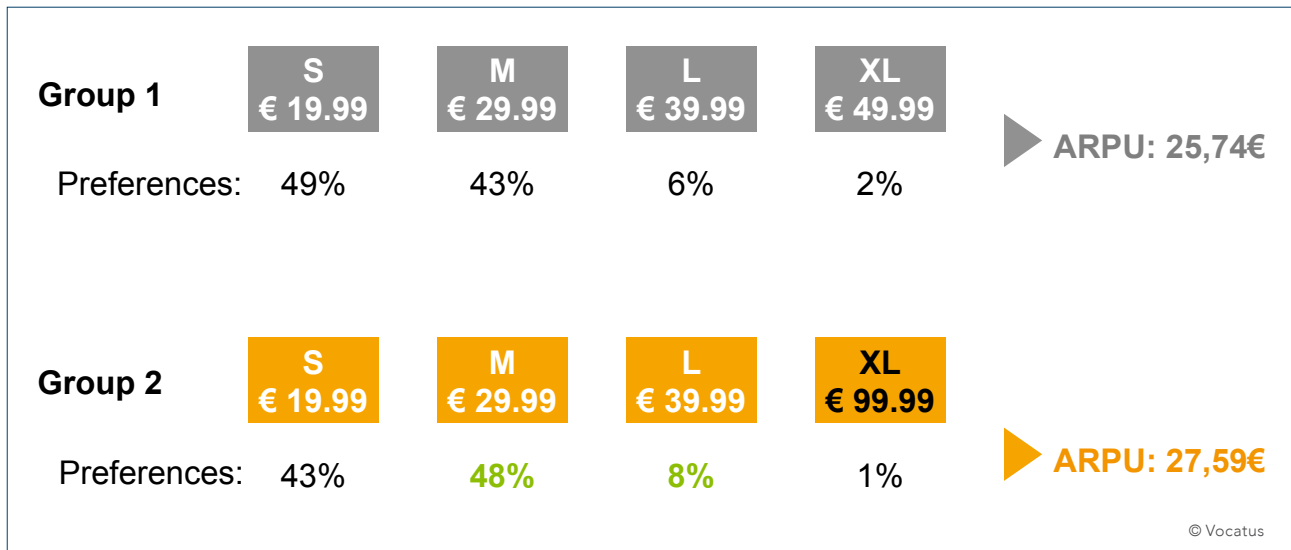
A bloated and overpriced option that no customer wants to pay for can still make sense, since it only has the function of making another option seem like a reasonable choice.

For example, a telecommunications provider could consciously offer a bloated, overpriced XL plan to help the customer opt for the L plan. Or, the advertising agency may offer an option with an implementation that the client is not supposed to choose in the first place.

## STARTING POINTS OF BEHAVIORAL PRICING

This means that a decision can also be facilitated by making it easier to decide against the worse alternative. This principle is hardly ever used in classic value-based pricing.

**Figure 6: Expensive anchor in a telecommunications portfolio**



## PRICING MODEL - WHY PAYING MORE CAN BE MORE ATTRACTIVE

The pricing model addresses the question of what for and when the customer pays for a service.

The answer of value-based pricing to "What for?" is that the customer should pay for things that create value for him. These are not necessarily the technical product features but the benefit or result generated by the product features. For instance, it would not be the bandwidth but the smooth streaming experience in the telecommunications example. For the advertising agency, not the man-hours, but the results report/ROI (but that is difficult to calculate). From the point of view of value-based pricing, the question "When?" is irrelevant

(if inflation and interest rates are not taken into account) because one euro is always worth the same amount to the customer, regardless of the time of payment.

Behavioral pricing supplements this approach with the question of which pricing model facilitates the decision. Besides the benefit or the result for the customer, it is primarily the question of price motivation that plays a role here. For example, a customer, who wants to be sure that he is not paying too much, prefers a fixed monthly amount - regardless of whether a service is adequate for this amount.

## STARTING POINTS OF BEHAVIORAL PRICING

This is not the exception in the telecommunications market but the rule because most customers use much less data volume (2020: 3.0 GB on average in Germany) than is included in their plan (2020: 6.9 GB on average in German postpaid plans).

At the end of the year, a business customer wants to show that he will be awarded the same budget

for consulting in the next year, and perhaps - for this reason alone - commissions consulting in the amount of the remaining budget, meaning he is particularly willing to pay at the end of the year. Even if a usage-based pricing model would better align price and value (and is thus ideal from a value-based pricing perspective), it overlooks the customers' decision-making motives in such cases.

## PRICE COMMUNICATION - WHY MORE ARGUMENTS ARE LESS CONVINCING

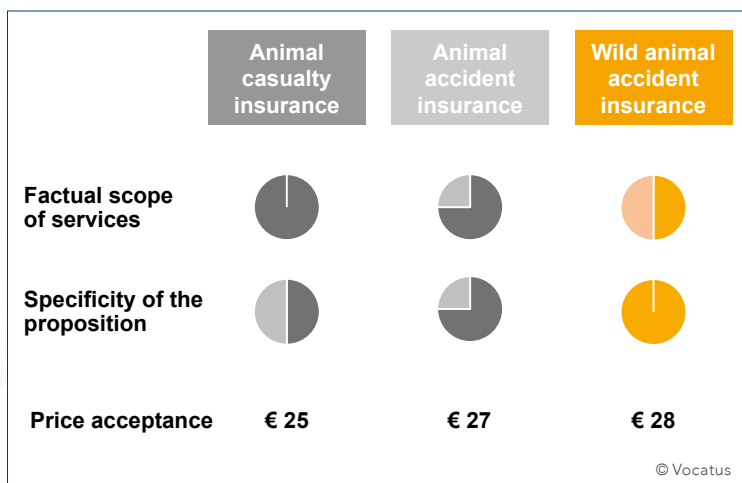
Price communication refers to how prices are communicated. This concerns, i.e., the information that frames the price (e.g., the selling propositions).

Classical value-based pricing assumes that price presentation plays no role and that the task of the information is primarily to convey the value of the offer, i.e., to clarify the features (and benefits) if they are not already known to the customer. This is implicitly based on the assumption: The more value arguments communication pro-

vides to the customer, the more likely the offer will convince him. Communication is a kind of insight therapy that aims to create the highest possible understanding of the offer's benefits. It is based on a "the more, the better" assumption. The more value arguments the customer understands, the more value the offer provides and the more he is willing to pay.

Behavioral pricing counters this with the question of what communication "makes the customer decided." And in most cases, it is not the number of arguments but the consistency of the story with which the customer can justify the purchase decision to himself and others. In this case, "less is indeed more": A weak positive argument has a marginally positive effect from the perspective of value-based pricing while diluting the overall narrative. And the clearer the story behind an offer, the better the customer can imagine when and how the offer will help him.

**Figure 7:**  
**Price acceptance depending on the scope of service and story**





# BEHAVIORAL PRICING IN PRACTICE

Marketing, pricing, and sales always have the same goal: to increase customers' likelihood of making a certain decision. It is not only about creating and skimming value (which is the mantra of value-based pricing) but about managing decisions.

The first step is to define which decision you want to influence as a company. The decision of potential customers to buy? The decision of existing customers to accept another offer? Or is there a decision that should not be made (e.g., a contract termination)? Here, it is worthwhile to start with those decision-making situations that you think have potential for improvement, where changes are not too

elaborate, and where there is buy-in from the organization for change.

First, you need to understand how these decisions are made to influence them. Value and price (the two dimensions of value-based pricing) may or may not play a decisive role in decisions. Whether and how this is the case is an empirical question and may differ depending on the experience background of your customers and the decision context at hand. So, the second step of applying behavioral pricing is always to understand how customers make decisions, for example, based on the breakdown of the GRIPS types (Bauer & Wätjen, 2018).



**Figure 8:**  
GRIPS typology

The third step is to develop measures based on the understanding of the customers' decision patterns. This can range from adjusting the price level, redesigning the product structure and pricing model, to optimizing price communication and beyond.

Since these measures change customer decision behavior more than the simple application of behavioral economics as "icing on the cake," they are also much more effective: Improvements in KPIs of 20-30% (e.g., conversion, gross profit) are thus not the exception but the rule.



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## ABOUT THE COMPANY

Vocatus develops pricing strategies and sales concepts for B2C and B2B business models. Not only relying on the assumptions of classic pricing theory but instead systematically leveraging the latest insights from behavioral economics to open up additional margins and conversion potentials for over 500 international top clients.

For our innovative projects and the successes we have achieved with them, we have already received numerous international awards – including the 6th consecutive “Best Consultants” award from the business magazine brand eins.

As we always derive our pricing strategy and sales concepts from the customer’s decision-making process, we ensure that a theoretically well-thoughtout pricing strategy can be consequently executed in sales practice. That has proven to deliver higher margin, conversion and loyalty.

More on [www.vocatus.de/en](http://www.vocatus.de/en) and [www.linkedin.com/company/vocatus-ag](https://www.linkedin.com/company/vocatus-ag)

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