Days Versus Dates: How Time of Delivery Can Impact Consumer Perception

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Problem of Practice:

Whenever customers place online orders, time-related information becomes an important driver of purchase decisions, satisfaction, and attitude towards a brand. Time implies not only time to deliver, but also delays, the difference between standard and express shipping speeds, warranty periods and the time frame that a subscription service will last. For this reason, brands and companies should (and do) pay attention to communicating time-related information to e-retail customers. However, consumers tend to have a subjective interpretation of time and their perception of a time duration influences how they view consumption events and make decisions. A recent study by Tatiana Sokolova talks about the 'Days-of-the-Week Effect': describing how a time period in 'days-of-the-week' leads to consumers perceiving time as longer, but using dates for the same duration makes it seem shorter. Implemented correctly, this insight can help managers in the e-retail and e-services industry to improve customer outcomes and perceptions towards their brands[2]

[1]The article 'Days-of-the-Week Effect in Temporal Judgments' by Tatiana Sokolova featured in Volume 50, Issue 1 of *Journal of Consumer Research* talks about how a time period in 'days-of-the-week' format leads to consumers perceiving time as longer, but using dates for the same duration makes it seem shorter

Brands and consumer experience

Time and communication about time are essential elements in any consumption experience. The most common context for brands to communicate about time with consumers is while delivering products. Delivery practices are a crucial factor in driving customer loyalty, with 98.1% of e-commerce consumers saying that the delivery-related experience impacts their loyalty towards a brand.[3,4] A 2020 survey found that 96% of online consumers will consider delivery time-related options as a factor in choosing an e-commerce website.[5]

Consumers also care about how long a promotional sale will last, the waiting time for a grievance resolution, the anticipatory time before a good experience (e.g., a vacation), or the dreaded wait before a bad one (e.g., a dentist visit). All of these instances across industries – whether in the context of delivery times for e-commerce, in the space of travel and tourism, healthcare, or the duration of any consumption experience stretching beyond a day, require businesses to describe the time duration to their consumers.

Brands have now started providing such time-related information not just in case of product/service delivery time but also for any delivery delays, time difference between standard and express shipping, warranty periods or subscription service period.

However, the problem lies in the fact that consumers do not view time objectively. Their subjective interpretation of time is affected by how the information is presented. Hence the big question is 'How best should a brand convey time-related information to positively impact consumers' purchase decisions, satisfaction, and attitude?'.

The study by Sokolova talks about the 'Days-of-the-Week Effect'— how describing time interval using 'days-of-the-week' (e.g.: 'ordered on Monday, July 1, to be delivered on Friday, July 5') is perceived as a longer duration relative to using dates ('ordered on July 1, to be delivered on July 5').

| Days-of-week framing | → | Duration perceived longer |
| Dates framing | → | Duration perceived shorter |

This is because when time is mentioned in 'days-of-the-week', customers tend to think in smaller, more detailed terms, compared to when time is mentioned in dates.


Using the correct time framing can help businesses change the way they frame time, as just by altering the framing of how time duration is communicated to consumers can influence how they view consumption events and make decisions

Why time framing matters

Hence, this insight can help businesses change the way they frame time. The research shows that just by altering how the time duration is communicated to consumers can influence how they view consumption events and make decisions.

However, to utilize this strategic tool, managers must first define their business and communication objectives. For instance, is the goal to lengthen the perceived duration (for pleasant experiences) or shorten it (in cases of unpleasant wait times or limited-time offers)? Accordingly, the business can select the correct framing by following steps outlined in *Figure 1*.

Figure 1: *A step-by-step implementation guide for time-related framing*
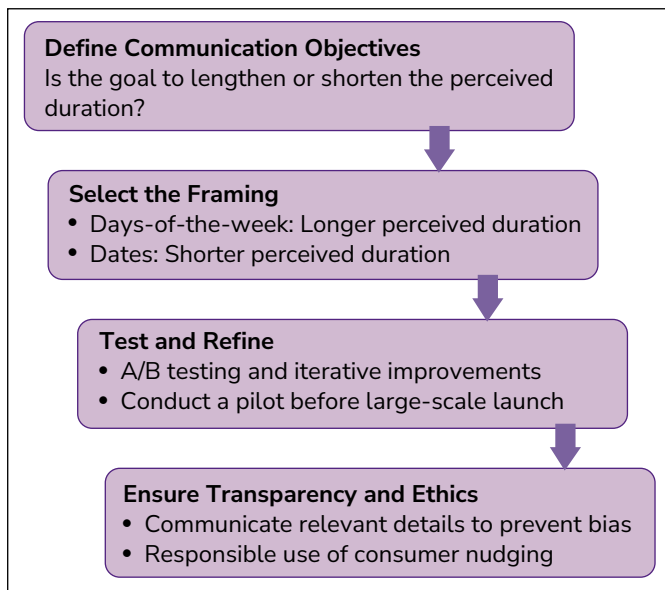
When the objective is to reduce duration perceptions, the organization should follow a date-based framing. This could be due to consumers' anticipation of the release of a new product or service or the beginning of a sale (*see Figure 2*).[6] A dates-based framing can also be used when businesses want to minimize the perception of unpleasant waiting time, for instance, delays in the product reaching the consumer or other information such as the duration to revert on a customer grievance. Dates-based framing can also be applied by healthcare providers while giving follow-up times, as this may make the patient's wait time between appointments seem shorter.

Figure 2: *Example of Dates-Based framing in use to project shorter duration*

Dates-based framing can also be applied to services such as appliance installation or repair, preventive healthcare and waiting times for products to be back in stock. In these cases, a dates-based framing would be more efficient as it would lead to the perception of a shorter time duration.

On the other hand, for any context involving prolonging a pleasant consumption experience, applying the days-of-the-week framing helps. Such framing helps increase duration perceptions and thus makes the ultimate experience more desirable. For example, days-of-the-week framing would be more effective for a positive experience such as a subscription service or a vacation, as this would lead potential consumers to perceive the duration as longer, thus prompting them to opt for the package. Many service providers can opt for this, as is being done by the popular property and vacation stay-booking platform Airbnb (*see Figure 3*).[7]

Figure 3: *Airbnb's display of trip-related details using Days-Of-The-Week*
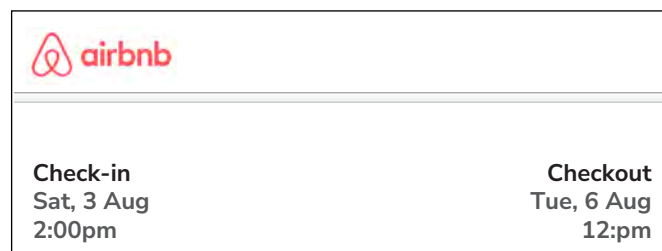
Managers in the vacation, housing or tourism sector, as well as those involved with hospitality, can hence, find value in utilizing days-of-the-week framing to result in the perception of a more extended period of pleasant consumer experience.

The research also talks about how consumers tend to perceive a more significant time difference between standard and express delivery dates in a delivery service if days-of-the-week framing is used. Several e-retailers have leveraged this insight to provide premium express delivery service to ensure that the express delivery option is perceived as more attractive, quicker and a better fit (*as in Figure 4*).

Figure 4: *Representation of Days-of-the-Week framing for express and standard delivery speeds*

Express delivery: Wednesday, 5th August
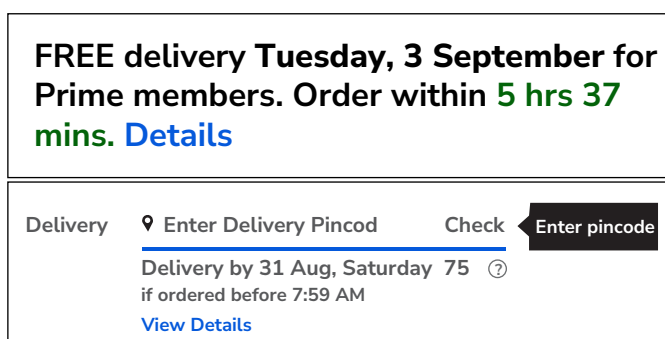Standard delivery: Saturday, 8th August

In a nutshell, days-of-the-week framing can be leveraged by brands that wish to increase consumers' perception of time duration, while brands that want to lessen the effect of duration, a dates-based framing would be more effective.

Beware a mismatched approach!

But what happens when the company's communication policy doesn't utilize the research insight? Look at the examples in *Figure* 5 from two leading e-commerce platforms in India. It is evident that both are using days-of-the-week framing. As per the research, using days-of-the-week framing would lead to the perception of time duration as more extended than it objectively is. If the objective is to reduce the perceived duration, then it would be a better idea to adopt dates-based framing.

Figure 5: Delivery timeline display for two prominent e-commerce platforms

FREE delivery Tuesday, 3 September for Prime members. Order within 5 hrs 37 mins. Details

| Delivery | 📍 Enter Delivery Pincod | Check | Enter pincode |

Delivery by 31 Aug, Saturday 75 ⓘ
if ordered before 7:59 AM
View Details

Source: Screenshot captured by the author from two prominent e-commerce websites

There are times when there are delays in delivery. In such instances, while communicating a delay, managers should again steer clear of providing days-of-the-week information, otherwise, consumers may switch to another e-retailer. For example, if Carrier A communicates, 'The product was expected to be delivered today, on Wednesday but now the delivery will be delayed until Sunday' but carrier B conveys 'The product was expected to be delivered today, on May 4 but now the delivery will be delayed until August 8'. This research suggests that Carrier A's message would lead to a higher likelihood of switching to another delivery carrier. Businesses should be wary of consumers' switching intentions and ensure they frame delay-related communication using dates-based framing to avoid losing customers.

These insights can also be extended to events and event planning. Notice how the music event, Lollapalooza, advertises its duration using a dates-based framing rather than the days-of-the-week framing (*see Figure* 6). If a dates-based framing is used, attendees may

underestimate the duration and perceive it as a short event. However, including days-of-the-week framing, such as 'Saturday, January 28 to Sunday, January 29' would highlight the event's actual length, allowing attendees to plan accordingly.

Figure 6: A concert advertisement with Dates-Based framing
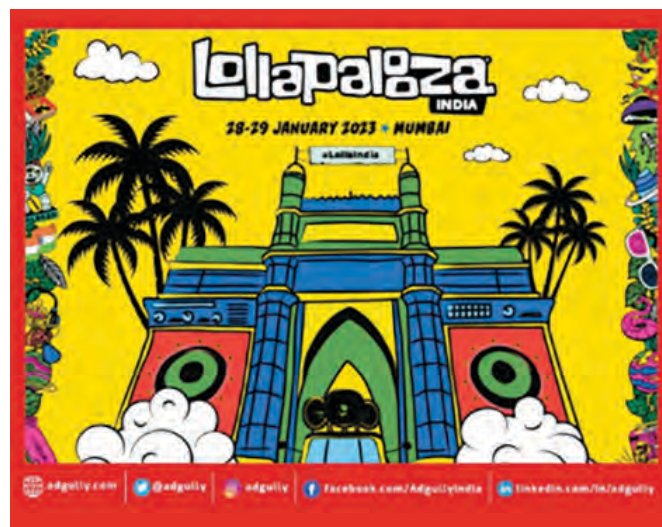
Source: Screenshot taken by the author

Dates and days

- When the objective is **to reduce duration perceptions**, the organization should follow a date-based framing. This could be due to consumers' anticipation of the release of a new product or service or the beginning of a sale

- But for any context involving prolonging a pleasant consumption experience for the consumer, applying the days-of-the-week framing helps. Such framing **helps increase duration perceptions** and thus makes the ultimate experience more desirable

If the managers used inappropriate framing, it could have led to consumers misjudging the duration, which could lead to lower attendance, less-than-expected footfalls and significant losses.

Now, e-commerce platforms are upping their game and offering to serve customers in a few hours or minutes for products such as fresh groceries, flowers, or other perishable items. Here, choosing a days-of-the-week framing may make the delivery time seem longer and

less acceptable to consumers, leading to assumptions about the products being not fresh or of good quality. A dates-based framing might be a better fit (*see Figure* 7).

Figure 7: Days-of-the-week framing on a grocery shopping platform
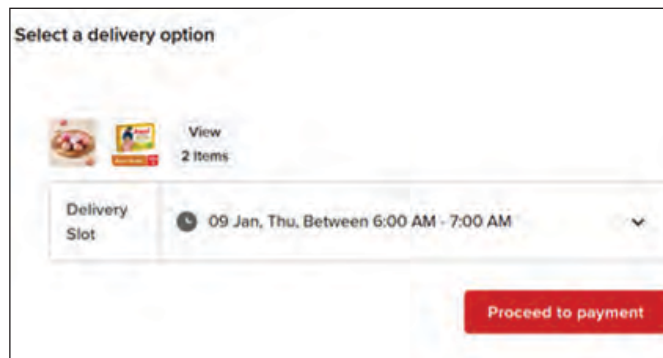
Source: Screenshot taken by the author

Role of objective time duration

Note that the days-of-the-week effect does not hold if the objective (actual) duration is much longer than three to five days – such as 18-20 days – at which time consumers tend to focus on the longer real time. An important implication is to first assess the relevant duration of time framing involved (*see Figure 8*).

Figure 8: A ready reckoner matrix for managers

| Objective time duration → Aim: ↓	Shorter objective time duration	Longer objective time duration
Reduce perceived time duration	*Dates-based framing* Urgency creation Minimizing length of negative experiences or delays	*Any framing* since the days-of-the-week effect vanishes
Lengthen perceived time duration	*Days-of-the-week framing* Prolonging a positive experience	*Any framing* since the days-of-the-week effect vanishes

Source: Created by the author based on the article by Tatiana Sokolova

Going beyond days and dates

Though the research insight deals with time framing for delivery, the scope can be extended to other contexts such as limited-time offers and event registrations. It can even be extended to B2B contexts.

While offering limited-time deals, the e-retailer has to first identify the purpose — if it is to generate a greater sense of urgency and push consumers to purchase faster, then using a dates-based framing would be more appropriate . However, if the objective is to make the offer period (*see Figure 9*) appear like it is lasting for a long time, then the appropriate strategy would be to use days-of-the-week framing: 'Offer valid till Friday, March 26'.

Figure 9: Dates-Based framing in a limited time offer creates urgency
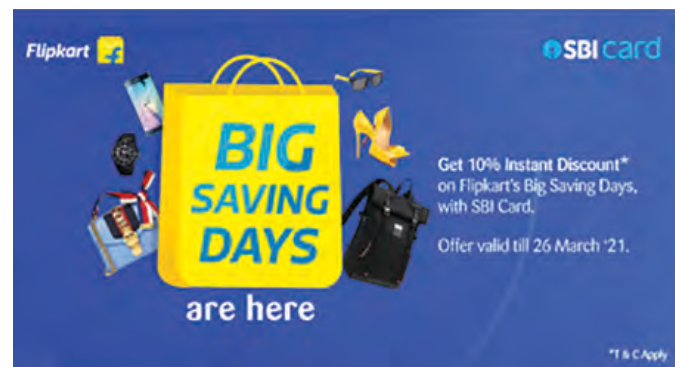
Source: Screenshot taken by the author

In the case of event registrations, while providing the last date for registration, the manager will have to test for both the decision points highlighted in *Figure* 8. Is the purpose to generate greater urgency and quicker action, or is it to prolong the consumption experience? Second, whether the objective time duration is short or long. The decision rules in *Figure* 8 can then be followed accordingly.

Figure 10: Dates-Based framing to encourage earlier registrations
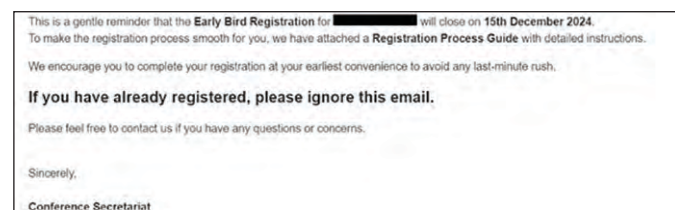
Source: Screenshot from a conference email taken by the author

The email in *Figure 10* above highlights dates-based framing, which makes the time frame seem smaller. This is a good fit to create urgency and encourage earlier registrations.

All the examples discussed till now have been in the B2C context. But many businesses also deal with partners and clients and the findings are applicable in even such B2B scenarios. For instance, while deciding terms of payment, delivery timelines, contract negotiations, coordination related to new product launches, resolving urgent issues, client-related deadlines and procurement approvals. Thus, whether internally or while dealing with partners and clients, a business will have to ensure adopting the appropriate time framing.

Time is ripe

Managers should carefully consider how time-related information is presented to ensure maximum efficiency. As a rule of thumb, if an organization's marketing and order fulfillment needs to emphasize urgency and shorter time duration, then use the dates-based framing. If the objective is to enhance consumers' time perception, then use days-of-the-week framing. This is applicable when the duration is relatively shorter (3-5 days). Framing time durations in such a manner ensures more positive consumer perceptions and long-term brand loyalty.

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