

I Didn't Expect That

*Surprise & delight for food & beverage,
built as a system instead of a stunt.*

Surprise Facts

Per serving, when you least expect it

Peaks per pack	At least one
Placement	Where it matters
Promises broken	None
Stunts	Zero
Logo test	Passed

Contains no slot machines.

The third in a series taking The Joy Dividend into practice. No. 01 removed the friction. No. 02 added play. This one plans the moment nobody saw coming.

ON THE TITLE

The book's promise for this lever, word for word. The line you want said about the product, and never about the price.

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OPENING

Same two candies. Bigger tip.

In a small study at a New Jersey restaurant, a server tried four ways of bringing the check. With no candy, tips averaged 19.0% of the bill. With one piece of chocolate, 19.6%. With two pieces, 21.6%.

In the fourth version, she left one piece, then stopped and offered a second. Tips averaged 23.0%.¹ That's the same two pieces as the third version. What changed was how the gift arrived: unplanned, and apparently just for that table. The researchers favor reciprocity as the explanation: a gift invites something back.

It's one server and 80 tables, and timing, personal attention and reciprocity are tangled together, so read it as a pattern, not a law. But it points at the lever this paper is about: the moment people didn't expect, designed on purpose.

The candy didn't change. How the gift felt did.



Same candy. Better timing.

01

THE ORDER

Surprise comes after calm. That's what lets it land.

The Joy Dividend runs in a fixed order: remove noise, layer delight, deepen with purpose. Surprise is the second half of the middle step, and it works because the first step is done.

STEP 1 · NO. 01

Remove noise

The Calm Advantage

STEP 2 · NOS. 02-03

Layer delight

Playful Design, then
Surprise & Delight (this
paper)

STEP 3 · NO. 04

Deepen with purpose

Connection & Purpose

The book's promise for this lever is the title of this paper: “I didn't expect that!” Its job is to create moments of unexpected positive emotion. It counters jaded expectations and goal fatigue, and it produces novelty or achievement spikes that create memorable emotional peaks.

The order matters. Joy can't compensate for unresolved frustration. If the journey is riddled with pain points, “a free cupcake isn't going to make them loyal—it might even seem insulting.” Surprise on top of friction reads as an apology.

Its second rule: surprise and delight should be a strategy, not a one-off. Isolated surprises “might win a moment but fail to build a lasting bond.”

Playful Design

Participation, built in.

Surprise & Delight

The unexpected
moment.

02

THE SCIENCE

Your reward system cares about timing.

Berns and colleagues put 25 people in a scanner and gave them small squirts of fruit juice and water. In one run the squirts came in a fixed, predictable pattern. In the other, the order and timing were random. Two reward regions, the nucleus accumbens and the medial orbitofrontal cortex, responded most when the squirts were unpredictable.² What people said they preferred wasn't directly correlated with that response.

Separate research looks at the emotional response. In gambles studied by Mellers and colleagues, “unexpected outcomes have greater emotional impact than expected outcomes,” strong enough “to make smaller wins more pleasurable than larger wins.”³ That's the Emotional Amplification Effect: surprise multiplies whatever comes next.

Food has its own version of jaded expectations. Eat one food and its pleasantness drops more than that of the foods you haven't eaten, a pattern Rolls and colleagues named sensory-specific satiety.⁴ That's a reason to vary something on purpose. Whether a surprise wins the pleasure back is something to test, not assume.

SURPRISE MOVES

Vary something small on a schedule people can't predict: a shape, a message, a bonus piece.

Never vary the core. The taste people bought is the one thing that has to be predictable.

Keep the surprise in the product, not only in the ad.

03

PEAK AND END

64%

picked the chocolate introduced as “the last one” as their favorite⁶

22%

picked the fifth chocolate when it was just “the next one”⁶

People remember the best bite and the last one.

The Peak-End Rule: memory of an experience is shaped by its most intense moment and its end, not its average. Kahneman and colleagues showed how far that goes. Asked which of two cold-water trials to repeat, 69% chose the longer one, because its last 30 seconds were slightly less cold.⁵

Food shows the same bias at the end. O'Brien and Ellsworth had people taste five chocolates. Nothing about the fifth changed except what people were told. Introduced as the last one, it was picked as the favorite 64% of the time. Introduced as just the next one, 22%. The group told it was last also rated the whole tasting as more enjoyable.⁶

So the end of a food experience isn't a leftover, and knowing it's the end is part of what makes it count. Make the ending recognizable, as well as worth remembering: the last bite, the bottom of the bag, the final serving in a multi-pack, the empty package.

SURPRISE MOVES

Make the last serving recognizable as the last, and worth remembering.

Put something worth finding at the bottom, not just at the top.



The end is prime real estate.

04

WITHOUT
DELIGHT

Exceed the expectation.
Don't contradict it.

Surprise amplifies whatever follows, including disappointment. As the book puts it, an ill-considered surprise “can just as easily annoy.”

The clearest food case comes from a study co-authored by the chef Heston Blumenthal. The same smoked salmon ice cream “generated strong dislike when labelled as ice-cream, but acceptance when labelled as frozen savoury mousse.” Called ice cream, it also tasted saltier.⁷ People expected sweet and fruity. The food didn't change. The broken promise did the damage.

That's the line for product teams. A surprise that exceeds what the pack promised is delight. A surprise that contradicts it is a complaint.

DELIGHT OR BETRAYAL

	EXCEEDS THE PROMISE	CONTRADICTS IT
In the mouth	A center that's better than the shell promised	A flavor the pack never warned you about
On the pack	A line worth finding where you already look	A message you need an app to read
In the offer	An extra piece nobody paid for	A smaller pack at the same price
Over time	A new flavor that tastes like the brand	A stunt flavor that tastes like a press release

05

Put surprise at the crossroads.

THE MAP

The book's Surprise Opportunity Map names four emotional inflection points, the places where people feel unsure, accomplish something, or settle into a routine with a brand. Each one has a food version.

Moments of Anxiety or Uncertainty

The first cook of a new product. The wait for the oven, or for the delivery.

SURPRISE MOVE

Pack a little insurance as a gift: a spare sauce packet for the first try.

Milestone and Achievement Moments

The tenth order. A subscription's first year. The last box of the season.

SURPRISE MOVE

Give the tenth box something the first nine didn't have.

Routine Touchpoints Ripe for Reinvention

The cap, the inside of the lid, the bottom of the bag, the receipt.

SURPRISE MOVE

Put something worth finding where people already look.

Recovery Opportunities

A crushed delivery. A stale bag. A recall.

SURPRISE MOVE

Fix it first, then add something nobody asked for.

BEFORE YOU BUILD IT, ASK

EMOTIONAL IMPACT POTENTIAL

How meaningful would a surprise be here?

OPERATIONAL FEASIBILITY

Can we consistently deliver this surprise?

BRAND ALIGNMENT

Does this surprise reflect our values and personality?

MEMORABILITY FACTOR

Will this create a story worth sharing?

06

WORKED
EXAMPLE

1,677

Real Facts printed by
early 2023⁸

Snapple put the
surprise under the cap.

Snapple prints a numbered “Real Fact” under its bottle caps. It marked 20 years of them in 2023, by which point it had printed 1,677.⁸ It's a surprise built the way the book says surprise should be built: as a system, not a one-off.

It also answers the hardest question about surprise: what happens once people expect it. A regular Snapple drinker knows there's a fact under the cap. The surprise is what it says. The container became familiar. The content stays fresh.

And it passes the authenticity test. Snapple says it has retired facts “as new research has come to light or to keep the list fresh,” and that “retired numbers are not reused.”⁸

SCORED ON THE STRATEGIC SURPRISE FRAMEWORK

Consistency & Authenticity	Facts have to be true, and the wrong ones get retired. Curiosity fits a brand that talks to you from the cap.
Scalability & Sustainability	Printed on every cap, on a part that already exists. No extra step at the open.
Memorability & Storytelling	Numbered, short, and easy to read out loud to whoever is sitting next to you.
Data-Informed Personalization	None. Not every surprise needs it.

No extra step, nothing to download, and
a small reason to open the next one.

07

STUNT OR
SYSTEM

1912

the year Cracker Jack
started putting a
prize in every box⁹

Stunts win a news cycle.
Systems win the next box.

The category's favorite surprise is the limited edition. Some are systems. Many are stunts. The Strategic Surprise Framework tells them apart before launch, not after.

STUNT OR SYSTEM

ELEMENT	STUNT	SYSTEM
Consistency & Authenticity	A flavor with nothing to do with the brand	Passes the logo test: strip the logo off, and it still feels like yours
Scalability & Sustainability	One launch, one press cycle	Built into standard processes, at a frequency you can keep: every pack, or every tenth order
Memorability & Storytelling	Made for the press release	Made for the person telling a friend
Data-Informed Personalization	The same stunt for everyone	Timed to where the customer is: the first box, the tenth

Systems can last a very long time. Cracker Jack has put a prize in every box since 1912, more than 23 billion of them by its hundredth year.⁹

Variable rewards are the system version of surprise, and the riskiest one. Chipotle's Freepotle gave Rewards members “up to ten free food drops” through 2023, and Chipotle has since brought it back as a recurring promotion.¹⁰ The rule for programs like this is “unpredictable but consistent”: nobody knows when the drop comes, and everyone knows it will.

08

GUARD RAILS

Four ways surprise goes wrong.

Surprise is the lever with the most upside and the shortest fuse. Each of these turns delight into its opposite.

It's on top of friction.

Joy ≠ gimmick: playful elements only work after core functionality is rock-solid. A bonus treat in a box that arrived crushed isn't a surprise. It's an apology.

It's a stunt.

Novelty for novelty's sake can backfire, because it can feel overwhelming or gimmicky. If it only works once, at launch, it's a press release with a flavor.

It's a slot machine.

A surprise gives something away. A slot machine keeps people paying for the chance. Empathy over engagement metrics is a guard rail for a reason: “If your business model depends on addictive engagement, redesign your economics before redesigning the experience.”

It becomes a broken promise.

Repeat a surprise often enough and people expect it, and missing an anticipated surprise feels deflating. It doesn't have to graduate into Playful Design. Let the container become familiar while the content stays fresh: people can expect a fact under the cap without knowing which one.

09

THE REVIEW

Eight questions before you call it a surprise.

If the answer to the first one is no, go back to No. 01.

-
- ☐ Is the product calm before we add this?
 -
 - ☐ Does it exceed what the pack promised, or contradict it?
 -
 - ☐ Strip the logo off. Does it still feel like ours?
 -
 - ☐ Can we deliver it reliably at the frequency we choose?
 -
 - ☐ Does it create a peak, wherever it lands?
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 - ☐ Does it give something, or keep people paying for a chance?
 -
 - ☐ What happens the day people start expecting it?
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 - ☐ Would anyone tell a friend about it?
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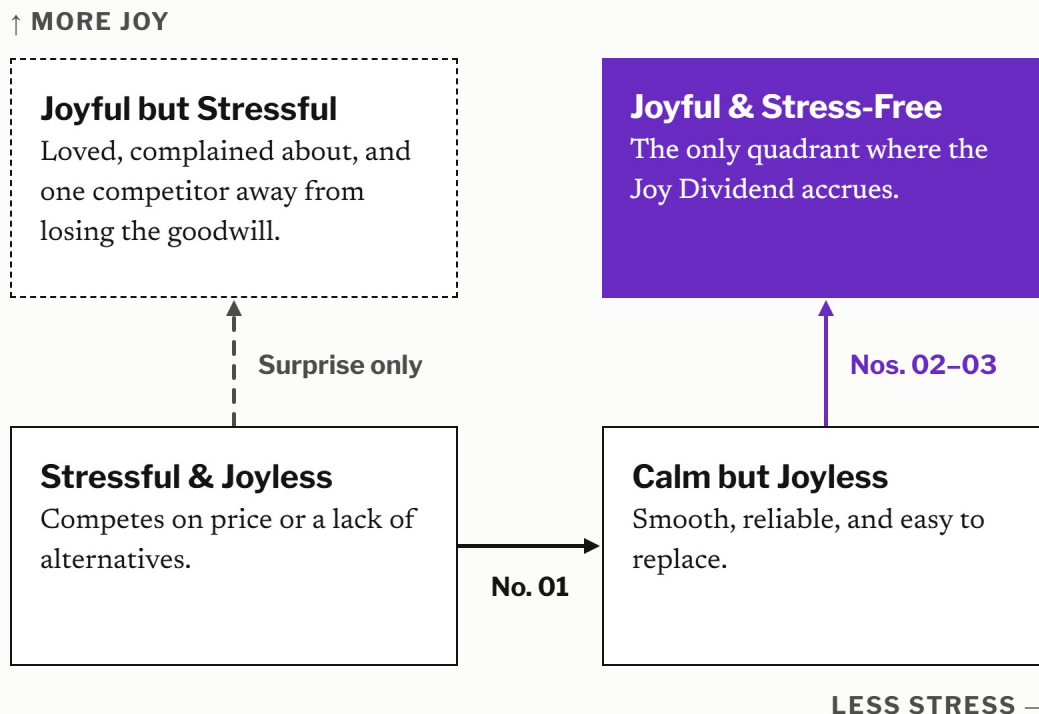
Where people already look.

10

CALM PLUS
DELIGHT

Without calm, surprise is an apology.

A surprise on top of friction lands in Joyful but Stressful: noticed, enjoyed once, and undone by the next fight with the packaging. A surprise built into a calm, playful product moves it further into the only quadrant where the Joy Dividend accrues.



The Joy-Stress Matrix. No. 01 removes noise. Nos. 02 and 03 layer delight. Surprise on its own goes up, and stays stressful.

No. 01 made the product calm. No. 02 made it a pleasure to use. This one gives people a reason to remember it. The last lever is the one that makes them stay: Connection & Purpose.

The best surprise is a promise you never made, kept anyway.

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FRAMEWORK

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