

The alcohol substitution playbook

Using behavioural science to promote healthier choices





1 Introduction – the case for substitution

You want to reduce alcohol-related harm without compromising social connection or commercial success. So how do you encourage people to make healthier choices? At BIT, we've conducted large-scale trials across the UK, Mexico, and Germany to show that simple 'choice architecture' changes, like moving alcohol-free options to the top of a menu, can reduce alcohol consumption by up to 24% without compromising revenue.

This playbook distils our findings into a practical guide for using no- and low-alcohol beverages (NABs and LABs) as a powerful tool for substitution. Whether you are a policymaker, regulator or hospitality leader, we've outlined the evidence-backed strategies you need to make the healthier choice the easier one.



BIT partners with clients across industries to solve real-world problems with applied behavioural research and innovative methodologies.

Need help understanding, changing, or evaluating behaviour – or want to build these skills among your team? Get in touch to see how our deep understanding of human behaviour and evidence-led problem-solving can help you.



2 The theory: why people drink (and why they switch)

To change drinking habits, we have to look past the bottle. For most of us, drinking is an automatic social ritual, a default; behaviour deeply embedded in our environments and habits. Understanding why we stick with alcohol, and what makes us switch, is the key to designing effective interventions.

Why we drink: the power of the default

Most people don't consciously choose to drink harmful amounts; they are nudged towards it by their environment.

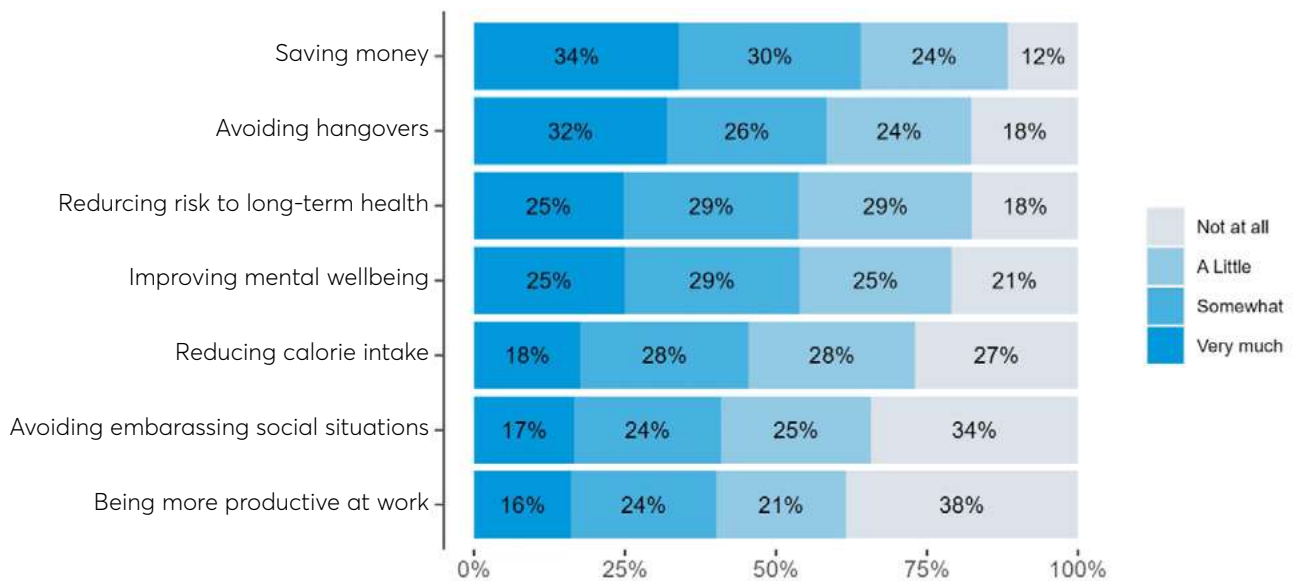
- » **The ritual habit:** drinking is often what's known as a 'System 1' (automatic) behaviour. The clink of a glass or a specific social setting triggers the 'hand-to-mouth' habit before we've even looked at a menu.
- » **Search friction:** in many pubs, bars, and restaurants, alcohol is the easiest thing to find. If NABs and LABs are hidden at the back of a menu or in a separate fridge, the default choice will tend to be a pint or a glass of wine.
- » **The intent-action gap:** there is often a huge gap between what people want to do and what they actually do. Even with a strong desire to moderate, the friction of finding a good alternative often leads people back to their usual order.

Key findings

We surveyed 7,566 adults to understand what might motivate them to drink less alcohol. We found that:

- » **64%** want to **save money** in the face of rising costs
- » **58%** want to **avoid hangovers** and stay productive
- » **46%** are motivated by **weight management** and calorie counting

How much or how little do the following considerations motivate you to drink less alcohol?



This tells us that interventions highlighting immediate lifestyle wins, such as saving money, avoiding hangovers, and reducing calorie intake, are likely to be more effective at driving behaviour change than traditional long-term health warnings.

Why we switch: the substitution solution

If alcohol is the default, NABs and LABs could act as a behavioural bridge. They succeed where traditional 'just stop' messages fail because they allow people to satisfy their social and sensory needs while reducing the harm.

- » **The social signal:** a key strength of NABs and LABs is that they look, feel, and taste like the real thing. This mimicry is a powerful psychological tool, it allows a person to signal they are part of the group without having to explain why they aren't drinking. By mirroring the ritual (the glass, the garnish, the branding), NABs and LABs remove the social tax of moderation.
- » **Lowering the stakes (substitution over abstinence):** switching is psychologically easier than quitting. NABs and LABs offer a pragmatic middle ground for the millions of people who don't want to stop socialising, but do want to avoid the 'next-day tax' on their health and productivity. It turns a difficult binary choice into a simple swap.

- » **The path of least resistance:** we switch when the alternative is easy. By making NABs and LABs more prominent when we are making key decisions, we align the environment with the user's existing intent. We move the choice from a difficult conscious effort to an automatic, healthier default.

3 How can behavioural science help?

Redesigning the choice environment

Our research shows that small, low-cost changes to how NABs and LABs are presented could help reduce harmful drinking. The goal in a restaurant, pub or bar setting is to disrupt the automatic order and make NABs and LABs the path of least resistance.

- » **The default nudge:** reposition NABs and LABs to the very top of each category (eg, Beer, Wine, Spirits) on digital and physical menus. This utilises primacy effects, signaling that NABs and LABs are the recommended or standard choices.
- » **Framing matters:** consider using specific health and safety icons or text, such as 'Safe for driving', next to alcohol-free items to prompt consumers to consider their immediate responsibilities.

Key findings

- » BIT collaborated with Comunidad Mexicana to explore how to support people shift from alcoholic beverages to no and low-alcohol alternatives.
- » In a trial across 11,000+ participants in the UK, Mexico, and Germany, we moved NABs and LABs from a separate section to the top of the standard menu.
- » We saw a 24% reduction in alcohol ordered in Mexico and a 15% reduction in the UK. Crucially, total customer spend remained stable - proving that public health goals and commercial success can go hand in hand.



The screenshot shows a digital menu interface. At the top, there's a header with a photo of beer glasses and a navigation bar with categories: 'No & low alcohol drinks', 'Beer & Cider', 'Wine', 'Cocktails', 'Spirits', 'Soft drinks', and 'Food'. The 'No & low alcohol drinks' category is highlighted with an orange box and an arrow. Below it, a list of items is shown in a two-column grid. The first column lists 'Heineken 0.0' (£3.70) and 'Beck's Blue - alcohol free' (£3.10). The second column lists 'Kopparberg Mixed Fruit Alcohol Free' (£4.70) and 'Peroni Nastro Azzurro 0.0%' (£3.85). Below this, the 'Beer & Cider' category is also highlighted with an orange box and an arrow. It lists 'Desperados' (£5.28), 'Asahi' (£6.41), 'Tsingtao' (£6.41), and 'Carling' (£4.15). On the right side of the interface, there's an 'Order basket' icon, a text prompt 'Add items from the menu', and a 'Checkout' button.

No & low alcohol drinks	
Heineken 0.0 Refreshing lager with distinct balanced taste / bottle 330 ml / 0% ABV	Kopparberg Mixed Fruit Alcohol Free £4.70 With notes of blackcurrants and raspberries / bottle 500 ml / 0% ABV
Beck's Blue - alcohol free £3.10 Light, crisp and refreshing / bottle 275 ml / 0.05% ABV	Peroni Nastro Azzurro 0.0% £3.85 Dry taste and dry body, with bitter notes of hops / bottle 330 ml / 0% ABV

Beer & Cider	
Desperados £5.28 Full bodied lager with a boost of Tequila flavour / bottle 330 ml / 5.9% ABV	Tsingtao £6.41 Smooth Pilsner with aromas of green apple, pear, cereal and white flower / bottle 640 ml / 4.7% ABV
Asahi £6.41 Clean grain flavour and refreshing sweet taste / bottle	Carling £4.15 Lager with the perfect balance of sweetness and bitterness / 1 pint

Ensuring clarity and substitution in advertising

For brands and regulators, the focus is on ensuring that advertising drives people away from alcohol units rather than inadvertently increasing brand awareness or consumer confusion regarding alcoholic versions.

- » **Visual distinction:** use distinct color palettes or design elements for NABs and LABs products that differ from the alcoholic mother brand' to prevent consumer confusion.
- » **Functional messaging:** prioritise ads that emphasise the functional benefits of NABs and LABs (eg, better sleep, safer driving, fewer calories) rather than just lifestyle imagery.
- » **Targeted outreach:** tailor NABs and LABs advertising to high risk drinkers, who currently show the lowest uptake but represent the greatest opportunity for harm reduction. At BIT, we can work with partners to co-design interventions that move beyond generic health messaging and strike the right balance between offering satisfying, healthy substitutions and protecting long-term consumer commercial loyalty.



4 What's next for alcohol substitution research?

With the proof-of-concept examples above, we now need to scale these insights into the real world. For global companies and policymakers, the goal is to move from whether substitution works to how to make it a consistent, global reality. Here we outline how the existing research could be scaled up.

From online trials to the real world

Digital simulations are just the start. Hospitality and retail have direct access to consumers and a wealth of data. By partnering with consumer industries, policy makers and regulators, we can launch live, in-venue pilots to test menu tweaks and shelf placements in real bars and supermarkets, and measure how these nudges influence long-term habits and commercial revenue in the real world.

Reaching the hardest segment: high-risk drinkers

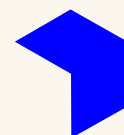
Our research found that **high-risk drinkers have the lowest uptake of alcohol-free drinks** (2% vs 5% for low-risk groups). We want to design specific interventions that satisfy the deep-seated rituals of heavy consumption, moving beyond generic health messaging to find what actually triggers a switch for those who need it most.

Building partnerships to expand the evidence base

We invite industry leaders and policymakers to join us in building a stronger evidence base in this space.

Our goal is to move from isolated pilots to credible, globally relevant substitution strategies that identify:

- » proven drivers of long-term behaviour change
- » necessary adjustments for diverse regulatory and cultural contexts
- » effective frameworks for responsible global scaling



How we can work together

- » **Intervention design and scaling strategy:** we help you design health interventions, services and products through behavioural insights. We help partners develop interventions from scratch or optimise the reach and impact of partners with existing products.
- » **Prototyping and simulated testing:** we regularly evaluate our behavioural interventions using Predictiv, our online experimentation lab, where we design and conduct sophisticated trials simulating real-world settings. This gives you quick, low-cost data to refine and further evaluate your solution with confidence, which is especially useful for pre-testing communications or digital journeys.
- » **Rapid piloting and evaluation:** we conduct robust real world evaluations with cutting-edge qualitative, quantitative and data science techniques. We generate evidence to help you understand what works, for whom and why. We use this to help you optimise your services.
- » **Behavioural diagnosis and strategic advice:** we conduct light-touch review of your existing communications and customer touchpoints to identify immediate quick wins and ensure messaging avoids consumer confusion.

Get in touch

At BIT, we use evidence and innovative technologies to help our partners to address complex healthcare challenges through behaviour change.
Get in touch to discuss how we can work with you.
