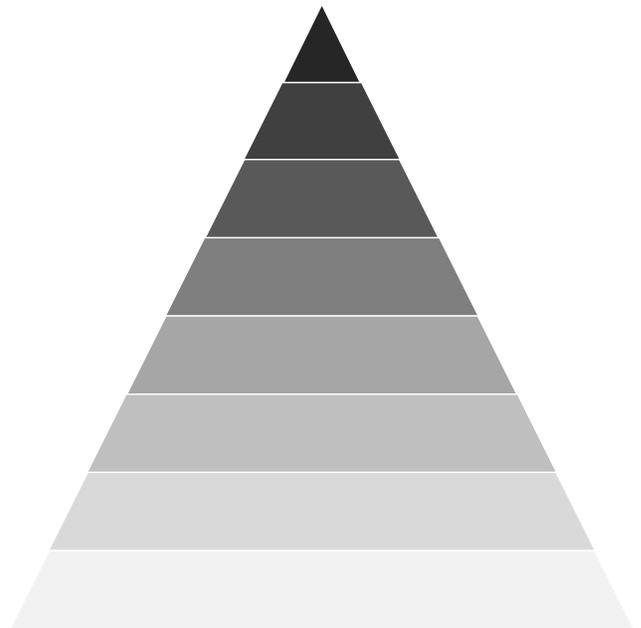


# Maslow's hierarchy of needs

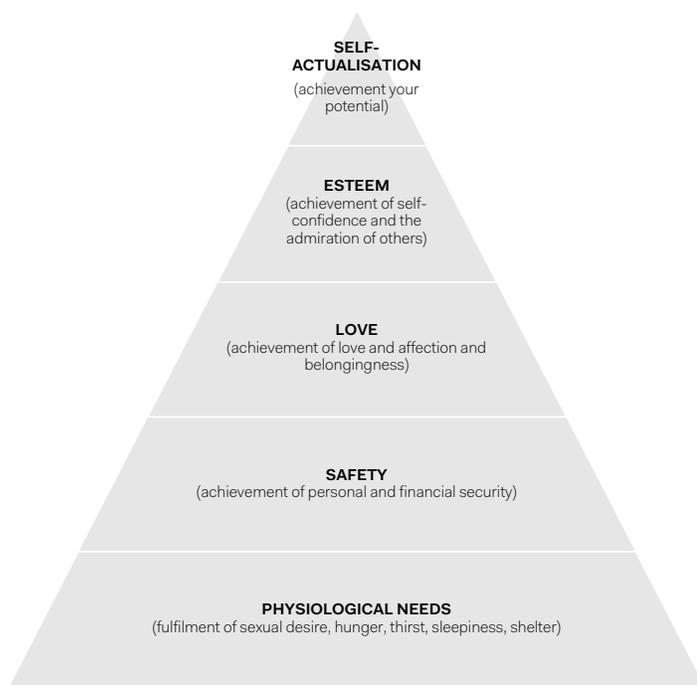


## What motivates people?

This is an enormously important question if you work in branding. Should we use a stick or a carrot? Love or fear? Should we play on insecurities or appeal to aspirations? Without some sort of framework for understanding human motivation, we would have no way of working out how to influence (or manipulate) people to behave the way we want them to: how to stimulate employees to work hard; how to persuade customers to buy and recommend your company's products; how to encourage partner organisations to work with you; or how to induce shareholders to buy your stock.

For many of us, the go-to framework for motivation was put forward by Abraham Maslow in his 1943 paper 'A Theory of Human Motivation' and is most commonly known as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. I've written about the hierarchy a few times already – partly because it's so popular but also partly because I'm so utterly suspicious of it. But brand consultants and marketers seem to love the hierarchy; it crops up all over the place.

His 1943 hierarchy contained five levels, which Maslow subsequently expanded through the '60s and '70s to a seven- and an eight-level hierarchy:

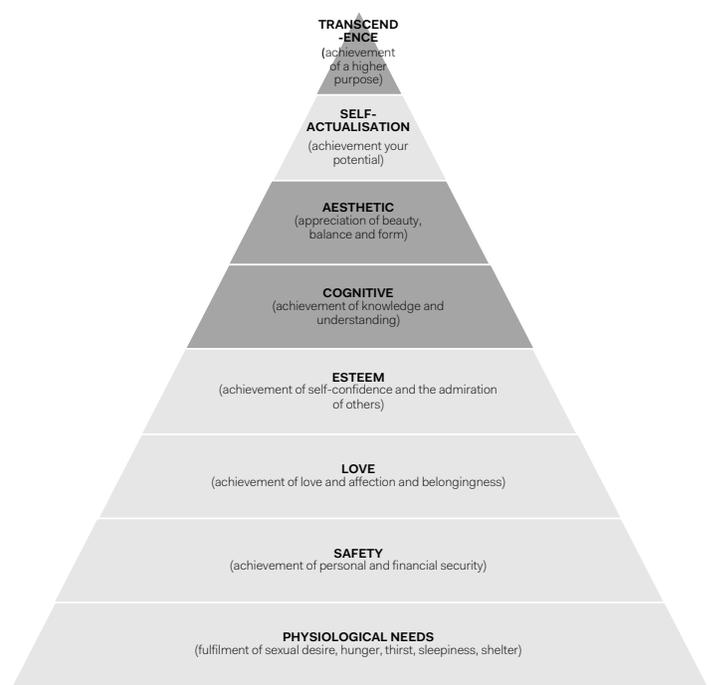


**1943**

The original five-level version is the one I bump into most often. I suspect it is the more popular model because it's simpler, but (cynically) I also wonder whether this is because it fits much better with our concept of a 'consumer'. Ultimate happiness for the 1943 Maslowian man (yes, he's a man) is to achieve SELF-actualisation by doing what he is fitted for:

*"A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately happy."*

This is great news if you want to sell guitars, or paint, or pens. But it's also great news if you want to understand a consumer, because you can position your brand as an essential tool for achievement. Gillette razors make men manlier. Veet cream makes women womanlier. And Apple devices make us all more creative. In comparison, the 1970s Maslowian is more like Mother Teresa: she has given herself to a higher cause; religion; altruism; humanity; nature; the infinite beyond. Not only is she more complicated than her 1943 predecessor, it's also a hell of a lot harder to motivate her to care about a ludicrously expensive razor, or canned hair removal cream, or a thousand-dollar smartphone. It's little wonder most of us stick to the original model: it's only got five gears and is easier to drive.



**1970**

And it's not an accident that Maslow's ideal resembles Mother Teresa. His hierarchy of needs is based on the biographies of 18 people, including Abraham Lincoln, Albert Einstein, Aldous Huxley, Mahatma Gandhi, Beethoven... And Mother Teresa! Although his 1943 paper claims to "conform to the known facts, clinical and observational as well as experimental", there is seemingly no solid empirical basis for his hierarchy of needs. It's about as scientific as arranging all of Roger Hargreaves' Mr. Men in order of colour.

Even Abraham Maslow seemed reluctant to buy in to his hierarchy. His 1943 paper contains a long list of caveats, including:

- That the order of needs is not rigid, but can flex based on external stimuli or individual differences, and
- That most behaviour is multi-motivated.

Anybody who's ever ordered a drink in a bar knows this instinctively. Inevitably, there's an element of thirst, but your choice of drink is also likely to be influenced by who else is at the bar with you (love and esteem), whether you can confidently pronounce the name of the brand you're ordering (cognitive), and how swiftly and completely it will make you pass out (transcendence).

Evidence suggests that even if needs can be neatly categorised, these categories are unlikely to be ordered in a rigid hierarchy. A 2011 analysis of Gallup data from over 60 thousand people across 123 countries revealed that we are happiest when we achieve a balanced fulfilment of needs – including a balance between basic needs, social needs and self-actualization needs. In other words, it's wrong to think of needs belonging to a hierarchy. Needs are like vitamins – we need a healthy and varied diet of them.

Where does that leave Maslow's hierarchy?

Despite all of my misgivings, I still use the expanded eight-level model to make sure I'm thinking openly about the needs that brands can respond to. Once you forget about the hierarchy and think about the multivitamin analogy, it's helpful to have some way of codifying the different types of vitamin:

aesthetic needs are really easy to overlook. So are transcendent needs. Sometimes we become so fixated on rational versus emotional needs that we miss social needs. And there are other motivational theories out there that can add a more nuanced set of needs to our vitamin box: plans, goals, mindsets, cognitive dissonance, effectance motivation, reactance, learned helplessness, identity, attribution, self-determination... These are all grist to the curious brand strategist's mill.

People who knew Abraham Maslow suggest that his psychology was more concerned with possibility than restraint. Personally, that's the lens through which I prefer to view his theory. Our goal shouldn't be to find a single model of human motivation to rule them all, but to challenge ourselves to think more expansively about all of our human foibles – and to build on that understanding to develop brands that have a deeper empathy for the human condition.