

The Powerful Persuasiveness of Introductions
Steve Martin



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Shortly after boarding a flight the other day, the captain came on the PA to welcome passengers on board and remind us to pay attention to the safety demonstration that the flight attendants would be taking us through. We've all heard these words a thousand times before. Like many others I probably wasn't paying that much attention to the words he used to persuade passengers to not only pay attention to the flight attendants, but to also keep their safety belts fastened at all times.

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But towards the end of his remarks, he added six words that I have never heard before and I immediately became convinced that many more passengers than usual would be persuaded to pay attention and keep their seat belts fastened even if the seat belt sign was turned off.

The words he added were "like we do in the cockpit."

These extra six words are not only a neat demonstration of how a pilot can influence his or her passengers but they also provide an example of how anyone in business – by understanding how people are influenced – can win more customers and clients.

For more than 65 years, social scientists have been studying the influence and persuasion process to determine what are the factors that cause people to say 'Yes' to the requests of others. My colleague Dr. Robert Cialdini, an Emeritus Professor of Psychology at Arizona State University, has shown that there are only six universal principles of persuasion.

One of these principles is Authority. Simply put, the persuasiveness of a message, proposal or recommendation can be enhanced if it is seen to come from a legitimate expert. In business settings, for example, people will often be more persuaded by proposals or offers that come from someone who, in their eyes, has both expertise and trustworthiness, compared to similar proposals that don't. So it's generally a good idea to present your business credentials, your staffs' training, and your business expertise to customers. But doing so can also present a problem.

How do you introduce your expertise and knowledge without being seen as a show-off?

Informing potential new customers that because of your greater knowledge and expertise, they should listen to and be persuaded by your proposal, will often result in them being turned-off rather than turned-on to you.

The answer, of course, is to have our expertise introduced by someone else. But what if such a person is unavailable? Or maybe you don't want to keep harassing current customers for introductions? Research from Stanford Business School suggests that a business can use its own co-workers equally effectively and, provided that they do so honestly and ethically, a notable increase in referrals and profit can be realised.

Take by way of an example a small study we conducted in a real estate office. Typically customers who telephoned in with enquiries about rentals or sales would speak first with a receptionist who asked them the nature of their enquiry and would then route the call through to the most appropriate colleague.

We made one small addition to this interaction. Now, before putting the caller through to their colleague, the receptionist not only tells callers the name of the colleague she is putting them through to, but also mentions her colleagues' credentials and expertise.

Customers interested in rental are told "Rental? I'll connect you with Sandra who has over 15 years experience renting properties in this area." Similarly, customers who want more information about selling their property are put through to Peter. "He is our head of sales and has 20 years of experience selling properties."

The impact of this expert introduction had an almost immediate effect. The agency registered a 20.1 percent rise in the number of face to face meetings and a 16 percent increase in the number of customers who appointed the agency to market their property.

There are several attractive features of this simple intervention. Firstly, everything the receptionist tells her customers is true, but for Sandra or Peter to tell the customers would be seen as boastful and self promoting. Second, and consistent with the Stanford Business School research, it doesn't seem to matter that the introduction comes from a colleague who will benefit from such an introduction, and thirdly, the intervention was both simple and costless to implement.

Proof perhaps that when it comes to influencing and persuading new customers, ensuring that we are introduced as experts could make for some big differences in our success.

Steve Martin is co-author (along with Dr. Noah Goldstein and Dr. Robert Cialdini) of the *New York Times* bestseller *Yes! 50 Scientifically Proven Ways to be Persuasive* (Free Press). Take the free Yes! Test to see how persuasive you are at www.influenceatwork.com.

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