Consumer Sciences Today

Institute of Consumer Sciences
incorporating home economics

Summer 2006
Volume 7 No 2 ISSN 1470-8159

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The Journal of the Institute of Consumer Sciences
incorporating home economics

In this exclusive and specially commissioned article for *Consumer Sciences Today* two global experts, **Steve Martin** and **Robert Cialdini** discuss the sometimes surprising results of almost five decades of scientific research into the field of human influence and persuasion.

The surprising science of influence and persuasion

Consumers today are often inundated and overwhelmed with choices and options about the products and services available to them. As a result the companies that manufacture, supply, market and sell these products and services are constantly looking for more and more innovative and effective ways to influence their consumers and persuade them that their products, services and offerings are the choice that they should make.

In our fast paced, ever changing world where information and knowledge is easily accessible, often instantly at the click of a button, what do consumers pay attention to when making their decisions? What are the factors that successfully influence and persuade consumers and what lessons can be learnt from the world of social science that will help us become more ethical and effective at influencing others?

Processing information

Wouldn't it be marvellous if people were like computers: able to absorb all of the relevant information they receive, rationally process it and arrive at informed decisions about what was the best product to purchase, what might be the most appropriate diet for their children, or what toothpaste was the most effective at keeping their teeth and gums healthy?

However, as many of us recognise, people are anything but computers. They are people. People who everyday of their lives are inundated with an ever increasing amount of information and data, much of it from businesses wanting to influence and persuade them to try their new product or service. It is currently estimated that the average UK consumer is exposed to up to 1700 advertising messages each and every day of their busy overloaded lives and that number is increasing.

One might expect that, faced with access to this sea of information, consumers make more rational and better informed decisions. But the surprising fact is that often they do not. Ironically there is simply too much information for consumers to deal with and therefore, in order to deal with this information overload, they use "decision shortcuts" or "rules of thumb" to help them to make choices.

This phenomenon affects businesses too. It is simply not enough just to have the best product or service anymore. It is the products and services that are presented in the most persuasive way that will often win the day. In the same way that consumers will often use "decision shortcuts" to make decisions, those of us looking to influence consumers can utilise these same decision shortcuts to make our communications more persuasive and influential. Understanding these shortcuts and using them in an effective and ethical way can provide tools to create more compelling messages, more effective persuasion attempts and can build mutually rewarding and long lasting relationships with consumers and customers. It doesn't stop there. Understanding these shortcuts will make us more individually persuasive too, with potential benefits in not just our professional life but our personal life too.

What often surprises people is that while there are many thousands of ways of influencing others, they generally fall into one of just six universal principles of social influence. In this article we review the six principles and offer some suggestions for how they can be incorporated into persuasion strategies.

Principles of social influence (table 1.0)

Reciprocity	People feel obligated to repay, in kind, what has been given to them
Scarcity	People typically overvalue things that are rare, dwindling in availability or difficult to acquire
Authority	People are more easily persuaded by individuals perceived to be legitimate authorities
Consistency	People feel strong pressure to be consistent within their own words and actions
Social Proof	People often look to the behaviour of similar others for direction about what choices to make
Liking	People prefer to say "yes" to those they like

■ Reciprocity

Imagine that one day while walking along the street, a volunteer from the National Blood Service approaches and asks if you would be willing to participate in a long-term blood donor initiative by donating a unit of blood every 60 days for the next three years. Thinking of the time this would require (and of the pile of work waiting for you on your desk) you tell the volunteer that, no, you don't think you can make such a commitment. The volunteer responds, "I understand. In that case, would you be willing to help us with a one-time donation sometime this week?" With some hesitation you say "okay," and agree to this more reasonable request.

Psychologists Cialdini and Ascani presented this very scenario in a scientifically controlled experiment, and what they found was quite interesting: those people who declined to participate in the long-term donor initiative (as nearly all did) subsequently agreed to the one-time donation substantially more often than people who were simply asked to offer a one-time donation straightaway. This study exemplifies our first principle of persuasion, the principle we call reciprocity. The principle of reciprocity states that people feel obligated to repay, in kind, what has been given to them. In this case, the volunteer granted the potential donor a concession - retreating from the larger request to the smaller request. In turn, donors felt obligated to repay the volunteer with a reciprocal concession, agreeing to the smaller one-time donation.

Reciprocity is a vital societal rule that plays an important part in our everyday lives. When someone does us a favour we should do one back - in fact society has nasty names for those that don't play by the rules. If someone remembers our birthday with a card the rule of reciprocity says we should remember theirs too. In the supermarket consumers are more likely to purchase a new type of biscuit if they have first been offered a "no obligation sample". As social psychologists we might argue that there is no such thing a "free sample".

To be more persuasive and influential we should provide personalised and unexpected gifts or favours to others. We say thank you to those that help us and we are more likely to say "yes" back to them.

■ Scarcity

The principle of scarcity suggests that people typically associate greater value with

things that are rare, dwindling in availability, or difficult to acquire. There are many examples that support this claim. In recent years many parents have gone to great lengths to purchase the most popular Christmas toy that happens to be out of stock in all the stores. In the UK, the petrol shortage in the summer of 2000 resulted in some extraordinary behaviour as people scrambled to acquire the fuel that was so limited in availability. Even as recently as October 2003 the notion of losing something caused many thousands of people to stop their cars and block a major motorway just to see the final take-off of the Concorde, a sight, we would point out, that had been a familiar one every single day for the last 30 or so years. So powerful is the concept of loss that householders in one research study were 350 per cent more likely to carry out energy efficient measures in their home when they were told how much money they would continue to lose if they didn't as opposed to how much money they would gain if they did.

■ Authority

Social psychological research indicates that people are more easily persuaded by individuals perceived to be legitimate authorities. Doctors, for example, are afforded substantial authoritative power in our society. Because we tend to view authorities as credible sources of information, they are particularly effective as agents of behaviour change. Using credible authorities to endorse products and services is often an effective route to persuade others which will explain why a toothpaste manufacturer might often be keen to ensure their toothpaste is recommended by, "more dentists than any other leading brand".

What might be surprising to some about this principle of influence is how we can convince others of our own credibility and expertise. Research shows that people view us as more credible and trustworthy if we point out weaknesses and drawbacks about ourselves before we present positive attributes, It sends a message that says, "I'm not hiding anything" - a technique that Stella Artois uses effectively when they inform consumers that they are, "reassuringly expensive".

■ Consistency

Our principles of social scientific research suggest that people feel strong pressure to be consistent within their own words and actions. Making a commitment ties a person's sense of self to a particular course of action.

Imagine that you are a restaurant owner with the problem of certain customers who reserve tables at your establishment then fail to arrive causing you inconvenience and a potentially considerable loss of income. Simply asking for a small commitment (such as requesting their telephone number) from them can help to minimise the "no show" rate. Social scientific research shows that people are more likely to behave consistently with commitments if they volunteer and own those commitments themselves. If you can arrange for effortful actions to also be incorporated then the commitments become stronger especially if they are published to others.

Negotiating initial voluntary commitments and making them effortful and action based as well as public is a powerful way to change and influence behaviours. In one study people spent significantly less time in the shower following a work out in their gym if they were first asked if they supported and signed up to a "use water responsibly" campaign.

■ Social proof

Suppose that this year you decide that you will take some more exercise and try to lose a few extra pounds. How do you choose the best way to achieve your goal? Do you join your local gym, take up cycling each morning to work, or perhaps take part in that new diet that you've heard your friends at work talk about? Most likely, you'll look outside yourself and to others around you for at least part of the answer. The principle of social proof says that when we are uncertain and we are attempting to make the right decisions about our health, we will often look to the behaviour of others around us for direction about what choices to make. This is compounded when those around us are similar to us in terms of age, education, social standing and experience.

Social psychologists refer to what people commonly do in a given situation as a descriptive norm. Descriptive norms typically provide people with useful information about which courses of action to take - if you find that a weekly yoga class is generally popular, the chances are that attending the yoga class would not be a bad choice. Looking to see what other people are doing is a quick and easy tool for making decisions in uncertain circumstances. Indeed, social proof has the greatest persuasive power when the 'right' choice in a given situation is somewhat ambiguous. For example, anxious people awaiting an anxiety-provoking medical procedure prefer to share a room with someone who has already undergone the procedure, because such a person can provide useful information about what to expect.

Highlighting proof of others' behaviours is often a powerful way to influence others' behaviour, prompting companies to point out that they are, "the most popular washing powder" or that, "eight out of ten owners say their cats prefer it".

■ Liking

Put simply, the principle of liking says that *people prefer to say "yes" to and comply with the requests of those they like.*

So what characteristics influence people's liking for others? Social scientists point towards three specific amplifiers of liking: similarity, praise and co-operation. We'll take them in turn.

Firstly, people tend to like others who are similar to them. For example, a nutrition specialist wishing to persuade people to change their dietary intake and habits might point out certain areas of similarity she shares with her audience (eg, like them, she was once not in the best physical shape; but, like them, she wanted a healthy, well-rounded lifestyle).

Secondly, people will tend to like those, and therefore be more persuaded by those, who pay them compliments and give them praise. There is strong evidence to suggest that people are extremely receptive to the requests of others immediately after they have received a compliment. In fact recent research points to the fact that people are more likely to respond positively to a request immediately after the requester has paid them a compliment.

Thirdly, we like people who co-operate with us towards mutual goals. Attempts to influence others that involve joint working or partnerships are often more successful than those that do not.

Conclusion

We have sought to provide not only interesting and scientifically validated evidence of how one can increase the likelihood of individuals complying with their recommendations but also some practical applications for the use of these principles. (See *table 2.0 on page 9*)

There are some additional points we would like to make regarding the use of the principles we have described. Firstly, although these principles are conceptually distinct, the communications are likely to be most effective at fostering influence and persuasion when using several of these principles at once. For example, consider how one might attract a new consumer. Perhaps one could first point out how a number of other consumers, who happen to be of a similar age and in similar circumstances, have enjoyed this specific product. One may then go on to compliment the

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In a specialist channel, familiarity is about the interaction between the shopper and the expert, for example the butcher. Convenience means how local the store is, and whether extra services are available, like the fishmonger filleting the fish. Value for money in this channel is defined by quality, trust and food safety as well as price. This highlights the different shopper needs that can affect store choice, and is behind the increased use of multiple stores to satisfy grocery needs. It seems that while the supermarkets have pursued the 'one size fits all' strategy, shoppers have felt an increased desire to personalise some aspects of their shopping experience.

The food shopping experience

It seems unlikely that multiple retailers will face strong challenges from other retail channels because, for shoppers, grocery shopping is a necessity of life defined by routine, and therefore the desire to make this process as quick and efficient as possible will always prevail. Shoppers are becoming more engaged with food, but do not always associate these positive feelings with the supermarket experience, and are therefore looking for this experience elsewhere. The desire for a mixture of experiences will continue to fragment shopping behaviour.

About IGD

IGD is the key research organisation for the sector. Our purpose is to provide thought leadership and supply chain best practice for the food and grocery industry. We work with consumers, companies and individuals throughout the food and grocery chain to ensure we are providing information, research and leading edge best practice to help companies grow their business and develop their people.

IGD provides impartial information for strategic decision makers; a forum for discussion and learning; a voice for the promotion and sharing of best practice; and a window into the industry promoting careers and opportunities for personal growth.

Our ongoing research investigates shopper behaviour and attitudes so that we understand their needs. Through a new online service The Shopper, IGD has pulled together existing and future consumer and shopper research information into a single annual subscription. More information about this and other services can be found at www.igd.com

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consumer and offer a free sample. By doing this, the persuader creates a powerful communication that, in this example, utilises three of the social influence principles we have presented namely social proof, liking and reciprocity.

Secondly, it should be clear that although people use these mental shortcuts when making decisions, this is not to say that people consciously use them. It is not the case, for example, that someone will say to himself, "Well, I've done this for so long now my sense of commitment dictates that I continue!" Nonetheless, whether or not the operation of the principles of persuasion is consciously recognised, the existing evidence indicates that they will be influential.

Thirdly, it is important to realise that the reason people use these shortcuts is because, on average and in most circumstances, they tend to appropriately steer people in the right direction. That is, it is not the case that people are being stupid or making mistakes when they use these mental heuristics to guide their choices. They are often merely overwhelmed with information and know subconsciously that these shortcuts have served them well in the past.

Fourthly, because information is sometimes highly relevant to their goals, people may consequently be motivated (although not always able) to deeply process the content of these messages. Indeed, the effectiveness of a message will depend upon a combination of the substance of the message and the way that message is delivered. Thus, the principles we have discussed are not an alternative to providing people with substantive information but more a vehicle for ensuring those important messages are communicated in an impactful and persuasive way that makes persuasion most likely.

The principles of social influence and their application in improving influence (table 2.0)

Principle	Definition	Application
Reciprocity	People feel obligated to repay, in kind, what has been given to them	Use concessions to engage in behaviour changes that are recommended. Give attention, compliments, advice and information first. Use gifts and not rewards as a motivator of future compliance
Scarcity	People typically overvalue things that are rare, dwindling in availability or difficult to acquire	Highlight what could be lost or potentially lost if an individual fails to take appropriate action or act on your advice
Authority	People are more easily persuaded by individuals perceived to be legitimate authorities	Make visible the credentials of those who deliver messages including displaying certificates, diplomas and training
Consistency	People feel strong pressure to be consistent within their own words and actions	Have people make active, public commitments, preferably in writing.
Social Proof	People often look to the behaviour of similar others for direction about what choices to make	Point out how other patients in similar circumstances have achieved favourable outcomes by following the advised course of action
Liking	People prefer to say "yes" to those they like	Point out areas of similarity and give genuine compliments to others. Demonstrate your desire to work with and co-operate others

About the authors

Professor Robert Cialdini is world renowned in the field of influence and persuasion. His classic text *Influence - Science and Practice* has sold over one million copies world wide. He is Regents Professor of Psychology at Arizona State University and has recently been awarded the prestigious 2006 Peitho prize for his major and consistent contributions to the world of social influence.

Steve Martin is a business colleague of Robert Cialdini and the director of Influence At Work (UK), an organisation that consults, provides training and conducts speaking engagements on the subject of influence, persuasion and compliance.

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