

# The Science and Practice of Persuasion

From business owners to busboys, the ability to harness the power of persuasion is often an essential component of success in the hospitality industry.

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Research reveals that there are six basic principles that govern how one person might influence another. Those principles can be labeled as: liking, reciprocity, consistency, scarcity, social validation, and authority.<sup>1</sup> In the pages that follow we elaborate on each of those six principles and highlight some of their applications in the hospitality industry—for instance, how a restaurant manager might reduce the reservation no-show rate by two-thirds; how to influence the size of the gratuity patrons leave for their servers; how to encourage customers to order additional food when they do not really want it; and how to get customers to comply with employees' reasonable requests.

Simply put, in general people are inclined to favor and to comply with those whom they like. A good illustration of this fundamental principle of influence in action is the Tupperware party, in which salespeople invite their friends and neighbors to their homes to pitch useful household plastic products. A study done by Frenzen and Davis confirmed what the Tupperware Corporation knew all along: guests' liking for their hostess was twice as important as was their opinion of the products in influencing their purchase decisions.<sup>2</sup>

In the case of the Tupperware party, the seller is not just a likeable person, but is probably a friend and respected community member as well. The power of the "liking" principle

<sup>1</sup> See also: Harsha E. Chacko, "Upward Influence: How Administrators Get Their Way," *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (August 1988), pp. 48–50.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan K. Frenzen and Harry L. Davis, "Purchasing Behavior in Embedded Markets," *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 17 (1990), pp. 1–12.

is so pervasive, however, that even perfect strangers can recognize whether there is any affinity between them within a relatively short time. Researchers have identified four primary determinants of our fondness for another person: physical attractiveness, similarity, cooperation, and the extent to which we feel the person likes us.

**Looking good.** Most of us acknowledge that those who are physically attractive have a social advantage held by few others, but evidence suggests that we have grossly underestimated the degree to which that is true. For example, good-looking candidates received more than two-and-a-half times as many votes as did unattractive candidates in the 1974 Canadian federal elections, despite the fact that most voters adamantly denied that attractiveness had any influence on their decisions.<sup>3</sup>

One possible explanation for such findings is that we tend to view attractive individuals as possessing numerous other positive qualities that would be considered relevant to our liking them—such as talent, kindness, honesty, and intelligence.<sup>4</sup> One practical (and unfortunate) result of the “attractiveness” principle is that less-attractive individuals who rely heavily on tips for income may have to work especially hard to gain customers’ affection, approval, and cash.<sup>5</sup>

The social and monetary rewards that beautiful people garner extend far beyond those benefits; they are also more successful at eliciting compliance with their requests. Reingen and Kernan found that an attractive fundraiser for the American Heart Association collected almost twice as many donations as did less-attractive individuals.<sup>6</sup> That finding suggests that train-

ing programs in the hospitality industry could increase the effectiveness of trainees by including, for instance, grooming tips.

**Simpatigo.** Similarity is another important factor that affects our liking for others. The effects of similarity—however superficial—can be quite astounding because of the instant bond that similarity can create between two people. Consider that in one study a fundraiser on a college campus more than doubled the contributions received by simply adding the phrase “I’m a stu-

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dent, too” to the request.<sup>7</sup> Just as salespeople are trained to find or even manufacture links between themselves and their prospective clients, individuals whose livelihoods depend on quick-forming rapport with their customers—such as food servers or valets—may enhance their earnings simply by pointing out a connection between themselves and their guests. “Hold the mayonnaise? Yeah, I don’t eat it very often myself,” and “Wow, you’re from Chicago? My wife is from just south of there. She sure doesn’t miss the winters” are examples of commonplace attempts to create such a bond.

Similarities need not be overtly called to the other individual’s attention to obtain the desired compliance. Researchers found that a person was significantly more likely to receive a requested dime from a stranger when the two were dressed similarly than when they were not.<sup>8</sup> Since the majority of workers in the restaurant and hospitality industry wear uniforms, this subtle form

<sup>3</sup> M.G. Efran and E.W.J. Patterson, “The Politics of Appearance,” unpublished paper, University of Toronto, 1976.

<sup>4</sup> For a review, see: Alice H. Eagly, Wendy Wood, and Shelly Chaiken, “Causal Inferences about Communicators and Their Effect on Opinion Change,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 36 (1978), pp. 424–435.

<sup>5</sup> For evidence of the pervasiveness of this discrepancy in the salaries of North Americans, see Daniel S. Hamermersh and Jeff E. Biddle, “Beauty and the Labor Market,” *The American Economic Review*, Vol. 84 (1994), pp. 1174–1194.

<sup>6</sup> Peter H. Reingen and Jerome B. Kernan, “Social Perception and Interpersonal Influence: Some Consequences of the Physical Attractiveness Stereotype in a Personal Selling Setting,” *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1993), pp. 25–38.

<sup>7</sup> Kelly R. Aune and Michael D. Basil, “A Relational Obligations Approach to the Foot-in-the-mouth Effect,” *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, Vol. 24, No. 6 (1994), pp. 546–556.

<sup>8</sup> Tim Emswiller, Kay Deaux, and Jerry E. Willits, “Similarity, Sex, and Requests for Small Favors,” *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, Vol. 1 (1971), pp. 284–291.

of persuasion may be rare. As a notable exception, however, many waiters and waitresses at one popular restaurant chain wear a myriad of buttons pertaining to their interests on their uniforms, at least some of which are likely to match the backgrounds and interests of their guests.

**Allies.** Cooperation has also been shown to engender feelings of liking, even between parties that previously exhibited mutual animosity. Muzafer Sherif and his colleagues found that pre-existing disdain between two groups of children at a camp was transformed into affection after they worked together to accomplish a necessary, mutual goal.<sup>9</sup> One would hope that food servers would start off on a better footing with their guests than the children in Sherif's study had with one another, so an air of cooperation should already exist. However, just as car salespeople "go to war" with their managers on behalf of their clients, some food servers benefit by making themselves seem particularly cooperative with their guests: "You want more chips and salsa, sir? Well, the manager normally asks us to charge extra for that, but I'll see whether I can get you some at no charge."

Our fondness for another person also depends on the extent to which we believe the other person likes *us*. Just ask Joe Girard, the world's greatest car salesman for 12 years in a row (according to the *Guinness Book of World Records*). One secret to his success may lie in a simple greeting card that he sent to all 13,000 of his former customers every single month. Although the holiday theme of each month's card differed, the text never varied. Other than his name, the only words written on the card were, "I like you."<sup>10</sup>

As a general rule we tend to like and to be more willing to comply with the requests of those who show they are partial to us.<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, one study revealed that a flatterer's laudatory comments engendered just as much liking for the

<sup>9</sup> Muzafer Sherif, O.J. Harvey, B.J. White, W.R. Hood, and C.W. Sherif, *Intergroup Conflict and Cooperation: The Robbers' Cave Experiment* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Institute of Intergroup Relations, 1961).

<sup>10</sup> Robert B. Cialdini, *Influence: Science and Practice*, fourth edition (Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> Ellen Berscheid and Elaine Hatfield Walster, *Interpersonal Attraction* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1978).

sweet-talker when the remarks were false as when they were correct.<sup>12</sup> Thus, praise is one way for food servers to show their fondness for their clientele—and thereby to increase their tips. Having pointed that out, however, servers would be wise to proceed with caution—or better yet, with honesty—because the "praise" tactic runs the risk of backfiring if guests perceive servers' comments to be a duplicitous attempt to manipulate them.

Researchers have established that there are a number of fairly basic strategies servers can use to increase the average gratuity they receive by at least 20 percent. Many of those strategies use the simplicity of the liking principle. Squatting, smiling, and occasional touching, for example, help to build a friendly rapport, while writing "thank you" and drawing a happy face on the bill are presumably signals to patrons that they are liked and that their waiter or waitress was especially happy to serve them.<sup>13</sup>

It is important to note that these techniques are not necessarily additive and that the appropriateness of each strategy varies depending on a number of factors, including the type of eating establishment, the disposition of each guest, and even the gender of the food server.<sup>14</sup> For example, waitresses who drew smiling faces on their customers' checks significantly increased average tip size by 18 percent.<sup>15</sup> No significant difference was found for their male counterparts, however. If anything, the smiley-face strategy actually backfired when used by waiters. Due to perceived violations of gender-based expectations, it appears that for males, drawing a smiling face on the check may very well draw out a frowning face from the guests.

<sup>12</sup> See: David Drachman, Andre deCarufel, and Chester A. Insko, "The Extra-credit Effect in Interpersonal Attraction," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 14 (1978), pp. 458–467; and Donn Byrne, Lois Rasche, and Kathryn Kelley, "When 'I Like You' Indicates Disagreement," *Journal of Research in Personality*, Vol. 8 (1974), pp. 207–217.

<sup>13</sup> For a review, see Michael Lynn, "Seven Ways to Increase Servers' Tips," *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No 3 (1996), pp. 24–29.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Bruce Rind and Prashant Bordia, "Effect of Restaurant Tipping of Male and Female Servers Drawing a Happy, Smiling Face on the Backs of Customers' Checks," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (1996), pp. 218–225.

## Reciprocation

A Chinese proverb states, “Favors from others should be remembered for a thousand years.” The maxim succinctly emphasizes the importance of the norm of reciprocity—that we are obligated to repay others for what we have received from them—in all human societies. The norm pushes us toward fairness and equity in our everyday social interactions, our business dealings, and our close relationships, while it helps us build trust with others. At the same time, however, it also leaves us susceptible to the manipulations of those who wish to exploit our tendencies to achieve inequitable personal gains.

An informative study of the reciprocity principle and its potential to be exploited was conducted by Dennis Regan in 1971.<sup>16</sup> In the experiment, individuals who received a small, unsolicited favor from a stranger (“Joe”) in the form of a can of Coca-Cola purchased twice as many raffle tickets from Joe as those who received no favor at all. This occurred even though the favor and the request took place one-half hour apart, and that Joe made neither implicit nor explicit reference to the original favor when he made his pitch about the raffle tickets. Interestingly, despite all that we have stated about the strong association between liking and compliance, Regan found that individuals who received a Coke from Joe made their purchase decisions completely irrespective of the extent to which they liked him. That is, those who didn’t like Joe purchased just as many raffle tickets as those who did like him if they were the recipients of the gift earlier on. Thus, we see that the feelings of indebtedness caused by the power of the reciprocity manipulation are capable of trumping the effects of the liking principle.

While we have so far established that the norm of reciprocity is powerful, the principle’s true power comes from its ability to create situations in which unequal exchanges take place. Regan found that on average, the Coke-bearing stranger had a 500-percent return on his investment, hardly an equal exchange at all!

<sup>16</sup> Dennis T. Regan, “Effects of a Favor and Liking on Compliance,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 7 (1971), pp. 627–639.

Corporations and fundraisers alike have been aware of the power of reciprocity for many years, and have attempted to use those principles with the public. The Disabled American Veterans organization, a charitable group that seeks donations via fundraising letters, for example, increased its average response rate from 18 percent to 35 percent simply by enclosing a small gift in the envelope.<sup>17</sup> The new addition—a set of personalized address labels—caused the recipients to feel an immediate sense of obligation to repay

**The positive results from using a variety of persuasion techniques are not necessarily additive.**

the organization, despite the fact that the gift was inexpensive to produce and the recipients never asked for it in the first place.

Individuals in the hospitality, travel, and tourism industries are also in an appropriate position to harness the power of the reciprocity principle. After all, tipping in the U.S. service industry is supposed to be based on a reciprocity-related *quid pro quo* system, in which it is tacitly acknowledged that the consumer will make a more generous payment in exchange for better-than-average service. Although the strength of the actual relationship between service and tipping has been challenged,<sup>18</sup> it is clear that food-service workers and others who rely heavily on tips stand to benefit substantially by providing better overall service; specifically, the server should make “additional” efforts that at least slightly exceed customer expectations. For example, Lynn and Gregor showed that a bellman nearly doubled his tip earnings by adding three simple and seemingly inconsequential steps to his standard duties: He showed the guests how to operate the television and thermostat, opened the drapes to

<sup>17</sup> Jill Smolowe, “Read This!!!!!!!,” *Time*, Vol. 136, No. 23 (November 26, 1990), pp. 62–70.

<sup>18</sup> See: Michael Lynn, “Restaurant Tipping and Service Quality: A Tenuous Relationship,” *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No 1 (February 2001), pp. 14–20.

expose the room's view, and offered to bring the guests ice from the machine down the hall.<sup>19</sup>

**Tip tips.** The above example illustrates the success of an individual who essentially made a low-risk investment that often paid big dividends. Food servers can take advantage of the reciprocity principle, too.<sup>20</sup> In one study it was shown that tips were higher when the servers allowed each guest to select a fancy piece of chocolate at the end of the meal than when no offer was made. Given that finding, we can see that the proprietor of the first dine-in Chinese restaurant to serve fortune cookies at the end of the meal made a clever and profitable decision. Unfortunately for the wait staff in Chinese restaurants today, patrons have come to see a fortune cookie at the end of a meal as part of the experience—that is, as more of a right than a privilege or extra treat.

A second study by the same researchers showed that allowing the guests to select two relatively inexpensive pieces of chocolate proved even more fruitful than when the server offered just one.<sup>21</sup> More revealing, the server who offered two pieces was most successful when she first offered each guest one piece of candy, gestured as if she was about to leave the table, and then let each guest choose one more piece of chocolate, as opposed to when she simply allowed the guests to choose both pieces at once. It seems likely that the guests in the “1+1” condition assumed that the waitress was making an extra effort beyond what was normally required of her by the managers, possibly because she liked these diners more than she did most of her guests. These findings suggest that hotel house-

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—Chinese proverb

keepers who leave mints on pillows may be the recipients of larger tips than those who do not, but that they may be even more successful by placing several extra mints on top of a personal thank you note the day before their guests check out.

Hotel managers might find the use of the reciprocity norm especially helpful when appealing to guests to reuse towels and linens in an effort to conserve energy and resources. Currently, most pleas take approaches that either educate the guests regarding the total amount of energy necessary to clean those items daily for a year, or invoke the guests' sense of social responsibility. Some hotels emphasize the benefit to themselves in their appeals; few guests, however, will be motivated to give up their clean sheets in exchange for a clean getaway by the hotel owner with the profits gained from such compliance. Perhaps in addition to one of the other two appeals mentioned, hotel managers may achieve a higher rate of participation by extending a reciprocation-based approach in the form of a promise to donate a portion of the money saved to an environmental-conservation organization or any other cause deemed worthy. For example,

the Windows of Hope Family Relief Fund, an organization that provides aid to the families of those in the food-service profession who were victims of the World Trade Center tragedy, successfully used this principle in an event dubbed Dine-Out, which took place on the day exactly one month after the attack. More than 4,000 restaurants throughout the world participated and agreed to donate at least 10 percent of that evening's

sales to the fund, which both raised millions of dollars for the charity and dramatically increased many of the participating restaurants' business for that night and potential beyond.

**Bargaining.** While the rule of reciprocity most often takes the form of gifts or favors, a specific application of the principle is frequently used in the negotiation process, which involves reciproc-

<sup>19</sup> Michael Lynn and Robert Gregor, “Tipping and Service: The Case of the Hotel Bellman,” *Hospitality Management*, Vol. 20 (2001), pp. 299–303.

<sup>20</sup> David B. Strohmetz, Bruce Rind, Reed Fisher, and Michael Lynn, “Sweetening the Till—The Use of Candy to Increase Restaurant Tipping,” *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (2002), pp. 300–309.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

cal concessions. That is, if Person A rebuffs a large request from Person B, and Person B then concedes by making a smaller request, Person A will feel obligated to reciprocate this concession with a concession of his or her own by agreeing to this lesser plea.

The first author and his colleagues conducted a study to examine this phenomenon in the mid-1970s.<sup>22</sup> Half of the students in the experiment were approached on a college campus walkway and asked if they would agree to chaperone juvenile-detention-center inmates on a day trip to the local zoo; relatively few (17 percent) responded in the affirmative. The other half of the students were asked a different question first; a plea was made for them to volunteer as a counselor for these inmates for two hours per week for the next two years. Not surprisingly, everyone who heard this appeal refused to participate. But when this same group was then asked if they would agree to chaperone the inmates at the one-time-only day trip to the zoo, the compliance rate for this smaller request was nearly triple that of the half who were never approached with the larger plea.

Some hotel managers make use of this approach when negotiating deals for conventions and banquets by holding back in their initial offer so that they can later appear to concede to the client a number of amenities not present in the original proposal. The assumption in this case is that the client will feel the need to reciprocate this concession by accepting the deal without making any more demands. Similarly, many managers start off the bargaining process with higher-than-desired price quotes in anticipation of having to shave off from the total charge during negotiations.

## Consistency

Prior to 1998, Gordon Sinclair, the owner of a prominent Chicago eatery, was too often the victim of a common occurrence in the restaurant business: the dreaded reservation no-show. On average, approximately 30 percent of all would-

be patrons who called for reservations failed to appear and never bothered to notify the restaurant with a statement of cancellation. One day, Sinclair thought of a way that might minimize the problem, so he asked his receptionists to make a few slight modifications in the reservation-taking procedure. Instead of ending their phone calls with "Please call if you have to change your plans," Sinclair instructed the receptionists to ask, "Will you please call if you have a change to your plans?" and then to pause for a moment to allow the caller to respond. Once the new strategy was implemented, the no-show-no-call rate dropped from 30 to 10 percent.

Sinclair's technique was successful because it took advantage of a fundamental human tendency to be and to appear consistent with one's actions, statements, and beliefs. This principle was illustrated in a study that found that residents who accepted and agreed to wear a small lapel pin supporting a local charity were significantly more likely to make donations to that charity during a fundraiser at a later date than those who had not been approached before the donation drive took place.<sup>23</sup> Those who had previously been induced to make public commitments to that charity felt compelled to act consistently with these commitments and to support it later on. Similarly, those who called for reservations and made a public commitment regarding their future actions felt obligated to be consistent with their statements and to live up to their pledges.

**Dessert first.** Some shrewd servers benefit from their keen understanding of this principle by drawing out commitments from their guests regarding potential dessert purchases when the patrons (and their stomachs) are at their most vulnerable. At one restaurant in particular, immediately following the introduction, some food servers enthusiastically ask, "Who here is getting cheesecake tonight?" After each person gives an affirmative response—an action that originates not from the brain, but the belly—the server then goes through the standard procedures. Once everyone at the table is feeling full and bloated after completing the main course, their server

The rule of "reciprocity" most often takes the form of gifts or favors, and that principle also is frequently used in business negotiations.

<sup>22</sup> Robert B. Cialdini, Joyce E. Vincent, Stephen K. Lewis, José Catalan, Diane Wheeler, and Betty Lee Darby, "Reciprocal Concessions Procedure for Inducing Compliance: The Door-in-the-face Technique," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 31 (1975), pp. 206–215.

<sup>23</sup> Patricia Pliner, Heather Hart, Joanne Kohl, and Dory Saari, "Compliance without Pressure—Some Further Data on the Foot-in-the-door Technique," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 10 (1974), pp. 17–22.

comes back, reminds the guests of their earlier commitments in a non-threatening, jovial manner, and begins to make dessert suggestions. In the end, despite initial urges to decline—tendencies that now originate from a full belly, the brain, and the wallet—many patrons still feel obligated to say yes.

### Scarcity

In the early 1970s Stephen West discovered that undergraduates' ratings of a University of Wisconsin campus cafeteria rose significantly within

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a nine-day span of time.<sup>24</sup> Surprisingly, the difference in opinion had nothing to do with a change in the quality of the eatery's food or service, but rather with its availability. Before the second set of ratings were assessed, students learned that due to a fire they would not be able to eat there for the next two weeks.

Whether it's an unavailable eating establishment, the last piece of apple pie, the only remaining convertible in a rental company's lot, the last lobster in the tank, the only hotel room with a balcony that's still vacant, or the final unclaimed blanket on an airplane, items and opportunities that are in short supply or unavailable tend to be more desirable to us than those that are plentiful and more accessible.<sup>25</sup> This often adaptive mental shortcut is one that naturally develops, since we learn early on in our lives that things existing in limited quantities are hard to get, and that things that are hard to get are typically better than those that are easy to get.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Stephen G. West, "Increasing the Attractiveness of College Cafeteria Food: A Reactance Theory Perspective," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 60 (1975), pp. 656–658.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Lynn, "Scarcity Effects on Value," *Psychology and Marketing*, Vol. 8 (1991), pp. 43–57.

<sup>26</sup> Michael Lynn, "Scarcity Effect on Value: Mediated by Assumed Expensiveness," *Journal of Economic Psychology*, Vol. 10 (1989), pp. 257–274.

**Act now!** Marketing strategists and compliance practitioners take advantage of the scarcity principle by emphasizing that their products are in limited supply, available for a limited time only, or are one-of-a-kind—often without regard to the veracity of those claims. Although assertions regarding availability status are in many cases spurious, businesses frequently employ scarcity-based marketing strategies legitimately in a genuine effort to make their offers more attractive. Lower rates for plane flights, hotel rooms, cruises, tours, and vacation packages are especially likely to be justifiably advertised as "limited time only" and "in limited supply" because such offers tend to be made for the small pockets of time when business would otherwise be slower.

Proprietors of nightclubs and restaurants can also make use of those principles by artificially limiting the availability of space. Nightclub owners, for example, commonly restrict the number of people allowed inside even though there is plenty of space for more, not due to concerns regarding maximum occupancy laws, but because the apparent inaccessibility of the clubs makes these establishments seem more desirable. Similarly, some restaurant managers limit the actual number of seats available to use the power of scarcity.

The domains in which the scarcity principle operates are not just limited to products and opportunities, but to information, as well. Research has shown that information that is exclusive is seen as more valuable and more persuasive. For instance, a former doctoral student of the first author showed that wholesale beef buyers more than doubled their orders when they were informed that a shortage of Australian beef was likely due to weather conditions overseas.<sup>27</sup> When those purchasers were told that the information came from an exclusive source at the Australian National Weather Service, however, they increased their orders by an astounding 600 percent. In this case the information regarding the upcoming shortages was true, but one can imagine the potential

<sup>27</sup> Amram Knishinsky, "The Effects of Scarcity of Material and Exclusivity of Information on Industrial Buyer-perceived Risk in Provoking a Purchase Decision," Ph.D. dissertation, Arizona State University, 1982.

for abuse of this principle, given its dramatic effectiveness. Thus, we should question any situation in which an individual claims that he or she is supplying us—and only us—with a certain piece of information.

Up to this point we have explained the scarcity principle in terms of the mental shortcut it provides between something's availability and its quality. There is another factor at work here as well, and it is related to the idea that as opportunities become less available, we lose freedoms. According to Jack Brehm's well-supported theory of psychological reactance, whenever our freedoms are threatened or restricted, we vigorously attempt to reassert our free choice, with a specific focus on retaining or regaining exactly what was being limited in the first place.<sup>28</sup>

A study conducted by Reich and Robertson suggests that a sign posted next to the hotel pool that reads, "Don't You *Dare* Litter" or even just "Don't Litter" is likely to backfire, especially with regard to young, unsupervised children. Instead, a less-strongly phrased message that emphasizes the social norm, such as "Keeping the Pool Clean Depends on *You*," stands the greatest chance of success.<sup>29</sup> Similar results were found in another study that showed that high-threat anti-graffiti placards placed in restroom stalls were defaced to a greater extent than were the low-threat placards.<sup>30</sup> Thus, some proprietors of bars—whose restrooms are particularly susceptible to such vandalism—stand to benefit by replacing messages that may be perceived as hostile or threatening with more moderate pleas.

## Social Validation

Earlier we described how some nightclub owners make their businesses appear more desirable by restricting the number of individuals allowed in at any one time. The secret of the success of this policy lies not only in its manipulation of

scarcity, but also in its use of the principle of social validation, which asserts that we frequently look to others for cues on how to think, feel, and behave, particularly when we are in a state of uncertainty.

Before returning to the example of a nightclub, an examination of a study done by Peter Reingen should prove informative.<sup>31</sup> In the experiment, a group of researchers posing as fundraisers went door-to-door to solicit donations for a local charity. As part of their request, the purported fundraisers showed homeowners a list of neighbors who had already agreed to donate to that particular cause. The experiment revealed that the likelihood of donation was positively correlated with the length of the list of names.

Just as many of those in the Reingen study decided how they would act based on the number of people they thought were engaging in the same behavior, individuals selecting where they would like to spend their time and money for an evening often use the number of others participating in a particular activity to gauge the popularity—and thus, the worthiness—of that activity. Since club operators limit the rate at which the inbound traffic moves, a figurative gridlock occurs, producing long lines of people waiting for their turn to move forward and into the club. As a result, passersby view the large crowd of individuals waiting to get in as evidence of the club's value. In this case, quantity is believed to be a true indicator of quality: If that many people are willing to endure the wait to get in, it must really be worth it.

In like manner, bartenders and live entertainers sometimes seed their tip jars with a number of bills in an attempt to manipulate patrons' perceptions of the tipping norm. Consider the difference in the messages conveyed by a jar filled three-fourths of the way to the top with one- and five-dollar bills, versus a jar completely devoid of anything, except a nickel and seven pennies, a ticket stub from the movie *Ishtar*, and an East German Deutschmark. The former indicates that tipping—specifically, with bills—is the norm and

<sup>28</sup> Jack W. Brehm, *A Theory of Psychological Reactance* (New York: Academic Press, 1966).

<sup>29</sup> John W. Reich and Jerie L. Robertson, "Reactance and Norm Appeal in Anti-littering Messages," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (1979), pp. 91–101.

<sup>30</sup> James W. Pennebaker and Deborah Y. Sanders, "American Graffiti: Effects of Authority and Reactance Arousal," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (1976), pp. 264–267.

<sup>31</sup> Peter H. Reingen, "Test of a List Procedure for Inducing Compliance with a Request to Donate Money," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 67 (1982), pp. 110–118.



creates a pressure for others to be consistent with this rule, while the latter suggests that tipping hasn't been the norm since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

**The principle of “social validation” asserts that people frequently look to others for cues on how to think, feel, and behave.**

Most companies have long understood the ability of social validation to sway our opinions and our wallets in their direction, which is why marketers spend much of their time thinking of ways to spin their products as the leading, the largest-selling, or the most popular ones out there. A common strategy is to make nebulous, lawsuit-proof claims to convey the product's popularity among the public such as, “We're the number-one cruise line in North America,” even if not true by any reasonable statistical standard. Still others attempt to quantify their success, such as the McDonald's Corporation, which claims “Billions and Billions Served.”

The outcomes of social validation at work are often the result of deliberate planning by businesses to harness this principle's power, but sometimes the effects of the principle fortuitously appear in unplanned and unintended domains. For example, some restaurants that are located inside malls (and airports) give pagers to their patrons and encourage them to walk around while they wait for a table to become available. Since the pagers are in most cases too large to place in one's pocket, the guests usually hold them in their hands as they stroll around the complex. Although clearly not intended to work in such a fashion, the beepers—which are being carried around by a multitude of individuals—act as a signal to others that the restaurant is a popular and worthwhile place to eat a meal. This suggests that if a mall contains more than one eating establishment with this policy, then each restaurant would make the greatest use of the principle of social validation if its pagers were both large and distinctive enough in colors, patterns, or design so that a potential customer could easily identify the restaurant to which it belonged.

Supplying individuals with specific *descriptive norms*—essentially, information about what other people are doing<sup>32</sup>—to elicit comparable behavior has proven to be successful in a number of different domains, including neighborhood household recycling.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, another way that hotel managers may attain greater results with their pleas for resource conservation is to inform their guests that a large number of people have already participated in the program since its inception.

### Authority

On the bitterly cold afternoon of January 13, 1982, Air Florida Flight 90 sat on the tarmac of National Airport in Washington, D.C. Following a series of delays, the plane was finally cleared to take off. As the captain and the first officer were completing their last round of pre-flight checks, the following exchange took place regarding one of the systems:

First officer: *God, look at that thing. That don't seem right, does it? Uh, that's not right.*

Captain: *Yes it is, there's eighty.*

First officer: *Naw, I don't think that's right. Ah, maybe it is.*<sup>34</sup>

Shortly after this conversation transpired, the plane took off. Less than one minute later, Flight 90 crashed into the icy waters of the Potomac River.

This tragedy is an example of a troubling and all-too-pervasive problem in aviation that officials in the airline industry have referred to as “Captainitis.”<sup>35</sup> This occurs when crew members

<sup>32</sup> Robert B. Cialdini, Raymond R. Reno, and Carl A. Kallgren, “A Focus Theory of Normative Conduct: A Theoretical Refinement and Reevaluation of the Role of Norms in Human Behavior,” *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 21 (1990), pp. 201–234.

<sup>33</sup> P. Wesley Schultz, “Changing Behavior with Normative Feedback Interventions: A Field Experiment on Curbside Recycling,” *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (1999), pp. 25–36.

<sup>34</sup> [www.avweb.com/articles/bogusepr/cvr.html](http://www.avweb.com/articles/bogusepr/cvr.html) (as viewed on May 9, 2002).

<sup>35</sup> Clayton M. Foushee, “Dyads at 35,000 Feet: Factors Affecting Group Processes and Aircraft Performance,” *American Psychologist*, Vol. 39 (1984), pp. 885–893.

fail to correct an obvious error made by the plane's captain, resulting in a crash. In this case—and many others like it—the copilot made the calamitous decision to defer to the captain's authority. This is a clear example of the power of the principle of authority; that is, we tend to defer to the counsel of authority figures and experts to help us decide how to behave, especially when we are feeling ambivalent about a decision or when we are in an ambiguous situation. Experts also have a hand in helping us decide what we should think. For example, one study found that when an acknowledged expert's opinion on an issue was aired just once on national television, public opinion shifted in the direction of the expert's view by as much as 4 percent.<sup>36</sup>

Although we have seen how the principle of authority has the potential to steer us wrong, more often than not experts provide reliable information that we use as shortcuts to make good decisions. In an increasingly complex world, deferring to individuals with highly specialized knowledge in their fields is often an essential part of smart decision making.

Some research shows that we are more swayed by experts who seem impartial than those who have something to gain by convincing us.<sup>37</sup> For instance, we tend to believe a laminated copy of a restaurant review from a local newspaper posted in that particular restaurant's front window or entryway because we have reason to believe that food critics have no vested interest in the outcome. Our confidence in a particular expert wanes, however, when we believe that he or she is biased in some way. Although many people see a "Chef's Choice" label next to an entrée listed on the menu as more appetizing because it is coming from a credible authority on the restaurant's food—the one who cooks it—a number of others would be less convinced. After all, a label like this might be subject to the biases and motivations of the restaurant managers, who could be trying to boost the sales of a less-

popular choice or increase net earnings by choosing dishes with high profit margins.

**Food experts.** Some crafty servers are careful to keep these principles in mind when taking their guests' orders. Their general approach is as follows: A guest asks about or orders a particular dish from the menu, to which the food server replies, as if it were a secret, "I'm afraid that is not as good [or fresh] tonight as it normally is. May I recommend instead [the names of two slightly less-expensive dishes]?" Notice that the food server accomplishes two important objectives. First, the server establishes him- or herself as an authority regarding the quality of the restaurant's food. Second, by suggesting two less-expensive entrées, the server seems to be making recommendations against the restaurant's and his or her own interests, since it could theoretically lead to a smaller bill and, subsequently, to a smaller tip. The server knows that, in actuality, the tip will probably be larger because the guests will like the server more and want to reciprocate the favor by leaving a generous gratuity. In addition, because the server now appears to be a trustworthy authority on the restaurant's food, the guests are more likely to take any other advice offered throughout the course of the meal, such as suggestions to order expensive desserts and wine that they would not have ordered otherwise.

Car-rental agencies may use a derivative of this approach, even inadvertently, when their employees offer customers extra insurance options. In many cases a customer won't be completely aware of his or her own insurance policy's car-rental coverage, so the rental agent makes some recommendations. The staff member, who is seen as the authority on car-rental insurance, says something like, "Well, you are going to have the car for only two days, so you'd probably be wasting your money with personal-accident insurance, the personal-effects coverage, or the supplemental liability insurance. However, I would recommend that you get the partial damage waiver, which is what most people go for." (Notice the additional use of social validation.)

Knowledge of the power of the tactic used in the above two examples goes back many centuries. François Duc de La Rochefoucauld, a seventeenth-century French writer and moralist, wrote, "We only confess our little faults to per-

<sup>36</sup> Benjamin Page, Robert Y. Shapiro, and Glenn R. Dempsey, "What Moves Public Opinion?," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 81 (1987), pp. 23–43.

<sup>37</sup> Alice H. Eagly, Wendy Wood, and Shelly Chaiken, "Causal Inferences about Communicators and Their Effect on Opinion Change," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 36 (1978), pp. 424–435.

suaude people that we have no big ones.” Many companies today have implemented such a strategy in marketing. By mentioning a shortcoming of their product, they hope to appear more honest and trustworthy to their potential customers, meaning that prospective consumers will assume that the product is likely to be of high quality in all other respects. For instance, one well-known company slogan is “Avis: We’re number two, but we try harder.”

We have thus far examined the role of impartiality and trust in how we perceive experts and the advice they dispense. In all of the examples above, those serving their customers could be considered—at least to some degree—legitimate authorities. To what extent can people be led astray by someone who is no more an authority than they are? A study sought to answer this question by examining the connection between perceived authority and the way an individual is dressed.<sup>38</sup> The researchers had a 31-year-old man illegally cross the street on a number of different occasions, while they surreptitiously observed the number of pedestrians who followed him across each time. Three times more people followed the jaywalking man into traffic and across the street when he wore formal business attire than when he was dressed in a more casual work outfit.

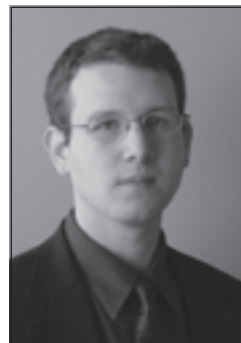
<sup>38</sup> Monroe M. Lefkowitz, Robert R. Blake, and Jane S. Mouton, “Status Factors in Pedestrian Violation of Traffic Signals,” *Journal of Abnormal Social Psychology*, Vol. 51 (1955), pp. 704–706.

Clearly, there are dangers of various kinds inherent in allowing non-authority figures to make decisions for us—some of which could be potentially hazardous.

### Some Final Considerations

It is important to emphasize that although we discussed each of the six tendencies separately for the sake of clarity, these principles often work in conjunction with one another to produce a more potent persuasive effect. For example, we mentioned earlier how some sly waiters and waitresses use their authority to gain larger tips by preventing their patrons from making an ostensibly poor entrée choice. Since most customers would view this action as a favor done for them by an amicable individual, the servers also commission the power of the liking and reciprocation principles.

**Be honest.** We also feel that it is imperative to stress that knowledge of the fundamental principles of social influence does not carry with it the right to use this information unscrupulously. In trying to persuade others, one can ethically point to genuine expertise, accurate social validation, real similarities, truly useful favors, legitimate scarcity, and existing commitments. Those who do attempt to dupe or to trap others into compliance are setting themselves up for a double-barreled whammy—by breaking the code of ethics and by risking getting caught—that can produce the disagreeable consequences of diminished self-concept and diminished future profit. ■



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