Q&A, Relationships, Travel

Marketing Influence: Q&A with Robert Cialdini

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Psychology professor, business consultant and best-selling author Robert Cialdini is the world's leading expert on influence. He explained to us how marketers can apply his signature "six principles of persuasion" to branded content, hotel greening initiatives and efforts to engage the consumer in transit.

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Before we get started, let's review the six principles:

- **Liking** We want to do business with people we feel we can relate to. But watch out for those phony compliments.

- **Authority** 'Who's the boss?' Demonstrating impressive credentials, experience and knowledge makes others more likely to listen to what we have to say.

- **Scarcity** We all want what we can't have, which explains the effectiveness of limited-time offers and collector's editions.

- **Consistency/Commitment** Charities use the "foot in the door" technique when they have us sign a petition, then follow up with a donation request. Shady car dealers use it to jack up the price at the last minute.

- **Reciprocity** We all like to return favours. Think free samples, cause marketing, and customer service that goes beyond the call of duty.

- **Social proof** 'Everyone else is doing it.' Testimonials and "best seller" labels can add value to products, while providing customers with useful information. But padding the tip jar or collection plate with $20 bills just isn't cool.

And now for our Q&A with Dr. Cialdini:

At Sparksheet we're fascinated by the concept of the transumer—the consumer in transit. The idea is that we behave differently and have different expectations and leisure and spending habits when travelling. How does the travel mind frame and environment affect our ability to be influenced?

Travellers often find themselves in unfamiliar circumstances—on a plane, in a hotel, in a city they don't know very well. When people are uncertain they are influenced by two principles, or sources of information. The first is what we call authority. 'Who are the experts in this situation? Who are the people who are most informed about this particular product or service or circumstance?' If marketers can present content that describes what experts have to say about a place or situation, people will be especially inclined to listen.

The other source of information people look to in a travel environment is their peers. We call this principle "social proof." 'What are people just like me doing in this situation?' I read that if a restaurant owner lists its most popular item on the menu, that item immediately becomes 20 percent more popular. If you want to engage the transumer, let them know what everyone else in the plane or hotel is up to. That reduces the uncertainty they may feel and moves them in a particular direction.

How would you apply the six principles to the online social media landscape? Do the same social rules apply when people aren't interacting face to face, or when identity is in question?

People interacting in the social media are still responding to the same principles that have been instilled in them from childhood. We like those individuals who are most like us, who have common experiences and background and traits. There was an interesting study done in which people were asked to negotiate a fictional budget via e-mail.

In 30 percent of instances people walked away from the project without reaching any agreement. But when the negotiators were asked to send each other a short bio detailing their background, college majors, where they grew up, whether they had any kids and that sort of thing, the number of stymied negotiations dropped from 30 percent to 6 percent.

Sharing that kind of information causes people to personalize and like each other as if they were face to face. In this context, the social media environment can be just as influential as the 'real world'.

What are some examples of brands bungling their attempts at influence, thereby turning off potential customers or partners?

We've done some research recently in hotels. In most hotels I stay at, I'm asked to reuse my towels and linens via some card that's placed in the bathroom. Well, here's the question that I asked myself: 'What should they say on the card? What should they say that will convince me to help that hotel save money on water and detergent and personnel?' And so we experimented with what that little sign said. Most hotels say, 'Do this for the environment, do this to save the planet.' We looked to see what percentage of people on any one night would hang up their towels for reuse. It was 38 percent, on average.

Now, some hotels tried something different. In keeping with what's called social cause marketing, they said, 'If you reuse your towels and linens, at the end of the year we will donate a percentage of our savings to an environmental organization.' The idea was to give something and expect something in return for it—we call this the principle of reciprocation. What we found was only 36 percent of guests hung up their towels. There was actually a reduction!

Why? Because they got the sequence of reciprocation backwards. They said, 'If you will do this for us, then we will do something for you.' That's wrong. They have to go first. So we made a third sign that said, 'We've already donated in the name of our guests to some environmental cause. Will you join us and help us cover the costs of that donation by reusing your towels?' Now we got 48 percent of the hotel guests to do it.

**How do you distinguish influence from manipulation?**

Influence involves change, the ability to move people in a desired direction. The difference between influence and manipulation is that we move them in our direction by giving them honest and accurate information. Putting your most popular item on a menu isn't in any way manipulative so long as it's the truth. If we educate people, and don't coerce or deceive them, we earn their trust. Ethical influence allows us to be successful in the short term, and to protect our long-term interests as people continue to come back and do business with us.
There are two principles at work there. First, you're establishing a rapport, which leads to liking. We want to do business with people or brands that we like and have forged a bond with over the years. But content also builds on the principle of authority. You've demonstrated your expertise in this field, and so customers will rely on you in the future. They don't have to constantly worry about your competence because you've already demonstrated your knowledge, your creativity and your credibility. They can trust you.

Check out http://influenceatwork.com for more on the Cialdini Method.

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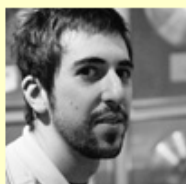
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