

Changing Minds and Changing Towels

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If you've stayed at a hotel anytime in the last several years, you've probably seen those little cards in your room asking you to reuse your towels to help save the environment. A survey of these persuasive messages communicated by scores of request cards from hotels around the globe reveals that these cards most commonly try to encourage towel recycling by focusing guests on the importance of the program to environmental protection. As it turns out, this persuasion strategy generally seems to be an effective one: It turns out that the majority of hotel guests who have the opportunity to participate in these programs do reuse their towels at least once during their stay.

Considering the success of these programs, my colleagues (Robert Cialdini of Arizona State University and Vladas Griskevicius of University of Minnesota) and I wondered why not a single sign that we encountered actually informed guests that the majority of their peers were participating in these types of programs. We thought an appeal of this nature, one that simply communicated the true social norm, might boost the likelihood of towel reuse even higher. So we decided to conduct some experiments at a local hotel, two of which are reported in the upcoming October issue of *Journal of Consumer Research*, and three of which are reported in my new book [Yes!: 50 Scientifically Proven Ways to Be Persuasive](#). (No blog is complete without a shameless plug for the author's new book. Next I'll be hawking our bobbleheads, T-shirts, decorative spoon rests, and cologne.)

We found that by simply changing a few words on the standard sign, guests who learned that the majority of their fellow guests had reused their towels (the social norms appeal) were 26% more likely than those who saw the basic environmental protection message to recycle their towels. Not a bad improvement for a message that, to our knowledge, has never been used in those signs.

So, does this mean that we're just sheep? Not necessarily. But we're definitely more likely to follow the herd when we're uncertain about how to behave. And it turns out that we're also more likely to follow the herd to the extent that we perceive the herd as sharing our circumstances. Consistent with this notion, we conducted another experiment in which we included a towel reuse sign communicating the social norm of guests who had specifically stayed in the same room as the guest. It turns out that despite the meaninglessness of the connection, this wording produced a 33% increase in towel-reuse participation compared to the standard environmental appeal.

Is the behavior exhibited by the participants who saw the same-room sign logical? I can think of two reasons why it's not. For one, you shouldn't exactly view the previous occupants of your hotel room in an especially positive light. After all, these are the same people who have, by simple virtue of previously staying in that room, played a bigger role in diminishing the quality of your room and its amenities than any other guests in the hotel, engaging in activities that range from the mundane to the...well...who-knows-what (e.g. pillow fights). Second, there's simply no rational reason to believe that the behaviors of those previously occupying your hotel room are any more appropriate or valid than, say, the behaviors of those previously occupying the room next door. Yet, as psychologists are often keen to point out, people don't always behave rationally.

Despite the fact that it might not be particularly rational to give more credence to the norms of one's own hotel room, it is generally rational for us to follow the behavioral norms associated with the particular environment, situation, or circumstances that most closely match our own environment, situation, or circumstances. For example, when you're at a public library, do you follow the norms of other library goers, quietly browsing through the nonfiction section and occasionally whispering to your friends, or do you follow the norms of the patrons at your favorite pub, crushing books against your forehead on a dare and playing games where you take a drink from your flask every time you read a word with the letter 'e'? If you want to avoid a lifetime ban from the premises, you'd clearly choose the former alternative rather than the latter.

Although using the power of similar others in persuasive communications seems obvious, countless organizations fail to take advantage of this influential factor. Besides simply remembering to convey how many people support your ideas, initiatives, or products, my co-authors and I advocate one particularly effective strategy: Invite both current and prospective clients who share something in common (e.g. industry, size of company, etc.) to a luncheon or educational seminar. Be sure to arrange the seating charts so that they can easily commingle. In this setting, they're likely to naturally strike up conversations regarding the advantages of working you're your organization.

Also, as our hotel experiments suggest, remember that when pitching an idea, proposal, or a product to your audience, the more similar the person giving the testimonial is to your audience,

the more persuasive the message becomes. This means that in deciding which testimonials to show to a prospect, you need to take your ego out of the process. You should not make the common mistake of beginning with the testimonial you're most proud of, but with the one whose circumstances are most comparable to your audience's. For instance, if you were selling software to the owner of a string of local beauty salons, he or she would be more influenced by information about how pleased other salon owners are with your software than the big shots at General Motors. After all, he or she would be likely to think, "If others in my situation have gotten good results with this product, then it should be right for me, too." And if you're really lucky, you could truthfully inform them that the five previous prospects who sat in this very conference room agreed to sign a contract with your company...

For those interested in hearing more about the science of persuasion, here's a link to an NPR interview with my co-author Robert Cialdini, President of [INFLUENCE AT WORK](#) and Regents' Professor of Psychology and Marketing at Arizona State University:

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=93872977>