



25 Years of Infomercials -- But Wait...There's More!

by [Edward Spurlock](#)

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Most readers of Daily Kos know that June 28 is the anniversary of an act that led to a great struggle, a struggle whose effects are still being felt today. Oh, and Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated on June 28, 1914.

But June 28 is notable for more than the start of the Stonewall Riots. World War I was bracketed by events on June 28 -- the Archduke's assassination in 1914, and the signing of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. Three years later, the Irish Civil War began. The Aum Shinrikyo cult released sarin gas in the Tokyo subway on June 28, 1994. And in 1997, Mike Tyson was disqualified and lost his match against Evander Holyfield II after biting a piece out of Holyfield's ear.

But Wait...There's More! (after the fold)

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Of course, June 28 is notable for less-violent events as well. Labor Day was made a federal holiday on that day in 1894, and Elián González was returned to Cuba on June 28, 2000 - an act which undoubtedly helped tighten the presidential race and led to the Florida recount and indeed the entire George W. Bush presidency.

A number of people of interest to the progressive community were born on June 28, including Hans Blix (of the Iraq WMD commission), Michigan senator Carl Levin, and Muhammad Yunus (who won the Nobel Peace Prize for his pioneering work in microcredit). Historical deaths occurring on June 28 (besides Archduke Ferdinand and his wife) include Theodora, empress of the Byzantine Empire, Rod Serling ("For your consideration..."), philosopher Mortimer Adler, and LGBT activist Brenda Howard (a.k.a. "The Mother of Pride").

And June 28 will be remembered as the day TV pitchman Billy Mays died. But Mays' death is not the only reason June 28 is important in the world of cheesy late-night product pitches. It was on June 28th in 1984 that Ronald Reagan's FCC chairman Mark S. Fowler:

officially repealed the rule that prevented broadcasters from scheduling more than sixteen minutes of commercials in an hour.

This last is from [*But Wait...There's More!: Tighten Your Abs, Make Millions, and Learn How the \\$100 Billion Infomercial Industry Sold Us Everything But the Kitchen Sink*](#), a new book by journalist Remy Stern.

But Wait...There's More! takes the reader on a journey through the story of infomercials and shopping networks, starting with its roots on the Atlantic City boardwalk where Billy Mays and Ed McMahon honed their pitchmen chops, and continuing through the early days of cable TV infomercials, when \$50.00 would buy an entire half-hour late at night on the Discovery Channel. The book continues through the modern era, and concludes with a visit to the industry convention and awards show in Las Vegas. It's a tale of Pocket Fishermen and Ginsu Knives, Girls Gone Wild and Personal Power. Along the way, Stern introduces the reader to a colorful cast of characters, including Ron Popeil, Bill Guthy and Greg Renker, A.J. Khubani, and Anthony "Sully" Sullivan.

I picked up *But Wait...There's More!* on the strength of the cover blurb by Robert Cialdini. Cialdini is the author of the 1986 classic [*Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*](#), which defined six broad classes of "Weapons of Influence," including reciprocity, consistency, social proof, liking, authority, and scarcity. The cover blurb is itself an illustration of reciprocity, because Cialdini's book is well known in the infomercial industry and Cialdini has spoken at a number of their events, according to Stern.

But Wait...There's More! is a great follow-up for anyone interested in the principles of *Influence*. Cialdini's six "Weapons of Influence" (WOIs?) are illustrated throughout Stern's book:

Scarcity: Pitchmen have been using scarcity to drive up demand for their products ever since the days on the boardwalk, and it continues to be a staple on TV pitches. "Supplies are limited!" "A limited time offer!" Stern illustrates this principle with a personal anecdote:

I remember once calling the 800 number on the screen and asking the operator what the price would be if I waited another fifteen minutes. "Oh, please," she said. "The price is always the same."

Social proof: This is another tactic that goes back to open-air sidewalk pitches. Stern notes that when Ron Popeil would reach the end of his pitch and begin selling, he would refrain from selling to the last eager customers and instead launch into a new pitch, thus seeding his audience and gaining the attention of new listeners. TV infomercials commonly demonstrate social proof using onscreen counters showing the number of sales made.

Infomercial screenwriter Colleen Szot originated the phrase "If the lines are busy, please call back" as another form of social proof. Although Stern doesn't mention it, PBS uses this form of social proof in its pledge drives. Clearly, if the lines are ringing off the hook, it's plain that the cubic zirconium ring or the \$120 Supporting Member pledge is popular, and this leads viewers to want to climb on to the bandwagon.

Stern provides one anecdote showing a social proof tactic in action at a small-time shopping network:

I stepped into the control room, where I found a young man was sitting behind the controls, operating the Chyron machine, the device responsible for displaying the graphics you see on the

air. Every few seconds, he punched in a number, which was displayed in the corner of the screen under the header that read "Items sold." He was steadily adjusting the number upward in batches of twos and threes: 278, 282, 284, 288, 291.

"How do you know what number to change it to?" I asked naively as he pecked away. He laughed. "It doesn't really matter what I type on the the screen. Just as long as it goes up."

Reciprocation: Reciprocation -- the idea that we're more likely to be persuaded or sold to by someone who has given us something first -- is another tactic used by pitchmen. "Call now, and we'll DOUBLE the offer!" According to Stern, Ron Popeil used this principle when selling the Ronco Dehydrator:

He suggested that he would only offer the Dehydrator at such a reasonable price point to people who promised to "tell a friend" about the "incredible offer" -- a classic tactic designed to make the audience feel indebted to him for his act of generosity...

Authority: We're probably all familiar with C. Everett Koop (one-time Surgeon General of the U.S.) and his commercials for Life-Alert. Stern doesn't mention Koop, but he does mention Dateline's infamous [Moisturool](#) investigation, which showed how easy setting up an infomercial for a dubious product could be, including an endorsement from a real M.D.

Stern goes into detail about the Trump Institute, a "make money in real estate" seminar program that featured Donald Trump in the commercials designed to get suckers attendees for the company's sales seminar. Stern made an appointment to attend one of the seminars:

The Web site had made it clear that The Donald himself was not going to be attending the seminar in person. Not everyone in the audience seemed to know that, though...

Consistency: The consistency principle is the idea that we tend to act in ways that are consistent with the kind of people we imagine ourselves to be. Stern notes that exercise equipment is sold early in the year, when viewers are thinking about their New Year's resolutions.

According to Stern, the "make money in real estate" infomercial sellers use consistency in their hard sells. For example, at the end of the aforementioned Trump Institute seminar,

...Before I got to the door, though, I was approached by a sales rep who asked me if she could talk to me for a moment..."Don't you want to have money? Don't you want women to be attracted to you?" she asked as I felt my face flush with embarrassment.

Liking: That people are more likely to find a friendly seller more persuasive than an unlikable one is an obvious observation. However, this obvious principle begins to look a little creepy in the context of infomercials and shopping networks.

When a caller tells HSN's Diana Perkovic just how much she adores her presentations, Perkovic thanks her for calling in and asks, "Will you call me again soon?" It's a clever gesture. For a moment, you might have thought that Perkovic actually cares about Gladys from Fresno.

Proof of concept?

Appropriately enough, *But Wait...There's More!* goes beyond illustrating Cialdini's six

principles. As an "added bonus," Stern's book includes proof of the validity of the persuasive principles (Cialdini's and others) used in infomercials. How? Stern demonstrates that infomercials and shopping networks provide marketers with instant feedback. As Barry Diller (former chairman of Paramount Pictures and Twentieth Century Fox) discovered while he watched Diane von Furstenberg sell over \$1.2 million of merchandise in less than two hours on QVC,

"It was the ultimate Nielsen rating. The phones light up...You don't wait till you come into the office tomorrow to find out how you did...It was the closest link I've ever seen between action and reaction."

Those of us interested in Web marketing are familiar with the idea of tracking visitors to our sites using Web analytics, then seeing the effect of changes to our pages as our visitors change their browsing patterns on our sites. But shopping networks take this feedback to another level:

QVC employs a staff of PhDs who analyze real-time sales data to determine how many minutes to devote to a specific product based on rising and falling demand curves. Hundreds of small adjustments are made on the fly to maximize sales.

"Pick up the ring again and twirl it on your finger," a producer might instruct a host through the IFB (for interruptible feedback) earpiece that all on-air talent wears. Because the networks see precisely how many calls are flooding into the network at any given moment--and just how many of those callers are converted into customers--the smallest gesture (such as twirling a ring) can be repeated if they generate a response. Camera angles that result in a call surge can be emphasized, lighting can be adjusted on the fly, and an utterance that strikes a chord with the viewing public can be repeated.

But Wait...There's More! is a great book for anyone interested in learning more about Cialdini's six principles of persuasion, and it's a good read for anyone who's watched TV commercials. So pick up the phone and order your copy now! If operators are busy, call again! Call in the next 15 minutes, and we'll throw in another dozen insights -- ABSOLUTELY FREE!! CALL NOW!!!