Human Behavior and the Marketplace

A long-standing joke in the advertising industry goes as follows:

An advertising agency representative was ushered into a plush office, where he sat across from an imposing wooden desk. Behind the desk, a successful vice president in the produce industry scrutinized him in silence for several moments. Finally, the vice president spoke.

"Have you ever advertised foodstuffs before?" the executive demanded.
"Why, yes, many times," said the ad agency representative.
"Do you have any experience in selling frozen food?"
"Yes, we do," said the representative.
"How about frozen vegetables?"
"Several types, sir."
"Spinach?" the vice president asked with growing interest.
"Yes," responded the agency representative, "We successfully advertised spinach for another client several years ago."
Now leaning forward in his seat, his voice strained in anticipation, the executive asked, "Whole leaf or chopped?"

When advertising professionals tell this joke among themselves, it often spurs derisive laughter. We think that laughter highlights a worthwhile point: Although highly specialized knowledge is certainly desirable in many areas, it's the expertise that comes from a mastery of the fundamental laws of human psychology that's likely to be much more valuable in understanding, predicting, and shaping human behavior. The skills of an expert market researcher are not only desirable for industry-specific knowledge, but also for a working knowledge of human behavior in general. Familiarity with the basic laws that regulate human responses allows for the construction of effective influence across a wide spectrum of circumstances—retail or wholesale, product or service, marketing or management, whole leaf or chopped.

akes customers say "yes" to a purchase request?

By Robert B. Cialdini and Kelton v.L. Rhoads

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Principles that influence human psychology can be useful in a variety of situations, such as business dealings, societal interactions, and personal relationships. For marketers, they can be most valuable for motivating consumer purchasing decisions. Our analysis has uncovered six basic psychological principles that underlie successful influence tactics: reciprocity, scarcity, authority, consistency, liking, and consensus. Having a firm grasp of these rules of persuasion can help marketing professionals confidently predict and influence consumer behavior.

We, too, are market researchers—after a fashion. As social psychologists, our marketplace is human behavior in general, and we strive to understand the fundamental, psychological laws by which humans are changed, are motivated to try something new, and are led to say "yes" in a variety of situations. Social psychology supports volumes of literature on why and how people are persuaded. Hundreds of tactics and scores of theories are now part of the social scientist's storehouse of knowledge. We're often asked if a "basic set" of influence tools exists, and we believe it does.

One of the authors has set about to identify the most robust influence principles—those that work in a variety of situations, for a variety of practitioners, on a variety of topics, for a variety of prospects. Surprisingly, just six basic psychological principles appear to underlie the majority of successful influence tactics. These six principles govern business dealings, societal involvement, and personal relationships, which can make a working knowledge of the rules of persuasion truly empowering.

Reciprocity

Societies worldwide abide by the norm of reciprocity, which obligates people to return in kind what they've received from others. Supporting this universal rule, market researchers have found that including a few dollars along with a mail survey questionnaire increases compliance significantly. A meta-analysis conducted in 1993 by A. H. Church determined such gifts generated an average 65% increase in return rate (19 percentage points) over mail survey requests that included no gifts. Offering comparably sized incentives contingent upon completion of the survey, however, did not enhance compliance. A related study found that a check for $5 accompanying a single mailed survey request produced significantly more compliance than an offer of $50 to be paid after survey completion (52% vs. 23%), which produced no more compliance than a no-incentive control condition (21%). What's more, as would be expected from an understanding of the rule for reciprocity, the great majority of those who received the $5 check, but did not complete the accompanying survey as requested, did not cash the check.

The desire to return perceived debts runs deep, even among researchers who pride themselves on objectivity. Pharmaceutical companies spend millions of dollars every year to support medical researchers—and also to provide gifts to individual physicians. It's possible these activities could subtly influence researchers' findings and physicians' recommendations. In fact, a 1998 study reported in the *New England Journal of Medicine* found that only 37% of researchers who published conclusions critical of the safety of calcium channel blockers had received prior drug company support. Among researchers whose conclusions supported the drugs' safety, however, investigation revealed that 100% of them had received free trips, research funding, or employment.

The rule of reciprocity usually applies to the exchange of gifts or services, but humans also reciprocate concessions. A series of experiments conducted by Robert Cialdini had researchers approach people walking along a sidewalk in Tempe, Ariz., to ask them if they would like to help the County Youth Counseling Program by chaperoning a group of juvenile delinquents on a day trip to the zoo. That request, by itself, was largely ineffective—just 17% complied. However, the results changed when this request was preceded by a much larger one: "Would you be willing to spend two hours a week as a counselor for a juvenile delinquent for a minimum of two years?" After the participants said no to this initial large request (as all of them did), the researchers retreated to the smaller one: "Oh, well, if you can't do that, would you be willing to chaperone a group of delinquents on a day trip to the zoo?" This approach proved more effective. Now fully 50% complied. Why? Because by presenting the zoo request as a concession—a retreat from the earlier request—the researchers had engaged the rule of reciprocity, which caused the participants to reciprocate with a concession of their own.

Applying the same technique to a business setting, researchers John Mowen and Robert Cialdini conducted an experiment that asked people to participate in an hour-long marketing survey for a California insurance company. After declining, these individuals were asked if they would just respond to one segment of the survey that would take "only" 15 minutes to complete. Compliance with this smaller request nearly doubled (44% vs. 25%) compared to that of control condition participants who received only the 15-minute request.

Scarcity

Items and opportunities become more attractive as they become less available. This often holds true even when those items or opportunities aren't desirable on their own. For example, undergraduates at Florida State University, like most college students, rated their cafeteria food as unsatisfactory. Researcher Stephen West found their opinions changed dramatically just nine days later, however, when they rated their cafeteria food as significantly more desirable than before. Why? Before rating their cafeteria food the second time, students learned a portion of the cafeteria had burned and that they would not be able to obtain meals there for several weeks. The cafeteria food was regarded as more desirable the moment that students realized it was less available.

A consumer preference test performed by researchers in North Carolina provides insight into how the scarcity principle works. Study participants were given a jar of chocolate chip cookies to taste and rate. Some of them received 10 cookies in a jar; others received a jar that contained only two cookies. All the cookies came from the same Nabisco box in the back room, but people who got only two cookies rated them as more attractive and able to command a higher price at the store than did people who received an abundant supply of the identical cookies (even though they did not rate them as tastier). For these cookie-consuming critics, fewer meant better, even when taste was rated equivalently.

Popular items quickly pulled from the marketplace can create interesting consumer reactions. Witness, for example, what *Time* magazine called "one of the worst hundred ideas of the century," Coca-Cola's decision to change its classic cola formula in the mid-1980s. You probably remember the outrage that New Coke drew from angry consumers, who demanded their old Coke back. You may also remember that many of the people demanding their beloved beverage back could not distinguish it from New Coke, or any other cola, in blind taste tests. Even Gay Mullins, the founder of the Old Cola Drinkers of America society—who worked tirelessly to get the traditional formula back into the marketplace by any civil, judicial, or legislative means possible—preferred the New Coke to the old in two separate blind taste tests. It's noteworthy that the thing Mullins liked more was less valuable to him than the thing he was being denied.

In a similar vein, consider the outcome of a decision made by county officials in Miami to ban the use and possession of phosphate detergents. Spurred internally by the scarcity principle, the majority of Miami consumers came to see phosphate cleaners as better products than before. Compared to Tampa residents, who were not affected by the Miami ordinance, Miami citizens rated phosphate detergents as gentler, more effective in cold water, better whiteners and fresheners, and more powerful on stains. After passage of the law, they had even come to believe that phosphate detergents poured more easily.

This sort of response is typical of individuals who have lost an established freedom. When our freedom to have something is limited, we experience an increased desire for it. It is for this reason that "limited time only" and "limited supply" appeals are so effective for marketers. Additional research demonstrates that people are especially attracted to scarce items when they are in competition for them with other individuals. The implication is that "limited supply" appeals, which carry inherent social competition, will be more effective than "limited time" appeals.

Authority

Legitimate authorities are particularly influential sources. Whether they have acquired their positions through superior training, talent, or experience, we look to authorities for information and guidance. For example, a single expert opinion news story printed in the *New York Times* is associated with an average 2% shift in public opinion nationwide. According to researchers Page, Shapiro, and Dempsey, when an expert's statement is aired on national television, public opinion shifts approaching 4% can be expected.

Researchers have discovered that credibility is the key to successful, influential authority. Credible authorities can bring about an almost automatic compliance with their recommendations and directives. A credible source is one who is both expert and trustworthy. Let's take a closer look at each part of this formula.

The business world routinely attempts to capitalize on expertise, experience, and scientific credentials in order to harness the power of credible authority: "Babies are our business, our only business . . ." "Serving the public since 1895 . . ." "Four out of five doctors recommend . . ." and so on. There is nothing wrong with such claims when they are real because prospective customers usually want the opinions of true and established authorities. Their insights help people choose quickly and well.

However, a demonstration of knowledge, experience, or wisdom only goes so far. Each of us has met people who are thoroughly informed, but who remain remarkably unpersuasive. Research conducted around the world indicates that, to be optimally effective, communicators must also convince audiences that they're trustworthy sources of information.

Expertise refers to a communicator's knowledge and experience while trustworthiness refers to the communicator's honesty and lack of bias. Most of the time, people trust those with an established track record or those whom they have known personally for a long period of time. But, without the benefit of a previously existing relationship, how can communicators convey their trustworthiness when delivering a persuasive message? Advertisements that depict frank and honest discussions about a product or issue illustrate one approach often taken to establish trustworthiness.

A second method of enhancing trustworthiness requires more skill on the part of the communicator. Communicators can provide both sides of an argument—the pros and the cons—which gives the impression of fairness and impartiality: "Expensive, but worth it," "The taste you hate three times a day," or "We're number two, but we try harder." Researchers have long known that communicators who present two-sided arguments can gain the trust of their audiences and thereby achieve the goal of becoming influential, credible sources. This two-sided approach is especially effective when the audience initially disagrees with the communicator.

Credible communicators possess both expertise and trustworthiness, but without trustworthiness even experts won't be very persuasive. Therefore, a medical researcher who claims that the link between cigarette smoking and cancer is overblown loses credibility and impact if people learn that he or she is employed by a tobacco company. The strong arguments of expert communicators have more potency when they come from unbiased, trustworthy sources because listeners lower their cognitive defenses for communicators who are perceived as impartial. This is why marketers should seek evaluations from independent testing laboratories whenever possible. When those evaluations are positive, they can be highly successful spurs to action.

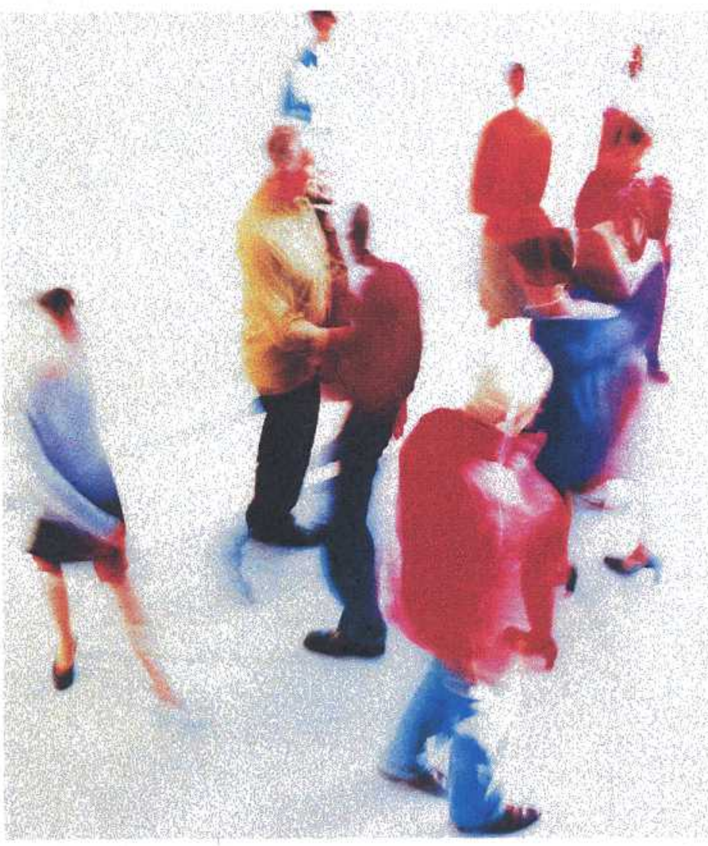
Consistency

In 1998, a well-known Chicago restaurant was struggling with a problem that afflicts all restaurateurs: no-shows. Fickle patrons make reservations and then fail to appear, booking times and tables that paying customers might have occupied, which means the restaurant has to foot the bill for unused labor and unsold food. This Chicago restaurant greatly diminished the problem by having its hostess change two words in her telephone script. Instead of saying, "Please call if you have to change your plans," she substituted the sentence, "*Will you* please call if you have to change your plans?" and then politely waited for a response. While the change in wording was subtle, the change in psychology was anything but small. The new request induced customers to fill the pause with a public commitment: "Yes, I'll call." As a result, the no-show rate dropped from 30% to 10% immediately.

Public commitments—even seemingly minor ones—prompt consistent future action because they tap into a potent human motivation to be, or at least to appear, consistent with previous commitments, attitudes, and actions.

In another example, Joseph Schwarzwald of Bar-Ilan University in Israel and his co-workers were able to nearly double contributions for the handicapped in certain neighborhoods. They were able to do so by harnessing the consistency principle: two weeks before asking for contributions, they asked residents to sign a petition supporting the handicapped, thus making a public commitment to that same cause. Many people were willing to sign the petition, which seemingly cost them nothing. But the implication of that small pro-social behavior caused residents to be unusually generous several weeks later when the opportunity arose to remain consistent with that initial commitment (by giving money to the cause).

However, a vast amount of influence stems not from establishing new commitments, but from tapping into commitments already in place. Drawing connections between products and pre-existing commitments within the consumer is one of the most powerful and efficient techniques used by savvy marketing professionals. If existing commitments can be made more salient to the customer, the motivation to maintain consistency can then direct behavior accordingly. For example, insurance agents are often taught to stress to new homeowners that the purchase of an expensive house reflects an enormous personal commitment to home and family. Consequently, they argue effectively, it would only be consistent with such a commitment to home and family to purchase home and life insurance in amounts that befit the size of this commitment.



Marketers have developed a variety of techniques to find the deep-seated commitments that drive consumer behavior. The "laddering" technique, for example, attempts to discover the underlying values that influence buying decisions or voting behaviors through structured interviews. Experience has shown that, when consumers are asked why they are attracted to a particular idea, candidate, service, or product, they typically respond by listing the desirable attributes associated with that item. ("Those shoes have elegant high heels.") If consumers are pressed as to why those attributes are attractive, consumers will next list a number of benefits associated with those attributes. ("High heels make you look taller, slimmer, and more exotic.") If they are further pressed as to why those benefits are important, consumers may finally reveal the fundamental values that underlie their purchasing decisions. ("Being taller makes you more powerful and formidable in negotiations; appearing slimmer makes you feel younger, sexier, and more alive.") Armed with the deeper knowledge about the fundamental values that drive selection decisions, marketers are in a much better position to design new products or create new promotions that align products, services, or candidates with the basic desires and pre-existing values of their customers.

Liking

It comes as no surprise that people prefer to say yes to those they like and are prone to like those who display certain congenial characteristics. One of these attributes is physical attractiveness. Good-looking fundraisers for the American Heart Association have been found to generate nearly twice as many donations (42% vs. 23%) as other requesters. In the 1970s, Canadian researchers found that voters in Canadian federal elections gave physically attractive candidates several times as many votes as unattractive ones. Yet, when asked, those same voters insisted their ballots could never be influenced by anything as superficial as appearance.

A comparable effect has been found in hiring situations. In one study, good grooming in a simulated employment interview accounted for more favorable hiring decisions than did job qualifications. Subsequent questioning of interviewers by researchers Mack and Rainey revealed that interviewers claimed appearance played only a minor role in their choices. The advantage given to attractive workers even extends to payday. Economists examining U.S. and Canadian samples have found that attractive individuals get paid an average of 12% to 14% more than their unattractive coworkers.

Cooperation is a second likable characteristic that has been shown to enhance positive feelings and behavior toward those who appear to collaborate. For example, automobile salespeople are coached to cast their sales managers as villains, so the salesperson can "do battle" on the customer's behalf. The gambit naturally leads to a desirable form of liking for the salesperson, which promotes sales.

A third likable characteristic is similarity. Psychologists Kelly Aune and Michael Basil reported research requiring solicitors to canvas a college campus asking for contributions to a charity. When the phrase "I'm a student, too" was added to the requests, donations more than doubled. Instruction regarding ways to generate more subtle forms of similarity occur in many sales training programs, where trainees are urged to "mirror and match" the customer's body posture, mood, and verbal style, as similarities along each of these dimensions have been shown to lead to positive results.

Consensus

Psychologists Susan Fiske and Shelly Taylor identify humans as "cognitive misers"—beings burdened with processing demands that far exceed our time frames and mental capacities. Because of this, we are forever seeking ways to arrive at correct solutions without employing a great deal of thought. Cognitive misers everywhere can breathe a sigh of relief that the next principle of influence, consensus, exists. Through a cursory examination of what others (especially others like us) are doing, we can usually make quick and satisfactory decisions. If all our friends are raving about a new best-selling book, travel agent, or piece of software, we will probably like those things, too. We can use the actions of others to locate and validate correct choices.

Taking advantage of social validation, a marketer can stimulate compliance by demonstrating that others just like the target audience have already complied. For example, a study found that a fundraiser who showed homeowners a list of neighbors who had donated to a local charity significantly increased the frequency of contributions. The longer the list, the greater the effect. Marketers, therefore, should never fail to inform customers of the popularity of their largest-selling or fastest-growing model or product line.

Less obvious, however, are the circumstances that cause social validation to backfire and produce the opposite of what a requester intends. Information campaigns may fret that alcohol use is intolerably high, that adolescent suicide rates are alarming, and that many polluters are spoiling the environment. Although the claims may be true and well-intentioned, the creators of such campaigns have missed something basic about the compliance process. Within the statement "Look at all the people who are doing this undesirable thing" lurks the powerful and undercutting message "Look at all the people who *are* doing this undesirable thing." Research shows that communication campaigns that lead people to overestimate the frequency of the behavior they are trying to eradicate may in fact generate even more of that undesirable behavior.

For instance, a suicide intervention program administered to New Jersey teenagers informed them of the high number of teenage suicides to date. Health researcher David Shaffer and his colleagues at Columbia University found that participants exposed to this message became significantly more likely to see suicide as a potential solution to their problems. Campaigns that honestly depict the unwanted activity as damaging even though relatively few individuals engage in it tend to be more effective.

The Ethics of Effective Influence

It's noteworthy that many of the data presented in this article have come from studies of the practices of persuasion professionals—marketers, market researchers, advertisers, fundraisers—whose financial well-being depends on an ability to induce others to say yes. A kind of natural selection operates in these professions because those who employ successful tactics flourish and pass along their beneficial strategies while those employing unsuccessful tactics soon turn to other means of employment.

Marketers and advertisers who use these principles honestly do everyone a favor. If an advertising agency, for instance, focused an ad campaign on the weight of genuine authoritative research evidence favoring its client's headache product, all the right people would profit—the agency, the manufacturer, and the audience. If that same agency, finding no particular scientific merit in its analgesic, tried to counterfeit the authority principle in its ad by using actors wearing lab coats, it would have used the principle unethically. By recognizing and employing this fundamental distinction, practitioners of the persuasive arts can powerfully and legitimately commission the six principles of influence to create change. In seeking to persuade by pointing to the presence of genuine expertise, true consensus, long-standing commitments, or real opportunities for cooperation, we serve the interests of both parties and enhance the quality of the social fabric in the bargain. For regularly updated information about the influence process discussed here, contact www.influenceatwork.com. ●

Additional Reading

Cialdini, Robert (2001), *Influence: Science and Practice*, 4th ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Cialdini, Robert and Kelton Rhoads (2000), *The Principles of Persuasion Workshop Leader's Guide*. Los Angeles: Influence at Work.

Eagly, Alice and Shelly Chaiken (1993), *The Psychology of Attitudes*. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers.

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