



1-on-1: The Science of Influence

Learn the principles behind the art of persuasion from Robert Cialdini.

By Karyn Reagan
June 20, 2011

Robert Cialdini has spent his entire career learning and teaching the science of influence. His book *Influence: Science and Practice* has sold more than 2 million copies and can be found in 26 languages.

Cialdini's immense knowledge of the subject has earned him the title of "The Godfather of Influence," and he is one of the most cited living social psychologists in the world. Cialdini is currently regents' professor emeritus of psychology and marketing at Arizona State University and president of Influence at Work, an international consulting, strategic planning and training organization.

SUCCESS: *How did you start studying the psychology of influence?*

Robert Cialdini: The very beginning was the realization that I was the characteristic patsy; I was easily swindled and bought things I did not want and contributed to organizations I'd never heard of. As an avid student of what makes people do what they do, I became curious as to how we are influenced. Upon further investigation, I discovered that there was no systematic scientific approach that modeled influence. There were no universal features of the influence process that, if incorporated into a request, proposal or recommendation, inclined people toward saying yes.

Can everyone benefit from the principles of influence you have defined?

RC: Due to the fact that the principles are based on scientific laws, they are both teachable and learnable, and therefore beneficial to everyone. It used to be that we thought of the ability to be persuasive as an art bestowed upon a chosen few. There are those who seem to be gifted. But influence is not just an art; it is a science based on principles and facts.

In your profession, you can become more successful agents of influence by learning and applying the principles while being entirely ethical. This is not a lesson in manipulation, but a guide to detecting authentic desires within a person and bringing them to the surface. Becoming a detective of influence is both ethical and effective.

Would you explain some of the principles of influence you have uncovered?

RC: The first is **reciprocation**. People will be ready and eager to help you when you have first done something for them. This principle suggests that to be successful one must be proactive in their approach instead of reactive. Give first, and then receive, not the opposite. Actually, it is a maxim that is embedded in every major religion. Christianity calls it the Golden Rule.

As an example of its effectiveness, there was a study done on tip amounts given to servers at restaurants. The study proved that applying reciprocity can significantly increase tips when used at the moment patrons are deciding the tip amount. When a mint was given on the tray holding the check, tips went up 3.3 percent. If two mints were on the tray for each diner, tips increased by 14 percent. Receiving two mints was unexpected by the diners, causing them to want to give back.

In this day and age, one of the most valuable assets you can give someone to help them do their job better and be more successful is information. Giving information first can

generate a feeling of gratitude causing one to want to reciprocate.

The second is **commitment or consistency**. People want to be consistent with what they have already said or done, especially in your presence. So help them start out on a positive note so they will stay consistent with that tone.

For instance, if you are called for a job interview, arrange for the interviewers to say something positive about you. One way to accomplish that is to say, "I'm pleased to be here today and happy to give you information about myself, but why did you see fit to invite me for an interview?" The interviewer will explain the favorable features about you that they identified. Then he or she will spend the rest of the interview seeking to validate what they have publicly said about you.

Another principle we discovered is **social validation**. People are more willing to perform a recommended action if a leader or peer provides evidence that many similar others are performing it.

This principle is seen at work in all walks of life. A study done in Beijing used a restaurant menu as the vehicle to analyze human tendencies. When the menu listed certain items as most popular, those items became 13 percent more popular than they had been. If our friends or colleagues are raving about something, we have a tendency to give it a try. That can include anything from food to the latest technological advance. And if the item or concept is something we don't have time or desire to study, it's almost as if those pushing it have done the research for us.

A principle very similar to this is **scarcity**. People find recommended opportunities or items more desirable to the degree that they are scarce, rare or dwindling in availability.

The most obvious example of this principle is the lines of people wrapping around the

corner of a building, perhaps spending a cold night in sleeping bags in order to be the first to purchase the latest hot item. The perception of scarcity motivates extreme measures. In business, the way to implement this principle ethically is to ask yourself what it is that you can offer that is unique that a consumer can only get if they purchase your product or idea. But make sure that it is true. If you offer something that has competition, package it uniquely. For example, maybe offer a certain combination that clients can only get from your company.

So do these principles take practice or work to master?

RC: Becoming a detective of influence plays an important role. People like those who are like them. It is the job of you, the detective, to actively listen and watch in order to uncover those similarities. Maybe you both like hockey or watch the same news station. When those common interests are brought to the surface, there is instant rapport—they like you and you like them—and there is no better environment in which to do business than one in which you like each other.
