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Weapons of persuasion' from Robert Cialdini

Robert Cialdini ('Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion') identifies six 'weapons of persuasion.'

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By Chris Woolston, Special to the Los Angeles Times

Humans have been testing their own trial-and-error persuasion techniques... (Ryan Snook, For the Los Angeles...)

Mitt Romney on the stump, singles at the bar, car salesmen on the lot: All sorts of people are practicing the art of persuasion, with varying degrees of success.

We like to think that we make our own decisions, that we're in control. But we're all open to persuasion by others, says Robert Cialdini, professor emeritus of psychology at Arizona State University and author of "Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion."

Humans have been testing their own trial-and-error persuasion techniques forever, Cialdini says. Now, for better or worse, the professionals are moving in. Or, as he puts it, "the art of persuasion has turned into a science."

Through experiments and real-world observations, researchers have unlocked some of the mysteries of persuasion: what works, what doesn't work and why so many of us end up with candidates, dates and cars that we never really wanted.

People who learn these secrets can keep themselves from getting duped, Cialdini says. With practice, they can even reach the ultimate goal: getting others to do their bidding.



Strategic persuasion can pay huge dividends, adds Steve Martin (not the guy you're thinking of, but Cialdini's colleague and the British director of the consulting company Cialdini founded, Influenceatwork.com). For example, the British government recently asked him for advice to encourage delinquent taxpayers to pay up. Martin suggested a simple tactic: Instead of threatening people with fines, the government should send out a letter saying that the great majority of Brits pay their taxes on time.

That kind of peer pressure works. "So far, they've collected about \$1 billion more than they would have otherwise," Martin says.

Cialdini's own research has identified six "weapons of persuasion" that can bring people to your side. Read and learn:

A rare find: Job seekers should do more than make the case that they're right for a job; according to Cialdini, they should present themselves as a unique fit. As he explains, nobody wants to miss out on a scarce opportunity. The allure of scarcity

explains why people line up at Best Buy at 4:30 a.m. on Black Friday and why inside info is valued more than common knowledge.

Count on payback: "Reciprocity is a part of every society," Cialdini says. A classic experiment from the 1970s found that people bought twice as many raffle tickets from a stranger if he first gave them a can of Coke — proof that even tiny favors can work to your advantage. Likewise, your buddy is more likely to help you move that couch if you've ever given him a ride to the airport.

Be likable: A tough assignment for some, that's for sure. But Cialdini's research has found that a little easygoing pleasantness can be just as persuasive as talent or actual ability. Perhaps unfairly, looks count too: A study of Canadian elections, for example, found that attractive candidates received more votes than their less-blessed opponents,, even though voters claimed they didn't care about appearances.

Society's seal of approval: Your friend is more likely to try something — recycle, eat at the new tapas place, watch "Glee" — if you mention that lots of other people are doing it. That's why his letter to Brit taxpayers was a billion-dollar success, Martin says. People may not want to follow the herd, Cialdini adds, but they do assume that other people make choices for a reason.

Play the consistency card: People will go to great lengths to avoid seeming flaky or wishy-washy. As Cialdini explains in his book, car salesmen exploit this trait by making fantastic "lowball" offers to potential customers. Once a customer decides to buy a car, he's unlikely to want to flake out on the deal even if the price mysteriously balloons — Oops! There was a

mistake! — before he gets the keys. Or, for a less slimy example, you're more likely to get that raise or a promotion if you remind your boss that she has a long history of treating her employees well. (Surely she wouldn't want to change her tune now.)

Speak from authority: Your suggestions will go a lot further if people think you're pulling them from somewhere other than thin air. Martin has an example: In a recent study, a real estate company significantly increased home sales when the receptionist took a moment to inform potential customers of each agent's credentials and experience. "The statements were true," Martin says, "they didn't cost anything — and they worked."

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