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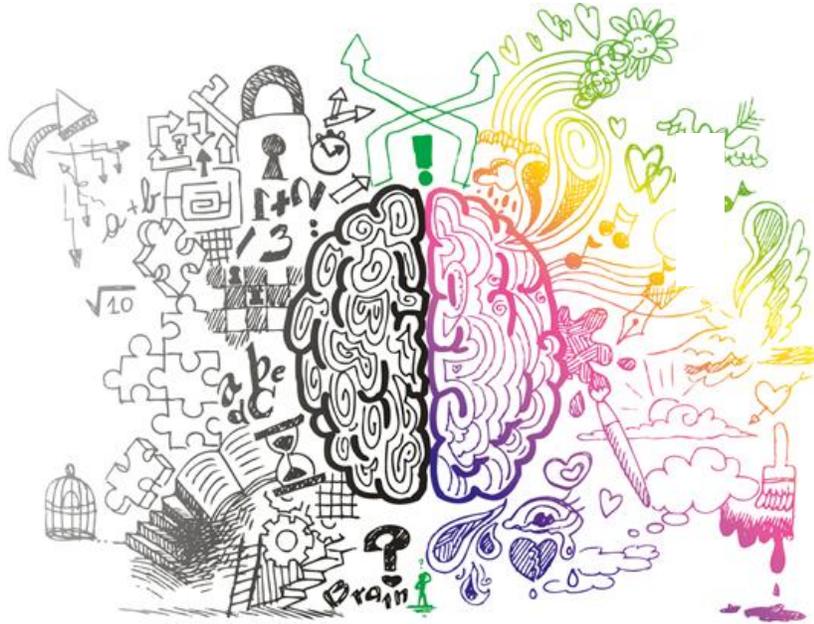
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Small is the new big

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Steve Martin explains how a little alteration in a message could leverage powerful human motivations and offers some tips for marketers wanting to 'think small'.



Credit: Getty Images

There can be few industries that better recognise the importance of influencing the thoughts, beliefs and behaviours of others than advertising. Its livelihood depends on the ability to sell ideas, capture an audience's attention, sway the undecided and persuade customers to buy products and share content.

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Without a doubt, it is equally important for marketers and communicators to consider the small things too – especially when those small things can produce dramatically big effects.

The very latest insights from the fast-growing science of influence and persuasion show that some of the most successful strategies and tactics often require only a small modification to a communicator's message to leverage one of three simple – yet powerful – underlying human motivations: to make accurate decisions as efficiently as possible; to affiliate with and gain the approval of others; and to see oneself in a positive light. Let's consider a few examples.

People proof

In 2009, in consultation with our company, Influence At Work, tax officials added an extra sentence to standard letters that truthfully stated that most UK citizens pay their taxes on time. This small change was remarkable not only for its simplicity but also for the big difference it made to response rates. For the segment of debt that was the focus of the pilot, more than £200 million more was collected compared with the previous year. Why the big effect? The message was able to leverage the inherent motivation we all have to follow others, as well as satisfy a fundamental motivation to make an accurate decision as efficiently as possible.

In the context of a busy, overloaded life, doing what others like us are doing can be a remarkably efficient shortcut to a good decision, whether that decision concerns which movie to watch, which restaurant to frequent or when to pay your taxes. Therefore, one small change that can have a big effect for marketers is to communicate the desirable action of many similar others. It is worth noting that recent studies we have conducted show social proof messages typically work more effectively in print rather than e-mail form.

Head start

Imagine you are designing a programme to encourage customer loyalty. What small change could double your programme's effectiveness? The answer, according to researchers, is to give people a head start.

Customers who were told they would get a free car wash after eight purchases were twice as likely to complete the required purchases if, instead of being given a loyalty card with eight empty spaces to collect stamps, they were given a card with ten spaces with two stamps affixed. The reason? People tend to be more motivated to undertake tasks that have already started rather than from scratch – primarily because it seems a more efficient decision.

Other studies have shown people's motivation to complete tasks is increased if a communicator focuses attention on the smaller number – whether progress made or effort remaining. So at the beginning of tasks, it is generally more persuasive to communicate "you've made 20 per cent progress" rather than "you've got 80 per cent to go". But as people get closer to completing a task, the opposite will be true.

Online reviews

As more businesses move online, an increasingly important part of any campaign is the views and opinions posted by users. Lots of "likes" keep both client and agency happy; negative comments do not, for good reason. Despite the fact that we have been brainwashed to believe positive information is more persuasive than negative information, this is simply not true.

Consider a recent study analysing 65,000 restaurant reviews posted on Yelp.com, which found that negative reviews were typically rated as much more helpful and persuasive to readers than positive ones.

Interestingly, positive reviews were only found to be helpful and persuasive when it was clear that they had been written on the same day that the restaurant was visited. For example, "I just got back from this restaurant" or "my husband and I had breakfast here this morning".

This insight suggests a small change that marketers should make to maximise the impact of positive reviews and minimise negative ones.

Encourage customers to post reviews immediately after consumption and explicitly communicate that immediacy at the start of their review. Restaurants, for example, could include a sentence to this effect on bills.

Think small

When it comes to influencing the way others think, feel and act, small changes such as those described in this article can make a big difference for one fundamental reason. They are small. They fly under the radar.

They rarely raise suspicion or attention, and simply go quietly about their business shaping decisions and influencing behaviours in largely automatic and unconscious ways.

In a world in which bigger is often equated with better, it is understandable why so many marketers and campaign managers are becoming increasingly interested in persuasion science insights because, when used ethically, rarely do they require large investments or expensive resources to produce impressive results.

In such a context, one can perhaps claim that small is very much the new big.

Steve Martin is a persuasion scientist and New York Times bestselling author. His new book, [The Small Big](#), is published by Profile Books and out now priced at £11.99

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