The science of influence and persuasion

**Persuasive communication**

Dil Sidhu explores how a strong message can influence thinking, behaviour and beliefs.

Influence and persuasion are not new but they are finding new uses in both the public, private and personal sectors. While consumer product companies and retailers have embraced the science of influence and persuasion (mainly to amend our buying habits and choices) there are also applications to change behaviours towards health and safety.

The history of influence and persuasion can be traced back 4,000 years to the days of the Greeks and Romans and the wide utilisation of ‘rhetoric’. Rhetoric, a much maligned word today, was the ability to be a communicator who was also able to influence the thinking or behaviours of others – usually to get someone to vote for you rather than an opponent.

Over the past 60 years or so influence and persuasion have become a foundation for organisations, particularly in the area of consumer goods, to favour particular brands over others. Social scientists, marketers and psychologists have done a tremendous amount of research to understand why people behave in the way they do (whether choosing toothpaste brands or signing up to donate their organs) and what can be done to amend those behaviours.

The undisputed pioneer of the development of influence and persuasion from art-form to a science has been Professor of marketing and psychology, Robert Cialdini, (Professor Emeritus at Arizona State University) who wrote Influence: Science and Practice. The seminal book looked at the ways in which we are all influenced, but also how we can influence others in an ethical way.

Professor Cialdini’s premise is that while there are literally thousands of tips, techniques, hints and approaches to influencing and persuading others, they all fit quite neatly into six universal categories which his 35 years of research have concluded.

These six principles of influence and persuasion are: reciprocity, scarcity, authority, consensus (or social proof), commitment (or consistency) and liking.

In addition, Professor Cialdini has found that the ethical use of the principles of persuasion can create an environment where significant changes in the outcome can be achieved within a win-win situation.

Reciprocity

As humans we generally aim to return favours, pay back debts, and treat others as they treat us. According to the idea of reciprocity, this can lead us to feel obliged to offer concessions or discounts to others if they have offered them to us. This is because we’re uncomfortable with feeling indebted to them.

For example, if a colleague helps you when you’re busy with a project, you might feel obliged to support his/her ideas for improving team processes. You might decide to buy more from a supplier if they have offered you an aggressive discount. Or, you might give money to a charity fundraiser who has given you a flower first and for no charge.

Commitment (and consistency)

Professor Cialdini’s research shows that we have a deep desire to be consistent. For this reason, once we’ve committed to something, we’re then more inclined to go through with it.

For instance, you’d probably be more likely to support a colleague’s project proposal if you had shown interest when (s)he first talked to you about their ideas. We are also more likely to support causes that we state publicly that we believe in. It also relies on the old adage that people live up to their values.

Consensus (and social proof)

This principle relies on people’s sense of ‘safety in numbers’. For example, we are more likely to work late if others in our team are doing the same, put a tip in a jar if it already contains money; or eat in a restaurant if it’s busy. Here, we’re assuming that if lots of other people are doing something, then it must be okay. So when a company advertises that it is ‘the choice for 95% of the buying public’ then it is probably good for us to choose as well.

We’re particularly susceptible to this principle when we’re feeling uncertain, and we’re even more likely to be influenced if the people we see seem to be similar to us. That’s why commercial TV ads use mums, not celebrities, to advertise household products.

Liking

Professor Cialdini says that we’re more likely to be influenced by people we like. Likability comes in many forms – people might be similar or familiar to us, they might give us compliments, or we may just simply trust them. Companies that use sales agents from within the community employ this principle with huge success. People are more likely to buy from people like themselves, from friends, and from people they know and respect.

Authority

We feel a sense of duty or obligation to people in positions of authority. This is why advertisers of pharmaceutical products employ doctors to front their campaigns, and why the majority of us will do most things that our manager requests. Job titles, uniforms, and even accessories like cars or gadgets can lend an air of authority, that they are making us feel more indebted to them.

Scarcity

This principle says that things are more attractive when their availability is limited, or when we stand to lose the opportunity to acquire them on favourable terms. For instance, we might buy something immediately if we’re told that it’s the last one, or that a special offer will soon expire.

Get it right

Be careful how you use the six principles – it is very easy to use them to mislead or deceive people, for instance, to sell products at unfair prices, or to exert undue influence.

When you’re using approaches like this, make sure that you use them honestly – by being completely truthful, and by persuading people to do things that are good for them. If you persuade people to do things that are wrong for them, then this is manipulative, and it’s unethical. And it’s clearly wrong to cheat or lie about these things – in fact, this may be fraudulent. A good reputation takes a long time to build, but you can lose it in a moment!

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