Robert Cialdini: Six Principles of Persuasion

Leading social psychologist Dr. Robert Cialdini has for many years worked in the field of influence, looking at persuasion, compliance and negotiation. He has discovered that by applying the knowledge and methods of behavioural scientists, it is possible to identify a set of human drives and tendencies related to persuasion. These render the outcomes of influencing scenarios predictable in a reliable way. He has distilled this knowledge into a set of six fundamental principles of persuasion.

Cialdini has long appreciated the problems of influencing and motivating a varied workforce, difficult employees or reluctant purchasers. He has sought to make this difficulty more manageable through the identification of a set of persuasive principles that can be learned and applied with consistency. Cialdini describes this endeavour as an investigation into ‘the factors that cause one person to say yes to another person [...] and which techniques most effectively use the factors to bring about compliance.’ [1] The principles are as follows:

- liking
- reciprocity
- social proof
- commitment and consistency
- authority
- scarcity

These principles will be more familiar from daily life than they first appear, as they work by extrapolating cultural and behavioural assumptions into useful predictor tools for levels of influence and response. Here the applications of Cialdini’s six principles are briefly outlined.

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The principle of liking: ‘the friendly thief’

This principle is based upon the common assumption that people like those who like them. As Cialdini has put it: ‘If you want to influence people, make friends.’ [2] In his conception, there are three paths toward liking:

- **Similarities** - in which you find a genuine area of commonality with your audience. Likeness generates a sense of good will and trust that may be absent from a negotiation. In fact, Cialdini points out that the critical point occurs when your audience see, not that you are likable, but that you like them. A sense of responsibility to find a compromise or agreement is then generated.
- **Compliments** - praise can be used to repair a damaged relationship, or one that has consistently failed to prove productive. You will be more open to a relationship in which you can admire the other party, whilst your audience will appreciate your effort to like (see above).
- **Cooperative endeavours** - finding a common goal towards which to work can serve to unite you and your audience.

Reciprocity: ‘the old give and take ... and take’

Based on the assumption that people repay in kind, the principle of reciprocity demands that you give what you want to receive. This works on various scales, from smiling to receive a smile, to gift giving. These are the cruder forms, however, and the real implication for the business world is the ‘first-mover advantage’ of managers hoping to foster a positive working culture. The principle also serves to create networks of cooperation amongst departments. Favours for employees in other areas will gain favours in return when your department is in crisis, for example.

Cialdini notes that the principle is of universal relevance, working in every human culture around the world. To be maximally effective, he suggests that your first thought when seeking to influence and persuade is to think ‘what can I do for my audience?’ The ‘gift’ can most powerfully consist of information, which gains valuable information in return as a matter of honour. However, the objective value of what is given is largely irrelevant; the gesture of giving is an influence generator in itself.

Social proof: ‘truths are us’

Based on the cultural assumption that people will follow the lead of respectable others, the principle of social proof amounts to the strategic use of peer power. Cialdini has deduced that persuasion can be at its most effective when it comes from peers. In a sales or marketing context, this can mean finding testimonials that demonstrate a high level of satisfaction. These testimonials must be drawn from clients in a similar situation to the proposed clients. The ‘herd instinct’ tells people that if others in similar circumstances have taken a certain decision and benefited, then the likelihood is that they will also benefit form the same decision.

Commitment and consistency: ‘hobgoblins of the mind’

The principle of consistency can be accessed once a commitment has been extracted from your audience. In order to gain such a commitment, Cialdini recommends making a connection with the existing values held by the person in question. If you know your employee or customer well, you can achieve insight into their personal priorities and values. Linking your proposal to these existing commitments ensures that in the name
of consistency they will consider your proposal.

This method also ensures that the persuasive power of your argument is held within them through this connection to their personal values. When you leave the discussion in which you hope to generate influence, the power of consistent commitment continues to act within them.

The commitment and consistency relationship is a powerful influencer. Once commitments have been sealed in writing or made public in some way, human nature dictates that a person will attempt to display consistency with those commitments. Public declaration therefore leads to dependable consistency, and predictable responses. Commitment and consistency have various business applications, such as:

- a manager wishing to direct the course of action of an employee will benefit from asking for a commitment in writing
- when making it clear that a certain commitment is irrevocable, you may benefit from making it clear that you have shared details of the commitment with another member of staff

**Authority: ‘directed deference’**

This principle is based on the cultural trait of deferral to the word of a perceived ‘expert.’ Cialdini attributes the tendency to defer to expert opinion to the ‘teeming complexity of contemporary life.’ [3] In this context, the expert offers an ‘efficient shortcut to good decisions.’ [4]

In order to instigate the use of this principle, you must expose your expertise and talents. It may not be adequate to assume a foreknowledge of your standing. In influencing scenarios making use of authority, it may be difficult to avoid a bragging tone. Cialdini has advocated the use of the introductory letter prior to a first meeting, so that your credentials may be conveyed without the need for face-to-face discussions which may be construed as competitive. Whilst the Western tendency is to avoid this overt reference to credentials, the system is well founded in South America, Asia and the Middle East.

**Scarcity: ‘the rule of the few’**

The principle of scarcity is based on the skewing of the value sense by short supply. This method of influencing has been used extensively within marketing strategy, but may be adapted to other scenarios. Highlighting the unique benefits of a product purchase or behavioural change, or the exclusivity of some information held by you can give you leverage in a negotiation situation.

Whilst the principles of want will lead people to be attracted to that which is in short supply, and hence the principle is extremely powerful, it must be noted that this is one of the areas in which ethical considerations are imperative. The promise of exclusive information, or any activities of exhortation are not acceptable to Cialdini. Neither are they profitable, potentially wrecking your reputation, and asking for ill-treatment in return, via the principle of reciprocity.

**Notes**

Cialdini advises that these principals can have far greater influencing impact when used in combination. He also advises repeatedly against unethical use of persuasive
practices.


[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

**Image Credit:** Flickr Early Novels Database (accessed 30 October 2014).