



Book Review, *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*, by Robert Cialdini.

By Jonathan Poisner, www.poisner.com

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First released in 1984, and updated multiple times since then, *Influence* is a easy-to-read, chock-full-of-ideas guide to how people get other people to do things they wouldn't automatically want to do. Cialdini refers throughout to a "click-whirr" mental shortcuts that humans take when faced with certain stimuli.

An example of this is "reciprocity." When people do us a favor, we feel obligated to do something for them in return, whether immediately or at some later date.

Cialdini cites a double blind study. Two people are brought into rate "art." That's actually a ruse for the real study. One of the people is actually a plant. For half the subjects, during a break, the plant goes out of the room and comes back in with two cokes, offering one to the other, saying: I asked him [the experimenter] if I could get myself a coke, and he said it was okay, so I brought one for you too." After the rating of art finishes, the plant says he's trying to sell raffle tickets to win a new car and he wins a prize if he sells the most. The subjects who had the favor done to them earlier bought twice as many raffle tickets as the ones where the favor hadn't been done – even though the raffle tickets cost far in excess of the value of the coke.

Another example is the "contrast" principle. After being presented with an extreme, something in the middle can seem really small. Evidence shows that in selling two items, something expensive and then accessories, people spend more money overall if they start with the expensive (eg. a suit) and then pick the accessories (eg. a tie) than the other way around. After spending a lot on the suit, they go for the more expensive among the accessories because the amount of dollars involved doesn't "seem" as large.

Here's another example from the book, discussing the principle of contrast. In the study, testers asked college students to chaperone juvenile delinquents to the zoo for two hours. 83% said no and 17% said yes. Another group that same question, but were first asked if they'd sign on to spend two hours per week with a juvenile delinquent for two years. Virtually everyone said no to the two year commitment. But after getting that no, when they were asked about the zoo trip, the yes rate tripled in comparison to those who just got the zoo question.

This is a study I'd share with anybody doing volunteer recruitment. Not that you should make up outlandish volunteer asks just as a ruse. Rather, that you should make up real opportunities that involve larger commitments and don't be shy about asking for them, knowing that the result will be more volunteers overall even if for more limited commitments.

Other principles discussed in detail in *Influence* include:

- Commitment - once we do something indicating a commitment to a product or idea, we are more inclined to repeat or increase that commitment.
- Social Proof – we look to others in determining how to respond when we don't immediately know.
- Liking – we're more likely to do something for people we like (and there's a lot of evidence about what causes somebody to be liked).
- Authority – we respond irrationally to displays of authority,
- Scarcity – when faced with a limited opportunity, we value it more highly than we otherwise would.

Too often people who work for progressive nonprofits recoil at the thought that we should take advantage of these principles. They're for the "dirty" business world while we're pure. We want all of our donors, our volunteers, and others we're trying to influence to be one hundred percent rational in responding to us because that's how we imagine we are.

Yet, there's nothing rational about the world of fundraising and nonprofit advocacy. Groups are selling an emotion – the positive feeling people get when becoming part of a cause they value. We should absolutely take advantage of the latest research on how to help individuals become part of our cause.

Of course, you can take things too far. If you leave people feeling manipulated, neither you nor they are going to be happy in the long run.

But nonprofits have tremendous room to use principles like reciprocity and contrast to make a bigger difference in the fight to change the world for the better without feeling like they're manipulating anyone. Indeed, if properly applied, supporters who've "bought" a donation or volunteer activity should leave the process feeling better about themselves.

Look for a follow up article on *Influence* in my April e-newsletter when I'll discuss some of the ideas nonprofits can use with the principles of commitment and social proof. Or, track down the book at your local library or independent bookstore.