



Book Review Part 2, *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*, by Robert Cialdini.  
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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. These shortcuts include: contrast, reciprocity, commitment, social proof, liking, authority, and scarcity.

My February review discussed some of the research on "contrast" and "reciprocity" that was relevant to nonprofit organizations.

This article focuses on the principles of "commitment" and "social proof," with some examples of how they can be used to benefit your nonprofit organization.

Commitment, in concert with its close cousin "consistency," represent a mental shortcut in which individuals want to behave (and want to appear to behave) consistent with their past behavior. Thus, once an initial commitment is made, the odds of additional similar action go up significantly.

A study of phone solicitations for charity finds that asking somebody at the start of a phone solicitation "how are you doing today?" and waiting for the answer can significantly increase response rates. Cialdini says the answer is "commitment." Since the vast majority of people will say "fine" or "good" as a matter of politeness, mentally that causes them to focus on what's right in their day/life rather than what's wrong. After making that "commitment," they are more likely to want to give and less likely to feel stingy.

Another study found that getting potential volunteers to first sign a relatively trivial petition (e.g. "Keep California beautiful") dramatically increased the percentage of them who subsequently agreed to a much bigger request: "put up a big 'drive safely' sign in your yard. Cialdini says that the key is to first ask for something small that causes the person to start thinking of themselves as public-spirited. When the bigger request comes later, the principle of "commitment" kicks into play.

Public commitments can be even more powerful. Not only are you trying live up to your own self-image, suddenly you have the double pressure of wanting to *look* consistent to your friends and neighbors. A study of college students had them estimate the length of a line. Some wrote it down and shared it publicly with others taking the test, others wrote it down for the researcher, and still others just made it orally to the researcher. The students were then given information suggesting reasons why their estimate was wrong and given a chance to revise their estimates. Those who just made judgments

orally to the researcher were most likely to change them. Those who had written them down privately were the second most likely to change them. Those who had publicly written them down were the most resistant to change.

Let's apply that study to the world of Facebook. The equivalent of writing something down publicly is to get somebody to update their facebook status to say something positive about your organization. This should significantly increase the odds of their continuing to support the organization irrespective of whatever benefit you're trying to achieve by impacting their friends' opinions.

The impact on their friends' opinions brings us to the next Cialdini principle: "social proof." Everybody says they hate laugh tracks on television, but there's a reason tv shows use them: as a general rule, it causes people who watch the shows to feel they're funnier than those watching without the laugh track.

The basic principle of social proof is that one way we figure out correct behavior is to see how others are behaving.

Examples of this technique are all around us in the world of commerce:

- Bartenders who seed their tip jar with few folded bills to give the impression that tipping with folded money is normal behavior;
- Advertisers who say their brand is the best selling;
- Nightclubs who artificially create lines out their door to make the club seem popular to those passing by.

Social proof comes most into play when there is *uncertainty* how to behave. A fascinating study presented people with a fake possible emergency situation (somebody appearing to have a seizure or falling down drunk, it's hard to know which). When the bystander was alone with the faker, 85% of the time they intervened to see if they could help. But when the experimenters added in a couple more researchers who just stood around ignoring the potential emergency, the bystander only responded with help 31% of the time.

Social proof also comes more into play when the people involved are most *like* the person being influenced. People are more likely to sign petitions, give money, or otherwise follow the behavior of those who're similar. Studies show that peer-based anti-smoking campaigns for teens are far more successful when those providing the anti-smoking message are most similar to those who are the target audience.

So how can nonprofit organizations take advantage of the principle of social proof? Here are five quick ideas, though no doubt we could brainstorm 100 if given an hour.

- Volunteer recruiters who seed their volunteer sign-up forms with a few names at the top.
- At fundraising events, having a few people pre-selected to make a show of getting out their checkbooks and filling out the donation form as soon as the initial ask is made.
- In election contests, getting people to put up lawn signs and/or bumperstickers.

- If after a public talk you plan on asking people to raise their hands if they want to volunteer, having a couple of people pre-recruited who will raise their hands.
- When introducing yourself to a new potential donor, mentioning somebody else who is a peer of theirs who you're confident they know and who you can state (accurately) is also a donor to your organization.

Nonprofit organizations shouldn't hesitate to use techniques like these. They may, at some base level, feel "manipulative." But there's a difference between manipulating people to take advantage of them for no reason other than economic gain and helping trigger people to make decisions that line up with their values to change the world for the better. Nonprofit organizations should absolutely use the latest research to figure out how to help people join your cause.