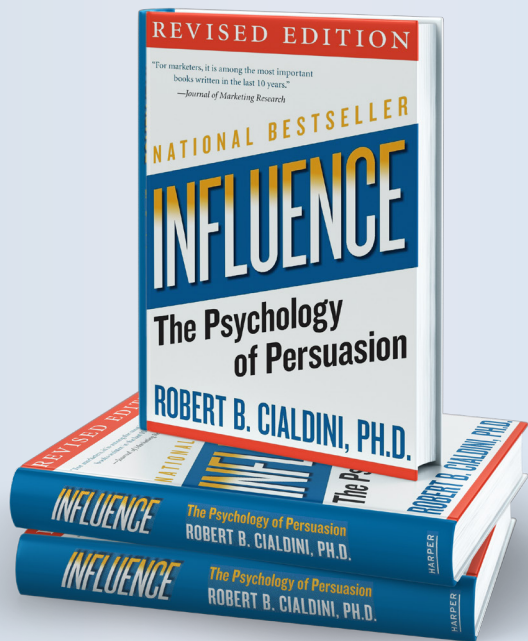


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Zooming In On Your Next Read



Influence

By Robert B. Cialdini

Dr. Robert Cialdini has spent his entire career researching the science of influence earning him an international reputation as an expert in the fields of persuasion, compliance, and negotiation. *Influence* has sold over 3 million copies in over 40 languages and is a New York Times Bestseller. Because of the world-wide recognition of Dr. Cialdini's cutting edge scientific research and his ethical business and policy applications, he is frequently regarded as the "Godfather of influence."

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The Psychology of Why People Say "Yes"

Robert Cialdini is a self-described "patsy" who has always been an "easy mark" for anyone selling anything. His entire life he has found himself as the not-so-proud owner of unwanted tickets, subscriptions, and more. As a regretful "sucker," he began to ponder what factors make one person say yes while another may say no under the same conditions. He wanted to uncover the techniques involved in bringing about compliance so that he could arm himself and others with techniques to avoid falling prey to persuasion.

He became an "experimental social psychologist" and started to research "the psychology of compliance" with students and university researchers. Over time, this work moved out of his academic environment and into a "broader scope of investigation." He looked to the group of people he calls "compliance professionals" whose very livelihood depends on their ability to get someone to agree with their mission. These "sales operators, fund-raisers, recruiters, and advertisers" offered a well spring of techniques and strategies that get results. It is this work that led to the first edition of *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*. In it, he "explains the psychology of why people say yes and how to apply these insights ethically in business and everyday settings." In the wake of the book's success, Cialdini became recognized as "the seminal expert in the fields of influence and persuasion." Progress has been made in the field of persuasion and influence in the years that have passed since the original release of the book, which is reflected in this updated edition.

Weapons of Influence

People are vulnerable to what Cialdini calls "automatic behavior patterns." These are mechanisms by which we make decisions based on quick assumptions that tend to work in our favor. For example, if presented with a coupon, many buyers will purchase the apparently discounted product because they assume they are getting a good deal. They will make this decision without doing any research or due diligence. They will buy the product featured in the advertisement even when, in reality, the coupon does not actually offer a discounted price or a good deal based on market competitors. The forces of influence are strong and our desire to act without thinking is even stronger. The realities of modern life encourage our reliance on it.



We are bombarded with a constant stream of information that is increasingly “intricate and variable.” Our dependence on these automatic thinking shortcuts is growing in response. The problem is that most of us are not even aware that we are relying on these behavior patterns nor do we understand how they work. And that “makes us terribly vulnerable to anyone who does.” They can use this knowledge against.

Cialdini writes, “There is a group of people who know very well where the weapons of automatic influence lie and who employ them regularly to get what they want.” Understanding that these influential strategies exist is the first step. Cialdini continues the book by sharing specific principles of influence that allow people to wield weapons of automatic influence over us to get what they want along with corresponding techniques that help us overcome their power.

Reciprocation

“We should try to repay, in kind, what another person has provided us.” When we receive a holiday card from someone, we feel the need to add them to our holiday card distribution list. When someone invites our child to their kid’s birthday party, we make a note to invite their kid to our child’s party in turn. Humans feel an absolute obligation “to the future repayment of favors, gifts, invitations, and the like.” This rule of reciprocation is the first principle of persuasion. Reciprocation is so common that the terms “thank you” and “much obliged” are treated as synonyms even though one implies an “indebtedness.” And the burden on indebtedness is great. We find it unbearably disagreeable and will do anything to find it removed.

The rule for reciprocation is pervasive across the human species, in all parts of the world and in all cultures. Sociologist Alvin Gouldner reported that “there is no human society that does not subscribe to the rule.” It stems from the ancestral need to share resources including food and skills. This “adaptive mechanism” is unique to human beings and made our evolution into organized society possible.

People began specializing in particular types of work, goods started being exchanged, and we started depending on that diversity for the betterment of us all. We have benefited so greatly from this highly ingrained rule that we ensure it is passed on to all members of the society. Our competitive advantage relies on it’s belief. Those who do not conform to the rule are held in the highest negative regard. We call them “moochers” or worse and most of us “will go to great lengths to avoid being considered one of their number.”

So, how is this rule exploited by those who “recognize it as the source of influence that it is?” This rule has significant power and thus, we are powerless in avoiding it. If a person can make us feel like we owe them something in return, even by giving us the most simple or inexpensive gift, for example, we find it almost impossible to refuse when they ask us to comply. They simply have to do us the smallest favor before their request. When a nonprofit group sends you a sheet of personalized address labels along with a request for a donation, the rule of reciprocation is being wielded.

How can we resist falling prey to this tactic, which is significant in strength? Cialdini says we have to “defuse its energy” by determining if we are entering into a favorable situation or trickery where we will be asked to give back in greater proportion than the original favor would require. It comes down to motivation. We must recognize when someone is motivated to exploit our reciprocity.

Social Proof

“One means we use to determine what is correct is to find out what other people think is correct.” When we make decisions, we often look to others to help us decide the best answer. We will throw out our own personal metrics of what is appropriate and what is not if we see social proof that a certain behavior is acceptable. Cialdini says that we have to look no further than a movie theater littered with empty popcorn boxes or a highway with all drivers exceeding the speed limit together to see evidence of this principle of persuasion.

This often works in our favor as a societal whole. Normally, people will behave in a way that is good and right and acceptable and those around them will follow suit. However, this “feature of the principle of social proof is simultaneously its major strength and its major weakness.” Similar to other weapons of influence, social proof is essentially a behavioral shortcut adopted by the masses. It is the use of the shortcut so blindingly that makes us “vulnerable to attacks of profiteers” who understand the mechanism involved.

It is common practice for bartenders to start their shift by placing a few of their own dollar bills into the tip jar or for church ushers to do the same before passing the collection basket around the congregation. Doing so yields larger contributions. If other people are throwing money into the pot, it must be the right thing to do. Advertisers leverage the same thinking. Simply stating that something is “fastest-growing” or “best-selling” is enough to convince people to choose that product over another one.

The autoresponse of social proof is activated even more strongly when we find ourselves in a state of uncertainty. Cialdini writes, “In general, when we are unsure of ourselves, when the situation is unclear or ambiguous, when uncertainty reigns we are most likely to look and accept the actions of others as correct.” There’s an inherent problem to that decision-making solution. It is quite likely that others in the social group are also looking for direction on how to behave. This can lead to a “fascinating phenomenon called pluralistic ignorance.” This is most clearly illustrated in looking at the countless cases of bystanders who do nothing when they bear witness to a heinous crime being committed against someone.

When an emergency situation is happening in front of a group of people, individuals will look to others for confirmation that there is, in fact, an emergency occurring. If everyone else appears unruffled and unconcerned, other individuals are likely to come to the same conclusion. The end result is that everyone in the group carries on as if nothing bad is happening and help is



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not given to the person in real need. These individuals are not unkind, they are unsure.

How does one protect themselves from falling victim to social proofing gone wrong? The challenge lies in the fact that social proof so often equips us to make decisions on autopilot “without personally having to investigate the detailed pros and cons” of each choice. The outcomes are by and large positive when we do this. However, that is not always the case and that is the dilemma that needs solving. “Our best defense against these disadvantages is to recognize when the data are in error.” We need to become more “sensitive to situations where social proofing is working with inaccurate information” so that we can turn the autopilot off and make decisions intentionally and thoughtfully.

Scarcity

“Opportunities seem more valuable to us when their availability is limited.” Humans are incentivized to act when they believe that not acting will result in a potential loss. This principle is applied liberally in the advertisement and promotion of products. The more rare an item, the higher value it is assigned. The sooner the product will become unavailable, the faster a consumer will press the purchase button. We see this play out in the wild world of online beauty products that sell out within minutes of being released.

Another facet of scarcity is the fact that “people seem to be more motivated by the thought of losing something than by the thought of gaining something of equal value.” Marketers who understand this principle use it to their advantage. Instead of telling homeowners how much money they could save on their energy costs by insulating their attic, for example, they focus on how much money homeowners will lose by not insulating their attic. It is a subtle, but important distinction.

Salespeople employ the principle of scarcity in an arguably unethical way. Cialdini shares an example from an appliance store as an illustration. A salesperson sees a couple lingering near a particular model of a discounted appliance. They are giving behavioral indications that they are interested and might be tipped into purchasing the appliance. The salesperson approaches them and tells them they seem interested in that model but the salesperson has to share the unfortunate news that the very last supply of that model was just sold a short time ago. Immediately, the buyers’ interest in the appliance skyrockets. People want what they cannot have!

The salesperson promises to check if any additional supply can be located for the couple, assuming they would buy it if one could be found. The couple agrees emphatically and the sales-

person disappears for a while only to have magically located another unit of the product. The couple buys it, of course, even if they start having second thoughts because they have already committed to doing so.

Knowing that scarcity tactics exist is not sufficient to defend oneself against them. In order to face a scarcity tactic and not be persuaded, we have to get out of the “cognitive processes” and get to the heart of the matter. We react emotionally to scarcity, which removes our ability to take a logical, cognitive approach to the decision. Cialdini says we must “use the arousal itself as our prime cue.” We can take the strength of the strategy back into our own control and use it to our advantage. “By learning to flag the experience of heightening arousal” as a warning sign that we are being actively swept up in a scarcity tactic, we can exercise caution and make a more calculated decision.

Throughout Cialdini’s book he continually circles back to a central theme. People have a tendency to make decisions based on a very limited snippet of all available data. Relying on “an isolated piece of information, even though it normally counsels us correctly, can lead us to clearly stupid mistakes—mistakes that, when exploited by clever others, leave us looking silly or worse.” We are rendered even less resistant to these traps by the fast-paced nature of modern life. We are “rushed, stressed, uncertain, indifferent, distracted, or fatigued” on a regular basis and this inclines us to taking the easy way out, saying yes or no based on the prompts that so often steer us in the right direction.

Cialdini asserts that our ability to recognize a profiteer’s motivation in exploiting these shortcuts is important, but it is not “the real treachery.” The “thing we cannot tolerate” is such widespread abuse of the shortcuts. Society relies on these rules and must continue having access to them for the good they provide, particularly in light of the increasing demands of daily life. Readers would benefit from a more comprehensive update that includes examples from present day profit centers. Modern readers would find a more relatable and applicable example of the social proof rule in social media influencers rather than the currently referenced canned laughter in sitcoms, for example. Nonetheless, the main ideas presented in *Influence* certainly hold relevance, even after more than thirty five years since its original release.