

**Do** you ever realise, after watching a TV weather forecast, from an attractive person of the opposite sex, that you've no recollection whatsoever of what the weather will be like tomorrow?

How helpful is that?

There's some obvious psychology behind this common experience, and it's just one example of how human beings are so easily and predictably influenced, either for good or bad, sometimes knowingly, but often unwittingly.

The ways in which we as a race are predictably influenced is so hard-wired into our brains that Professor Robert Cialdini has made a name for himself by capturing the science and art of influence into six fundamental laws.

These are the laws of...

1. Reciprocation
2. Commitment and Consistency
3. Social Proof
4. Authority
5. Liking
6. Scarcity

As an admirer of Cialdini's work I've summarised each of these laws I've presented the first three in this article. (Laws 4 - 6 can be discovered in Part-II). I've also added examples that we can all relate to which illustrate their endemic power.

As you read, consider the degree to which you are personally influenced by these laws, and the degree to which you currently use them yourself in increase your powers of persuasion.

### 1 Reciprocation

Most people feel an overwhelming urge to repay debts, to do something in return when something is done for them, a favour, a kindness, an unexpected gift.

Am I right? Do you feel this yourself?

This deep-seated urge is so strong that the famous palaeontologist Richard Leaky has described it as... *"The very essence of what it means to be human"*. Going further, sociologist Alvin Gouldner asserts that *"No society on Earth escapes the reciprocity principle"*.

The law of Reciprocity means that we are all bound, even *driven* to repay debts of *all* kinds. If someone does something for you then you feel obligated to repay the kindness in some way, it's an almost automatic reaction.

When socialising with a friend who buys you a drink, you are expected to, and of course you expect, to buy the next round. It's an unwritten, often unspoken social code.

But it goes deeper than that.

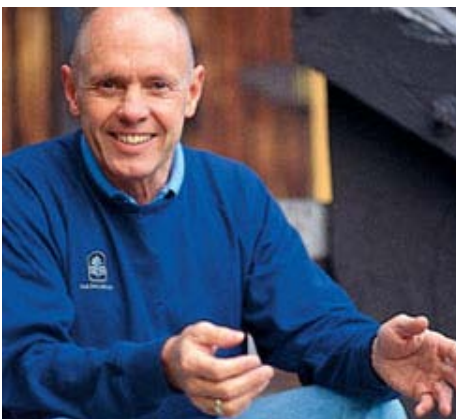


**How would you feel** if your friend insisted on buying that round too, and the next, and the next? You would be feeling pretty uncomfortable is my guess (though quite drunk), and you'd be wrestling them to the floor to get the next round in.

Unless, of course, you're a freeloader who's only in it for the 'here and now', for what you can take, and you don't give a toss about sustaining and building important long-term relationships!

The law of Reciprocity states that when someone has done something meaningful for us in the past, and they ask for a favour later on, we often quickly, and *automatically* say, "Yes". We don't even think about it much because subconsciously we know that we're indebted to them, and we need the psychological release to be able to feel that the 'books are balanced'.

Stephen Covey, in his book 'The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People', talks about the 'Emotional Bank Account'. This wonderful metaphor that accurately describes the balance of 'give and take', or emotional 'deposits and withdrawals' that people make between one another, and which oil the wheels of social interaction and society in general.



Nobody truly wants to feel indebted to another person. Do you? For one thing, it's a disempowering and weak position from which to operate.

Therefore, Reciprocity is a deep and powerful psychologically compelling principle that, under the right circumstances, is all but impossible to resist.



## How to make the law of 'Reciprocity' work for you

How can you make this law work for you in a way that taps into the human psyche and leverages this, without damaging or tricking people into doing things that are harmful to themselves or others?

### 1. Give something away

Such as a gift, a service, valuable information, assistance, or anything that the recipient genuinely finds value in and will benefit from.

Do NOT do this on any form of 'conditional' basis, as in... "I'm giving this to you so that you do this for me". Your gift should be truly unconditional and in no way connected to a future request.

Later, if and when you are in a position of need, then the feeling of indebtedness that the other person feels will allow the law of Reciprocity to go to work. And why shouldn't it?

In the animal and plant world there are numerous examples of 'symbiosis' in which species cooperate with each other to achieve mutual, but exclusive objectives. For example, the clownfish (above) can come in contact with the stinging tentacles of the sea anemone and not be harmed by them. In this way the fish receives protection from its enemies. The clownfish feeds the anemone by gathering nutrients and

also leaving nutritional waste on the tentacles. A sub-aquatic 'win-win'.

### 2. Be the first to give something

The person who gives first is in control. Not from a negative abuse of power perspective, but from the moral stance of... "I helped you when you needed something, and now I'm asking for you to help me out with something else. Will you help me?"

So what can you give? Virtually anything, so long as it's genuinely free, and willingly given, without strings attached. It must benefit your recipient whether or not you get anything out of it.

### 3. Make it personal

Be clear that it's coming from you, not from some faceless organisation. People do favours and 'paybacks' for people, rarely for inhuman organisations.

### 4. Keep on giving

For example, offer something extra that a customer didn't ask for, go the 'extra mile' for a friend or colleague or offer to do another favour or kindness a few weeks later.

When you intelligently employ the law of Reciprocity, then the more you give, the more you will receive (different things, at different times and from different people). Even if you don't, isn't it better to give than to receive?

## 2 Commitment and Consistency

We're all driven to remain consistent in our attitudes, words, and actions. So, when we make a commitment of some kind, go on public record, take a stand or make a decision, there is a personal urge to remain consistent with that original commitment later on.



People are driven to be consistent in all areas of life - in their words, deeds, attitudes, opinions, beliefs, values, habits, and promises.

Donors find it difficult to refuse appeals once they've donated to a cause. Consumers stick with brands they've bought before, even if they're more expensive. Sometimes people are brand loyal without fully understanding why.

*I own a lot of Panasonic electrical items, yet I struggle to explain why this is so, even to myself! I can only put it down to the fact that I bought a Panasonic wide screen TV 8 years ago and I've been pretty consistent ever since. No, it's NOT just because the TV was excellent quality, there are many excellent brands that are just as good. Something else is going on at a deeper psychological level. I think it's to do with commitment and consistency.*

### Why does the Rule of Consistency work?

Consistency is what psychologists call a 'decision heuristic' - a shortcut for making decisions. Life's too complicated to carefully evaluate every element of every situation, so we learn to take shortcuts to help us make what are usually reasonable and reliable decisions.

Socially and personally, consistency is beneficial. Doing things the same way time and time again saves time, avoids having to make repeated decisions and we pretty much know what to expect. It's a form of 'comfort zone'; stick to what we know and we avoid the chance of disappointment, embarrassment, failure, and loss. When the Rule of Consistency is triggered, decisions are made almost automatically.

Moreover, people are also driven to 'appear to be' consistent, because in society consistency is a desirable personal trait. We're seen as rational, trustworthy, stable, and decisive.

Inconsistency, on the other hand, is usually frowned upon as it is seen as irrational, deceptive, unstable, and indecisive. People who are inconsistent in their behaviour embarrass themselves in public, seem a little 'unhinged', cannot be relied upon and probably need 24 hour care... don't they?

Once someone agrees to a request, their attitude may change, they may become, in their own eyes, the kind of person who does this sort of thing, who agrees to charity donations, who takes action on things they believe in etc.

There is a fascinating phenomenon called 'post-purchase cognitive dissonance reduction' which, apart from a wonderful expression to casually trip off your tongue in the pub, describes the tendency of a person to justify to themselves and to others why they made the right decision when making a major purchase. We've all done it. We've all bought something, or made a major public commitment, and even if the seeds of doubt then start to spring, we continue to justify why we have made the right decision. We lie to ourselves.

### How to make the law of 'Commitment and Consistency' work for you

#### 1. Ask someone to make a small commitment

*Commitment is the key to triggering the action of Consistency*

If you can get someone to make a commitment, even a seemingly inconsequential or small one, you automatically trigger the law of consistency. This can then help trigger a further commitment for subsequent, often much larger requests.

According to Cialdini, once we have made a commitment we encounter personal and interpersonal pressures to behave consistently with that commitment. These cause us to respond in ways that justify our earlier decision, even if most onlookers would consider it unwise.



**2. Start small and then build**

Begin by asking someone to agree to a simple request or a small commitment such as completing a questionnaire, request some information or sample a product.

By getting someone to make a decision, take a stand, or perform an action, you establish a new psychological commitment. Once you have that commitment, no matter how small, you will have changed your prospect's self-image just enough to trigger the Rule of Consistency.

Since people strive to be consistent, you can then build on this new self-image and make ever-increasing requests. Accepting a free sample can lead to accepting a small transaction. A small transaction can lead to a larger transaction and so on; a 'relationship' is born.

Organisations align their products and services with their prospect's current sense of consistency, as in...

*"If you're the kind of person who loves fine wine, this magazine was written especially for you."*

They also use the principle the other way around by showing that refusing their offer would be inconsistent...

*"No true wine connoisseur would ever be without the exclusive information in this magazine"*

**3. Action is the key**

If you want to use this law in your own influence and persuasion situations then the more active a commitment you can obtain the better. Instead of telling a person something ask them to think about it: instead of asking them to merely think about it get them to say it out loud; instead of saying it, get them to write it; instead of writing it, get them to do it!

Your requests should not be difficult, but they must be 'active' on the part of the other person i.e. you need to get the other party to think, say or do something of their own volition.



So, ease of response is important, but sometimes it's good to make people work a little. When someone has to expend a small amount of personal effort it increases the power of their commitments, because they have already begun to take action towards it. The more work someone does to get something, the more committed they are to it and the more likely the Rule of Consistency will kick in.

When appropriate, try to obtain public commitments. Public commitments create more lasting change. The more public, the stronger the sense of consistency and the less likely a person will change their mind or withdraw later on. This is why quit smoking campaigners advise those wish to quit to tell as many close friends, family and work colleagues as possible that they're giving up the fags. It's harder to start smoking again when you're going to let so many people down and look a fool in front of people who matter to you.

Remember... people are not only driven to be consistent, but also to 'appear' to be consistent as well.

**3 Social Proof**

All of us look to others to help us decide how to act, to guide our behaviour, to determine whether something is right or wrong.

Most of us are imitators in much of what we do. We look to others for guidance, especially when we're uncertain about something. We ask, "What do others think about this? What do others feel? What do others do?" Then we act accordingly.

*"Social Proof (and social pressure to conform) is evidenced in subtle, and sometimes more obvious ways"*



We do it on the roads, following others when the traffic lights have broken down, we do it at the office conforming to the beliefs and behaviours of the organisation's culture, and fashion is rooted in the principle of social proof, with many people choosing to dress like everyone else.



Why do you think bartenders and street buskers put pound coins or bank notes in their tip jars and guitar cases respectively? How do you feel when signing a sponsorship form for a friend or colleague, when the previous entries are for significant amounts of money?

Because of the Rule of Social Proof, if others are doing it, it must be the right thing to do. It's a sound, logical adaptive behaviour and it's mathematically justified; the more people do something, the more likely it's to be correct... isn't it?

If not, at least it's relatively safe as there's strength in numbers and people generally don't want to be doing something that might be regarded as 'wrong' or stupid.



- Display the number of customers/clients they have
  - Talk about their market leadership
  - Show important or well-known people using the product or service - leveraging the good feeling people have towards a particular celebrity
  - Display a seal of approval by an official rating organisation which supports public approval
  - Cite favourable reviews as third third-party compelling information
  - Cite mentions in 'respected media' as newsworthy products, services and ideas are more trusted
- ... and more

When you want to persuade someone to take a course of action then you may not think that it's the same as selling a product or service.

In fact it's *exactly* the same, as you're selling something... an idea, concept, change of thinking, a shift in behaviour or trying to convince someone to take a specific course of action.

Look back at the bullet point list on the left and apply these principles to your own influence/persuasion situation; most if not all will be relevant.

**2. Social Proof works best in two conditions:**

**Uncertainty**

Social Proof will have the greatest effect when someone is uncertain about you, your offer, your ideas, product, service, company etc. because they will tend to want to do the 'safe' thing, even if they feel this may not be the 'best' thing.



People are driven by a fear of losing something that they already have and/or by losing out on the prospect of a gain.

The dot com bubble of 10 years ago is one of the most dramatic illustrations of the law of social proof.

Millions of people jumped on a bandwagon in fear of losing out on the dramatic stock market gains of that time, only to find that ultimately the bandwagon had no 'wheels'.

**How to make Social Proof work for you**

**1. Most people are imitators**

So, if you want someone to do something, show others doing it. Again, marketers and salespeople know and practice this principle extensively; they...

- List testimonials of satisfied customers and clients, in particular those who have been 'converted' from an alternative product or service or way of thinking
- Show pictures of people using their product or service - seeing is believing
- Show people similar to you using your product or service
- Show the excitement of others who have discovered the product or service; popularity and enthusiasm are unbeatable emotional pulls

**Similarity**

Secondly, Social Proof works best when someone sees people similar to themselves using the product or service or taking the action.

Again, the psychological drive is one of not wanting to do, or to be seen to be doing something that is at odds with the general consensus.

Whenever you go counter to what most other people are doing you are potentially exposing yourself or making an avoidable mistake.

**It doesn't always work...**

Interestingly, in the world of Social Proof two counteracting psychological factors should also be born in mind. These are 'polarity response' and the 'Diffusion of Responsibility' effect.

**1. Polarity responders**

These are people who do not follow the crowd; in fact they often do the exact opposite of what other people do or expect.

These people are mavericks. They can be either fun or frustrating to be around, depending upon the situation and your perspective.

Because polar responders do not swim with the shoal they can be innovative, creative and stretch boundaries. However, they can also fail, trip themselves up and rub people up the wrong way.

A typical response from a polar responder to the common statement "Order now to avoid disappointment" might be ...

*"Why do you need to advertise and persuade me to buy one when clearly you have more customers than you can deal with and will have sold out in no time at all?"*

Polar responders can see through many blunt influence techniques, and are a reminder to us all that Cialdini's laws of influence need to be applied elegantly and subtly.

Thus if you are only 'giving' in order to get something back, you're deliberately trying to trick someone into signing an insurance plan that doesn't meet their needs, or you're pretending that things are scarce when in fact you've a warehouse full of them...

... stop it now!

**2. Diffusion of Responsibility**

The second counter to social proof works in certain group situations, such as a car accident or rummage sale, both of which can result in serious physical injury!

In the former situation passing drivers might reason... *"There are lots of others helping so I needn't get involved."* Or worse still, if the accident has only just happened... *"Surely, with all these cars around someone is bound to stop."*

Consequently they, along with everyone else, drive on whilst people bleed to death!

In the rummage sale, with a huge crowd fighting to get to the front to nab a few bargains many other onlookers might simply think...

*"What's the point, I'm unlikely to get through, and in any case, I'm not going to behave like an animal to grab a cheap bargain."*



**Summary**

So, here we have the first three of Cialdini's 'Laws of Influence':

1. Reciprocity
2. Commitment and Consistency
3. Social Proof

In part-II of this article I will describe laws 4, 5 and 6, and again illustrate these with modern day examples.

I will also answer the provocation I posed at the start, which is why attractive people should not be allowed to present the weather forecast on TV. If you've not already guessed... it's a typical 'polarity response'!

If you would like to receive a free copy of Part 2 of this article, and discover the remaining 3 laws, and how they can help you to be come more influential and persuasive, then click on the automated email button below (if reading this article electronically), or email the author at:

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*I hope you enjoyed reading this article as much as I enjoyed writing it!*

Jon



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