The Principles of Persuasion

Researchers have been studying the psychology of influence and persuasion for 50 years. Robert Cialdini’s research suggests there are just six principles of influence that will significantly increase the possibility of a positive response to your requests.

The Principle of Reciprocation. Every culture on earth trains its members in the rule of reciprocation that says, “You must not take without giving in return.” When you have a situation where you want to be more influential, look for whose business circumstances can you advance and how you can do it. That will cause them to want to help you in return. You can leverage the principle of reciprocation when they thank you by saying, “Of course, I’m glad to help. It’s what partners do for one another.” If there isn’t a long term partnership yet, say, “Of course, I was glad to do it, I know you’d do the same for me.”

The Principle of Scarcity. People are more mobilized to action by the idea of losing something than of gaining that very same thing. Tell people that what you have to offer is unique, uncommon and rare – and that they can’t get it if they don’t move in the direction you are recommending. And tell them what they stand to lose if they don’t follow your advice.

The Principle of Authority. People want to follow legitimate experts. Before you try to influence, share your level of expertise on the topic. If you’re embarrassed to do so, have someone who knows your new prospect call and tell them about you. An excellent time to ask someone to make that call for you is in the moment after their “thank you.”

You must be knowledgeable and trustworthy. You can convey your honesty by mentioning a weakness in your position before presenting the strongest argument in its favor. There is a moment of power immediately after you admit a weakness. Admit a weakness and say, “but…” and then deliver your strongest argument.

The Principle of Commitment and Consistency. Increase your success by getting prospects to take a small step that’s logically consistent with where you’re going to ask them to move later. The best commitment I know is a written commitment; people live up to what they write down.

The Principle of Consensus. People decide what to do by looking at what others do in that situation. Use the people who refer you as the communicators for your products and services. Use client letters and testimonials and share the ones that are most similar to the people you are trying to persuade. Those are the ones that will resonate with them.

The Principle of Liking. We prefer to say “yes” to those people we like. Your job is not to get people to like you as much as it is to come to like the people you’re dealing with. Then you have two people who like each other. You can’t do better than that in the business world.

Robert B. Cialdini, Ph.D., president of Influence at Work, is the most cited social psychologist in the field of influence and persuasion. His books, Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion and Influence: Science and Practice, have sold more than 500,000 copies in 12 languages. A Regent’s Professor of psychology at Arizona State University, Cialdini was named Distinguished Graduate Research Professor New Information Presentations. His entire 2005 MDRT Annual Meeting presentation is available at the MDRT Power Center (www.mdrtpowercenter.org).