




WEBS OF INFLUENCE

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF
ONLINE PERSUASION

The secret strategies that make us  click

NATHALIE NAHAI
THE WEB PSYCHOLOGIST

13 INFLUENCE: AN INTRODUCTION

“ *Who shall set a limit to the influence of a human being?*
RALPH WALDO EMERSON, POET, ESSAYIST AND LECTURER,
THE CONDUCT OF LIFE, ‘POWER’ (1860)

- You have a great product.
- You have a clear business strategy.
- You even have a beautifully designed website.

Now what?

Now, you sell – but not to just anybody and certainly not just by launching your website and hoping for the best.

If you’ve been reading this book in order, you’ll already be armed with a good understanding of who your target market is and how best to communicate with them. This alone will go a long way to creating a rapport and engagement with your audience – factors that are essential to increasing your influence online – but there is one final step. To really see results, you need to learn and apply the principles of direct, automatic influence.

In the following pages we’ll take a look at the theory behind these persuasion principles, how and why they work and when to use which ones. By the end of this chapter, you’ll have the building blocks you need to wield influence online.

THE ART OF PERSUASION

Psychologists define persuasion as ‘the process through which the attitudes and behaviors of an agent are intentionally conveyed in a certain direction by another agent without coercion’.¹ To put that in plain English, persuasion is the art of shaping someone’s attitudes and behaviours.

In an online context, it’s about designing an environment that will persuade your users to behave a certain way. Persuasion techniques can be used to

encourage people to sign your petition, rate your products, comment on your blog, purchase your new service, subscribe to a newsletter – in fact, any symbolic or physical action that you wish your users to make can, potentially, be influenced by persuasion.

When visitors arrive at your website, they will literally (and most of the time, subconsciously) scan the page for cues as to what the website's about and how they should interact with it.² By engineering this virtual space in such a way that only some actions and resources are available, you can reduce the possible actions your user can take to encourage favourable outcomes.

To give a simple example, if your primary goal is to build an e-mail database of subscribers, you can construct your website so that users can only access your newsletter by submitting their e-mail address. In this particular case, by designing your website around this reciprocal e-mail-for-access exchange, you are sending a clear signal to new visitors that this is the action they should take.

MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

Clean and simple

- **Give us a clue** What cues are you providing to your website visitors? Identify three actions that you wish visitors to take and provide clear calls to action. For instance, 'Sign up to our newsletter for special discounts!', 'Try it [service/product] for free!', 'Like us on Facebook!'
- **Fair exchange** Make sure you use the principle of reciprocity to ensure a fair sense of value exchange. Requesting a user's name and e-mail address in return for access to valuable information is usually seen as a fair trade.

COMPLIANCE

'Compliance' refers to the act of requesting something from someone and getting the desired response. Whether this request is overt (being asked to babysit for a friend) or covert (seeing a laundry detergent advert that claims to 'wash whiter' in the hope that you'll switch brands), when it comes to compliance, the person being targeted will know that they're being impelled to respond in a certain way.

Disrupt then reframe

Of course, with the growing popularity of influence literature and an ever-increasing public awareness of how persuasion tactics work, it can be tricky to use such techniques effectively. This has not escaped the notice of the academic world, where researchers are now unearthing new, powerful mechanisms that can work on even the most jaded of audiences.

Perhaps the most intriguing and effective technique to be discovered is the one known as 'disrupt then reframe'. This particular process works by intentionally disrupting someone's resistance to an attempt to influence by reframing the request or message so that the target is more susceptible to it.

Allow me to give you an example. In one study, two psychologists named Davis and Knowles³ went from door to door trying to sell holiday cards for three dollars apiece. In order to test which elements (or combination of elements) were the most persuasive, they introduced a disruptive component in their sales pitch, telling their targets that the cards were worth '300 pennies' (as opposed to three dollars). Alongside this simple 'disrupt' condition, they also included a reframing component, saying that the cards were 'a bargain'.

The experiment yielded fascinating results. The process worked – but only when targets were approached with the 'disrupt then reframe' sales pitch. In being told that the cards were '300 pennies ... that's three dollars. It's a bargain', the targets' natural thought process of 'I am being solicited' was disrupted by the uncommon wording of the request. This created room for the reframe. By disrupting their targets' resistance processes and catching them off guard, this simple technique ultimately resulted in a significant increase in the levels of compliance and sales.

MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

Cause disruption

- **Catch them off-guard** How can you disrupt your visitors' natural anti-soliciting defence mechanisms? Take a look at your website and those of your direct competitors and identify the common sales pitch ('Try it now for only £4.99 a month!').
- **Reframe it** Once you've identified your soliciting pitch, find a way to reframe it so as to stand out from your competitors and catch your clients off-guard. For example, instead of saying 'Try it now for only £4.99 a month!', you could experiment with 'Try it now, for less than a bucket of beans! For only £4.99 a month, it's an amazing bargain.'

Fear then relief

Interestingly, the sequence in which we experience emotions prior to receiving a request can also influence whether or not we comply. In a field study set in Poland, two psychologists took to the streets to test just that.⁴

They placed a card that resembled a parking ticket on the doors or under the windscreen wipers of illegally parked cars. While the cards placed on the car doors were simple advertisements designed to elicit relief in the car owners, those placed beneath the wipers were either fake parking tickets (to elicit fear) or advertisements (fear then relief).

Of the drivers whose cars had been targeted, which do you think were the ones most likely to comply with a subsequent request?

If you guessed the advertisement group, you'd be right. The psychologists found that the drivers who experienced fear then relief were more likely to comply with a subsequent request than fellow participants who had either not experienced any fear or continued to be anxious after the event.

The researchers concluded that this seemingly mindless acquiescence was a result of the subjects' fear response, in which their attention would have been diverted to assess and manage the threat (the potential parking ticket) they were facing.

Anchor points

When it comes to asking people for favours in the real world, salespeople know only too well that the key to success often lies in the delivery and content of the initial request. Using a technique called 'anchoring', a salesperson will deliberately manipulate your decision-making process simply by providing you with the 'anchor' of an unattractive initial request.

In this context, any subsequent (and less outlandish) requests will appear more acceptable than the first, resulting in a higher probability that you'll 'compromise' and comply with the second. Of course this doesn't work all the time, and if you get it wrong and ask for something completely ridiculous, you risk getting dismissed out of hand.⁵

Innate interesting-ness

Research exploring the psychology of decision-making shows that we are motivated to achieve our goals in the most rewarding, effective way possible and our responses to a request will usually stem from the way we *feel* about it.⁶

For example, one group of psychologists found that when it comes to complying with a public request, such as being asked to donate a prize to the school raffle, we tend to act from the need to avoid feelings of fear and shame. When it comes to responding to a favour in private, however, we may act from the need to alleviate feelings of guilt or pity.⁷

In terms of positive motivations, research has shown that we are more inclined to comply with requests that we find interesting in and of themselves. This would suggest that the kick we get from performing an exciting or stimulating task can be rewarding enough to ensure compliance.⁸

So, how does this work online? Well, the team over at Silverman Research⁹ (an employee research company) decided to test just this – on one of the most boring tasks known to humankind: the employee survey. I'm the first to admit that these time-consuming, bureaucracy-serving forms fill me with sense of dread, but what if they could be made interesting? Exciting, even? That's the challenge the Silverman Research team took on when it launched 'Opinion Space',¹⁰ – a project it helped build in collaboration with computer scientists at the University of California, Berkeley.

Designed to enable its client, Unilever, to collate and analyse richer, more accurate data from its international assignees (IAs), the Silverman team decided to break away from the traditional tick box format and, instead, created a fantastically innovative solution to the problem.

They developed an interactive, visually compelling online survey that allowed employees to give feedback, while seeing where they were in relation to their peers. The employees were asked to write a comment in response to the question, 'How could Unilever improve its IA policies?' Using algorithms to interpret this data, the answers given by each respondent created a unique data point that was then represented visually by a glowing white dot, so the employee could see his or her placement relative to the other dots within the employee galaxy (see below). They could then click on the dots of their (anonymous) colleagues to read and rate their comments, resulting in a survey unlike any other.

The outcome? Unilever was delighted with the resulting data and the project went on to win two industry awards.¹¹ It just goes to show, if you can make this, the most mundane of activities, exciting enough to elicit high levels of quality compliance, you can do it for your own online business.



Source: Screenshot from www.Stivemeffresearch.com/home/direct/

MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU

Real-time fun

- **And ... action** What actions are you trying to get your users to take? If it's something simple and mundane like gathering a name and someone's e-mail address, you may wish to revert to the principle of reciprocity (as mentioned earlier, that's when they give you their e-mail address in exchange for access to valuable information on your website).
- **Make it interesting** If you're looking to collect richer data, such as getting users to take a poll on your website or during an online webinar, you can make the task more interesting by using a system that visualises real-time results. Not only does this increase the innate interestingness of the task itself but it also panders to our fundamental interest in how we match up to our peers. For website polls, you can use simple software like SurveyMonkey¹² to get real-time results, or to poll attendees during live webinars, you can use platforms such as InstantPresenter¹³ to invigorate your data collection.