

A LINE ON LIFE

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Antecedents of Influence *

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

If you want to persuade people, how can you influence them to say "Yes" to you?

Dr. Robert Cialdini of Arizona State University was a "*pushover*" for various products and little-known causes. He decided to study the processes that had influenced him so effectively. Cialdini sought training from "*influence professionals*" — fund raisers, advertisers, salespersons, negotiators, con artists, cult recruiters — whose success depended on using effective strategies. Here are a few principles of influence that he found.

The context of the request is more important than the request itself.

To his surprise, the most successful persuaders do not pay as much attention to making their requests as the do to "*what they did immediately before they made their requests*." Essentially, they created a **psychological context** for their request. This context changes the way the request is viewed.

With this context, persuaders can create a **contrast effect**. For example, if you come into an exclusive store to buy a sweater and a suit, the smart salesperson would sell you the suit first. After spending \$600 for a suit, \$150 for a sweater would not seem that expensive. The sale of the suit provides the context for the sale of the sweater. By structuring previous events, people can change how anything is viewed.

Cialdini's favorite example of contrast is a coed who — after two months into her first year away at college — writes to her parents for the first time. She apologizes for not writing sooner, but asks them to sit down before they read further.

After several weeks in the hospital, her head injuries are better. She can almost see normally, and her headaches are less frequent. She was injured by jumping out of her dorm window during the dorm fire. Since the dorm burned down completely, a kind gas attendant — who helped her immediately after she jumped and visited her at the hospital — offered her a place to stay. While she was sharing his basement room, they fell in love and are going to be married, especially since she is pregnant.

After this deluge of terrible news, the coed reveals to her parents that none of it is true. However, she is failing chemistry. After mentioning the worst fears of any parent, she tells them of her failure. The coed knew her parents would be upset about her grade in chemistry. However, in contrast to her disastrous news — even though it was false — her failure seems mild.

Another contextual factor involves the norm of **reciprocity** — "*we are obligated to give back to others the form of behavior that they have first given to us*." Besides being found in all known cultures, this norm is ingrained in all areas of our culture. From childhood, we are socialized to reciprocate. It affects all areas of our lives — sending greetings, giving presents, invitations to parties. To avoid negative labels like "*moocher*" or "*freeloader*," we are obligated to return favors done for us.

Walking through an airport, many of us have been offered a gift. The best example of these "*gifts*" involves the **Hare Krishna** sect. They approach people and pin flowers on them. Feeling obligated by this gift, we are much more likely to donate a few dollars to their cause. The donation releases us from any feeling of obligation. Then while leaving, most of us angrily throw the flower away. Later, Krishna solicitors

scavenge the waste cans, retrieve the flowers, recycle them many times and increase their income dramatically.

Some of us rebelled against this. We usually threw the flowers on the ground — so we no longer have a gift that obligates us — and walked away without giving a donation. To counter that strategy, the Krishnas used lapel pins of small American flags. Especially during "*Desert Storm*," how many of us would throw an American flag on the ground? This left us still feeling obligated.



This method is used by other organizations. For example, the **DAV** (Disabled American Veterans) use it too. When they used to send their annual appeal for funds, they got donations from 18% of their letters. Currently, by including a seven-cent pack of address labels, they increased donations to 35% — almost double the original percentage!

The law of reciprocity also applies to making a concession. In other words, if you make a concession, then most others will feel obligated to make one too. Cialdini was approached by a Boy Scout, who asked him to buy two \$5 tickets to the Boy Scout Circus. When Cialdini refused, the Boy Scout offered a couple of chocolate bars for a dollar each. Cialdini bought two. He had fallen victim to the "*door-in-the-face*" ploy. If you feel the least bit guilty for refusing a large request, you are more likely to comply with a smaller request by the same person. Similarly, would you write me your opinion about this article, or would you rather just read my next article on influencing others?

* Adapted from Robert B. Cialdini's talk, "Principles and Tactics of Social Influence," presented at the American Psychological Association Convention in Los Angeles, August 12, 1994. For more information, read Cialdini's book, *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*, Quill Publishers, 1993.