

A LINE ON LIFE

12/18/94

More Influence Principles *

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In a previous article, to influence others, we learned that the **psychological context** of the request was more important than the request itself. We also covered principles of **contrast** and **reciprocity**. What other principles can we use to influence others?

The principle of **scarcity** essentially says that people desire more those things that seem to be scarce. We see sales that advertise "*limited supply*" or "*limited time only*" to give the idea of scarcity. Remember the Cabbage Patch Doll craze, when people paid \$900 at auction for the dolls? These dolls sold for \$23 each in the store, but the stores no longer had them.

The same scarcity principle applies to competing with others for a scarce resource. Cialdini's brother used this principle in buying and reselling cars. As interested parties answered his ad to sell the car, he would schedule *all* to see the car at the same time. Usually one person would show up early to inspect the car. While he was inspecting the car, others potential buyers arrive to view it. With several buyers vying for the same article, each sees it as scarcer and therefore more valuable. Of course, the first arrival is given priority. Even though the first person has the advantage, he is now being pressured by the presence of the others. If he rejects the car, the others are there to buy it – so he is less likely to make a thorough inspection or quibble about the price. Of course, if the first person rejects the car, the others are ready to pounce on it.

Another principle relates to **credibility**, which is due to at least two other factors. One of these is **authority** – those who *seem* to have greater knowledge or experience in an area are more influential. Only the *aura* of expertise needs to be there. Remember the ads in which Robert Young advocated the use of decaffeinated coffee for health measures? That campaign was the most successful one ever for the American Coffee Association. Though Robert Young was not a physician, he played the part of "*Marcus Welby, M.D.*" for many years.

Another aspect of credibility is being **trustworthy** – providing information in an honest and unbiased way. This is best indicated by making statements that go *against* your interests. Advertisers indicate this by first mentioning a disadvantage of their product. Some examples are –

"The Peace Corps: we're the toughest job you'll ever love."

"Avis: we're number two, but we try harder."

"Listerine: we're the taste you hate three times a day."

Once they have mentioned a negative point, they seem more objective. As they continue to describe their product, we are more willing to trust them.

The use of influence occurs in all settings, even a restaurant. To get larger tips, waiters and waitresses want us to buy more. In this way, the base for figuring their percentage is larger. For example, when celebrating a special event at a fine restaurant, we often ask the waitress about a specific item on the menu. What if she says it is not good today, and she recommends a less expensive item? We are more likely to trust her later recommendations. Some use this as a ploy, and they later recommend more expensive wines and desserts. Others, before their shift, make a definite effort each day to find out what is good from the chef. Then they pass this information on to their customers. Of course, satisfied customers leave bigger tips.

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We need to discuss the **ethics** of using these principles. If the context is real, then the behavior is ethical. However, if the context is artificially created, then it is not ethical.

Unethical manipulations might succeed in the short run. However, in the long run, unethical influence is disastrous for those who use it. In the restaurant, if customers discover that a ploy was being used, trust will be lost. Once trust is lost, it is almost impossible to regain. Customers may request another waitress or waiter, or they may never come back to that restaurant again.

Remember the manipulations of the Hare Krishna that we discussed last week? They artificially created a context of obligation by giving a "gift" – a flower or an American flag lapel pin. Angered at the manipulation, people began to avoid Hare Krishna cult members, to prepare themselves to resist their gift offers, or to complain about them to airport authorities. Airport authorities typically responded by either restricting the Hare Krishna to isolated areas or by announcing their location over the loudspeaker, so they could be avoided. Since nobody is falling for their scheme, last year the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Inc. went into bankruptcy.

Are you planning to use these principles to get more, bigger or better presents this Christmas? It might work this year, but if it is unethically rigged, it will hurt your ability to influence others later.

* 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.