Chapter 12
Turning Persuasion from an Art into a Science

Robert B. Cialdini

What is the place of the persuasion process in the topic of clashes of knowledge? The outcome of such clashes is often determined not so much by the features of the knowledge itself as by the features of the way the knowledge is presented. Having a good case to make is not enough. It is the side that makes its good case well (i.e., most persuasively) that will frequently win the day. The focus of this chapter, then, will be on methods for communicating one's case in the most effective manner so as to prevail in clashes of knowledge.

The Roots of Persuasion Studies

Dangerous Fruit

First, a brief step into the past is in order. The renowned scholar of social influence, William McGuire, determined that in the four millennia of recorded Western history, there have been only four scattered centuries in which the study of persuasion flourished as a craft. The first was the Periclean Age of ancient Athens; the second occurred during the years of the Roman Republic; the next appeared in the time of the European Renaissance; and the last extended over the 100 years that have just ended and that witnessed the advent of large-scale advertising, information, and mass-media campaigns (McGuire, 1985). Although this bit of background seems benign, it possesses an alarming side: Each of the three previous centuries in the systematic study of persuasion ended similarly when political authorities had the masters of persuasion killed.

A moment's reflection suggests why this pattern occurred. Information about the persuasion process was dangerous because it created a base of power entirely separate from that which the authorities of the times controlled. Persuasion is a way to move people that does not require coercion, intimidation, or brute strength. Persuaders win the day by marshalling forces that heads of state have no monopoly over, such as cleverly crafted language, properly placed information, and, most important, psychological insight. To eliminate this rival source of influence, it was easiest for

P. Meusburger et al. (eds.), *Clashes of Knowledge*.

the rulers to eliminate those few individuals who truly understood how to engage in the process.

Consequently, each of the three earlier centuries in the systematic study of persuasion ended in the same unsettling manner—with a purge of the reigning persuasion experts. It has not been long since the completion of the fourth such century. Therefore, should those who study and master the material contained in this chapter begin looking for cover out of fear that they might be included in an impending fourth day of annihilation? Not this time.

The Flowering of Science

Something revolutionary has happened to the study of persuasion during the past half century. In the bargain, the change has rendered implausible the idea that persuasion expertise could be eradicated by eradicating the persuasion experts. Alongside the art of persuasion has grown a formidable science of the process. For over 50 years, researchers have been applying a rigorous scientific approach to the question of which messages most successfully lead people to concede, comply, or change. Under controlled conditions, they have documented the sometimes astonishing impact of making a request in one fashion versus making the identical request in a slightly different fashion. Besides the sheer size of the effects these researchers have uncovered, there is another noteworthy aspect of their results—they are repeatable.

Scientists have long employed a set of systematic procedures for discovering *and* replicating findings, including persuasion findings. As a consequence, the study of persuasion no longer exists only as an ethereal art. It is now a science, a solid science, that can produce the same result time and again. What is more, whoever engages in the scientific process can duplicate the result. Brilliant, inspired individuals are no longer necessary to uncover the truth about persuasion. The power of discovery does not reside inside the minds of a few persuasive geniuses anymore but inside the scientific process. Therefore, knowledge about persuasion cannot be eliminated by eliminating the people who possess it—because somebody else can come along, use the same scientific procedures, and get the knowledge back again. So, anyone interested in becoming expert in the ways of persuasion is safe from threatened power holders, who should now be more interested in acquiring the information than abolishing it.

But, students of persuasion have a right to feel more than just relieved. They are entitled to feel encouraged by the fact that similar procedures can produce the same persuasion results over and over. If such replicability is indeed the case, it means that persuasion is governed by natural laws. The upshot offers a distinct advantage to anyone wishing to employ persuasion effectively. If persuasion is lawful, it is learnable. Whether born with an inspired talent for influence or not, whether preternaturally insightful about the process or not, whether a gifted artisan of the language or not, a person can learn how to be more influential. By applying a small

set of principles that govern the persuasion process, one should be better able to move others in the direction of desired concessions, consensus, and compliance.

Six Universals of Persuasive Influence

For the past 30 years, I have been a fascinated participant in the search for a set of universal principles of persuasive influence, concentrating primarily on the major factors that bring about a specific form of behavior change—compliance with a request (Cialdini, 2001). What are the features of a request that my colleagues and I have found reliably spur a "yes" in response? Six central human tendencies appear to be key to successful influence of this sort: reciprocation, consistency, social validation, liking, authority, and scarcity.

Reciprocation

When the American Disabled Veterans' Organization sends out requests for contributions to potential donors in the United States, its appeal is productive about 18 percent of the time. But when the mailing includes an unsolicited gift (personalized address labels), the success rate jumps to 35 percent (Smolowe, 1990). Why? What is it about those gummed bits of paper, which no one requested and few desired, that could nearly double the effectiveness of the request? To understand, one must recognize the reach and power of an essential rule of human conduct: the code of reciprocity.

All societies subscribe to a norm that obligates individuals to repay in kind what they have received (Gouldner, 1960). When seen in this light, one can begin to appreciate why, upon receiving a packet of unwanted address labels from the veterans' organization, twice as many people would send a donation in return. It was not *what* they had received as a gift that was crucial. It was that they *had* received a gift.

Charitable organizations are far from alone in this approach. Food manufacturers offer free in-store samples, exterminators offer free in-home examinations, health clubs offer free workouts, and so on. The effect is not merely to give customers exposure to the product or service, it is also to indebt them. And the pull of the reciprocity rule extends beyond consumer decisions. Pharmaceutical companies spend millions of dollars per year to support medical researchers and to provide gifts to individual physicians. Evidence indicates that, as a result, researchers' findings and physicians' recommendations become drastically more favorable to these companies' interests. For instance, a 1998 study in the *New England Journal of Medicine* found that 37 percent of researchers who published conclusions critical of the safety of calcium-channel-blocking drugs had received prior drug company support; but every one of the researchers whose conclusions were favorable to the drugs' safety

had received prior support in the form of free trips, research funding, or employment (Stelfox et al., 1998).

The rule for reciprocation does not just cover gifts and favors; it also applies to reciprocal concessions, that is, concessions that people make to one another. For instance, if you were to reject my large request and I then were to make a concession by retreating to a smaller request, you would likely reciprocate with a concession of your own—perhaps by agreeing to my smaller request. If you do not believe me, consider the results of an experiment my colleagues and I conducted. We stopped a random sample of passersby on public walkways and asked if they would be willing to volunteer to chaperone a group of inmates from the local juvenile detention center on a day trip to the zoo. As you can imagine, very few complied. But, for another random sample of passersby, we began with an even larger request—to serve as an unpaid counselor at the center for 3 h per week for the next 2 years! Not one of our second sample agreed to this extreme request. But, at that point, we offered them a concession, saying "Oh, if you can't do that, would you chaperone a group of juvenile detention center inmates on a day trip to the zoo?" That concession worked wonders, stimulating return concessions and nearly tripling compliance with the zoo trip request from 17 percent to 50 percent (Cialdini et al., 1975).

Consistency

Not long ago, Gordon Sinclair, the owner of a well-known Chicago restaurant, was struggling with a problem that afflicts all restaurateurs these days. Patrons frequently reserve a table but, without forewarning, fail to appear as scheduled. Mr. Sinclair solved the problem by asking his receptionist to change two words of what she said to callers requesting reservations—a change that dropped his "no-show" rate from 30 percent to 10 percent immediately. The two words were effective because they drew on the force of another potent human motivation: the desire to be (and to appear) consistent.

Most people prefer to be consistent with what they have previously done or said. For this reason, if I can get you to go on record, to make a public commitment, I will have greatly increased the chance that you will behave congruently with that commitment in the future. For example, Israeli researcher Joseph Schwartzwald and his coworkers were able to nearly double monetary contributions for the handicapped in certain neighborhoods by approaching residents 2 weeks before the actual request and getting them to sign a petition supporting the handicapped (Schwartzwald et al., 1983).

So, what were the two words that harnessed the tendency toward public consistency among Mr. Sinclair's restaurant patrons and pressed them to act in his interests? The receptionist modified her request from "Please call if you have to change your plans" to "*Will you* please call if you have to change your plans?" At that point, she paused politely … and waited for a response. To my mind, the wait was pivotal

because it induced customers to fill the pause with a public commitment to comply with her request. And public commitments, even seemingly minor ones, direct future action.

Social Validation

One wintry New York morning, a man stopped for 60 s on a busy sidewalk and gazed skyward—at nothing in particular. He did so as part of an experiment by City University of New York social psychologists Stanley Milgram, Leonard Bickman, and Lawrence Berkowitz. It was designed to find out what effect this action would have on passersby. Most of them simply detoured or brushed by. Then, he did one thing differently that caused large numbers of pedestrians to halt, crowd together, and peer upward with him, still at nothing. What was it? I can offer two hints. First, he altered not one bit of what he did or said during that 60 s, staying stock-still and silent just as before. Second, the single change he made incorporated the phenomenon of "social validation."

One fundamental way that people decide what to do in a situation is to look to what others are doing or have done there. If *many* individuals like us have decided for a particular idea, we are more likely to follow, for we find the idea more correct, more valid, than would be the case without their lead. How did our New Yorker take advantage of the process of social validation to multiply his influence over passersby? He brought in four of his friends to stare skyward with him. When the initial set of upward-gazers increased from one to five, the percentage of New Yorkers who followed rose dramatically; and larger initial sets of friends generated even greater impact, nearly stopping traffic on the street within 1 min (Milgram et al., 1969). It appears that if numerous others seem to find merit in something—even something insubstantial—people assume that it must have merit, and they act accordingly.

As a result, requesters can foster our compliance by demonstrating (or merely implying) that others just like us have already complied. For example, in one study, a fundraiser who showed homeowners a list of neighbors who had donated to a local charity significantly increased the frequency of contributions; what is more, the longer the list, the greater was the effect (Reingen, 1982). It seems obvious, then, why marketers inform us that their product is the largest selling or fastest growing or why television commercials regularly depict crowds rushing to stores and hands depleting shelves of the advertised item.

Not so obvious, however, are the circumstances under which social validation can backfire. There is an understandable, but misguided, tendency of health educators to call attention to a problem by depicting it as regrettably frequent. Information campaigns stress that alcohol and drug use is intolerably high, that adolescent suicide rates are alarming, and that polluters are spoiling the environment. Although their claims are both true and well-intentioned, the creators of these campaigns have overlooked something basic about the compliance process: Within the statement

"Look at all the people who are doing this undesirable thing" lurks the powerful and undercutting message "Look at all the people who *are* doing it." Research shows that, as a consequence, many such programs boomerang, generating even more of the undesirable behavior. For instance, a suicide intervention program administered to New Jersey teenagers informed them of the alarming number of teenage suicides. Health researchers found that, as a consequence, participants became significantly more likely to see suicide as a potential solution to their problems (Shaffer et al., 1991). Much more effective are campaigns that honestly depict the unwanted activity as a damaging problem despite the fact that relatively *few* individuals perform it (Donaldson, 1995; Donaldson et al., 1995).

Liking

It is hardly surprising that people prefer to say yes to those they know and like. Consider, for example, the worldwide success of the Tupperware Corporation and its "home party" program. Through the in-home demonstration party, the company arranges for its customers to buy from and for a liked friend (the party hostess) rather than from an unknown salesperson. So favorable has been the effect on proceeds that, according to company literature, a Tupperware party begins somewhere in the world every 2.7 s.

But, of course, most commercial transactions do not take place in home parties among already-liked others. Under these much more typical circumstances, those who wish to invoke the power of liking must resort to another strategy: They must first get their influence targets to like them. How do they do it? The tactics that compliance practitioners employ cluster around certain factors that controlled research has shown to increase liking.

Physical attractiveness. Although it is generally acknowledged that good-looking individuals have an advantage in social interaction, most people sorely underestimate the size and reach of that advantage. For example, researchers found that voters in Canadian federal elections during the 1970s gave several times more votes to physically attractive candidates than to unattractive ones—while insisting that their choices would never be influenced by something as superficial as appearance (Efran & Patterson, 1974, 1976). Looks are influential in other domains as well. In a 1993 study conducted by Peter Reingen and Jerome Kernan, good-looking fundraisers for the American Heart Association generated nearly twice as many donations (42 percent versus 23 percent) as did other requesters.

Similarity. We humans like people who are similar to us. Thus, salespeople often search for (or fabricate) a similarity between themselves and their customers: "You're a skier? I love to ski!" Fundraisers do the same, with good results. For example, as part of one experiment, charity solicitors canvassed a college campus asking for contributions to a cause. When they added, "I'm a student, too" to their requests, donations more than doubled (Aune & Basil, 1994).

Compliments. Praise and other forms of positive estimation also stimulate liking. The simple information that one is appreciated can be a highly effective device for producing return liking and willing compliance. Indeed, praise may not have to be accurate to work. Research at the University of North Carolina found that compliments produced just as much liking for the flatterer when they were untrue as when they were genuine (Drachman et al., 1978). It is for such reasons that direct salespeople are trained in the use of praise.

Cooperation. Cooperation is another factor that has been shown to enhance positive feelings and behavior (Bettencourt et al., 1992). That is why compliance professionals often strive to be perceived as cooperating partners with a potential customer (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1991). Automobile sales managers frequently cast themselves as "villains" so that the salesperson can "do battle" on behalf of the prospective buyer. The cooperative, pulling-together kind of relationship that is consequently produced between the salesperson and customer naturally leads to a desirable form of liking that promotes sales.

Authority

Remember the man who used social validation to get large numbers of passersby to interrupt their progress and stare toward the sky with him? How might he use a different principle of influence or authority to accomplish the opposite? Rather than getting moving strangers to halt, how could he spur into motion stationary strangers waiting at a corner for a red light to change; and how could he do so without a single encouraging word or gesture? As discovered by a team of University of Texas researchers, the answer is simple: He could wear the right clothes. When he wore a suit and tie, which marked him as some kind of authority, 350 percent more pedestrians followed him across the street—against the light, against the traffic, and against the law—than when he was dressed casually (Lefkowitz et al., 1955).

Humans are not the only species to give sometimes single-minded deference to those in authority positions. In *The Social Contract* Robert Ardry (1970) reports on studies of food-taste acquisition in colonies of Japanese monkeys. In one troop, a taste for caramels was developed by introducing this new food into the diet of low-ranking members of the colony. A year and a half later, only 51 percent of the troop had acquired the taste, but still none of the leaders. Contrast this with what happened in a second troop where wheat was introduced first to the leader. Wheat-eating—to that point unknown to these animals—spread through the whole colony within 4 h.

Legitimate authorities are extremely influential in directing human conduct (Blass, 2000). Normally, it makes great sense to accept experts' guidance. Following their advice often helps facilitate rapid and correct choices. Therefore, people sometimes respond unthinkingly, deferring to an authority's judgment when it makes no sense at all: That Texas jaywalker, even in a suit and tie, was no more an

authority on crossing the street than the rest of the pedestrians there. But when his clothing served as a symbol of authority, they followed.

It should come as no surprise that influence professionals frequently try to harness the power of authority by touting their experience, expertise, or scientific credentials: "In business since XXXX," "Four out of five doctors recommend the ingredients in XXXX," and so on. There is nothing wrong with such claims when they are real, for people usually want to know what true authorities think; it helps promote sound choices. The problem comes when phony claims are made. When people are not thinking hard, as is often the case when confronted by authority symbols, they can be easily steered in the wrong direction by ersatz experts—those who merely present the aura of legitimacy. For instance, several years ago in the United States, a highly successful ad campaign starred the actor Robert Young proclaiming the health benefits of decaffeinated coffee. Mr. Young appears to have been so effective in dispensing this medical opinion only because for many years he had played a physician (Marcus Welby, M.D.) on TV.

Scarcity

While a member of the faculty at Florida State University, psychologist Stephen West registered an odd occurrence after surveying students about the campus cafeteria cuisine. Ratings of the food rose significantly from the week before, even though there had been no change in the menu, food quality, or preparation. Instead, the shift resulted from an announcement that, because of a fire, cafeteria meals would not be available for several weeks (West, 1975).

This account highlights the impact of perceived scarcity on human judgment. A great deal of evidence shows that items and opportunities become more desirable as they become less available (Lynn, 1991). For this reason, marketers trumpet the unique benefits or the one-of-a-kind character of their offerings. It is also for this reason that they consistently engage in "limited time" promotions or put prospective consumers into competition with one another in "limited supply" sales programs.

Less widely recognized is that scarcity affects the value not only of commodities but of information as well. Information that is exclusive is more persuasive than information that is widely available. Take as evidence the dissertation data of a former student of mine, Amram Knishinsky—a man who owned a company that imported beef into the United States and sold it to supermarkets. To examine the effects of scarcity and exclusivity on compliance, he instructed his phone salespeople to call a randomly selected sample of customers and to make a standard request to purchase beef. He also instructed them to do the same with a second random sample of customers but to add that a shortage of Australian beef was anticipated, owing to certain weather conditions there. The added information that Australian beef was soon to be scarce more than doubled purchases. Finally, he instructed his salespeople to call a third sample of customers and to tell them about (a) the impending

shortage of Australian beef and (b) the origin of this information—his company's *exclusive* sources in the Australian National Weather Service. These customers increased their orders by over 600 percent (Knishinsky, 1982). Why? Because they had received a scarcity one-two punch: Not only was the beef scarce, the information that the beef was scarce was itself scarce.

Defense

I think it is noteworthy that much of the data presented in this chapter has come from studies of the practices of the persuasion professionals. Who are the persuasion professionals and why should anyone find special insight in their approaches to the process of social influence? They are the individuals whose financial well-being depends on their ability to get others to say yes—marketers, advertisers, salespeople, fund-raisers, and the like. With this definition in place, one can begin to see why the regular practices of these professionals would lead one to the most powerful influences on the influence process—a law, not unlike natural selection, assures their emergence. Those practitioners who use unsuccessful tactics will soon go out of business, whereas those using procedures that work well will survive, flourish, and pass these successful strategies on—somewhat like adaptive genes—to succeeding generations (trainees). Thus, over time, the most effective principles of social influence will appear in the repertoires of long-standing persuasion professions. Those principles embody the six fundamental human tendencies examined in this article: reciprocation, consistency, social validation, liking, authority, and scarcity.

So, are people doomed to be the helpless victims of these principles? No. After all, in the vast majority of cases, the principles counsel correctly. Most of the time, it makes great sense to repay favors, behave consistently, follow the lead of similar others, favor the requests of likable others, heed legitimate authorities, and value scarce resources. Consequently, influence agents who use these principles honestly do consumers a favor. If an advertising agency, for instance, focused an ad campaign on the genuine weight of authoritative, scientific evidence favoring its client's headache product, all the right people would profit—the agency, the manufacturer, *and* the audience. Not so, however, if the agency, finding no particular scientific merit in the pain reliever, "smuggled" the authority principle into the situation through ads featuring actors wearing lab coats. The task of consumers, then, is to hold persuasion professionals accountable for the use of these six powerful motivators by purchasing their products and services, supporting their political proposals, and donating to their causes only when they have acted honestly in the process.

If we consumers make and enforce this vital distinction in our dealings with practitioners of the persuasive arts, we will rarely allow ourselves be tricked into assent. Instead, we will give ourselves a much better option: to be informed into yes. Moreover, as long as we apply the same distinction to our own influence attempts, we can legitimately avail ourselves of the same six principles in our

campaigns for others' consent. In seeking to persuade by pointing to the presence of genuine expertise or growing social validation or pertinent commitments or real opportunities for cooperation and so on, we serve the interests of both parties and enhance the quality of the social fabric in the bargain. Helpless victims of the social influence process? Hardly.

References

Ardry, R. (1970). *The social contract*. New York: Antheneum.

Aune, R. K., & Basil, M. C. (1994). A relational obligations approach to the foot-in-the-mouth effect. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 24*, 546–556.

Bettencourt, B. A., Brewer, M. B., Croak, M. R., & Miller, N. (1992). Cooperation and the reduction of intergroup bias. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 28*, 301–319.

Blass, T. (Ed.). (2000). *Obedience to authority: Current perspectives on the Milgram paradigm*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Cialdini, R. B. (2001). *Influence: Science and Practice* (4th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Cialdini, R. B., Vincent, J. E., Lewis, S. K., Catalan, J., Wheeler, D., & Darby, B. L. (1975). Reciprocal concessions procedure for inducing compliance: The door-in-the-face technique. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 31*, 206–215.

Donaldson, S. I. (1995). Peer influence on adolescent drug use: A perspective from the trenches of experimental evaluation research. *American Psychologist, 50*, 801–802.

Donaldson, S. I., Graham, J. W., Piccinin, A. M., & Hansen, W. B. (1995). Resistance-skills training and onset of alcohol use. *Health Psychology, 14*, 291–300.

Drachman, D., deCarufel, A., & Insko, C. (1978). The extra credit effect in interpersonal attraction. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 14*, 458–465.

Efran, M. G., & Patterson, E. W. J. (1974). Voters vote beautiful: The effects of physical appearance on a national election. *Canadian Journal of Behavioral Science, 6*, 352–356.

Efran, M. G., & Patterson, E. W. J. (1976). *The politics of appearance*. Unpublished manuscript, Canada: University of Toronto.

Gouldner, A. W. (1960). The norm of reciprocity: A preliminary statement. *American Sociological Review, 25*, 161–178.

Knishinsky, A. (1982). *The effects of scarcity of material and exclusivity of information on industrial buyer perceived risk in provoking a purchase decision*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Tempe, AZ: Arizona State University.

Lefkowitz, M., Blake, R. R., & Mouton, J. S. (1955). Status factors in pedestrian violation of traffic signals. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 51*, 704–706.

Lynn, M. (1991). Scarcity effects on value. *Psychology and Marketing, 8*, 43–57.

McGuire, W. J. (1985). Attitudes and attitude change. In G. Lindzey & E. Aronson (Eds.), *Handbook of social psychology* (3rd ed., Vol. 2, pp. 233–346). New York: Random House.

Milgram, S., Bickman, L., & Berkowitz, L. (1969). Note on the drawing power of crowds of different size. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 13*, 79–82.

Rafaeli, A., & Sutton, R. I. (1991). Emotional contrast strategies as means of social influence. *Academy of Management Journal, 34*, 749–775.

Reingen, P. H. (1982). Test of a list procedure for inducing compliance with a request to donate money. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 67*, 110–118.

Reingen, P. H., & Kernan, J. B. (1993). Social perception and interpersonal influence: Some consequences of the physical attractiveness stereotype in a personal selling setting. *Journal of Consumer Psychology, 2*, 25–38.

Schwartzwald, J., Bizman, A., & Raz, M. (1983). The foot-in-the-door paradigm: Effects of second request size on donation probability and donor generosity. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 9*, 443–450.

Shaffer, D., Garland, A., Vieland. V., Underwood, M., & Busner, C. (1991). The impact of curriculum-based suicide prevention programs for teenagers. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 30*, 588–596.

Smolowe, J. (1990, November 26). Contents require immediate attention. *Time*, p. 64.

Stelfox, H. T., Chua, G., O'Rourke, K, & Detsky, A. S. (1998). Conflict of interest in the debate over calcium-channel antagonists. *New England Journal of Medicine, 333*, 101–106.

West, S. G. (1975). Increasing the attractiveness of college cafeteria food. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 10*, 656–658.