



Book Yes!

Fifty Secrets from the Science of Persuasion

Noah J. Goldstein, Steve J. Martin and Robert B. Cialdini
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Recommendation

Yes! is an entertaining book – to match the title, it’s a blast! Noah J. Goldstein, Steve J. Martin and Robert B. Cialdini provide, as the subtitle indicates, 50 distinct examples, explanations or techniques to help you become more persuasive. They present the general principles of persuasion and discuss an abundance of specific, detailed uses. The authors offer numerous studies (their own and others’), hypothetical situations, and elucidations of what to do and what not to do. They advocate the idea that you can and should test persuasive strategies. They are convincing, and they write wittily and breezily. *BooksInShort* recommends this useful book to anyone engaged in persuasion, including executives, marketers, trainers and salespeople.

Take-Aways

- When they think about persuasion, most people emphasize their own experiences too much, rather than depending on data or techniques.
- Increase your persuasive power by understanding six core principles: “reciprocation,” “authority,” “commitment/consistency,” “scarcity,” “liking” and “social proof.”
- A small gift or favor will make you more persuasive. People will want to pay you back.
- The public believes in authority, so enlist higher-ups on your side.
- People want to be consistent and committed, so show how your proposal aligns with their values.
- The rarer something is, the more people want it.
- Individuals want to be liked, so practice seeing the good in them.
- People tend to follow the majority. By establishing norms, you can get them to act as you wish.
- Fear paralyzes people, so use scare tactics only if you offer an antidote to fear.
- Admit your errors. Demonstrating honesty increases your influence.

Summary

The Nature of Persuasion

Persuasion is a curious thing. Because it is based on human psychology and because life gives everyone direct experience of that psychology, people depend too much on their own experiences when they try to persuade others. In fact, people aren’t even especially good at figuring out what persuaded them or at understanding why they did something. Instead, they jump to conclusions based on faulty data. The result is that persuasion is seen as an “art” and treated as a mysterious phenomenon. But whether you are innately gifted at persuading other people or not, you can use specific scientifically tested techniques that have proven to be reliably persuasive.

Many of these techniques draw on one or more of “the six universal principles of social influence”:

1. “Reciprocation” – People Want to Treat Each Other Fairly

If you give someone something, even a soft drink, he or she will want to repay you. This can take the form of agreeing to your suggestions or making a larger purchase from you. To apply this principle, consider what you could do for others. How could you help them? What could you give them? You will have an automatic persuasive edge with people you’ve helped or enriched. This is the essence of reciprocity, which you can apply in small ways. If you do something extra for someone, even scrawling a brief personal message on an attached Post-It Note when you send a document, that person will agree with you more easily and respond more quickly. However, the value of doing something nice for someone changes over time. People value a favor most highly right after you bestow it. In fact, its value to them will diminish over time, but – as the person who did the favor – you’re likely to value it even more highly as time passes. This can create tension, so take these attitude shifts into account when you request a reciprocal favor.

2. “Authority” – People Want to Follow the Experts

You face a quandary if you need to persuade people of your worth or convince them about a topic you know well. You want to demonstrate how good you are and how expert, but you don’t want to seem like an egotistical braggart. Instead, get someone else to speak for you. You can even pay a speaker, since people generally disregard “situational factors.” People don’t pay attention to how a situation shapes other people’s actions, so they trust what they see more than they should. You can use this predisposition in your office. If two people work together, designate each one as a specialist in some area, then refer related calls to them accordingly. People will give more weight to the so-called specialists’ words, even if they don’t know anything extra. If you work alone, display some sign of your expertise for visitors. Even posting a diploma helps.

3. “Consistency” – People Want to Act in Alignment with Their Beliefs

The human desire to be consistent plays out several ways. If you want someone to do you a large favor, he or she will be more likely to do so if you lay the groundwork by asking for a small favor first. This will establish a specific image in the person’s mind. If you’re trying to make a large sale, selling a small sample has a similar impact. This also works when you label a person. For example, if you tell a man that you can discern that he is good, he’ll be more likely to be good in order to align his actions with your favorable perception. To get people to perform a “socially desirable behavior,” like voting, get them to agree to it in public. The more actively you can get someone, including yourself, to commit to an action, the firmer the commitment will be. So write your plans, don’t just ponder them. Shape surveys so people make active choices about a course of action, rather than just agreeing by default. When scheduling appointments, get the other person to select the time, so he or she is invested. To boost turnout at a meeting, ask potential attendees how they’d like to be reminded of the session.

“The primary purpose of this book is to give readers access to fifty secrets to successful persuasion that have been validated in scientific studies and that can be used in wholly ethical ways.”

To change people’s previous behavior, appeal to their desire for consistency. Don’t tell them that they did something wrong. Instead, frame the new choice as being more akin to their values. Use a variation of this idea to reshape relationships that aren’t going well. For instance, if you work with someone who doesn’t like you, ask him or her for a small favor. That takes nerve, but people who grant you a favor are more apt to shift to seeing you more positively, because that would align their actions and their attitudes. This tactic also helps when you ask for donations. Request a tiny amount of money; explain that even a penny helps. Setting such a small threshold gets people to give, and many will give more than if you had asked without that small specific entry point.

4. “Scarcity” – If It is Rare, People Want It

When General Motors announced that it was discontinuing the Oldsmobile due to falling sales, sales shot up. Why? Because people realized it wasn’t going to be available. The car became scarce and people want rare things. This is powerful since people are loss-averse: They prefer avoiding losses (or even the thought of losses) to acquiring gains. You don’t have to discontinue your product. Just explain what it offers that the customer cannot get elsewhere. By contrast, you can inadvertently make an offer unappealing by making it free, since that communicates that it lacks value. Instead, spell out how much the gift would cost, then emphasize that you are giving it to people without that cost to them. This works in service situations. If a restaurant gives away mints after a meal, customers take them for granted. If servers give customers mints with a personal touch, tips increase. If the servers give people mints, and then more mints, or mention how nice the group has been, tips climb still higher.

5. “Liking” – People Want to be Liked

In the service industry, you can observe a foundational persuasive technique at work. People can tell the difference between a server’s “authentic smile,” and a fake or forced smile. Customers like receiving authentic smiles and are more apt to like you if you greet them with one. If you’re serving their table or checking them in at a hotel, people are apt to judge your performance as superior if you say hello with a genuine smile. Admittedly, such positive, genuine expressions don’t come easily in every situation. You could train your staff in emotional skills, but that’s costly. Instead, practice seeing the good in people. This is very valuable with someone you dislike. Try to reflect on what he or she does well. Look until you find something admirable and you’ll like the individual more easily.

“Researchers are often on the lookout for ways to apply their scientific knowledge to make existing policies and practices even more effective.”

People also are more prone to like you if you share their “personal characteristics.” These can be large, complex traits, like beliefs, but it also works with smaller traits, even ones you don’t choose, such as a shared name. When floods damaged Quincy, Illinois, in 1993, it received a lot of help from people in Quincy, Massachusetts. More people responded to mail surveys from people with names similar to theirs. This surprising tendency applies in many areas. People are more likely to choose careers that sound like their names (“dentist” and “Dennis”). If you move, you’re more likely to move to a state with a name like yours (“Florence” to Florida) or to a street that sounds like your name. People are even more likely to marry people with similar names.

“Many classical findings in social psychology demonstrate the power of social proof to influence other people’s actions.”

You can use this tendency several ways. Make projects more attractive to workers by assigning them to people with like names or make a sale by echoing the prospect’s name. For instance, call your proposal to “Mr. Peterson” at Pepsi, the “Pepsi Proposal” or the “Peterson Plan.” To get a student to read, suggest a book where the main character shares the child’s name (give *Harry Potter* to “Harriett”). Activate a related form of connection by mirroring someone’s body language or repeating a menu order back to the customer verbatim – that makes tips go up. You can also use mirroring literally: People are more likely to act honestly when they see themselves in a mirror or know they are being observed.

6. “Social Proof” – People Want to Act Like Their Peers

When you make a decision based on your peers’ opinions and your context, you are relying on social proof. Once you realize the power of this persuasive technique, you can use it to get people to do as you wish. Hotel guests responding to a program urging them to reuse towels were more prone to comply when told how many other people had cooperated. This worked even better when the information was more specific, such as how many guests who stayed in that same room had complied. Generally, people tend to align themselves with social norms. If you can establish these norms clearly (as a library mandates silence), people are more likely to follow them. They’re also more inclined to act as you wish if you offer testimonials from people like them who did so. If you’re a teacher, this means quoting an average student, not the class whiz kid.

“Broadly speaking, this research provides a valuable insight into human behavior: An ounce of personalized extra effort is worth a pound of persuasion.”

eBay demonstrates how to persuade people. Starting an auction with a high initial bid can convince people that the item is worth a lot, but starting with a lower price diminishes the barriers to entry and brings in more bidders. Their presence provides social proof of the item’s desirability. Yet if other factors raise barriers to access (misspelling the product’s name), a low price isn’t as effective.

“Reduce multitasking when the stakes for...decisions and interactions with others are high.”

In related reasoning, if you attach a handwritten note to a document, people are more likely to trust its contents if your handwriting is neat. And if you have the skill to write a rhyming message, people hear that as even more credible. Make it easy for people to remember your messages. Post them visibly where people make related decisions. Hang messages about excess drinking in bars, not doctors’ offices. Shape your messages to the right cultural context. To reach someone from an individualistic culture, as in the U.S., accent the benefit to the individual. If you’re trying to persuade someone from a collectivist culture, such as South Korea, emphasize the community benefit.

Other Approaches to Persuasion

Too many choices can overwhelm people, so to persuade them to buy, limit the number of items on the sales table. To frame potential sales choices, add a higher-priced option. Since that choice demarcates the high end of the scale, customers now can choose something from the new middle...including the previous high end. Fear can also paralyze people. Faced with too much fear, people freeze rather than act. If you provide information on how to resolve a scary issue, such as a health crisis, the fear may become an incentive to buy. People must do all they can to resolve their fears. Other physical or emotional situations can impair their judgment. A mere lack of sleep makes people worse at distinguishing credible statements from faulty ones.

“[Use] social influence strategies...as constructive tools that help build authentic relationships with others, highlight the genuine strength of one’s message...and ultimately create outcomes that are in the best interests of all parties.”

When you’re working in a group, take group dynamics into account. This doesn’t mean voting on every decision; you might not decide to vote on any decisions. But even if you are the brightest, best-informed person present, enlist others’ perspectives. You’ll get new insights, put many minds to work on common issues and help the group form more functional teams. Groups often founder on “groupthink,” when everyone thinks about a subject the same way. You could assign someone to play devil’s advocate to generate more creative solutions, but involving a real dissenter works even better. Sometimes using a devil’s advocate may produce overconfidence because people mistakenly think they’ve considered all the alternative views.

“When these tools are instead used unethically as weapons of influence...any short-term gains will almost invariably be followed by long-term losses.”

Even errors can be useful. Trainees learn more from case studies where people make mistakes and use “good decision making” to learn from their errors, than from case studies that simply model the desired behavior. Acknowledging your service’s limits also increases your credibility. Progressive Auto Insurance offers free rate comparisons with other firms’ fees. Often, Progressive offers the lowest rates. The rest of the time, it points potential customers toward their lower-priced competitors. When you admit a weakness or a limitation in your offering, you appear especially credible. This can work in modified ways. Admit your product’s small weaknesses in the process of pointing out its larger attractive features. If you make a mistake, don’t cover it up or pretend it didn’t happen. Admit it and explain your plan to correct the situation. This will show you are honest, which increases your influence.

“Those who behave in an untrustworthy manner can do little to regain the public’s trust.”

You can boost your persuasive powers with just one word: “because.” If you explain why you want something, people are far more likely to agree to it, even if the reason makes little sense to them. On the flip side, make it easy for people to figure out why they want to buy your product. Ask them to name one reason why they might buy it, but not 10 reasons. If you ask for 10 reasons and they name six, they’ll feel as if they’ve fallen short. To apply a variation of this tactic, ask a potential customer to list a lot of reasons to choose your competition’s product. When the customer finds that hard to do, your offering will look good. If you’re launching a customer loyalty program, give people a “head start.” Rather than offering a free item after they buy 10 things, give them a reward for buying 12, but start them with credit for two purchases.

About the Authors

Noah J. Goldstein teaches at the UCLA Anderson School of Management. Psychologist **Robert B. Cialdini** also wrote *Influence* and *Principles of Ethical Influence*. **Steve J. Martin** is managing director and Cialdini is president of a consultancy that helps organizations improve performance by using the principles of influence.
