Cialdini's Principles of Persuasion

The American psychologist Robert Cialdini spent many years studying why people say yes to requests. In his book Influence, first published in 1984, he described six principles of persuasion, and in 2016 he added a seventh principle called unity. The seven principles are reciprocity, commitment and consistency, social proof, authority, liking, scarcity and unity. They work because people often use mental shortcuts when they need to decide quickly. Cialdini stressed that these principles must be used honestly, to help people make good decisions, and never to trick them.

1. Reciprocity

People feel a natural duty to give back what they have received. A small gift, a favour or useful information makes people more willing to help in return. The effect is stronger when the gift is personal and unexpected. Used ethically, reciprocity means giving real value first, without pressure.

At work: Marwan, a sales manager at a software company, wants a busy clinic to try his booking system. Using reciprocity, he first sends the clinic manager a free checklist for reducing missed appointments, with no conditions. The manager finds it useful and agrees to a meeting.

2. Commitment and Consistency

People like to act in line with what they have already said or done. A small first commitment, especially one that is active, public and voluntary, makes a later and bigger step more likely. That is why a small yes often leads to a bigger yes. The ethical rule is to ask only for commitments that truly fit the other person's goals.

At work: In the meeting, the clinic manager says that fewer missed appointments is her top goal this year. Marwan builds on commitment and consistency: he suggests a free one-month trial that matches the goal she has just stated. She agrees, because the step fits her own words.

3. Social Proof

When people are unsure, they look at what others are doing, especially others who are similar to them. This is why a busy restaurant often attracts even more guests. Reviews, ratings and examples from peers reduce uncertainty. The proof must be real, because invented reviews or fake numbers destroy trust.

At work: Marwan uses social proof: he shares a short, true case study from three clinics of a similar size in the same city. The manager sees that people like her have succeeded, and her doubts become smaller.

4. Authority

People tend to follow the advice of credible experts. Titles, qualifications and experience signal that someone knows the subject. It helps to make real expertise visible before making a request, for example through a short introduction. Authority must be genuine, and it should never be used to silence questions.

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At work: Marwan applies authority honestly: he brings a colleague, an engineer who has set up the system in many clinics, to answer the technical questions. The manager trusts the answers because they come from someone with real experience.

5. Liking

We say yes more easily to people we like. We tend to like people who are similar to us, who give us sincere compliments and who work with us toward shared goals. Building real rapport therefore makes cooperation easier. Liking should come from honest interest in the other person, not from false praise.

At work: Marwan builds liking: he learns that the clinic manager also started her career in customer service, and he sincerely praises the way her team treats patients. The conversation becomes warmer and more open.

6. Scarcity

People want more of what is rare, limited or about to disappear. Explaining what is unique about an offer, and what the other person may lose by waiting, can increase interest. The fear of losing something can motivate people more than the hope of gaining it. Only true limits should be mentioned, because false deadlines are manipulation.

At work: Marwan explains the scarcity honestly: the free setup support is real but limited to five clinics this quarter, and only two places are left. The manager decides early, because the limit is true.

7. Unity

Unity, the seventh principle, is about shared identity. People say yes more easily to those they see as part of their own group. This feeling can come from family, a hometown, a profession or an experience that people share. When we honestly show what we have in common, people begin to see us as part of the same team.

At work: Marwan uses unity: he reminds the manager that both their organisations share the same mission of serving patients in their city, and he invites her to join a group of local clinics that exchange ideas. She now sees him as a partner rather than a seller, and she signs the contract.

Conclusion

In summary, Cialdini described seven principles of persuasion: reciprocity, commitment and consistency, social proof, authority, liking, scarcity and unity. Each one is based on the way people naturally make decisions. Used honestly, they help us present good ideas and real offers in a way that people can easily accept. Used with tricks or false information, they damage trust and relationships. The best persuasion helps the other person make a decision that is truly good for them.

Sources

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