

The strategist's bookshelf

Before I speak I want to say something: the setup for persuasion

Harvey A. Hornstein

Pre-suasion: A Revolutionary Way to Influence and Persuade

Robert Cialdini, (Simon & Schuster, 2016).

Few behavioral scientists match Robert Cialdini's ability to write with such charming clarity, helping his corporate readers understand and use complex research findings on the art of persuasion. It's one reason to applaud his new book, *Pre-suasion*, which dovetails nicely with his previous bestseller, *Influence*. The twist, this time, is tipped by what the book's subtitle labels "revolutionary," alluding to mounting evidence that what happens **before** a persuasive appeal is made affects the appeal's likelihood of success. Filled with easy-to-understand, scientifically sound explanations of why this boost in receptivity occurs, and acknowledging that success is not one hundred percent guaranteed, *Pre-suasion*, provides corporate readers with numerous illustrations of actions that predispose customers or colleagues to embrace subsequent appeals.

Evidence that mere exposure to seemingly trivial stimuli significantly affects subsequent attitudes and outlook abounds. People asked to write a pair of higher Social Security numbers were prepared to pay more for Belgian chocolates than those who were asked to write lower ones and others, who believed

they'd be eating in a restaurant named Studio 97, reported that they were ready to spend more money than those who'd been led to believe that the restaurant was named Studio 17. Self-predictions of work performance—output and effort—made by research participants told that they were in "experiment 27" were higher than the self-predictions of those told that they were in "experiment 9." People who held a cup of warm coffee reported feeling more warmly, trusting and closer to their fellows than those who held a cup of iced coffee.

Uncovering intriguing research findings of this sort was probably not very difficult for Cialdini. A greater problem for him was to explain why certain experiences predispose recipients to accept subsequent appeals and then, in plain language, tell managers, politicians, parents, and you and me, what might be done beforehand in order to create the desired predisposition, increasing the likelihood that subsequent efforts to influence succeed.

Cialdini's successful solution to this problem is embedded in the book's organization. To his credit, he does not simply divide the book in two, devoting part one to *why*, a critical review of the reasons that certain social psychological conditions heighten recipients' receptivity to incoming messages, and part two to

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illustrating *what* – those things readers might actually do in order to produce the necessary social psychological conditions– those that heighten subsequent receptivity. Instead, for the most part, Cialdini illustrates what readers might actually do in the midst of his discussions of why the doing produces greater receptivity to subsequent influence efforts. It’s a strategy that works.

Although Cialdini builds his case using hundreds of published research studies without ever presenting tedious detailed descriptions of their procedures and findings, he successfully educates readers about the social psychological dynamics that underlie the link between message recipients’ pre-message experiences and their subsequent receptivity to influence. Consequently, fresh from reading about the causal link between certain social psychological conditions and receptivity, readers are both prepared to judge whether their situations are ones in which the recommended actions will produce the necessary social psychological conditions and, if they won’t, stimulated to think about workable alternatives that might be better suited to their particular circumstance.

Intuitive not formulaic

Unfortunately, regardless of whether a reader selects one of Cialdini’s recommended actions or sculpts his or her own, intuition will be the best and only guide. Neither the research

literature, nor the author provide precise, empirically supported guidelines for pinpointing the characteristics of pre-message experiences required to produce greater post-message receptivity to influence. Cialdini’s examples may enrich readers’ intuition, but that’s it. No formula for calculating even a crude prediction of any action’s outcome exists.

As for causes of the heightened receptivity, Cialdini discusses the qualities of those moments when recipients are particularly open to incoming messages and why attention, properly constructed, also produces elevated receptivity. He explores the nature of circumstances that affect both attention levels and associations between thoughts and their impact on receptivity, and how the relevant characteristics of these two events are affected by surrounding physical conditions. Finally, drawing on his previous book, he devotes a full chapter to discussing how these potential causes of heightened receptivity are related to what he claims are the six “universal principles of influence”—reciprocation, liking, social proof, authority, scarcity and consistency, and he illustrates what would-be influencers might actually do in order to employ these universal principles in their pre-suasion efforts.

In this book, to these six “universal principles of influence,” Cialdini adds a seventh that he calls “unity.” As before, while discussing why raising consciousness of “we

relationships” increases receptivity to another “we-group member’s message,” Cialdini counsels readers about what they might actually do in order to build the necessary “we relationships.”

As it likely has occurred to you as you read this review, Cialdini’s advice can be used by the wicked as well as the righteous. He dismisses the danger that this possibility poses, arguing that misconduct using pre-suasive influence tools produces negative consequences that ultimately deter misbehavior. Focusing primarily on the business community, citing research that he and others have done, he contends that these negative consequences include economic losses, employee turnover and poor performance. As someone who has investigated abusive boss behavior as well as lopsided power and privilege in business organizations, I believe that Cialdini rests his defense on a too narrow a set of data and, for that reason, to me, it is unconvincing. Contrary evidence exists. Lying, deception and similar forms of misconduct sometimes produce enduring benefits to bosses as well as profits for organizations.

Nonetheless, advances in the practice of persuasion are masterfully described by Cialdini. If you want to learn a set of scientifically well-grounded possibilities to help you in your dealings with others, then read this book. But, while you do, ponder what can be done to limit the misuse of these potentially powerful tools.

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