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# **INFLUENCE**

## **THE PSYCHOLOGY OF PERSUASION**

*This expanded edition includes*

- New research and examples
- New chapter on the unity principle
- New insights for digital businesses

**ROBERT B. CIALDINI, PH.D.**



# **INFLUENCE,**

**NEW AND EXPANDED**

**THE PSYCHOLOGY OF PERSUASION**

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**HARPER  
BUSINESS**

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## ***Dedication***

*For Hailey, who, every time I see her, leaves me more amazed.*

*For Dawson, who, every time I see him, leaves me  
more convinced he will do great things.*

*For Leia, who, every time I see her, leaves me a happier man.*

# ***Contents***

*Cover*

*Title Page*

*Dedication*

*Preface*

Introduction

**Chapter 1: Levers of Influence: *(Power) Tools of the Trades***

**Chapter 2: Reciprocation: *The Old Give and Take***

**Chapter 3: Liking: *The Friendly Thief***

**Chapter 4: Social Proof: *Truths Are Us***

**Chapter 5: Authority: *Directed Deference***

**Chapter 6: Scarcity: *The Rule of the Few***

**Chapter 7: Commitment and Consistency: *Hobgoblins of the Mind***

**Chapter 8: Unity: *The “We” Is the Shared Me***

**Chapter 9: Instant Influence: *Primitive Consent for an Automatic Age***

*Acknowledgments*

*Bibliography*

*Notes*

*Index*

*About the Author*

*Praise*

*Copyright*

*About the Publisher*

## *Preface*

From the outset, *Influence* was designed for the popular reader, and as such, an attempt was made to write it in a nonacademic, conversational style. I admit to doing so with some trepidation that the book would be viewed as a form of “pop” psychology by my academic colleagues. I was concerned because, as the legal scholar James Boyle observed, “You have never heard true condescension until you have heard academics pronounce the word ‘popularizer.’” For this reason, at the time of the first writing of *Influence*, most of my fellow social psychologists didn’t feel safe, professionally, writing for a nonacademic audience. Indeed, if social psychology had been a business, it would have been known for having great research and development units but no shipping department. We didn’t ship, except to one another in academic journal articles that no one else was likely to encounter, let alone use.

Fortunately, although I decided to push ahead with a popular style, none of my fears has been realized, as *Influence* has not received disparagement on “pop” psychology grounds.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, in subsequent versions, including the present one, the conversational style is retained. Of course, more importantly, I also present the research evidence for my statements, recommendations, and conclusions. Although the conclusions of *Influence* are illuminated and corroborated through such devices as interviews, quotes, and systematic personal observations, those conclusions are invariably based on properly conducted psychological research.

### ***Comment on This Edition of Influence***

Shaping the current edition of *Influence* has been challenging for me. On the one hand, recalling the “Don’t fix what’s not broken” axiom, I was reluctant to perform major reconstructive surgery. After all, previous



versions had sold more copies than I could have sensibly imagined, in multiple editions and forty-four languages. In this last regard, my Polish colleague, Professor Wilhelmina Wosinska, offered an affirming (yet sobering) commentary on the perceived worth of the book. She said, “You know, Robert, your book *Influence* is so famous in Poland, my students think you’re dead.”

On the other hand, in keeping with a quote my Sicilian grandfather favored, “If you want things to stay as they are, things will have to change,” there was a case to be made for timely upgrades.<sup>2</sup> It has been some time since *Influence* was last published, and, in the interim, changes have occurred that deserve a place in this new edition. First, we now know more than we did before about the influence process. The study of persuasion, compliance, and change has advanced, and the pages that follow have been adapted to reflect that progress. In addition to an overall update of the material, I have devoted more attention to updated coverage of the role of influence in everyday human interaction—how the influence process works in real-world settings rather than in laboratory contexts.

Relatedly, I have also expanded a feature that was stimulated by the responses of prior readers. This feature highlights the experiences of individuals who have read *Influence*, recognized how one of the principles worked on (or for) them in a particular instance, and wrote to me describing the event. Their descriptions, which appear in the Reader’s Reports of each chapter, illustrate how easily and frequently we can fall victim to the influence process in our daily lives. There are now many new firsthand accounts of how the book’s principles apply to commonplace professional and personal situations. I wish to thank the following individuals who—either directly or through their course instructors—contributed the Reader’s Reports used in past editions: Pat Bobbs, Hartnut Bock, Annie Carto, Michael Conroy, William Cooper, Alicia Friedman, William Graziano, Jonathan Harries, Mark Hastings, Endayehu Kendie, Karen Klawer, Danuta Lubnicka, James Michaels, Steven Moysey, Katie Mueller, Paul Nail, Dan Norris, Sam Omar, Alan J. Resnik, Daryl Retzlaff, Geoffrey Rosenberger, Joanna Spychala, Robert Stauth, Dan Swift, and Karla Vasks. Special thanks are due to those who provided new Reader’s Reports for this edition: Laura Clark, Jake Epps, Juan Gomez, Phillip Johnston, Paola, Joe St. John, Carol Thomas, Jens Tralolt, Lucas Weimann, Anna Wroblewski, and Agrima Yadav. I would also like to invite readers to contribute similar

reports for possible publication in a future edition. They can be sent to me at [ReadersReports@InfluenceAtWork.com](mailto:ReadersReports@InfluenceAtWork.com). Finally, more influence-relevant information can be obtained at [www.InfluenceAtWork.com](http://www.InfluenceAtWork.com).

Besides the changes in this edition that are updated extensions of previously existing features of the book, three elements appear for the first time. One explores internet-based applications of proven social-influence tactics. It is clear that social media and e-commerce sites have embraced the lessons of persuasion science. Accordingly, each chapter now includes, in specially created eBoxes, illustrations of how this migration into current technologies has been accomplished. The second novel feature is the enhanced use of endnotes as the place where readers can find citations for the research described in the text as well citations and descriptions of related work. The endnotes now allow for a more inclusive, narrative account of the issues at hand. Finally, and most significantly, I have added a seventh universal principle of social influence to the book—the principle of unity. In the chapter devoted to unity, I describe how individuals who can be convinced that a communicator shares a meaningful personal or social identity with them become remarkably more susceptible to the communicator's persuasive appeals.

## *Introduction*

I can admit it freely now. All my life I've been a patsy. For as long as I can recall, I've been an easy mark for the pitches of peddlers, fundraisers, and operators of one sort or another. True, only some have had dishonorable motives. The others—representatives of certain charitable agencies, for instance—have had the best intentions. No matter. With personally disquieting frequency, I have always found myself in possession of unwanted magazine subscriptions or tickets to the sanitation workers' ball. Probably this long-standing status as sucker accounts for my interest in the study of compliance: Just what are the factors that cause one person to say yes to another? And which techniques most effectively use these factors to bring about compliance? I have wondered why it is that a request stated in a certain way will be rejected, but a request asking for the same favor in a slightly different fashion will be successful.

So in my role as an experimental social psychologist, I began to research the psychology of compliance. At first the research took the form of experiments performed, for the most part, in my laboratory and on college students. I wanted to find out which psychological principles influenced the tendency to comply with a request. Right now, psychologists know quite a bit about these principles—what they are and how they work. I have characterized such principles as levers of influence and will be discussing some of the most important in this book.

After a time, though, I began to realize that the experimental work, while necessary, wasn't enough. It didn't allow me to judge the importance of the principles in the world beyond the psychology building and the campus where I was examining them. It became clear that if I were to understand fully the psychology of compliance, I would need to broaden my scope of investigation. I would need to look to the compliance professionals—the people who had been using the principles on me all my life. They know what works and what doesn't; the law of survival of the fittest assures it. Their business is to make us comply, and their livelihoods

depend on it. Those who don't know how to get people to say yes soon fall away; those who do, stay and flourish.

Of course, the compliance professionals aren't the only ones who know about and use these principles to help them get their way. We all employ them and fall victim to them to some degree in our daily interactions with neighbors, friends, lovers, and family. But the compliance practitioners have much more than the vague and amateurish understanding of what works than the rest of us do. As I thought about it, I knew they represented the richest vein of information about compliance available to me. For nearly three years, then, I combined my experimental studies with a decidedly more entertaining program: I systematically immersed myself in the world of compliance professionals—salespeople, fundraisers, marketers, recruiters, and others.

My purpose was to observe, from the inside, the techniques and strategies most commonly and effectively used by a broad range of compliance practitioners. That program of observation sometimes took the form of interviews with the practitioners and sometimes with the natural enemies (for example, police fraud-squad officers, investigative reporters, consumer-protection agencies) of certain of the practitioners. At other times, it involved an intensive examination of the written materials by which compliance techniques are passed down from one generation to another—sales manuals and the like.

Most frequently, though, it took the form of participant observation—a research approach in which the investigator becomes a spy of sorts. With disguised identity and intent, the researcher infiltrates the setting of interest and becomes a full-fledged participant in the group to be studied. So when I wanted to learn about the compliance tactics of magazine (or vacuum-cleaner or portrait-photograph or health-supplement) sales organizations, I would answer an ad for sales trainees and have them teach me their methods. Using similar but not identical approaches, I was able to penetrate advertising, public-relations, and fundraising agencies to examine their techniques. Much of the evidence presented in this book, then, comes from my experience posing as a compliance professional, or aspiring professional, in a large variety of organizations dedicated to getting us to say yes.

One aspect of what I learned in this three-year period of participant observation was most instructive. Although there are thousands of different

tactics that compliance practitioners employ to produce yes, the majority fall within seven basic categories. Each of these categories is governed by a fundamental psychological principle that directs human behavior and, in so doing, gives the tactics their power. This book is organized around these seven principles, one to a chapter. The principles—reciprocation, liking, social proof, authority, scarcity, commitment and consistency, and unity—are discussed both in terms of their function in society and in terms of how their enormous force can be commissioned by a compliance professional who deftly incorporates them into requests for purchases, donations, concessions, votes, or assent.<sup>1</sup>

Each principle is examined as to its ability to produce a distinct kind of automatic, mindless compliance from people: a willingness to say yes without thinking first. The evidence suggests that the ever-accelerating pace and informational crush of modern life will make this particular form of unthinking compliance more and more prevalent in the future. It will be increasingly important for society, therefore, to understand the how and why of automatic influence.

Finally, in this edition, I've sequenced the chapters to fit with the insights of my colleague Dr. Gregory Neidert regarding how certain principles are more useful than others, depending on which persuasive goal the communicator wishes to achieve with a message. Of course, any would-be influencer wants to create change in others; but, according to Dr. Neidert's Core Motives Model of Social Influence, the communicator's prime goal at the time affects which influence principles the communicator should prioritize. For instance, the model asserts that one of the main motives (goals) of a persuader involves *cultivating a positive relationship*. Research shows that messages are more likely to be successful if recipients can first be made to feel positively toward the messenger. Three of the seven principles of influence—reciprocation, liking, and unity—seem particularly appropriate to the task.

In other situations, perhaps when a good relationship is already in place, the goal of *reducing uncertainty* may be a priority. After all, having a positive relationship with a communicator doesn't necessarily mean message recipients will be persuaded. Before they are likely to change their minds, people want to be assured any decision they are being urged to make is wise. Under these circumstances, according to the model, the principles of social proof and authority should never be ignored—because evidence

that a choice is well regarded by peers or by experts makes it, indeed, appear prudent.

But even with a positive relationship cultivated and uncertainty reduction accomplished, a remaining goal needs to be achieved to boost the likelihood of behavioral change. In such a situation, the goal of *motivating action* becomes the main objective. That is, a well-liked friend may show me sufficient proof that almost everyone believes that daily exercise is a good thing and that leading medical experts overwhelmingly support its health benefits, but that proof may not be enough to get me to do it. The friend would do well to include in any appeal the principles of consistency and scarcity. The friend could do so by reminding me, for example, of what I've said publicly in the past about the importance of my health (consistency) and about the unique enjoyments I would miss if I lost it (scarcity). That's the message that would most likely move me from a mere decision to act to steps based on that decision. Consequently, it's the message with the best chance to get me up in the morning and off to the gym.

Thus, the arrangement of the chapters takes into account which principles are particularly suited to achieving these three motives of persuaders: reciprocation, liking, and unity for when *relationship cultivation* is primary; followed by social proof and authority for when *reducing uncertainty* is foremost; followed in turn by consistency and scarcity for when *motivating action* is the principle objective. It is important to recognize that I am not suggesting these associated principles are the sole options for achieving their respective goals. Rather, I am only suggesting that if they are available for accomplishing an aligned goal, failing to employ them would be a considerable mistake.

## Chapter 1

# *Levers of Influence*

*(Power) Tools of the Trades*

Civilization advances by extending the number of operations we can perform without thinking about them.

—**Alfred North Whitehead**

Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication.

—**Leonardo da Vinci**

This book presents numerous research results that at first appear baffling but can be explained through an understanding of natural human tendencies. A while ago, I encountered such a finding when I read a study that gave volunteers an energy drink designed to increase mental abilities. Some volunteers were charged the retail price of the drink (\$1.89); others were told, because the researcher had made a bulk purchase, they'd have to pay only \$0.89. Both groups were then asked to solve as many mental puzzles as they could in thirty minutes. I expected the second group, feeling good about the price break, would have tried harder and solved more problems. Wrong, the opposite occurred.<sup>1</sup>

The outcome put me in mind of a phone call I had received years earlier. The call came from a friend who had opened a Native Indian jewelry store in Arizona. She was giddy with a curious piece of news. Something fascinating had just happened, and she thought, as a psychologist, I might be able to explain it. The story involved a certain allotment of turquoise jewelry she had been having trouble selling. It was the peak of the tourist season, the store was unusually full of customers, and the turquoise pieces were of good quality for the prices she was asking; yet they had not sold. My friend had attempted a couple of standard sales tricks to get them

moving. She tried calling attention to them by shifting their location to a more central display area, with no luck. She even told her sales staff to “push” the items, again without success.

Finally, the night before leaving on an out-of-town buying trip, she scribbled an exasperated note to her head saleswoman: “Everything in this display case, price  $\times \frac{1}{2}$ ,” hoping just to be rid of the offending pieces, even if at a loss. When she returned a few days later, she was not surprised to find that every article had been sold. She was shocked, though, to discover that because the employee had read the “ $\frac{1}{2}$ ” in her scrawled message as a “2,” the entire allotment had sold at twice the original price.

That’s when she called me. I thought I knew what had happened but told her that if I were to explain things properly, she would have to listen to a story of mine. Actually, it isn’t my story; it’s about mother turkeys, and it belongs to the science of ethology—the study of animals in their natural settings. Turkey mothers are good mothers—loving, watchful, and protective. They spend much of their time tending, warming, cleaning, and huddling their young beneath them; but there is something odd about their method. Virtually all of their mothering is triggered by one thing, the “cheep-cheep” sound of young turkey chicks. Other identifying features of the chicks, such as smell, touch, or appearance, seem to play minor roles in the mothering process. If a chick makes the cheep-cheep noise, its mother will care for it; if not, the mother will ignore or sometimes kill it.

The extreme reliance of maternal turkeys on this one sound was dramatically illustrated in an experiment involving a mother turkey and a stuffed polecat. For a mother turkey, a polecat is a natural predator whose approach is to be greeted with squawking, pecking, clawing rage. Indeed, the experiment found even a stuffed model of a polecat, when drawn by a string to a mother turkey, received an immediate and furious attack. However, when the same stuffed replica carried inside it a small recorder that played the cheep-cheep sound of baby turkeys, the mother not only accepted the oncoming enemy but gathered it underneath her. When the machine was turned off, the polecat model again drew a vicious attack.

## ***Click, Run***



How ridiculous a mother turkey seems under these circumstances: She will embrace a natural adversary just because it goes cheep-cheep, and she will mistreat or murder one of her chicks just because it doesn't. She acts like an automaton whose maternal instincts are under the control of that single sound. The ethologists tell us that this sort of thing is far from unique to the turkey. They have identified regular, blindly mechanical patterns of action in a wide variety of species.

Called fixed-action patterns, they can involve intricate sequences of behavior, such as entire courtship or mating rituals. A fundamental characteristic of these patterns is that the behaviors composing them occur in virtually the same fashion and in the same order every time. It is almost as if the patterns were installed as programs within the animals. When a situation calls for courtship, the courtship program is run; when a situation calls for mothering, the maternal-behavior program is run. *Click*, and the appropriate program is activated; *run*, and out rolls the standard sequence of behaviors.

The most interesting aspect of all this is the way the programs are activated. When an animal acts to defend its territory, for instance, it is the intrusion of another animal of the same species that cues the territorial-defense program of rigid vigilance, threat, and, if need be, combat; however, there is a quirk in the system. It is not the rival as a whole that's the trigger; it is, rather, some specific feature: the trigger feature. Often the trigger feature will be one tiny aspect of the totality that is the approaching intruder. Sometimes a shade of color is the key. The experiments of ethologists have shown, for instance, that a male robin, acting as if a rival robin had entered its territory, will vigorously attack nothing more than a clump of robin redbreast feathers placed there. At the same time, it will ignore a perfect stuffed replica of a male robin without redbreast feathers. Similar results have been found in another bird, the bluethroat, where the trigger for territorial defense is a specific shade of bluebreast feathers.<sup>2</sup>

Before we enjoy too smugly the ease with which trigger features trick lower animals into reacting in ways wholly inappropriate to the situation, we should realize two things. First, the automatic, fixed-action patterns of these animals work well most of the time. Because only normal, healthy turkey chicks make the peculiar sound of baby turkeys, it makes sense for mother turkeys to respond maternally to that single cheep-cheep noise. By reacting to just that one stimulus, the average mother turkey will nearly

always behave correctly. It takes a trickster like a scientist to make her automatic response seem silly. The second important thing to understand is that we, too, have our preset programs, and although they usually work to our advantage, the trigger features that activate them can dupe us into running the right programs at the wrong times.

This parallel form of human automaticity is aptly demonstrated in an experiment by social psychologist Ellen Langer and her coworkers. A well-known principle of human behavior says that when we ask someone to do us a favor, we will be more successful if we provide a reason. People simply like to have reasons for what they do. Langer demonstrated this unsurprising fact by asking a small favor of people waiting in line to use a library's copying machine: "Excuse me, I have five pages. May I use the Xerox machine, because I'm in a rush?" The effectiveness of this request-plus-reason was nearly total: 94 percent of people let her skip ahead of them in line. Compare this success rate to the results when she made the request only: "Excuse me, I have five pages. May I use the Xerox machine?" Under those circumstances, only 60 percent complied. At first glance, it appears the crucial difference between the two requests was the additional information provided by the words *because I'm in a rush*.

However, a third type of request showed this was not the case. It seems it was not the whole series of words but the first one, *because*, that made the difference. Instead of including a real reason for compliance, Langer's third type of request used the word *because* and then, adding nothing new, merely restated the obvious: "Excuse me, I have five pages. May I use the Xerox machine because I have to make some copies?" The result was once again nearly all (93 percent) agreed, even though no real reason, no new information was added to justify their compliance. Just as the cheep-cheep sound of turkey chicks triggered an automatic mothering response from mother turkeys, even when it emanated from a stuffed polecat, so the word *because* triggered an automatic compliance response from Langer's subjects, even when they were given no subsequent reason to comply. *Click, run.*<sup>3</sup>

Although some of Langer's additional findings show that there are many situations in which human behavior does not work in a mechanical, click-activated way, she and many other researchers are convinced that most of the time it does. For instance, consider the strange behavior of those jewelry-store customers who swooped down on an allotment of turquoise

pieces only after the items had been mistakenly offered at double their original price. I can make no sense of their behavior unless it is viewed in *click, run* terms.

The customers, mostly well-to-do vacationers with little knowledge of turquoise, were using a simplifying principle—a stereotype—to guide their buying: expensive = good. Research shows that people who are unsure of an item's quality often use this stereotype. Thus the vacationers, who wanted “good” jewelry, saw the turquoise pieces as decidedly more valuable and desirable when nothing about them was enhanced but the price. Price alone had become a trigger feature for quality, and a dramatic increase in price alone had led to a dramatic increase in sales among the quality-hungry buyers.

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### ***READER'S REPORT 1.1***

#### ***From a doctoral student in business management***

A man who owns an antique jewelry store in my town tells a story of how he learned the expensive = good lesson of social influence. A friend of his wanted a special birthday present for his fiancée. So, the jeweler picked out a necklace that would have sold in his store for \$500 but that he was willing to let his friend have for \$250. As soon as he saw it, the friend was enthusiastic about the piece. But when the jeweler quoted the \$250 price, the man's face fell, and he began backing away from the deal because he wanted something “really nice” for his intended bride.

When a day later it dawned on the jeweler what had happened, he called his friend and asked him to come back to the store because he had another necklace to show him. This time, he introduced the new piece at its regular \$500 price. His friend liked it enough to buy it on the spot. But before any money was exchanged, the jeweler told him that, as a wedding gift, he would drop the price to \$250. The man was thrilled. Now, rather than finding the \$250 sales price offensive, he was overjoyed—and grateful—to have it.

**Author's note:** Notice, as in the case of the turquoise-jewelry buyers, it was someone who wanted to be assured of good merchandise who disdained the low-priced item. I'm confident that besides the expensive =

good rule, there's a flip side, an inexpensive = bad rule that applies to our thinking as well. After all, in English, the word *cheap* doesn't just mean inexpensive; it has also come to mean inferior.

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## ***Simplifying by Betting the Shortcut Odds***

It is easy to fault the tourists for their foolish purchase decisions, but a close look offers a kinder view. These were people who had been brought up on the rule “You get what you pay for” and had seen the rule borne out over and over in their lives. Before long, they had translated it to mean expensive = good. The expensive = good stereotype had worked well for them in the past because normally the price of an item increases along with its worth; a higher price typically reflects higher quality. So when they found themselves in the position of wanting good turquoise jewelry but not having much knowledge of turquoise, they understandably relied on the old standby feature of cost to determine the jewelry's merits.

Although they probably didn't realize it, by reacting solely to price, they were playing a shortcut version of betting the odds. Instead of stacking all the odds in their favor by trying painstakingly to master each feature signifying the worth of turquoise jewelry, they simplified things by counting on just one—the one they expected to reveal the quality of any item. They bet price alone would tell them all they needed to know. This time because someone mistook a “ $1/2$ ” for a “2,” they bet wrong. But in the long run, over all the past and future situations of their lives, betting those shortcut odds represents the most rational approach.

We're now in a position to explain the puzzling result of the chapter's opening study—the one showing that people given a drink said to boost problem-solving ability solved more problems when they paid more for the drink. The researchers traced the finding to the expensive = good stereotype: people reported *expecting* the drink to work better when it cost \$1.89 versus \$0.89; and, remarkably, the mere expectation fulfilled itself. A similar phenomenon occurred in a separate study in which participants were given a pain reliever before receiving small electric shocks. Half were told the pain reliever cost \$0.10 per unit while the other half were told it cost

\$2.50. Although, in actuality, all received the same pain reliever, those who thought it was more expensive rated it much more effective in dulling the pain of the shocks.<sup>4</sup>

Such automatic, stereotyped behavior is prevalent in much of human action because in many cases, it is the most efficient form of behaving, and in other cases it is simply necessary. You and I exist in an extraordinarily complicated environment, easily the most rapidly moving and complex ever on this planet. To deal with it, we need simplifying shortcuts. We can't be expected to recognize and analyze all the aspects of each person, event, and situation we encounter in even one day. We haven't the time, energy, or capacity for it. Instead, we must often use our stereotypes, our rules of thumb, to classify things according to a few key features and then respond without thinking when one or another of the trigger features is present.



## Figure 1.1: Caviar and craftsmanship

The message to be communicated by this Dansk ad is, of course, that expensive equals good.

*Courtesy of Dansk International Designs*

Sometimes the behavior that unrolls will not be appropriate for the situation, because not even the best stereotypes and trigger features work every time. We accept their imperfections because there is really no other choice. Without the simplifying features, we would stand frozen—cataloging, appraising, and calibrating—as the time for action sped by and away. From all indications, we’ll be relying on these stereotypes to an even greater extent in the future. As the stimuli saturating our lives continue to grow more intricate and variable, we will have to depend increasingly on our shortcuts to handle them all.

Psychologists have uncovered a number of mental shortcuts we employ in making our everyday judgments. Termed *judgmental heuristics*, these shortcuts operate in much the same fashion as the expensive = good rule, allowing for simplified thinking that works well most of the time but leaves us open to occasional, costly mistakes. Especially relevant to this book are those heuristics that tell us when to believe or do what we are asked. Consider, for example, the shortcut rule that goes, “If an expert said so, it must be true.” As we will see in [chapter 5](#), there is an unsettling tendency in our society to accept unthinkingly the statements and directions of individuals who appear to be authorities on a topic. That is, rather than thinking about an expert’s arguments and being convinced (or not), we frequently ignore the arguments and allow ourselves to be convinced just by the expert’s status as “expert.” This tendency to respond mechanically to one piece of information in a situation is what we have been calling automatic or *click, run* responding; the tendency to react on the basis of a thorough analysis of all of the information can be referred to as *controlled* responding.

Quite a lot of laboratory research has shown that people are more likely to deal with information in a controlled fashion when they have both the desire and the ability to analyze it carefully; otherwise, they are likely to use the easier *click, run* approach. For instance, in one study, university students listened to a recorded speech supporting the idea of requiring all seniors to pass comprehensive examinations before they would be allowed

to graduate. The issue affected some of them personally, because they were told that the exams could go into effect in the next year—before they had the chance to graduate. Of course, this news made them want to analyze the arguments carefully. However, for other subjects in the study, the issue had little personal importance, because they were told the exams would not begin until long after they had graduated; consequently, these students had no strong need to carefully consider the arguments' validity. The study's results were straightforward: those students with no personal stake in the topic were primarily persuaded by the speaker's expertise in the field of education; they used the "If an expert said so, it must be true" rule, paying little attention to the strength of the speaker's arguments. Those students for whom the issue mattered personally, on the other hand, ignored the speaker's expertise and were persuaded primarily by the quality of the speaker's arguments.

So it appears that when it comes to the dangerous business of *click, run* responding, we give ourselves a safety net. We resist the seductive luxury of registering and reacting to just a single (trigger) feature of the available information when an issue is important to us. No doubt this is often the case. Yet I am not fully comforted. Recall that we learned that people are likely to respond in a controlled, thoughtful fashion only when they have both the desire and the ability to do so. I have become impressed by evidence indicating that the form and pace of modern life is not allowing us to make fully thoughtful decisions, even on many personally relevant topics. Sometimes the issues may be so complicated, the time so tight, the distractions so intrusive, the emotional arousal so strong, or the mental fatigue so deep that we are in no cognitive condition to operate mindfully. Important topic or not, we have to take the shortcut.

Perhaps nowhere is this last point driven home more dramatically than in the life-and-death consequences of a phenomenon that airline-industry officials have labeled *Captainitis*. Accident investigators from the US Federal Aviation Administration noted that, frequently, an obvious error made by a flight captain was not corrected by the other crew members and resulted in a crash. It seems, despite the clear and strong personal importance of the issues, the crew members were using the "If an expert says so, it must be true" rule in failing to attend or respond to the captain's disastrous mistake.<sup>5</sup>





### **Figure 1.2: The catastrophic consequences of Captainitis**

Minutes before this airliner crashed into the Potomac River near National Airport in Washington, DC, the accompanying exchange occurred between the pilot and copilot concerning the wisdom of taking off with ice on the wings. Their conversation was recorded in the plane's black box.

**Copilot:** That reading doesn't seem right.

**Captain:** Yes, it is.

**Copilot:** Naw, I don't think it is. [Seven-second pause.] OK, maybe it is.

**Copilot:** Larry, we're going down.

**Captain:** I know it.

[Sound of impact that killed the captain, the copilot, and sixty-seven passengers.]

© Cohen/Liaison Agency

## ***The Profiteers***

It is odd that, despite their current widespread use and looming future importance, most of us know very little about our automatic behavior patterns. Perhaps that is so precisely because of the mechanistic, unthinking manner in which they occur. Whatever the reason, it is vital that we clearly



recognize one of their properties. They make us terribly vulnerable to anyone who *does* know how they work.

To understand fully the nature of our vulnerability, let's take another glance at the work of ethologists. It turns out that these animal behaviorists with their recorded cheep-cheeps and clumps of colored breast feathers are not the only ones who have discovered how to activate the behavior programs of various species. One group of organisms, termed mimics, copy the trigger features of other animals in an attempt to trick the animals into mistakenly playing the right behavior programs at the wrong times. The mimics then exploit this altogether inappropriate action for their own benefit.

Take the deadly trick played by the killer females of one genus of firefly (*Photuris*) on the males of another firefly genus (*Photinus*). Understandably, the *Photinus* males scrupulously avoid contact with the bloodthirsty *Photuris* females. However, through centuries of natural selection, the *Photuris* female hunters have located a weakness in their prey—a special blinking courtship code by which members of the victims' species tell one another they are ready to mate. By mimicking the flashing mating signals of her prey, the murderess is able to feast on the bodies of males whose triggered courtship program causes them to fly mechanically into death's, not love's, embrace.

In the struggle for survival, nearly every form of life has its mimics—right down to some of the most primitive pathogens. By adopting certain critical features of useful hormones or nutrients, these clever bacteria and viruses can gain entry into a healthy host cell. The result is that the healthy cell eagerly and naively sweeps into itself the causes of such diseases as rabies, mononucleosis, and the common cold.<sup>6</sup>

It should come as no surprise, then, that there is a strong but sad parallel in human behavior. We, too, have profiteers who mimic trigger features for our own brand of automatic responding. Unlike the mostly instinctive response sequences of nonhumans, our automatic programs usually develop from psychological principles or stereotypes we have learned to accept. Although they vary in their force, some of the principles possess a remarkable ability to direct human action. We have been subjected to them from such an early point in our lives, and they have moved us about so pervasively since then, that you and I rarely perceive their power. In the eyes of others, though, each such principle is a detectable and ready lever, a

lever of automatic influence. Take for instance the principle of social proof, which asserts that people are inclined to believe or do what they see those around them believing or doing. We act in accord with it whenever we check product reviews or star ratings before making an online purchase. But, once on the review site, we have to deal with our own brand of mimics—individuals who counterfeit genuine reviews and insert their phony ones. Fortunately, [eBox 1.1](#) offers ways to spot the fakes.

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### ***EBOX 1.1***

Here's How to Spot Fake Online Reviews with 90 Percent Accuracy, according to Science

***A new computer program identifies phony reviews with incredible accuracy.***

*By Jessica Stillman. Contributor, Inc.com@EntryLevelRebel*

When you buy products online, for either yourself or your business, reviews probably weigh heavily in your decision-making. We check to see other buyers' opinions on Amazon, opt for the five-star option rather than the one with only four and a half stars, or book the Airbnb with the most enthusiastic former guests.

Of course, we all also know these reviews can be bogus—either paid for by the seller or maliciously placed by the competition. A team of Cornell University researchers decided that building a computer program that could spot bogus recommendations sounded like a useful thing to do.

So what are the tells that a “five-star” hotel room might end up being moldy and cramped or that a highly rated toaster might die before you get through a single loaf? According to the Cornell research, you should beware if a review:

- lacks detail. It's hard to describe what you haven't actually experienced, which is why fake reviews often offer general praise rather than digging into specifics. “Truthful hotel reviews, for example, are more likely to use concrete words relating to the hotel, like ‘bathroom,’ ‘check-in’ or ‘price.’ Deceivers write more about

things that set the scene, like ‘vacation,’ ‘business trip’ or ‘my husband.’”

- includes more first-person pronouns. If you’re anxious about coming across as sincere, apparently you talk about yourself more. That’s probably why words such as *I* and *me* appear more often in fake reviews.
- has more verbs than nouns. Language analysis shows that the fakes tend to include more verbs because their writers often substitute pleasant (or alarming) sounding stories for actual insight. Genuine reviews are heavier on nouns.

Of course, these subtle tells alone probably won’t make you a master of spotting fakes, but combined with other methods of checking a review’s trustworthiness, such as watching out for various types of verified buyers and suspicious timestamps, you should be able to do a lot better than random chance.

**Author’s note:** Minding the mimics. Online review sites are in an ongoing battle with fake reviewers. We should join the fight. One set of comparisons shows why. From 2014 to 2018, customers’ favorable responses to online reviews went up in every category (for example, those who read reviews before buying rose from 88 percent to 92 percent), except one: those who trusted a business that had positive reviews dropped from 72 percent to 68 percent. It seems the mimics are undermining our confidence in the worth of the shortcut information we seek.

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There are some people who know very well where the levers of automatic influence lie and who employ them regularly and expertly to get what they want. They go from social encounter to social encounter, requesting others to comply with their wishes, and their frequency of success is dazzling. The secret to their effectiveness lies in the way they structure their requests, the way they arm themselves with one or another of the levers of influence that exist in the social environment. To do so may take no more than one correctly chosen word that engages a strong psychological principle and launches one of our automatic behavior programs. Trust the human profiteers to learn quickly how to benefit from our tendency to respond mechanically according to these principles.

Remember my friend the jewelry-store owner? Although she benefited by accident the first time, it didn't take her long to begin exploiting the expensive = good stereotype regularly and intentionally. Now during the tourist season, she first tries to speed the sale of an item that has been difficult to move by substantially increasing its price. She claims that this is marvelously cost effective. When it works on the unsuspecting vacationers, as it frequently does, it generates an enormous profit. And, even when it is not initially successful, she can then mark the article "Reduced" and sell it to bargain hunters at its original price while still taking advantage of their expensive = good reaction to the inflated figure.<sup>7</sup>

## *Jujitsu*

A woman employing jujitsu, the Japanese martial art, uses her own strength only minimally against an opponent. Instead, she exploits the power inherent in such naturally present principles as gravity, leverage, momentum, and inertia. If she knows how and where to engage these principles, she can easily defeat a physically stronger rival. And so it is for the exploiters of the levers of automatic influence that exist naturally around us. The profiteers can commission the power of these principles for use against their targets while exerting little personal force. This last feature of the process gives the profiteers an enormous additional benefit—the ability to manipulate without the appearance of manipulation. Even the victims themselves tend to see their compliance as a result of the action of natural forces rather than the designs of the person who profits from that compliance.

An example is in order. There is a principle in human perception, the contrast principle, which affects the way we see the difference between two things that are presented one after another. If the second item is fairly different from the first, we tend to see it as being more different than it actually is. So if we lift a light object first and then lift a heavy object, we estimate the second object as being heavier than we would have estimated it if we had lifted it without first lifting the light one. The contrast principle is well established in the field of psychophysics and applies to all sorts of perceptions. If we are watching our weight and at lunch we are trying to estimate the calorie count of a cheeseburger, we'll judge it as being much

higher (38% higher in one study) in calories if we first estimate the calories in a salad. In contrast to the salad, the cheeseburger now *seems* even more calorie rich. Relatedly, if we are talking to an attractive individual at a party and are joined by a comparatively less attractive one, the second will strike us as being less attractive than he or she actually is. Some researchers warn that the unrealistically attractive people portrayed in the popular media (actors, models) may cause us to be less satisfied with the looks of the genuinely available romantic possibilities around us. The researchers demonstrated that increasing exposure to the exaggerated sexual attractiveness of sensual models in the media lowers the sexual desirability of our current mates.<sup>8</sup>

Another demonstration of perceptual contrast is one I have employed in my classrooms to introduce students to the principle. Each student takes a turn sitting in front of three pails of water—one cold, one at room temperature, and one hot. After placing one hand in the cold water and the other in the hot water, the student is told to place both simultaneously in the room-temperature water. The look of amused bewilderment that immediately registers tells the story: even though both hands are in the same bucket, the hand that was in the cold water feels as if it is in hot water, while the one that was in the hot water feels as if it is in cold water. The point is that the same thing—in this instance, room-temperature water—can be made to seem very different depending on the nature of the event preceding it. What’s more, the perception of other things, such as college course grades, can be affected similarly. See, for example, in [figure 1.3](#), a letter that came across my desk several years ago from a university student to her parents.

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**Figure 1.3: Perceptual contrast and the college coed**

*Dear Mother and Dad:*

*Since I left for college I have been remiss in writing and I am sorry for my thoughtlessness in not having written before. I will bring you up to date now, but before you read on, please sit down. You are not to read any further unless you are sitting down, okay?*

*Well, then, I am getting along pretty well now. The skull fracture and the concussion I got when I jumped out the window of my dormitory when it*

*caught on fire shortly after my arrival here is pretty well healed now. I only spent two weeks in the hospital and now I can see almost normally and only get those sick headaches once a day. Fortunately, the fire in the dormitory, and my jump, was witnessed by a worker at the gas station near the dorm, and he was the one who called the Fire Department and the ambulance. He also visited me in the hospital and since I had nowhere to live because of the burnt out dormitory, he was kind enough to invite me to share his apartment with him. It's really a basement room, but it's kind of cute. He is a very fine boy and we have fallen deeply in love and are planning to get married. We haven't got the exact date yet, but it will be before my pregnancy begins to show.*

*Yes, Mother and Dad, I am pregnant. I know how much you are looking forward to being grandparents and I know you will welcome the baby and give it the same love and devotion and tender care you gave me when I was a child. The reason for the delay in our marriage is that my boyfriend has a minor infection which prevents us from passing our pre-marital blood tests and I carelessly caught it from him.*

*Now that I have brought you up to date, I want to tell you that there was no dormitory fire, I did not have a concussion or skull fracture, I was not in the hospital, I am not pregnant, I am not engaged, I am not infected, and there is no boyfriend. However, I am getting a "D" in American History, and an F in Chemistry, and I want you to see those marks in their proper perspective.*

*Your loving daughter,  
Sharon*

**Author's note:** *Sharon may be failing chemistry, but she gets an A in psychology.*

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Be assured the nice little lever of influence provided by the contrast principle does not go unexploited. The great advantage of the principle is not only that it works but also that it is virtually undetectable. Those who employ it can cash in on its influence without any appearance of having structured the situation in their favor.

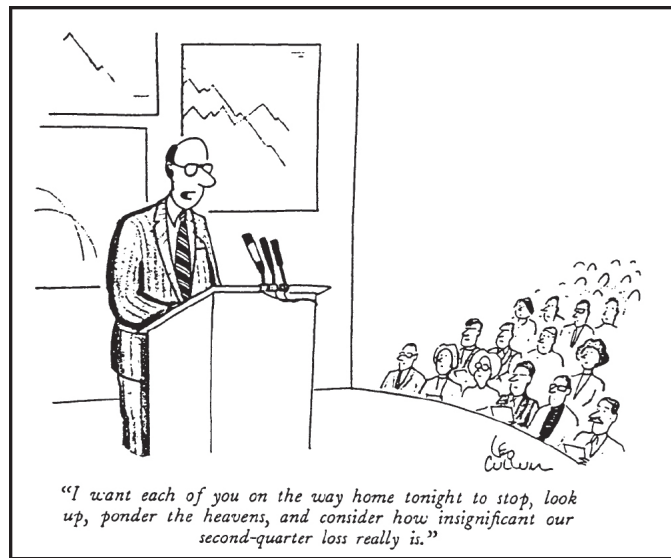
Retail clothiers offer a good example. Suppose a man enters a fashionable men's store to buy a suit and a sweater. If you were the salesperson, which would you show him first to make him likely to spend

the most money? Clothing stores instruct their sales personnel to sell the costly item first. Common sense might suggest the reverse. If a man has just spent a lot of money to purchase a suit, he may be reluctant to spend much more on the purchase of a sweater, but the clothiers know better. They behave in accordance with what the contrast principle advises: sell the suit first, because when it comes time to look at sweaters, even expensive ones, their prices will not seem as high in comparison. The same principle applies to a man who wishes to buy the accessories (shirt, shoes, belt) to go along with his new suit. Contrary to the commonsense view, the evidence supports the contrast-principle prediction.

It is more profitable for salespeople to present the expensive item first; to fail to do so not only loses the force of the contrast principle but also causes the principle to work against them. Presenting an inexpensive product first and following it with an expensive one makes the expensive item seem even more costly—hardly a desirable consequence for sales organizations. So just as it is possible to make the same bucket of water appear to be hotter or colder depending on the temperature of previously presented buckets of water, it is possible to make the price of the same item seem higher or lower depending on the price of a previously presented item.

Clever use of perceptual contrast is by no means confined to clothiers. I came across a technique that engaged the contrast principle while I was investigating, undercover, the compliance tactics of real-estate companies. To learn the ropes, I accompanied a salesman on a weekend of showing houses to prospective home buyers. The salesman—we can call him Phil—was to give me tips to help me through my break-in period. One thing I quickly noticed was that whenever Phil began showing a new set of customers potential buys, he would start with a couple of undesirable houses. I asked him about it, and he laughed. They were what he called “setup” properties. The company maintained an unappealing house or two on its lists at inflated prices. These houses were not intended to be sold to customers but only to be shown to them so that the genuine properties in the company’s inventory would benefit from the comparison. Not all the sales staff made use of the setup houses, but Phil did. He said he liked to watch his prospects’ “eyes light up” when he showed the places he really wanted to sell them after they had seen the unattractive ones. “The house I got them spotted for looks really great after they’ve first looked at a couple of dumps.”

Automobile dealers use the contrast principle by waiting until the price of a car has been negotiated before suggesting one option after another. In the wake of a many-thousand-dollar deal, a couple hundred extra dollars for a nicety such as an upgraded sound system seems almost trivial in comparison. The same will be true of the added expense of accessories, such as tinted windows, better tires, or special trim, that the dealer might suggest in sequence. The trick is to bring up the options independently of one another so that each small price will seem petty when compared to the already determined much larger price. As veteran car buyers can attest, many a budget-sized final-price figure balloons out of proportion from the addition of all those seemingly little options. While customers stand, signed contract in hand, wondering what happened and finding no one to blame but themselves, the car dealer stands smiling the knowing smile of the jujitsu master.



**Figure 1.4: “A Stellar Idea”**

There’s a whole universe of applications for the contrast principle.

*The New Yorker*

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**READER’S REPORT 1.2**

***From a business-school student at the University of Chicago***



While waiting to board a flight at O'Hare, I heard a desk agent announce that the flight was overbooked and, if passengers were willing to take a later plane, they would be compensated with a voucher worth \$10,000! Of course, this exaggerated amount was a joke. It was supposed to make people laugh. It did. But I noticed that when he then revealed the actual offer (a \$200 voucher), there were no takers. In fact, he had to raise the offer twice to \$300 and then \$500 before he got any volunteers. I was reading your book at the time and I realized that, although he got his laugh, according to the contrast principle he screwed up. He arranged things so that, compared to \$10,000, a couple hundred bucks seemed like a pittance. That was an expensive laugh. It cost his airline an extra \$300 per volunteer.

**Author's note:** Any ideas on how the desk agent could have used the contrast principle to his advantage rather than his detriment? Perhaps he could have started with a \$2 joke offer and then revealed the true—and now much more attractive sounding—\$200 amount. Under those circumstances, I'm pretty sure he would have secured his laugh *and* his volunteers.

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## ***SUMMARY***

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- Ethologists, researchers who study animal behavior in the natural environment, have noticed that among many animal species, behavior often occurs in rigid and mechanical patterns. Called fixed-action patterns, these mechanical sequences are noteworthy in their similarity to certain automatic (*click, run*) responses by humans. For both humans and subhumans, the automatic-behavior patterns tend to be triggered by a single feature of the relevant information in the situation. This single feature, or trigger feature, can often prove valuable by allowing an individual to decide on a correct course of action without having to analyze carefully and completely each of the other pieces of information in the situation.
- The advantage of such shortcut responding lies in its efficiency and economy; by reacting automatically to a normally informative trigger feature, an individual preserves crucial time, energy, and mental

capacity. The disadvantage of such responding lies in its vulnerability to silly and costly mistakes; by reacting to only a piece of the available information (even a usually predictive piece), an individual increases the chances of error, especially when responding in an automatic, mindless fashion. The chances of error increase even further when other individuals seek to profit by arranging (through manipulation of trigger features) to stimulate a desired behavior at inappropriate times.

- Much of the compliance process (wherein one person is spurred to comply with another person's request) can be understood in terms of a human tendency for automatic, shortcut responding. Most of us have developed a set of trigger features for compliance—that is, specific pieces of information that normally tell us when compliance with a request is likely to be correct and beneficial. Each of these trigger features for compliance can be used like a lever (of influence) to move people to agree with requests.
- Perceptual contrast—the tendency to see two things that are different from one another as being more different than they actually are—is a lever of influence used by some compliance practitioners. For example, real-estate agents may show prospective home buyers one or two unattractive options before showing them a more attractive home, which then seems more attractive than it would have if shown first. An advantage of employing this lever of influence is that its tactical use typically goes unrecognized.