The Science of Influence

A summary of recent insights

Selling Interactions
DIAGNOSIS; DESIGN; DELIVERY

Influence: From "dark art" to "open book"?

"You can make more friends in two months by becoming interested in other people than you can in two years by trying to get other people interested in you."

Dale Carnegie

There was once a time when selling was seen as a mysterious art. Some people had the "gift of the gab" or could "sell ice to Eskimos". We couldn't really explain why some people could 'influence' others to buy and some not.

Today, after decades of psychological research, we are starting to peel the layers of the onion to get to the core of why we say "Yes, I will buy!"

This resume is designed to update you on current findings around influence that you can apply every day in sales / business development – consciously.

12 Big ideas for exploration

Like any formulae or recipes, application is everything: Slavishly and clumsily using a "principle of influence" in front of a customer runs the risk of having the opposite effect of what we intend!

We present these 12 big ideas to stimulate your thoughts about managing customer interactions differently.

These ideas are well known and written about in both the research literature and popular psychology already (see references section for sources).

Our aim here is to help you think through their application in sales and business development

1. Herd thinking: The power of social proof

Ever since Solomon Asch's seminal work on group conformity (1) it is clear that we humans are heavily influenced by those around us.

Asch showed that people would override their own common sense in order to conform with others. He famously asked participants to compare the lengths of lines in the presence of "plants" in the group who claimed the lines were identical in length., when they were not. The "real" participant went along with the crowd against their own better judgement.

Dr Cialdini developed this theme more recently in his book "Influence" (2) showing how powerful peer influence is, especially when we are uncertain about what to do

How can I apply this in sales?

Prepare concrete examples of other clients using your services that your prospect respects
Explain how and why others are using your product / services
Look for examples of similar practices in the prospect's own organisation and highlight them
Ask what risks your client sees if competitors adopt your practices and they do not

2. The Affect Heuristic: Do you like me?

Is it more important that your client likes you or that you like your client? Every sales person knows that a customer does not buy from you if they don't like you….and yet, who should take the initiative to build relations? What chances are there that the customer will like us unless we first look for their positive points?

Dr Cialdini (2) cites the Tupperware Party as a prime example of how our liking of someone (in this case , our friends) strongly influences us to buy from them.

We also know that physical attractiveness plays a role in "affect" (or liking). The winter 2013 Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management (3) featured a paper showing that facial appearance significantly affected customer satisfaction

How can I apply this in sales?

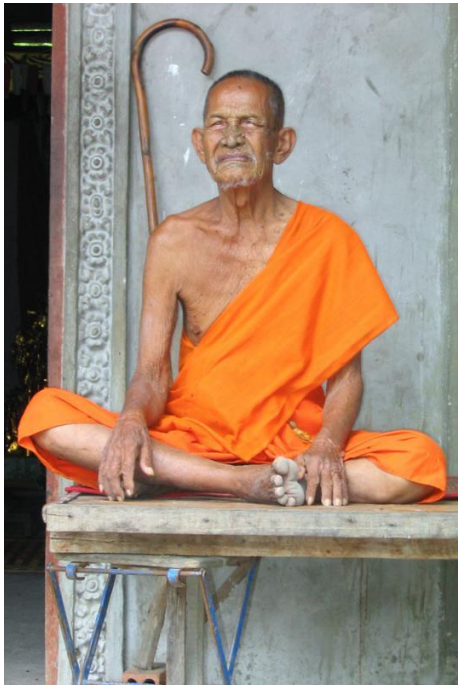
Proactively plan to be liked! Make each meeting with a client an event – surprise them with special preparation personal to them e.g. find out about their interests and bring a book related to them

Be interested in them always – listening actively to their agenda!

Take care with your physical appearance and dress to always make an excellent impression

3. Reciprocity: You scratch my back and….

That we recognise a social debt is nothing new: We expect that if we do something for someone, they will do us a favour in return. What is not so obvious is the *power* of the obligation we feel. Think for a moment how you feel when someone does you a good turn: Don't we feel a strong need to reciprocate and aren't we often more generous than the original benevolence?



Dr Cialdini (2) explains how the Hari Krishna movement exploited this dynamic by first giving a gift to passers by before they asked for donations. When we have been given something spontaneously and generously it has a big impact on us and we feel compelled to reciprocate.

How can I apply this in sales?

Get in the habit of proactively giving to your existing network as best you can, without keeping stock of the payback you receive - Help make connections, introductions and send interesting articles to customers and prospects

Send a book / gift / good wishes "out of the blue"

Don't be afraid to ask for help from your network in return…..

4. Conditioning: Sow seeds in the subconscious

We are so easily influenced sometimes it's almost embarrassing. Experienced procurement professionals know this when they say upfront "*Our existing supplier is the lowest cost on the market so you will have to really sharpen your pencil if you want to win our business*".

These seeds grow in our subconscious and influence our actions later down the road. Daniel Kahneman (4) has written extensively on this area in his book "Thinking, Fast and Slow".

Conditioning basically means we can influence someone's thinking by exposing them to information early on that will affect their judgement later.

A concrete example: If we just heard about a plane crash in China, how do we feel about booking that flight to Paris? Is it really a rational reaction?

How can I apply this in sales?

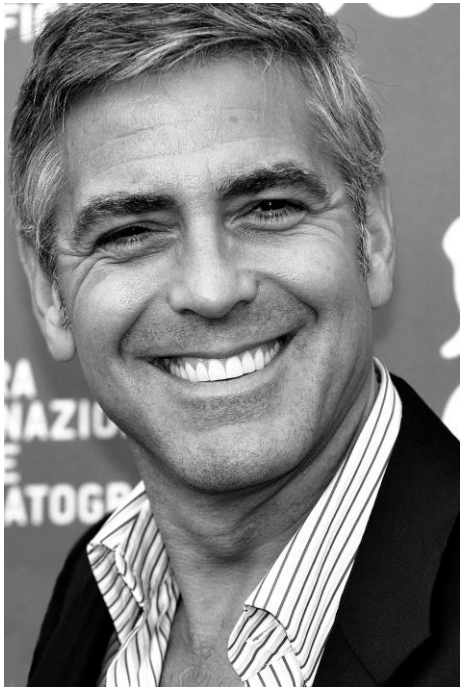
Prepare the order carefully in which you discuss items in client meetings

Mention products / services that you will talk about at the ***next*** *meeting*

What key information does your client need to digest in advance so they are receptive?

5. Charisma: Nature or nurture?

Why do some people exude charisma and gravitas? Can we develop it or is it innate? Work by Antonakis et al presented in the Harvard Business Review (5) in 2012 identified 12 "CLTs" (charismatic leadership traits) that we can mimic and apply to increase our charisma. Examples are: metaphors, similes, and analogies; stories and anecdotes; contrasts; rhetorical questions; three-part lists; expressions of moral conviction; reflections of the group's sentiments and the setting of high goals.



On the basis that we are drawn to charismatic people, trust them and want to be led by them, it is worth all of us in business development working on our "CLTs". This is most easily practised during sales presentations, asking for feedback from our colleagues shortly afterwards

How can I apply this in sales?

A strong charismatic presentation to a group of clients can be transformational in the sales process
Prepare well, practice extensively and be creative to make impact
Don't accept that charisma is an unchangeable characteristic

6. Authority: A figure of our imagination?

When Stanley Milgram conducted his infamous experiments in 1974 (6) he demonstrated that normally rational human beings were prepared to electrocute others because someone in authority told them do so. What relevance does this have for us in sales today?

Dr Cialdini has again developed the theme, citing the example of physicians who exert such strong influence on our health decisions. All healthcare organisation know this, hence today's sophistication in managing "KOLs" (Key Opinion Leaders – those doctors who endorse treatments and are respected and well known in the disease area).

By understanding who is respected, followed and influential, we can "stand on the shoulders of greatness" and align our products / solutions to great effect.

How can I apply this in sales?

Find out who the thought leaders are in your industry and align your offerings

Cite opinion leaders in your solution recommendations

Gather endorsements from respected key figures

Use the "Doctor Attitude" in selling "My advice is that you should….."

7. Scarcity: Demand and supply in action

As we will see with the risk / reward principle, we humans fear loss more than we value the equivalent gain. It is this irrational primeval instinct that we respond to when assessing scarcity

You don't have to walk very far down any high street to see how the retail profession exploits this: "*Only 1 day remaining*" or "*Buy while stocks last*" are all sentiments designed to play on this dynamic. If it looks like supply will go down, then we can expect demand to go up.

And yet this approach / attitude is risky: As buyers we are highly attuned to false claims of scarcity, and some industries have abused the principle to the extent where their credibility is close to zero: Think of furniture store "*closing down sales*" which go on indefinitely.

How can I apply this in sales?

Make any discounted offers time bound and stick to them to maintain credibility!

Ensure that you don't undervalue your own precious time in front of customers

Politely remind clients that you do have other clients to look after and their quick decision will help guarantee your time and support

8. Risk / Reward: How loss aversion biases us

Daniel Kahneman (5) is famous for introducing us to "prospect theory" which shows how we assess risk and reward. Working with Amos Tversky, he showed that we value equivalent losses twice as much as an equivalent gain. For example, if asked to gamble, we would balance a potential win of £100 with a potential loss of £50.

This simple result has major implications for our behaviour. Playing with risk in discussions is like playing with fire: If we over emphasise it with a client, it will look like scaremongering.

If we instead ask questions to help clients explore the risks they take, by not acting / taking our solutions, then this can help to increase urgency.

How can I apply this in sales?

Sell the problem , not the solution to create motivation to act

Explore the client's pain with their current situation and show how our solution alleviates it

Don't present features that the client hasn't expressed a need for…they will be like allergies

9. Anchoring: Setting a stake in the sand

Are we influenced by 'random' figures presented to us? Not sure? Consider this example cited by Kahneman (5). In the San Francisco Exploratorium, visitors were asked:
Is the height of the tallest redwood more or less than 1200 feet?
What is your best guess about the height of the tallest redwood?

Another group were asked the same question with 180 feet in the first question. The two groups produced very different means: 844 and 282 feet respectively.

This example shows us clearly how easily we are influenced by information presented to us when we do not have expert knowledge. The technique is well documented in procurement negotiation ("You'll have to find at least 20% discount to win this account…") but not so well known in sales.

How can I apply this in sales?

Sow seeds early on to help presentation of prices later on e.g. "A typical budget for this type of project would be x"

Start high in negotiations and only concede in small steps

Consider other information / data / studies / research that can help to influence your client

10. I am a consistent being

It is not a socially valued trait to be vapid and inconsistent. We don't trust people who keep changing their mind. Since being valued by society is a deeply ingrained instinct to avoid exclusion , we act strongly to be seen as confident and consistent in our dealings.

If we listen carefully to our clients, we will understand their beliefs and motivations. We will understand what makes them tick.

If we base our sales approach on helping a client to do what they believe to be right, then playing back to them their ideas, wishes, decisions and ambitions helps to invoke this principle.

How can I apply this in sales?

Understand the why behind your client's purchase decision
Reinforce their conclusions that link to your solution
Always create a concrete written action plan after every sales meeting and recall their commitments at the next meeting

11. Confirmation Bias: Halo and horns

Most of us in sales are highly aware of the importance of first impressions. When we dig beneath this, we find the confirmation bias at work.

Simply put, it means we selectively value information that reinforces our current beliefs.

We are not active in investigating new ways of interpreting a situation. In a "first impressions" scenario, it means we can be over-influenced by initial positives (Halo effect) or negative points (Horns effect). Our confirmation bias simply collects examples that reinforce our existing emerging perspective

How can I apply this in sales?

We must manage our first impressions without a doubt!

Think through how we can make the first 5 minutes result in a positive impression

Be ready to challenge "stuck perceptions" in our client to open their eyes to new value

12. Cognitive laziness: Jumping to conclusions

By now it should be obvious that humans are not the objective, rational, concrete, analytical beings we might like to think. One key driver of this is our "cognitive laziness" or "cognitive ease" as Kahneman (5) likes to call it. Our mind is good at jumping to conclusions, answering questions it was not asked and making important decision based only on information easily available to it. In one experiment, participants read 2 sentences:

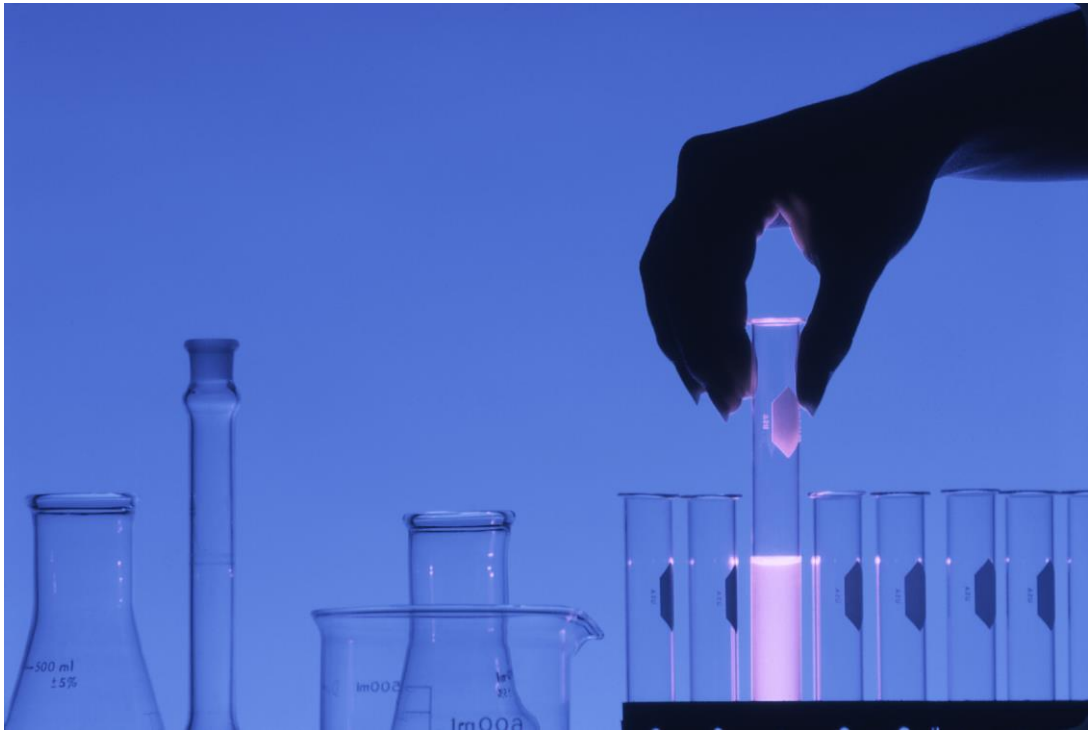
Adolf Hitler was born in 1892
Adolf Hitler was born in 1887

Whilst neither is correct, participants tend to evaluate the first highlighted example as true. We can exploit this dynamic of cognitive laziness by taking care that we manage the information clients receive so that they make good decisions that result in win / win outcomes.

How can I apply this in sales?

Be mindful of the mental shortcuts you and your customer are making in evaluating options
Be prepared to ask questions and challenge your customer to make better decisions
Manage information to help build the image you want your client to have

Workshop: Innovations in Influence



For a more in depth investigation into how your organisation can apply these ideas to your markets, we run an in-house **"innovation in influence"** workshop. We can help you to apply science to influence for more effective sales meetings.
Contact info@sellinginteractions.com to arrange your workshop

Influence: References / Further reading

1. Asch, S.E. (1951) '**Effects of group pressure upon the modification and distortion of judgment**', in H.Guetzkow (ed.) *Groups, Leadership and Men.* Carnegie Press, New York
2. Cialdini, R.B. (2007) '**Influence: The psychology of Persuasion**' Harper Collins
3. McColl, R & Truong, Y (2013) '**The Effects of Facial Attractiveness and Gender on Customer Evaluations During a Web Video Encounter'**; Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management, Pi Sigma Epsillon National Educational Foundation
4. Kahneman, D (2012) '**Thinking, Fast and Slow**' Penguin
5. Antonakis, J Fenley, M and Liechti,S '**Learning Charisma**' Harvard Business Review June 2012
6. Milgram, S. (1974) '**Obedience and Authority'**, Tavistock, London

"The most important thing in communication is hearing what isn't said"
Peter Drucker

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