

UNLIMITED POTENTIAL

Volume VI, No. 8

Newsletter

The Brain Science of Persuasion: 7 Automatic Triggers

People make two major mistakes when trying to persuade others:

1. Using the argument that would work best on themselves
2. Overestimating the power of logic and rationality

The scientific study of persuasion has continued for more than half a century, yet executives across all fields make presentations based on these faulty assumptions.

Instead of researching what makes people buy or make decisions, they ask themselves, "What would motivate me to participate in this program or buy this product?"

When learning economics, finance and management, executives refer to outside experts to achieve a level of competence. But when it comes to persuasion skills, most believe they already possess an intuitive understanding of psychological principles, simply by virtue of living life and interacting with others. Consequently, they're less likely to consult psychological research on how people make decisions.

This overconfidence leads many executives, managers and salespeople to miss opportunities for improving their presentations and efforts to influence others.

The fact is, persuasion can be defined, learned and successfully incorporated into anyone's communication abilities. It doesn't matter if you work in sales, marketing or another field directly related to persuasion. Every leader or manager depends on getting things done through others.

Getting Things Done Through Others

Personal and organizational success hinges on how well you persuade people to willingly follow your directions. Your boss may give you specific powers, but execution and results come from successfully influencing others.



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**P.O. Box 20389
St. Simons Island, Georgia 31522
912.634.9300
877.626.2960
(toll free)**

potential@Herdlinger.com

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So, what have we learned about the process of persuasion that we didn't know before? What does brain science tell us about the natural processes of decision-making and being influenced? What can we learn to become better persuaders?

Actually, we've discovered a great deal in the last 10 to 15 years about how the human brain processes information. With the recent advent of live, real-time brain-imaging technology, we can now look at what happens inside the brain as we process information, make decisions and respond to others.

It's important to emphasize that our brain isn't similar to a computer. Author and neuroscientist Richard Restak, MD, puts it this way:

- "We are not thinking machines, we are feeling machines that think." (*The Secret Life of the Brain*)
- "Your brain is not a logic machine. As it turns out, emotions and feelings about something or someone occur before you've made any attempt at conscious evaluation." (*Mozart's Brain and the Fighter Pilot*)

Feelings First, Logic Later

Most of us try to persuade by using our best arguments, best data, logical flow charts and rationality to generate the thinking, decisions and actions we seek. Business leaders still believe everyone relies heavily on logic and reason to make decisions. We've traditionally believed that emotion wreaks havoc on rationality, especially in business.

As science evolves, we're starting to realize that emotions come first. Not only do they guide our decisions and actions, but we're incapable of making decisions without them.

We use the emotional parts of our brain to make rational decisions. Emotional context helps us make the best choices, often in a split second, long before the rational centers of the brain are even activated.

It's estimated that managers spend 80 percent of their time communicating with others, trying to persuade them to accomplish what needs to be done. But how well have leaders and managers understood how humans process information and make decisions?

Perhaps we should pay attention to what the new brain science tells us about persuasion.

Ethos, Logos and Pathos

Aristotle identified the three basic elements of every persuasive argument:

- **Ethos** – the credibility, knowledge, expertise, stature and authority of the person trying to persuade

- **Logos** – the appeal of logic, reason, cognitive thinking, data and facts
- **Pathos** – the appeal to the emotions; the non-cognitive, non-thinking motivations that affect decisions and actions

These elements are the powerful cornerstones of every persuasive argument or presentation. They aren't weighted equally, however, and therein lies the hidden secret of unlocking your persuasive powers.

The Secret Key to Unlocking Persuasive Powers

If we pay attention only to these three keys, we still won't unlock the full potential of our persuasive powers.

Research on the brain during decision-making reveals that we respond to persuasive attempts either analytically or automatically.

Those who respond analytically use a reasoned evaluative approach to come to a decision, but this requires enormous mental energy. The brain uses up reserves of glucose and calories whenever it evaluates. And because it's human nature to conserve energy, most of us won't respond with the extra effort required to be analytical.

In fact, most people slip into automatic response mode whenever possible. We avoid cognitive evaluation because it's hard work. This doesn't mean we're lazy; it's actually a primitive survival instinct. We automatically take the easy way to conserve energy in case we're attacked or threatened.

That's why most people don't act on logic and reason. We make emotional decisions and then justify them with logic and reason.

The Brain's Trigger Center

If we had to evaluate every decision before acting, we'd be exhausted. Instead, we rely on the limbic system and our brain's center for emotions and memories, the amygdala. This part of the brain acts as our personal navigation system, with an internal data bank of triggers.

The more complicated and sophisticated our lives become, the more we rely on simple ways to make decisions and get through each day – a key concept in Malcolm Gladwell's book *Blink*. Smart managers, leaders and marketers understand this need.

This doesn't mean you can skip logical arguments, but it does place less emphasis on reason and more on emotion. When you understand that people want to make rapid, automatic and accelerated

decisions, you can make it easier on those you're trying to influence and increase your success at persuasion.

How do we generate automatic influence? With triggers. Everybody has them. A trigger is any stimulus that will help us make a non-thinking decision or action. A trigger activates a person's immediate compliance to an attempt to influence.

We are preprogrammed to comply with requests when a trigger is activated. It's simply a shortcut to avoid the pain and effort of mental activity.

Each of us has infinite triggers, and some are universal. Research has identified seven super triggers. Once you understand them, you'll see them everywhere – in every request you make, email you write and TV commercial you watch.

Seven Super Triggers

These triggers help us quickly sense and feel the best decision or action to take. They allow us to navigate paths that would be overwhelming and unmanageable if we had to constantly employ cognitive thought.

Most of us, especially marketing people, understand the trigger of benefits. Appeal to what people want, and talk to them in terms of solving a problem or filling a need. This is part of the hope trigger. But it's only one limited approach. You can improve your chances of persuasion success by using more than one trigger.

Let's examine the seven triggers that automatically influence others.

1. The Friendship Trigger

We are more easily influenced by people we like, and liking is a prerequisite for the other triggers. Friendship generates trust, and trust activates a strong internal trigger. This is the basis of the marketing axiom "*people buy from people they know, like and trust.*" The best way to activate friendship is through similarity. Find connections and common interests, and listen to the people you wish to influence.

2. The Authority Trigger

We respond with unthinking, automatic compliance to those we believe have authority, credibility and power. Managers and leaders may think they have authority by virtue of their position, but without the likeability factor, this trigger is weakened. The authority trigger works because we assume the person in position of authority has done the evaluation work for us.

3. The Consistency Trigger

Our internal guidance system compels us to be consistent in the way we see ourselves and the peers we admire. We are slaves to consistency and

conformity; in fact, these drives are hard-wired into our brain, governed by the amygdala.

The research is clear: Decisions are emotion based. When it's time to make a decision, we call up an emotional memory that's similar to the situation at hand, and we're guided in the same direction.

4. The Reciprocity Trigger

One of the strongest, most universal internal triggers is the law of giving and receiving, or *quid pro quo*. Reciprocity is the well-documented psychological desire to give back to someone who has given us a gift. It's another automatic response hard-wired into our brains. Marketers have been using bonus gifts and free samples for years.

5. The Contrast Trigger

Framing a proposition so it appears more desirable than an alternative is a proven automatic compliance technique. How you frame the proposal is critical: Always present the most onerous approach first, followed by what you really want.

6. The Reason Why Trigger

The brain looks for shortcuts to doing mental work. When you present a valid reason to accept a proposition, you achieve compliance. This concept has been successfully applied in myriad situations, and we know it works because we've seen the neural networks in the brain's decision-making process. The amygdala seems to accept any valid reason and doesn't bother to send the information to the cerebral cortex. When you provide a reason, you persuade successfully.

7. The Hope Trigger

Hope motivates all human activity. We are easily persuaded by those who understand our hopes, wishes and dreams. This is one of the strongest persuaders, underlying all others. We hope our decisions and actions will somehow improve our lives and status, helping us to become more successful and happy. Once we perceive an opportunity to satisfy our hopes, we seldom rely on rational, cognitive thought or logic before we act.

The constant desire for happiness is the foundation for the omnipotent hope trigger. Among the best examples are get-rich-quick scams, gambling and lotteries. The vitamin and cosmetic industries thrive because of the strong hopes and desires their marketing messages trigger. Not a shred of logic or reason is employed in weighing the odds.

Six Steps to a Persuasive Presentation

Virtually everything we communicate is a proposal of sorts. All persuasive communication hopes to move someone to do something. The best way to accomplish this is to use the brain's natural processes.

We make most decisions based on the amygdala's initial emotional response. If we deal with rationality and logic, it's to reinforce these emotional decisions with logical information sent after the fact to the prefrontal cortex.

A properly framed presentation will be more easily understood and acted upon by the brain. Here's a proposed outline for framing a successful presentation that persuades others to act in the direction you desire:

1. Write down your persuasion goal, what you hope to accomplish, what you expect others to do and the ideal time frame.
2. List the questions you'll ask your audience to determine their perceptions on the issue.
3. List each of the seven internal triggers. Under each one, list every possible item that could apply. Select and prioritize the three or four triggers best suited to the situation.
4. Frame your presentation with the beginning and ending that have the highest impact. The friendship trigger, coupled with the reciprocity trigger, is a great start. You'll also want early application of the authority trigger.
5. The body of the proposal, including the logic and data, will follow the other trigger information. Minimal application of logic and data will reinforce a positive decision.
6. Finally, frame your closure by defining precisely what you want your audience to do, and determine how you will ask for this action.

Herdlinger Associates

P.O. Box 20389

St. Simons Island, Georgia 31522