

THE POWER
OF PERSUASION

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THE POWER OF PERSUASION

How We're Bought and Sold

Robert Levine, Ph.D.



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To my mother, Esther Levine,
the leader of the band

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments

ix

Introduction

I

ONE

The Illusion of Invulnerability

Or, How Can Everyone Be Less Gullible
Than Everyone Else?

5

TWO

Whom Do We Trust? Experts, Honesty, and Likability

Or, the Supersalesmen Don't Look Like Salesmen at All

29

THREE

Killing You with Kindness

Or, Beware of Strangers Bearing Unexpected Gifts

65

FOUR

The Contrast Principle

Or, How Black Gets Turned into White

91

vii

FIVE**\$2 + \$2 = \$5**

Or, Learning to Avoid Stupid Mental Arithmetic

113SIX**The Hot Button**

Or, How Mental Shortcuts Can Lead You into Trouble

137SEVEN**Gradually Escalating the Commitments**

Or, Making You Say Yes by Never Saying No

159EIGHT**Winning Hearts and Minds**

Or, the Road to Perpetual Persuasion

187NINE**Jonestown**

Or, the Dark End of the Dark Side of Persuasion

209TEN**The Art of Resistance**Or, Some Unsolicited Advice for Using
and Defending against Persuasion**227**

Notes	245
Index	267

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INTRODUCTION

When I was growing up in Brooklyn we had a standard put-down for intellectuals: “Good school smarts, no street smarts.” I suspect most of us who make our way up the academic ladder are prone to the shortcoming. After all, in the majority of our disciplines we’re trained to conduct research and write manuscripts, to give lectures and exams, not to live by our wits. But in my own field—social psychology—the affliction can be particularly onerous. If you’re studying nuclear physics, it doesn’t really matter what you know about real life. You don’t need a lot of social skills to run a linear particle accelerator or a spectrophotometer. Social psychologists, however, are in the business of people. Who cares if we master technical jargon and sophisticated research methodology if it doesn’t add to our understanding of real people in real settings?

Which means that to research this book properly, I had to leave the academy and journey into that tangled netherland social scientists call “the field” and everyone else calls “the real world.” So, along with a number of adventurous students, I threw myself directly into the path of persuasion professionals, those whose lives depend not on theories but on actual results, in order to observe their methods firsthand and discover their secrets. I would quickly learn that we persuasion professors have much more to learn from them than they have to learn from us.

We began with the salespeople. We listened to hucksters selling everything from Tupperware and cosmetics to health and religion. We listened to pitches for time-shares and kitchenware. One of us watched a woman in a neighbor’s home—a “good friend from Florida” who happened to be visiting—sell a roomful of friends a “one-size-fits-all magnetic Model 52 shoe insole, proven in scientific research to change your body’s energy field—only \$70 plus tax.” We put ourselves at the mercy of the purest of the trade’s artists: automobile salespeople. I observed

those who use their skills to control others' lives—the heavyweights—such as politicians, psychotherapists, and religious and cult leaders.

I also spoke to many people who have been on the receiving end of the process. These range from consumers who were induced to make purchases they didn't need to former Moonies and Jonestown survivors. They vary from individuals who are convinced they've been saved to those who believe they were ruined by psychobabbling control freaks.

Finally, I've tried to learn firsthand. I went to seminars and training sessions that teach the tricks of the trade. I studied magicians, mentalists, and assorted flimflam men. Most educational of all, I took jobs selling cars and hawking cutlery door-to-door.

To be sure, this book also draws heavily on my school smarts, be what they may. As a professor and researcher in the field, I've studied many of the numerous systematic investigations—of which, for better and for worse, there are thousands—that have been conducted on the psychology of persuasion and its many applications. These scientific findings permeate this book. But I've tried to be selective about which studies I report. One of the accusations sometimes leveled at social science research—a variant of the “no street smarts” problem—is how often our findings fall into the category of “*Bubbe* psychology”: using academic jargon to describe something your grandmother could have told you. I've done my best to extract findings that are at best surprising and at the very least useful.

For instance, the direct, verbal approach—where I try to win you over to my way of thinking—has been studied extensively, most notably in a classic series of experiments by psychologist Carl Hovland and his colleagues at Yale University. They and other researchers would consider such questions as whether it's more effective to present one or both sides of an argument (answer: one-sided appeals are most effective when the audience is already sympathetic to your position; two-sided appeals work better when the audience is already considering a conflicting argument), and whether you should present a carefully reasoned argument or one that appeals to emotions (answer: it depends on the audience—less-educated people are generally more susceptible to emotional appeals; better-educated audiences are more responsive to rational appeals).¹

But the actual content of the message is just one part of the persuasion process. Over and over I learned that what is said is often less important than how it is said, when and where it is said, and who says

it. It's the setup, the context, the nondirect, nonverbal features of the process that persuasion artists know how to exploit. These subtle, silent features of the process are the focus of this book.

My research had led me to three broad conclusions. First, we're more susceptible to persuasion than we think. People tend to have a curious illusion of personal invulnerability to manipulation—a belief that we're not as vulnerable as others around us. In part, this illusion derives from the subtlety of clever operators who make it hard to see that you're being manipulated. In part, it feeds off another “normal” illusion—that we're more capable and, so, better defended than other people. The illusion of invulnerability is a comforting notion for moving forward in an unpredictable and dangerous world. Unfortunately, however, the more immune we feel, the less likely we are to take precautions and, as a result, the more susceptible than ever we become.

Second, the most effective persuaders are the least obvious. Almost everyone is savvy enough to put his or her guard up against the fast-talkers—pushy salespeople, aggressive con artists, and egotistical leaders. The people who often get through to us, however, are more subtle. They seem likable, honest, and trustworthy. As Abraham Lincoln once observed, “There's nothing stronger than gentleness.” And they move gradually—so gradually, in fact, that we may not realize what we've gotten ourselves into until it's too late. The most successful salesmen, as we'll see, don't appear to be salesmen at all. In the 1950s, Vance Packard wrote a best-selling book, *The Hidden Persuaders*, in which he claimed to reveal how Madison Avenue was using extraordinary, devious techniques based on the powers of psychoanalysis, most famously in the form of subliminal messages, to sell us products with astonishing rates of success. Subsequent research offers virtually no support for Packard's hypotheses—neither that subliminal techniques were often used nor that they had any success when they were. But the term *hidden persuader* is a good one: the most effective persuasion often takes place when we don't recognize we're being persuaded. It borders on the invisible.

Third, the rules of persuasion aren't all that different no matter who is the source. Whether people are selling Tupperware or eternity, it seems that most are reading from the same manual, and often the same page. I've come to agree with the words of advertising commentator Sid Bernstein: “Of course you sell candidates for political office the same way you sell soap or sealing wax or whatever; because, when you get right down to it, that's the only way anything is sold.”² The

effectiveness of virtually all these experts' strategies can be explained by a finite number of principles. The content of the come-on may differ dramatically, but not the form. I don't mean to make persuasion sound overly mechanical. There's a great deal of artistry involved—watching the professionals makes it clear it's as much an art as it is a science—and it's often the creativity and artistry that make it so fascinating to watch. But the persuasion artist is only effective to the degree he or she follows certain rules of psychology. I've tried in this book to highlight the psychological techniques you're most likely to come across in the world of persuasion. They vary around a few common themes. But we best be prepared for their swift intensity.

It's important to recognize, however, that persuasion isn't an inherently exploitive force. It's not so much a crystallized weapon as it is a process; no less, in fact, than the process underlying virtually all meaningful social communication. After all, doesn't communication boil down to either requesting information that may in some way change us or dispensing messages that we hope will change others? Persuasion covers considerably more than the conniving tricks of bullies and con artists. Teaching, parenting, and friendship rest on skills of persuasion, as do self-change and discipline. "Mastery of others is strength; mastery of yourself is true power," Lao-tzu once wrote. If we accept that humans are social animals, then the psychology of persuasion—knowing both how to use it and how to resist it—should be viewed as an essential life skill. Questions of the morality of persuasion are best reserved for how and for what purposes the process is used, not whether it's used. (I'll have more to say about ethics in the last chapter.)

I use the term *persuasion* in its broadest sense in this book. By it, I refer to the psychological dynamics that cause people to be changed in ways they wouldn't have if left alone. The term serves as an umbrella that encompasses a number of related concepts in psychology: basic processes such as influence, control, attitude change, and compliance; and more ominous-sounding extremes like mind control and brainwashing.

My ultimate interest is how people are manipulated to do things they never thought they'd do and are later sorry they did. The following chapters contain tales of human imperfection and the psychology behind them. They're offered in the spirit of some old advice from Eleanor Roosevelt: "Learn from the mistakes of others. You can't live long enough to make them all yourself."