

Ready to Sell

Need to boost your sales? This surprising new research will help

"WE TEND TO THINK OUR MESSAGE is what moves people," says Robert Cialdini, the author of *Pre-Suasion: A Revolutionary Way to Influence and Persuade*. "But it's what we do first to create a particular state of mind in our audience that makes them receptive." Offering coffee, for instance: Research has shown that when people hold something warm, it makes them more generous. Or try playing on what social scientists call the rule for reciprocation. In one study, candy store shoppers were 42 percent more likely to buy something if they received free chocolate. "Many things that shape our frame of mind are so primitive and automatic that they aren't really part of the deliberative process," Cialdini says. Tilt those instincts in your favor with these insights. —KATE ROCKWOOD



FIND COMMON GROUND

"It's not just that people want to deal with someone they like. It's that they want to deal with someone who likes *them*, and who is like them," says Cialdini. "People trust that those who like them won't steer them wrong." Visual cues (sports caps, college rings) can help you find on-the-fly commonalities on the sales floor, but for deeper prep for an upcoming meeting with a prospective customer, hit social media and LinkedIn hard and do some reconnaissance. "Then, if you see that you have a shared hometown or alma mater or love of running, you'll know to steer the small talk in that direction," Cialdini says.

KNOW YOUR OPENING GAMBIT

When researchers approached people and asked for their email addresses in exchange for a bottle of a new kind of soda, 33 percent ponied up their info. But when researchers first asked, "Do you consider yourself adventurous?" nearly 76 percent of people provided their email addresses. Why? "This kind of single-chute memory question," says Cialdini, "significantly increases the percentage of people who brand themselves as adventurous," which momentarily makes them "highly vulnerable to aligned requests"—such as your pitch.

If you're one of many companies competing for a firm's business, start by asking: Why did you invite us here? "They will begin telling you about all of the things they find favorable and powerful about what you're offering," explains Cialdini. "Now you know what strengths you have, and you can double down on those."

DRAW STRENGTH FROM YOUR DRAWBACKS

Pointing out your shortcomings earns points, says Cialdini; the quicker you can do it, the better. "People are surprised when you mention a weakness, and that convinces them of your trustworthiness," he explains—and then "they'll believe more deeply whatever comes next." When, in 1962, Avis debuted its famous "When you're only No. 2, you try harder" ads, the rental agency reportedly swung from \$3.2 million in the red to \$1.2 million in the black, its first profit in 13 years. That pivot—chasing a weakness with a strength that challenges its relevance—is key. Try a frame like: "Our installation costs may not be the lowest, but you'll recoup quickly with our superior efficiencies."

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HOT LEADS
It sounds like wishful thinking, but it's true: Studies show that the heat of a piping-hot beverage can translate into warm thoughts about your company—and make potential customers more receptive to your pitch.



SPOTLIGHT YOUR BEST FEATURE

You can influence how much import people give to quality, speed, service, or another feature through visual cues. When researchers created an online furniture store with either fluffy clouds or shiny pennies on the landing page, they found that consumers who saw clouds ranked comfort as more important than those who saw coins. Cloud watchers were also more likely to search for information about comfort features and purchased more comfortable (read: pricey) furniture. Yet when questioned afterward, most participants denied that the clouds or coins had any influence over their shopping behavior. As Cialdini explains, "Drawing attention to the favored feature isn't effective only in getting audiences to consider it fully, but also in getting them to lend the feature exaggerated significance." In other words: It might be time to rethink your website's landing page.

NIX COMPETITORS FROM YOUR PITCH

Congrats on how well you know your competitors. Now, don't mention them. "There's a substantial advantage for a brand when consumers focus on it in isolation from its competitors," says Cialdini. In fact, when you ask people to consider a particular product, their intention to purchase it naturally increases. But when they consider that product after a mention of what your competitor has to offer, the impulse to purchase that brand plummets.

SCARCITY SELLS

Our monkey brains panic when resources are scant—which makes consumers more likely to buy. "FOMO is real," says Cialdini. "Anything that plays to that fear—ticking clock emojis in an email marketing campaign, limited-time offers—can stoke that sense of urgency and that impulse to purchase."