

Pré-suasion by Warren Buffett

If you want to influence people don't try to persuade them. Use 'pre-suasion' instead.



Berkshire Hathaway Chairman and CEO Warren Buffett speaks during an interview with Liz Claman on the Fox Business Network in Omaha, Neb., May 4, 2015.

Today and every day we are the targets of salespeople, marketers, advertisers, fundraisers and (heaven knows) politicians trying to persuade us to buy something, do something or think a certain way. And they're good at it. Over the years, they've learned a lot about which features to build into a communication and which psychological strings to strum with that communication to elevate its success.

But, by concentrating so intently on the message itself, they've missed a crucial component of the process. Research done in the last fifteen years shows that optimal persuasion is achieved through optimal pre-suasion: the practice of arranging for people to agree with a message before they know what's in it.

Pre-suasion works by focusing people's preliminary attention on a selected concept — let's say softness — which spurs them to overvalue related opportunities that immediately follow. In one study, visitors to an online sofa store were sent to a site that depicted either soft clouds or small coins in the background of its landing page. Those who saw the soft clouds were more likely to prefer soft, comfortable sofas for purchase whereas those who saw the small amounts of money preferred inexpensive models. (When questioned afterwards, the visitors refused to believe what they saw pre-suasively — clouds or coins — had influenced them at all.)

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A subsequent study showed the primitiveness of the pre-suasive mechanism. Subjects became three times more likely to help a researcher who "accidentally" dropped some items if, immediately before, they'd been exposed to images of figures standing together in a friendly pose. If this tripling of helpfulness doesn't seem remarkable enough, consider that the subjects were 18 months old — hardly able to reason or review or reflect.

Long before scientists started studying the process, a few notable communicators had an intuitive understanding of it. Some instructive examples are available.

In 1588, British troops massed against a sea invasion from Spain at Tilbury were deeply concerned that their leader Queen Elizabeth I, as a woman, would not be up to the rigors of battle. In addressing the men, she dispelled their fears pre-suasively: first acknowledging their concern by admitting a weakness, which established her honesty for whatever she said next, and then following it with a strength that demolished the weakness. “I know,” she asserted, “I have the body of a weak and feeble woman. But I have the heart of a king, and a king of England, too.”

It’s reported that so long and loud were the cheers after this pronouncement that officers had to ride among the men ordering them to restrain themselves so the queen could continue.

The same pre-suasive, honesty-establishing tactic was employed in the late 1950s by the advertising firm Doyle Dane Bernbach to introduce the oddly shaped Volkswagen Beetle to a U.S. market dominated by big, powerful, boat-like vehicles. The “We’re ugly but...” campaign tactically admitted to cosmetic limitations before trumpeting the auto’s strengths such as economy, reliability and simplicity (“Ugly is only skin deep.” “It’s ugly but it gets you there”). Credited with cracking open the U.S. market for compact cars, the ad campaign has been rated among the greatest of all time.

As national security advisor and secretary of State during the 1970s, Henry Kissinger was considered America’s greatest international negotiator. When asked who he considered the best such negotiator he had encountered, he nominated Egypt’s then-President Anwar Sadat. Why? Because of a pre-suasive tactic Sadat regularly employed that allowed him to get more from a negotiation than was warranted by his political or military position. Before beginning negotiations, he would assign an admirable trait to the opposing side (perhaps Israelis’ “well-known” tradition of fairness or sympathy for the underdog or support for those in need) that fit with what he wanted. In other words, Kissinger said, “Sadat gave his opponents a reputation to live up to” — something they then did remarkably often.

In February 2015, the financial investor Warren Buffett had a problem. It was 50 years since he had taken control of Berkshire Hathaway Inc., guiding it to astounding levels of value, along with his brilliant partner Charlie Munger. Many investors were worried that, because Buffett and Munger were getting older, these levels couldn’t be maintained in the future, perhaps making it time to sell Berkshire stock.

To respond to these concerns, Buffett wrote a letter to shareholders in which he recounted various reasons for confidence in Berkshire’s continuing profitability. But, before the description of strengths, he declared with characteristic sincerity that what he was about to assert was “what I would say to my family today if they asked me about Berkshire’s future.” The result was a flood of favorable reaction to the letter (with headlines like “You’d be a fool not to invest in Berkshire Hathaway” and “Warren Buffett just wrote the best annual letter ever”), as well as a per-share increase for the year of nearly five times that of the S&P. I can say that, as a Berkshire Hathaway stockholder, I have never since thought of selling any shares. After all, Buffett had given me the same recommendation he first declared he’d give to a family member.

With considerable success, practitioners of social influence have always placed persuasive prods — glowing testimonials, emotional tugs, last-chance opportunities — inside their appeals. Perhaps because of that success, they’ve mostly missed an accompanying truth. For maximum impact, it’s not only what you do; it’s also what you do just before you do what you do.

Robert B. Cialdini is a behavioral scientist and author of the new book “Pre-Suasion: A Revolutionary Way to Influence and Persuade.”

3 Killer Persuasion Techniques You Can Learn From Billionaire Warren Buffett

Psychologist Robert Cialdini dissects what makes the world's most successful investor so incredibly persuasive.

If you want to persuade others, there are endless tips and tricks available. Most of them tell you how to package your argument to make it as convincing as possible, but according to psychologist Robert Cialdini, even if you heed every bit of advice out there on the topic, you've still ignored the most important part of persuasion.

A huge chunk of persuasion happens before people even know what you're selling, he says. This "pre-suasion" is all about establishing your credibility and relationship, and it's often the difference between people embracing your ideas or tuning you out.

"Research done in the last 15 years shows that optimal persuasion is achieved through optimal pre-suasion: the practice of arranging for people to agree with a message before they know what's in it," he writes in *The Los Angeles Times*.

So how do you learn this skill? You can do a lot worse than observe billionaire investor Warren Buffett, Cialdini says.

1. Build unity

When it comes to persuading people, trust often matters more than the content of your ideas, and you get people to trust you by demonstrating that you're all on the same team. Buffett knows this and demonstrated it in his 2015 letter to shareholders.

Aiming to convince readers that his company, Berkshire Hathaway, could continue its improbably long run of incredible success, he opened by saying that the message contained in the letter, was "what I would say to my family today if they asked me about Berkshire's future." That's a masterstroke, according to Cialdini.

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2. Admit mistakes

Admitting your errors upfront might sound like a terrible way to persuade people. After all, who would have confidence in someone who bumbled badly in the past? But Buffett proves that showing you're human straight off can actually be a brilliant move, Cialdini says.

On *The James Altucher Show* (hat tip to *Business Insider*), Cialdini praised Buffett's 2012 shareholder letter for this reason. Buffett kicked it off with an admission that "for the ninth time in 48 years, Berkshire's percentage increase in book value was less than the S&P's percentage gain."

"It's disarming every time he says, 'You know, we made this mistake.' I believe the next thing he says to me--and that's where he puts the strength of the last year," Cialdini explains. "He's just readied me to listen to and process the next thing he's going to say more deeply because he's established himself as a trustworthy source."

3. Make fun of yourself

Buffett understands that showing vulnerability can, paradoxically, strengthen your argument. As we saw in the last section, he does that by admitting missteps, but he also strives to come across as more human and believable by making fun of himself.

Every year, at their annual shareholder meeting, Buffett and his right-hand man Charlie Munger play a video that makes them the butt of jokes. These videos "humanize them and make them seem like they're not arrogant, know-it-all types, but very much in keeping with the image of who they are as honest, straight-talking people who will reveal their foibles if those foibles exist," Cialdini told *Yahoo Finance*.

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