Yes!
50 Scientifically Proven Ways to Be Persuasive
by Noah J. Goldstein, Steve J. Martin & Robert B. Cialdini

Every day you face the challenge of persuading others to do what you want. And, chances are, you're pretty good at it ... most of the time. But when it comes right down to it, do you honestly have any idea what makes people say "yes" to your requests? Is it because you're a nice person? Because you speak with authority? Dress well ...?

As it turns out, at any given time, there are hundreds (if not thousands), of interconnected factors that can influence whether someone is more likely to be agreeable or disagreeable to your requests. Many of these factors are nebulous and/or outside of your control, which leads many people to conclude that "persuasion is an art." But persuasion is also a science, and researchers who study it for a living are slowly but surely uncovering new sets of tools and techniques for moving people in your direction.

Professor Robert B. Cialdini of Arizona State University is the world's most quoted expert on the subject of influence. Together with two colleagues, Noah Goldstein and Steve Martin, Dr. Cialdini set out to distil over sixty years of groundbreaking research into the social psychology of persuasion, into a single easy-to-use reference book. This book, Yes! 50 Scientifically Proven Ways to Be Persuasive, reveals fifty simple but remarkably effective strategies that are sure to make you much more persuasive at work, and in your personal life too.

In fact, it doesn't matter whether you're the CEO of a large multi-national corporation, or a junior stock clerk at the local grocery store; the scientifically proven tools and techniques espoused by Cialdini and his team are universally applicable to any workplace or social situation. But you needn't take their word for it. Along the way, the authors point to dozens of studies that confirm how unseen psychological factors can have a profound impact on human decision-making.

Because Yes! was written by a team of academics, you can be sure that the studies and examples they chose will stand up to scientific scrutiny. At the same time, even though the examples chosen are scientifically rigorous, that doesn't mean they're boring. In fact, a few of the studies you'll hear about are downright bizarre (e.g. you'll learn why people named Dennis are disproportionately likely to become dentists, and what Luke Skywalker can teach us about becoming a great leader). As silly as those two examples may sound, the authors also cover off plenty of important questions, such as: What common mistake do communicators often make that cause their message to backfire? Which one word will strengthen your persuasion techniques? And why is it often dangerous to be seen by others as too much of a subject matter "expert"?

The fastest way to get the answers to these and other questions is to review all 50 persuasion techniques, which follow below.
1. How can inconveniencing your audience increase your persuasiveness?

When people are themselves unsure of which path to take, they generally look to see what others are doing. This phenomenon is called "social proof." Clever marketers will capitalize on this factor by making it seem as though the demand for their product (or service) is higher than it actually is. Think of the night club owner who inconveniences his customers by making them wait outside in the cold for an extended period of time before letting them into the bar, even though the place is empty.

2. How can you shift the "bandwagon effect" into high gear?

Human beings are largely herd animals who prefer to follow each other. More particularly, most people prefer to follow other people who look, and act, like themselves. So if you're a marketer who's looking to fully leverage the bandwagon effect, the authors suggest you use customized testimonials. For example, if you're creating a campaign aimed at getting troubled students to stop cutting class, don't pick "A" students to star in your ads. Select young people who look and sound like your target audience to share your message.

3. What common mistake can cause your messages to self-destruct?

All across the country, clinics and hospitals place posters on the walls of their waiting rooms decrying the number of patients who don't show up for scheduled appointments; then get frustrated when the non-attendance rates rise even further. Even though these posters are well intentioned, according to the authors, the senders of these messages are failing to realize that using "negative social proof" (i.e. the opposite of the two examples cited above) is usually counter-productive. Telling people that "lots of people miss their appointments" is effectively giving other people license to miss theirs too.

4. How can you steer people away from the "magnetic middle"?

Let's say you're a line supervisor, and you've got a new guy on your crew who hasn't yet jumped on the social bandwagon. In many ways this could be a real benefit to your organization. For example, unlike the other members of your team who are occasionally late for a shift, your new guy has never been late. And you want to do what you can to prevent him from drifting, over time, towards the "magnetic middle" where most of your employees reside (i.e. they come to realize it's OK to be late occasionally, with no consequences). The persuasion trick is simply to express your appreciation to your new hire for his good behaviour. Research has shown that showing a little appreciation is often all it takes.

5. When does offering people more make them want less?

Suppose you work for an organization that sells many different variations of a single product. Although it may seem counterintuitive at first, the authors suggest you consider reducing the total number of options you're offering in order to
significantly increase customer interest in those that remain. Numerous studies have shown that we humans are easily overwhelmed by too much choice. The old saying may be partly true: "Variety truly is the spice of life." But too much spice can easily spoil a great dish.

6. When does a bonus become an onus?

Offering freebies, such as a ballpoint pen or a free bottle of perfume to encourage people to buy a product or service, is one of the oldest tricks in the book. But according to Cialdini and his team, offering customers free bonuses often has the opposite of its intended effect. Social studies have found that, for many people, when they are offered a freebie they become skeptical and wonder "What's wrong with the product or service in the first place that the vendor needs to offer me a free gift to get me to buy it?" Think carefully about whether you want the word "free" associated with any of your products.

7. How can offering a new, superior product drive more sales of your old one?

A few years ago, the upscale kitchen retailer Williams-Sonoma started offering a bread machine that was far superior to their best-selling model. Yet when they added the fancy new machine, sales of the inferior model nearly doubled. Why? Because, according to the research, most consumers are naturally drawn to "compromise choices." In other words, we tend to consume products and services that fall somewhere between what we need, at a minimum, and what we can afford. So if you want to drive sales of a mid-market product, then introduce a slightly more upscale one.

8. Does fear persuade, or does it paralyze?

For the most part, the research shows that invoking fear in your communications will drive people to take action to reduce the perceived threat (e.g. warn people that Y2K will screw up their electronic devices, and then offer software to prevent it). But this rule has one important exception. When a fear-producing message does not include clear information on how to mitigate the danger, most people tend to deal with their fear by "blocking out." So they may be paralyzed into taking no action at all, which is not good.

9. What does the "rule of reciprocity" teach us?

Most people instantly feel a sense of moral obligation after someone treats them kindly. Therefore, we often comply with quid pro quo requests from someone who has just done us a small favor, even when that favor was unsolicited. In social science circles, this norm is known as the "rule of reciprocity." This rule has nearly unlimited applications. For example, if you wish to minimize the chances that you'll experience less-than-helpful customer service over the phone then try the following: As soon as the phone conversation gets underway, if the agent says something even remotely polite or helpful, tell the agent that you are so happy
with his/her positive attitude that you are going to send a positive e-mail to the agent's boss. If the research holds true, this unsolicited favor will likely encourage the agent to provide you with excellent service in return.

10. Which everyday office supply can make your influence "stick"?

Answer: a Post-it Note. When an employee grabs a piece of paper from his inbox, studies have shown that they're far more likely to take immediate, effective action on that document when it is accompanied by a simple, hand-written Post-it Note from their immediate supervisor. Most people simply appreciate that little personal touch.

11. Why should restaurants ditch their basket of mints?

Studies have shown that when waiters and waitresses personally give a small piece of candy to each guest at the end of a meal, tips rise by an average of 14.1%. By contrast, when diners are simply left to grab a mint for themselves on their way out of the restaurant, there is no positive impact on tipping. The former experience is a personalized one — i.e. my server is giving me a candy. The latter is entirely impersonal.

12. What's the pull of "no strings attached"?

This persuasion technique builds on number nine above. As we saw before, the rule of reciprocity can be effective when you do an unsolicited favor for someone, and then immediately ask for something in return. But if you really want to kick it into high-gear then consider doing favors for others with "no strings attached." If someone tries to reciprocate on the spot, don't let them off the hook. Chances are, you'll find the no-strings approach to be much longer lasting — people will feel indebted to you indefinitely.

13. What's the best way to cash-in on favors you've done?

Say you've provided one of your customers with a "no strings attached" favor as per above and some time has now passed. You need to cash-in on the favor, but you want to do it delicately. Overtly saying to your customer "Hey buddy, it's payback time," is a strategy that's doomed to fail. Instead, the authors recommend you (1) subtly remind the customer of the favor you did for them, perhaps by saying something like, "So, did you find that report I sent you last month ago useful?"; and then (2) make your request.

14. How can "small steps" turn into "giant leaps" of persuasion?

Imagine you're trying to convince your 14-year old son to do his homework. According to Cialdini and his team, resistant children (and adults too) are more likely to be persuaded if they're first asked to take a small step in that direction. So instead of sending Junior up to his room to finish his homework on his own, try suggesting that you will spend 10 minutes working on it together, and then subtly
walk away after that time has passed. Chances are, your son will simply continue plugging away at it until it's done.

15. How can you become a Jedi Master of persuasion?

A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away, Luke Skywalker achieved the ultimate act of persuasion: he got Darth Vader to turn against the evil Emperor Palpatine, thereby saving his own life, and restoring hope and peace to the galaxy. He did so by using a social influence strategy known as the "labeling technique." This technique involves successfully assigning a trait or other label to a person, and then making a request of that person to act in a consistent way with that label. In Star Wars, Luke said repeatedly and convincingly to Vader, "I know there's good in you," and in doing so, he planted the seeds of persuasion that ultimately resulted in Vader killing Palpatine to prove Luke right.

16. How can a simple question drastically increase support for your ideas?

Let's say you're thinking about signing up for a charity marathon, but you're uncertain as to whether you'll receive many donations. Asking your friends, family and co-workers in advance whether they "think they might give money, if you sign-up for the race" will dramatically increase the chances that they will, in fact, fork over the dough once you come knocking with your pledge sheet in hand. Once someone has already said "yes" to a hypothetical request, the chances that they'll follow through on an actual request are higher.

17. What is the active ingredient in long-lasting commitments?

The simple act of writing your personal commitments down on paper (or getting someone else to put their commitments to you in writing) will increase the chances they'll be kept.

18. How can you leverage consistency?

As we saw earlier, people generally prefer to act in a manner that is consistent with their pre-existing attitudes, values, statements, and actions. And most people's preference for consistency tends to increase as they age. This finding has important implications for how we try to influence older people. So, for example, if you're trying to convince a reluctant senior citizen to take her heart medication, an often effective strategy is to suggest that doing so would be consistent with her pre-existing beliefs and practices.

19. What did Benjamin Franklin teach us about persuasion?

As an author, politician and diplomat, Benjamin Franklin was a remarkably persuasive figure in his time. Early in his career, Franklin came to realize that "once someone had done him a kindness, they would be more ready to do him another." Accordingly, Franklin would go around asking rival politicians, and even mortal enemies, if he could, say, borrow a book; even if he had no intention of
reading it. A week later, he’d return the book and then ask for something really important, such as a vote in favor of a particular piece of legislation. More often than not, the individual would then comply with Franklin.

20. A little goes a long way.

According to the authors, when you ask others for help, you will dramatically increase your odds of getting what you want if you pepper your request with the words, “even a little would go a long way.” For example, if you are raising money for charity on a street corner and you say to a total stranger, ”even a penny would help,” there’s a 20% better chance of that person opening his or her wallet. And once they’ve decided to stop and open their wallet, you can be pretty sure they will give you more than a penny.

21. Start low to sell high

If you are in the business of offering goods or services through any kind of competitive bidding process (e.g. eBay), the research clearly shows that if you start the bidding at an artificially low price you will likely attract more interest initially, and end up selling higher.

22. Nobody likes a "show off."

Nobody likes a loud mouth or a show off. This creates a problem when you are trying to convince others of something and it just so happens that you’re a very knowledgeable authority on the subject. It can be challenging not to come off as conceited. In this case, the best approach is often to get someone to speak on your behalf. Give them the key information, let them do most of the talking, and play more of a supporting role.

23. It’s dangerous to be the smartest person in the room.

Building on the point above, Cialdini and the others are strong believers in the value of teamwork. The research shows that people with deep expertise in particular areas often fail to seek advice and input from other members of their team. This is to their own detriment because two heads are often better than one. And even when this old adage isn’t true, it’s almost always the case that people will go along with solutions that they had a hand in shaping; as opposed to ones that were dictated by some “expert.”

24. Recruit a Devil’s advocate.

The research shows that people are more likely to be persuaded to adopt a new point of view after they’ve listened to a debate where a dissenting point of view was expressed, and then resoundingly defeated. So if you’re trying to promote a new policy in your workplace, even if you expect it will be well-received by most of your employees, it may still be worthwhile to recruit someone to play the role of “Devil’s advocate” at the staff meeting. That person can openly challenge the
policy, you politely rebut their arguments, and at the end of the day, staff will be more likely to conform to the new rules.

25. When can the right way be the wrong way?

Successful teachers, coaches and corporate trainers know something that most of us don’t: if you want to teach others to be successful in a particular endeavor, you can’t just focus on the positive. Showing people how to execute a task the right way is only half the battle. You also need to talk about common errors (e.g. how not to hold a sand wedge, how not to fillet a fish), and how to avoid them, in order to present a complete picture.

26. How can you turn a weakness into a strength?

Saying things that cast yourself, or your organization, in a negative light can often be beneficial to your bottom line, say the authors. For example, for years Volkswagen ran ads that focused on how its cars were not particularly pleasing to the eye, but had other positive attributes. Volkswagen was successful with this strategy of highlighting an obvious weakness because many potential customers saw it as a sign of trustworthiness.

27. Which faults unlock people’s vaults?

Further to the above, if you choose to pursue a strategy of repositioning your weaknesses as strengths, the research suggests that some weaknesses may be better than others. No surprise, it’s better to highlight little "cosmetic" faults, as opposed to major ones. (If a car company were to show commercials saying its cars are "unsafe," people might appreciate their honesty, but you can be sure that company’s sales would suffer.)

28. When is it right to admit that you were wrong?

"It takes bravery and a sense of humility to admit one's mistakes, which is perhaps why it is so rare to see people and organizations take the blame when they screw up," writes Cialdini and his colleagues. But the research clearly shows that when companies do attribute their failures to internal mistakes, instead of pointing fingers, they usually come out ahead, not only in terms of public perception, but also in terms of future profits.

29. How can similarities make a difference?

A substantial amount of psychological research has proven that humans are most likely to relate to others with whom we share common personal characteristics, such as age, sex, and culture. Believe it or not, people also respond better to others who have similar-sounding names. Obviously then, potential clients may be more receptive to a sales pitch from a salesperson who either is like them, or even pretends to be like them.
30. When is your name your game?

Believe it or not, our names can influence important, life-altering decisions we make, such as the type of career we choose to pursue. For example, a few years ago, a nation-wide study discovered that there were 482 dentists named Dennis. The researchers concluded that dentists are 43% more likely to be named Dennis than one would expect if name had absolutely no impact on career choice. It's hard to explain why this phenomenon occurs. One theory holds that Dennis sounds a lot like “dentist.” Whether or not that’s the reason, the impact on influencing strategies remains the same: if you are designing something that’s tailored towards a specific client, or group of clients, be sure to use the name of the client, or the group, in the name of the program.

31. What can waiters and waitresses teach us about persuasion?

Many food servers have found that their tips increase when they parrot back the exact words used by a customer when placing an order, instead of simply saying “yes, I got your order.” The reason for this isn’t about ensuring the accuracy of the orders, but rather because most people inherently need to feel as though they’re being listened to.

32. What kind of smile can make the world smile back?

Some smiles are more effective than others in terms of creating customer satisfaction. Research shows that humans have an uncanny ability to detect a fake smile, which has the opposite of its intended effect. The lesson here is simple: if you’re not someone who smiles easily and naturally, don’t try to fake it. You’ll do more harm than good.

33. When is a loser a winner?

In 2003, General Motors announced that it'd be discontinuing its flagging Oldsmobile line of cars. And guess what? The sales of Oldsmobiles skyrocketed. This is partly because many people show a greater desire for an opportunity when they learn that it is unique, or available only for a limited time. The scarcer something is, the more we want it.

34. What can you gain from a loss?

Remember the uproar that occurred across America when the Coca-Cola Company suddenly discontinued Coca-Cola and replaced it with New Coke? Extensive market research had shown that most people preferred the taste of New Coke, so the company was caught completely off guard by the popular revolt. Why did this happen? Because most people don’t respond well to losing something they have grown accustomed to, even when it is replaced with something that’s arguably better. As a marketer, once you understand that humans are naturally “loss averse” you can use this to your advantage.
35. Which single word will strengthen your persuasion attempts?

The word is "because." According to the authors, this is because people respond better to arguments when they are supported by a reason; any reason. For example, few children like being asked to do a chore. But if you say something like, "Please cut the grass, because it is getting long and unsightly," you're more likely to elicit compliance.

36. Never give all the reasons.

Just as your persuasion attempts can be more successful when you use the word "because," followed by a plausible reason, the authors warn against providing too many reasons. Hearing too many reasons can be confusing to the listener, and counterproductive. So, sticking with the above example, it would be a bad idea to ask your child to cut the grass "because it is getting long, unsightly, and because it will be bad for the roots if the grass gets too long, and because weeds are likely to take hold if it stays unkempt."

37. Simple names sound more valuable.

People tend to respond better to product and company names that are easy to spell and pronounce. This is even true for stock symbols. All things being equal, a car company with a stock symbol of "KAR" will outperform a mining company with a symbol of "RDO," simply because the former's symbol is easier to pronounce, and remember.

38. How can you make your influence rhyme?

From advertising to public service announcements, rhyming slogans are everywhere (e.g. "Gillette, the best a man can get."). Why? Because reams of social science research proves they work. In fact, not only does using rhymes increase the likeability of a product, it also increases the perceived truthfulness of the message. Go figure.

39. What can batting practice tell us about persuasion?

When professional ballplayers take batting practice, they routinely swing a heavier bat than they actually use in a real game. Whether the ballplayers realize it or not, the underlying reason for this behavior is the principle of "perpetual contrast." Simply put, this principle holds that the characteristics of objects are never perceived in a vacuum, but rather in relative comparison to other objects. So, for the ballplayer, come game-day the ballplayer is able to trick himself into thinking that his bat feels a whole lot lighter.

40. How can you get a head start on achieving customer loyalty?

Many companies look to achieve increased customer loyalty by offering freebies, discounts off future purchases, or other incentive programs, such as frequent flyer programs.
points. Consumer research shows that incentive programs can be more effective when a customer feels like they are being given a head-start (e.g. 10,000 "free" points when they join the program). This is because, for most people, the closer they are to completing a goal, the more effort they’ll exert towards achieving that goal. So if they perceive they've been given a "head start," they'll try to collect future points even faster.

41. What can a box of crayons teach us about persuasion?

Open a box of crayons nowadays and you'll find that the old common names (e.g. red, blue, brown) have been replaced by names such as "Tropical Rain Forest," or "Laser Lemon." Why? Because the crayon companies stumbled across the social science research that shows most people like a mystery, provided it's relatively easy to solve. Labeling a crayon "orange" leaves no mystery. But calling it "Frazzle-Dazzle" leaves just enough to the imagination to compel many people to want to buy it, and try it out.

42. Keep your message going, and going, and going.

When the battery company Energizer first launched the Energizer Bunny (it keeps going, and going, and going ...), customers loved the ads, but the sales of batteries remained flat. Why? Because in the early days of the new campaign, Energizer had failed to incorporate the images of the popular bunny on its packaging and store displays. Consequently, while standing in the store, customers were forced to search their memories to recall whether the funny bunny belonged to Energizer, or Duracell. The battery maker soon found out that it's risky to rely on people's memories too much. As soon as the bunny showed up on Energizer's packaging, sales went through the roof.

43. What object can persuade people to reflect on their behavior?

Strangely, people tend to behave better after they have just finished looking at themselves in a mirror. Research done in schools and waiting rooms has shown that carefully placed mirrors can actually persuade people to act more kindly to one another.

44. Don't negotiate if you're sad.

Research shows that sad or depressed people are more likely to get taken advantage of in negotiations. Somehow, the person standing across the counter from you is able to perceive that you're down in the dumps, and they may use that to their advantage. (In one study, sad buyers ended up paying 30% more for the same item than neutral buyers.)

45. When else can make someone more susceptible to being persuaded?

Just as it's generally a bad idea to try to negotiate with someone else if you're sad or upset, it's also usually a bad idea to negotiate when you're really tired. Not
surprisingly, people are more likely to be in a heightened state of gullibility (and thus are more likely to be taken advantage of) when they are over tired. In fact, studies have shown that exhausted people are far more likely to believe outright lies than are well-rested people.

46. Does coffee boost your influence?

We all know that caffeine can make us feel more alert, but can it also make us more persuasive? Well, according to the authors, yes it can. Building on the point above (i.e. that tired people are more susceptible to being influenced), if you have a chance to grab a coffee late in the work day, and then try to influence someone who hasn't had any caffeine since earlier in the day, you may have a significant mental edge on that person.

47. How can technology impede persuasion?

According to the authors, there is mounting research that shows miscommunications are much more likely to occur over e-mail, than face-to-face or by phone. This is largely because non-verbal cues (such as facial expressions) are entirely absent in e-mail conversations. So if you really need to exert your influence on someone, don't just send them an e-mail. Your message will carry far more impact if delivered in person.

48. How do you get to "yes" in any language?

This is a trick question, because there is no one-size-fits-all approach to get to "yes" in any language or cultural situation. Marketers would do well to remember that advertising campaigns, and the messages embedded within them, must always be tailored to suit the cultural circumstances of the target audience. Persuading someone in China to buy your new toothpaste is not at all the same as persuading an American, and vice-versa. So before you launch an expensive campaign, do your cultural homework.

49. Individualism vs. collectivism

Building on the point above, when you’re setting out to influence someone who comes from a vastly different cultural background than your own, perhaps the most important factor you should consider is whether they come from a highly individualist culture, such as the United States or Britain, or a collectivist culture, such as Korea. If it’s the latter, you may want to try to appeal to your audience’s collectivist leanings when making your sales pitch. For example, instead of saying to the person, “You have always provided me with timely information in the past, could you please give me a report by Friday,” you might say, “You and your co-workers have always provided me with timely information in the past, I’m hoping that you can please provide us with a report by Friday.”

50. Don't let the call go to voicemail.
If you’re like most of us, the following scenario happens all the time: your phone rings, you know you should take the call, but for one reason or another you don’t feel like talking at that moment in time, and you let the call go to voicemail. You reason that the caller will almost certainly leave a message, and at the end of the day, no harm will be done. But, as we’ve seen in previous examples, relationships are a key component to the persuasion process (and this is particularly true for people who come from collectivist cultures). And relationships can’t be built effectively by trading voicemails. Countless studies have shown that the act of communication is about much more than simply exchanging information. It’s about making a personal connection with your audience. So if you truly wish to be persuasive, look for every opportunity to make those connections.

Conclusion

Persuasion has often been referred to as a mysterious “black art” that is often practiced, but never well understood. In many ways this is true. Throughout our lives, we’ll be sure to meet at least a few lucky people who seem to have been born with a natural — and almost inexplicable — talent for bending others to their will. But as intrepid social researchers like Drs. Cialdini, Goldstein and Martin continue to pull back the curtain, humanity is learning more and more everyday about the real science of persuasion. Armed with this research, even people who formerly thought of themselves as persuasion “lightweights” will have an opportunity to morph into successful influencers, simply by practicing 50 or so strategies that have been universally proven to be effective.

Whether you are in sales, marketing, or simply curious about how to become more influential in your day-to-day life, this is one book you may want to say Yes! to.