A new—and intriguing—science reveals the triggers that influence us.

By David Berreby

ILLUSTRATIONS
BY PETER HORVATH
The Gentle Art of Persuasion
While staying at a hotel in Montreal recently, Tom Dietz found a card near his sink that urged him to use his towels more than once. It didn’t tell him that reusing towels was good for the environment or that it would reduce society’s energy costs (though those are both good reasons for guests to refold). Instead, it simply informed him that most other people were reusing their towels, and asked him to “join your fellow guests in helping to save the environment.”

Dietz, a professor of sociology and environmental science and policy at Michigan State University who has long studied environmentally related behaviors, recognized an idea familiar from lab work and other research: You get people to reuse towels by telling them that’s what most people do. The study showing this had been conducted in more than a thousand hotel rooms across the U.S. in 2003, and it had found that telling guests they could help the environment by saving their towels had caused about a third to comply. But telling them that most guests were already doing so caused nearly 45 percent to go along. What struck Dietz that evening, though, was not that he was reading about towels in a social science lab or library. “For the first time since I read that study,” he says, “I was staying in a hotel where they actually used the message.”
Robert Cialdini, the psychologist who literally wrote the book on the subject of influence, has identified six drivers that incline people to go along with what others want. They are:

**Reciprocity**
People who feel they have received a gift, favor or good treatment feel impelled to give back. Handwritten notes are effective.

**Social Proof**
Many people are guided by what others do—or what they think others do. For example: Electricity bills that compare your neighbors' usage.

**Commitment & Consistency**
People will do things to avoid feeling they have not kept their word or because they’ve done it in the past. Remind students they’re supposed to be honest and they’ll cheat less.

**Likeness**
Any kind of sense of similarity makes people inclined to favor or cooperate well with each other, including similar names and even similar Social Security numbers.

**Authority**
People trust authority. In a sense we have to. We don’t have the time or energy to figure out everything from traffic laws to wedding planning for ourselves.

**Scarcity**
People will be eager to have what appears hard to obtain. If they think something is rare or hard to get, they will chase it.
The new science of persuasion—which shows how subtle, often unnoticed, cues can drive people more than facts, arguments, quantifiable carrots (like bonuses) and sticks (like fines)—has gone mainstream. It’s making itself felt in organizations large and small, and in government as well.

If you have received a letter from your power company or local water authority telling you how your use of their product compares with your neighbors’; or found yourself asked to commit publicly to a goal (like weight loss or quitting tobacco); or noticed calorie information on a restaurant menu; or just shopped for a mattress on a website whose background image was of fluffy clouds, then you too have felt it.

Today, says psychologist Robert Cialdini, social scientists have figured out the workings of the mind into which persuasive pitches fit like a key in a lock. It is now, he argues, “possible to learn scientifically established techniques that allow any of us to be more influential” than we are when we use only facts and figures. We can, he says, “front-load these principles and motives in people, so that when they encounter our evidence, they’re ready to see it.”

Not long ago, governments and businesses assumed that people were rational—or that at least they had to treat people as if they were rational—because they didn’t have an alternative model. Experts at persuasion (the top salesman, the genius copywriter) followed their instincts and couldn’t entirely explain how they did it. And when an organization assumes people are calculating their decisions rationally, Dietz notes, “then to get people to change, it’ll try to change incentives, which usually means prices.” Today, though, people around the world are encountering fewer pitches aimed at their pocketbooks and more aimed at their psyches. The persuasive magic that once belonged to self-made masters is turning into a science.

For example, thanks to the new discipline of behavioral economics, which tracks how people make often-irrational choices, governments are building policies that rely on our biases and rough, often inaccurate, rules of thumb. They’re often known as “nudges,” the term coined for them by the economist Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein, the law professor and former chief of the White House’s Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs. (“Nudge” policies are in place in 136 out of the world’s 196 nations, according to a recent study by Mark Whitehead, a geographer at Aberystwyth University in Wales.) At the same time, businesses have turned to similar techniques to deal with employees and customers.

Today, as a tool for persuading people to do things, “behavioral science is in a kind of Golden Age,” writes Cialdini, the Regents’ Professor Emeritus of Psychology and Marketing at Arizona State University, in his latest book, “Pre-Suasion: A Revolutionary Way to Influence and Persuade.”

Cialdini, who styles himself “the Godfather of influence,” is one of the main drivers of this trend. Like the “nudge” approach, Cialdini’s begins by accepting that people’s decisions often are not rational. But nudges often work outside people’s awareness, Dietz notes: You can be nudged into a 401(k) plan without knowing that was what happened. His 1984 book “Influence” introduced the idea of non-explicit persuasion to millions. To map “the factors that cause one person to say yes to another person,” he says, he spent three years shadowing “compliance professionals,” who sold the public on everything from cars to televisions to stock. From that, he distilled the basic principles that made people susceptible to pitches. Not incidentally, it was Cialdini and his colleagues who devised the towel study. The towel-recycling pitch appeals to “social proof,” one of the six principles named in “Influence.” The fact that a lot of us are doing something is a powerful motivator for us to do the same.

If we were thinking about it
consciously, we might express this as "if we're all doing that, it must be the right thing for us to do." But the key is that in general we don't think about it. The mechanism of social proof is a precursor to thinking about it—an automatic response that, in many circumstances, saves time and effort. As Dietz puts it, we like to be in line with "what people we care about are doing." It works for towels, and it works for many other behaviors. For example, Dutch high school students ate 35 percent more fruit at lunch after they were repeatedly told that the majority of high school students make an effort to eat fruit for their health. And in India and Indonesia, companies that were shown to be heavier polluters than their peers have cut their emissions by some 30 percent.

Cialdini identified six principles of persuasion (see "Under the Influence: Six Drivers for Persuasion"). Lately, Cialdini says, he has found a seventh principle hiding all this time in his data: shared identity (if a persuader feels like she is "one of us," we're more receptive to her message).

Cialdini has come to think that there is a second channel of persuasion that is even harder to resist than the influence factors he has been describing since the 1980s. It exists before the pitch even starts, when apparently insignificant or unnoticed aspects of a situation can lead people to lean toward a "yes" before they hear any detail of a request. In other words, the seven principles don't just operate within pitches—they also operate before the communication even starts. Cialdini dubs the effect "pre-suasion."

Pre-suasion, he says, is the creation of a moment, before the pitch, that inclines the "targets" to favor what they are about to hear. In creating those moments, the principles apply. "The factor most likely to determine a person's choice in a situation is often not the one that offers the most accurate or useful counsel; instead, it is the one that has been elevated to attention [...] at the moment of decision." Make someone feel they should reciprocate in this "privileged moment," and they’ll be inclined to do so when, in the next, they hear your message. Make someone worry that something is scarce, and they’ll be ready to receive such a message. Recently, for example, Cialdini was in a big-box store browsing for a possible television purchase but not planning on buying anything. While eyeing a particular TV, a salesperson told him that there was only one set left at that price, "and a lady had just called from Scottsdale and she

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was on her way over," he says. "Ten minutes later I'm walking out of the store with that television set. I write books on this and it worked on me."

Cialdini was happy with his purchase, because the television really was a good deal. These tactics work best when people don't reflect, and we often don't notice that they're being used. "One thing about pre-suasion is that it almost always flies under the radar," Cialdini says. "People don't recognize that they're being influenced."

But of course pre-suasion, and other tools from the science of getting people to do what you want, can also be used to steer people toward harm. For example, marketers can create the illusion of scarcity about a product that isn't really scarce. Or, like the officials at the British Department of Work and Pensions in 2014, they can create phony social proof. In that office, all unemployed people who had taken a personality test were told they had traits including "love of learning" and "curiosity" and "originality." People who believe they have those traits have been shown to spend less time unemployed. But what people were told had no relation to their real test results. (The test program was discontinued after it was revealed by The Guardian.)

The trouble arises when conscious, logical thought ought to be brought to bear, but people are too hurried, sleepy, distracted (or all three) and so rely on their built-in decision-making guides. Many social scientists, Dietz says, have seen this kind of tunnel vision. As a colleague of his told him, "You get called into a room where you're the only social scientist, and you get asked, 'How do we get people to stop doing stupid things?' And what 'stupid things' means is 'not in line with the values of the people in the room.'"

Because it works outside our awareness (and because it can be made to work even better by making people rushed, sleep deprived and scattered), the new science of persuasion is now the subject of an ongoing and lively debate among both scholars and practitioners. Is it ethical to nudge people to do something they don't know you're promoting? What is the difference between a legitimate tactic for setting up a privileged moment, and creating an unfair advantage?

What if organizations decide they should take advantage of the fact that persuasive principles work well "under the radar"? Cialdini believes, in the long term, such organizations only harm themselves. Deceptive organizations' employees have lower productivity, more turnover and are more likely to cheat their employers, he says. "It's a kind of triple tumor."

Still, the power of persuasive science to work "under the radar" means society needs some safeguards, Dietz says. The only assurance we can have against abuse is for people who are targets of persuasion to have a role in deciding when and how they will be used. "To what degree are people—who are going to be affected—empowered to design the process?" he asks. "That's going to be a crucial question."