

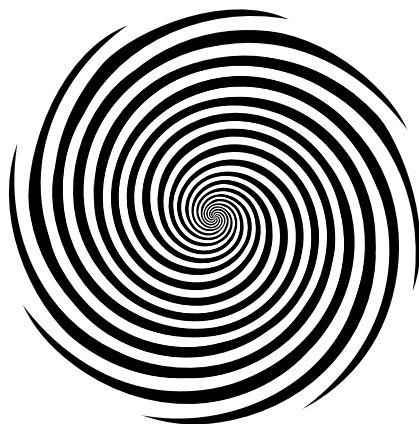
How to Get People to **Do Stuff**



Master the art and science of
persuasion and motivation

Susan M. Weinschenk, Ph.D.

How to Get People to Do Stuff



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New
Riders

VOICES THAT MATTER™

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*This book is dedicated to my two children, Guthrie and Maisie,
who had the sometimes blessing and probably many times
misfortune of having a psychologist for a mother.
I got to try out all my theories on you!*

About the Author



Susan Weinschenk is a Ph.D. behavioral psychologist. She applies research in psychology and neuroscience to business situations. Dr. Weinschenk is the Founder and Principal of the Weinschenk Institute. She consults with Fortune 1000 companies, educational, government, and non-profit organizations. Her clients call her “the brain lady” because she reads and interprets the latest research in neuroscience and how the brain works, and applies that research to business and everyday life. Susan writes a blog for *Psychology Today* called “Brain Wise: Work better, work smarter”, and also has a blog at her website: www.theteamw.com/blog

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Other books by Susan Weinschenk:

- *100 Things Every Presenter Needs to Know about People* (New Riders, 2012)
- *100 Things Every Designer Needs to Know about People* (New Riders, 2010)
- *Neuro Web Design: What Makes them Click?* (New Riders, 2008)

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The Power of Stories

NO IDEA IN this book is more powerful than the idea of using stories to affect behavior. Everything we do is related to a story we have about who we are and how we relate to others. A lot of these stories are unconscious. Whether conscious or unconscious, our stories about ourselves deeply affect how we think and behave. If you can change someone's story, you can change behavior.

I remember a moment many years ago when I was having a series of crises. I was 30 years old. A long-term relationship had just ended in a difficult way. I had moved to a new city where I did not know anyone. I had started a job I wasn't sure I liked. I had rented a place to live that I couldn't really afford, and I was sleeping on a mattress on the floor because I didn't have the money to buy furniture. Then I discovered my new home was infested with fleas.

I took all my clothes to the laundromat a few blocks from where my new job was located and put them in a washing machine. I ran out of my office an hour later and put my clothes in the dryer, then ran back to the office. When I went out again an hour later to get my clothes out of the dryer, I discovered that someone had stolen them.

I still remember, many years later, what it felt like going back to work. I sat quietly in my office at the company I had joined less than a week ago. My head was in my hands. I had no friends or family for hundreds of miles. I felt very vulnerable and very alone. I had to figure out on my own why all these things were happening and what to do about them. Why did I seem to be making a series of bad decisions? Should I have taken the job? Should I have moved so far from friends and family? Why did I rent such an expensive place to live in when I couldn't afford it?

Then I had an *a-ha* moment.

In the 10 years before the current crisis, I had some tough times, including both of my parents dying. I had to be strong and independent and take care of myself. I had a belief that said, "I am a strong person. I can handle any crisis." I realized that I was (unconsciously) making decisions that would eventually cause more crises, at least partly so I could overcome them to prove to myself that I was strong. I had a belief that I was a strong person who could overcome all obstacles. I had a persona of a strong, independent person. That persona had been helpful and useful. I'd had a series of setbacks and I needed to think of myself as strong in order to make it through.

But the persona and the story around it had outlived its usefulness. The story and persona had become problems. I realized that I needed to change the story so I could change my persona. I knew that if I could change both

my story and my persona, then I would start to make different decisions. And, in turn, those decisions would result in an easier life with fewer obstacles. I would find myself making decisions that resulted in easier and more pleasant outcomes.

I said out loud, “My life is easy and graceful.” I took a few minutes and wrote down how my life was going to be different, about the type of person I would need to be in order for my life to be easy and graceful, about the things I would do differently if I were the kind of person who had an easy and graceful life. I would ask people for help—not just friends and family, but even people I didn’t know well. I wrote a new story for my new persona.

One of my new coworkers walked by my office, leaned her head in and said, “How’s it going?” The old persona would have put on a brave face and said, “Great, it’s all great!” But the new persona said, “Well, actually, not so well.”

I proceeded to tell her the story of the fleas and the laundromat. It turned out that she had an extra bedroom in her apartment, and she invited me to stay there while I got everything sorted out. I called my landlord. He tried fumigating the place while I stayed with my coworker. When he wasn’t successful in getting rid of the fleas, I talked him into letting me out of the lease. My coworker became a friend, and suggested that I move in with her instead of looking for another place. I saved money and gained a new friend. She helped me adjust to my new city, and introduced me to her friends. I began to make decisions that would make my life easier. And, in fact, my life turned around and did get a lot easier. I learned how to ask for help and rely on others. I had changed my story. I had changed my persona. I was no longer a “strong person ready to handle crises.” I was a “person ready to accept help and depend on friends.”

Now there’s research that proves the power of stories to shape personal stories, personas, and, by extension, to change beliefs, behaviors, and lives. In his book *Redirect: The Surprising New Science of Psychological Change* (Wilson 2011), Timothy Wilson talks about the research on “story editing.” Here’s the definition from his book:

a set of techniques designed to redirect people’s narratives about themselves and the social world in a way that leads to lasting changes in behavior.

I didn’t realize it when I was going through my experience with the fleas and the laundromat, but I was using story editing to change my behavior. I had used story editing on myself.

What about with other people? Can you use story editing with other people to get them to do stuff? The answer is yes.

In this chapter we'll talk about how to use story editing, as well as another technique, story prompting, to get people to do stuff. You'll learn about how to use stories to influence people and why stories are so powerful. We'll also talk about personas—self-descriptions that are intertwined with the stories we tell about ourselves to ourselves and to others. You'll learn how to work with existing personas to get people to do stuff, and how to get people to change their personas.

It's hard to change behavior when you're working against someone's existing persona. In many of the chapters in this book you're working to get people to do stuff with methods that don't actually change the person's own view of who he or she is. But the strategies in this chapter will help you activate or even change an existing persona to get people to take certain actions. The easiest way by far to get people to do stuff is to get them to change their own story. Getting people to change their story, and thereby change their persona, is the most powerful and long-lasting way to get people to do stuff.

I Feel Your Pain (Literally!)

When we read or hear a story, our brains react partly as though we're experiencing the story ourselves.

A story contains a large amount of information in digestible chunks. Stories break down events into smaller units so we can better understand the information being communicated.

When you hear the word “storyteller,” you might think of some overly dramatic person telling a story to children using different voices. But everyone is a storyteller.

Think about your communication with other people throughout a typical day. You wake up in the morning and tell your family about a dream you had (story). At work you tell a coworker about what happened at the new product design meeting the day before (story). At lunch you tell your friend about a family reunion you have coming up and your plans to take time off to go (story). After work you speak with your neighbor about the dog you encountered while you were on your evening walk (story).

Most of the communication in our daily lives is in the form of a story. Yet we rarely stop and think about stories and storytelling. Storytelling is so

ubiquitous that we don't even realize we're doing it. If someone at work suggested you attend a workshop on how to communicate clearly at work, you might be interested. But you might scoff if someone suggested that you attend a workshop on storytelling. It's interesting how unaware and unappreciative most people are about the major way we communicate.

Stories involve many parts of the brain. When we're reading or listening to a story, there are many parts of our brain that are active:

- The auditory part of the new brain that deciphers sound (if the story is being listened to)
- Vision and text processing (if the story is being read)
- All the visual parts of the brain (as we imagine the characters in the story)
- And, often, the emotional part of the midbrain.

A story not only conveys information, it allows us to feel what the character in the story feels. Tania Singer's research on empathy (Singer 2004) studied the parts of the brain that react to pain.

First, she used fMRI scans to see what parts of the brain were active when participants experienced pain. She discovered that there were some parts of the brain that processed where the pain came from and how intense the pain really was. Other parts of the brain separately processed how unpleasant the pain felt and how much the pain bothered the person feeling it.

Then she asked participants to read stories about people experiencing pain. When participants read stories about someone in pain, the parts of the brain that processed where the pain comes from and how intense it is were not active, but the other areas that process how unpleasant the pain is *were* active.

We literally experience at least a part of other people's pain when we hear a story about pain. Likewise, we experience at least a part of other people's joy, sadness, confusion, and knowledge.

Stories are how we understand each other's experience.

Anecdotes versus Stories

Because of the way our brains react to stories, stories are the best way to communicate information. We're more likely to be committed, take action, and make a decision if we've experienced something concretely ourselves. Stories simulate actual experience. If you tell people a story, they're more likely to be willing to take action on the information than if you just present data.

Let's say you have to make a presentation to the department heads at work about your latest conversations with your customers. You want the

group to agree to fund a new project based on the data. You interviewed 25 customers and surveyed another 100, and have lots of important data to share. Then you're going to ask for funding.

Your first thought might be to present a summary of the data in a numerical/statistical/data-driven format, for example:

- 75 percent of the customers we interviewed...
- Only 15 percent of the customers responding to the survey indicated...

But this data-based approach will be less persuasive than stories and anecdotes. You may want to include the data, but your presentation will be more powerful if you focus on one or more anecdotes, such as, "Mary M from San Francisco shared the following story about how she uses our product"; and then go on to tell Mary's story.



STRATEGIES

Strategy 29: People are more likely to do what you ask of them when you communicate your supporting information and data in the form of a story.

Our Internal Stories Drive Our Behavior

We think in stories. And the stories that we tell ourselves about ourselves influence our behavior.

Here's an example:

Someone knocks on your door. You recognize him as a kid from your neighborhood. He's selling popcorn as a fundraiser for a club he belongs to at school. The club is trying to go to the state convention. How do you react?

It depends on the story, or persona, you have of yourself when it comes to topics such as school, fundraising, and your relationship to your neighborhood. Here's one story you might relate to:

I'm a very busy person. When I'm at home I want to relax, not get bombarded with people at the door selling things. I don't like it when people bother me at home with these fundraising schemes. The schools should pay for these trips and not make us buy this overpriced popcorn. This poor kid isn't to blame, but I'm not going to buy the popcorn because it just perpetuates this behavior. Someone has got to act right on this. I'm the kind of person who does what is right on principle. I'm going to say no nicely, but firmly.

Or maybe you can relate to this story:

Oh, isn't that great that the kids are going to the state convention. I remember when I went on a similar trip when I was in high school. It was really fun. Maybe not all that educational, but definitely fun! I'm the kind of person who encourages students to have lots of experiences outside of our own neighborhood. I am the kind of person who supports the school. I'll buy some popcorn and help this kid out.

Or maybe you can relate to this story:

It kind of annoys me that there are always these kids selling things. But this is part of being a good neighbor. I'm part of the community. I am a good citizen of our neighborhood. I'll buy the popcorn because that's what a good community member would do.

Multiple Personalities

We have an idea of who we are and what's important to us. Essentially we have a "story" operating about ourselves at all times. These self-stories, or personas, exert a powerful influence on our decisions and actions.

We actually have more than one persona. There are different personas for different aspects of life in relation to others. For example, we have a persona as a husband or wife, another persona as a parent, another persona at work, and yet another persona that defines our relationship with the neighborhood we live in.

The Desire to be Consistent

We make decisions based on staying true to our personas. Most of this decision making based on personas happens unconsciously. We strive to be consistent. We want to make decisions that match our idea of who we are. When we make a decision or act in a way that fits one of our personas, the decision or action will feel right. When we make a decision or act in a way that doesn't fit with one of our personas, we feel uncomfortable.

Once we make one decision consistent with one of the personas, we'll try to stay consistent with that persona. We'll be more likely to make a decision or take an action if it's consistent with that story or persona.

In the next sections we'll look at how to use this desire for consistency to get people to do stuff.



STRATEGIES

Strategy 30: When you get people to change their own persona stories, they'll change their behaviors.

How to Turn on a Persona

Since personas are so powerful in governing decisions and behavior, you can influence whether someone does something and exactly what they do by activating an existing persona. You can activate a persona and connect the persona to specific action. This is a powerful way to get people to take action. Here's an example:

Jeffrey is in charge of local fundraising for one of his favorite charities, Lend a Hand for Jobs. Lend a Hand for Jobs helps people who are having a hard time getting a job. The organization provides job interview training, business clothes for interviewing, and helps people land a job. Jeffrey is going to give a presentation to a local business group, and hopes to get the group to agree to donate money to the charity.

Jeffrey prepares a presentation about all the wonderful things that the charity is doing, and examples of the people who have been helped. He's got great photos of the people they've helped and hopes that after showing the photos and telling the success stories, the local business group will vote to make a donation. Will he be successful? Will they donate money? How much?

Jeffrey is more likely to get the local business group to donate and more likely to get more money if he activates a persona. What personas do the decision makers in the local business group have that would make them want to donate and donate more? Here are some possibilities:

1. "I'm the type of person who gives a helping hand to others in need. In fact, that's why I'm a member of this local business group, because the group likes to help out people in our community who are in need."
2. "I am a successful business person. In fact, I'm so successful that I can afford to give back to the community. This local business group that I'm a member of is filled with other successful business people just like me. We are the cream of the crop."
3. "I struggled and worked hard to get to where I am. It wasn't easy. At one point I was unsuccessful and in trouble. Because other people were willing to help me, I was able to pull myself up to be successful. This local business group that I'm a member of is filled with other people like me who were once in difficult straits."
4. "I struggled and worked hard to get to where I am. It wasn't easy. At one point I was unsuccessful and in trouble. No one was willing to help me. I had to do it all by myself. But now that I've made it, I don't like to think

about those hard days. This local business group that I'm a member of is filled with successful business people who didn't struggle like I did. I want to forget about my previous life. I'm on top and that's all that matters."

Jeffrey's plan for the presentation and asking for a donation may not be successful with all of these personas. Let's take a look at how his plan will work for each persona and what he might want to do differently.

His plan will probably work fairly well with the first persona. But he can strengthen his presentation by first giving examples of other donations the local business group has made to similar charitable organizations. This would remind them of the first persona. By talking about similar donations, and then telling stories of the people in need, Jeffrey would be activating this "Gives a Helping Hand" persona. When he asks for money, he'll be more likely to get a yes, and more likely to get more money.

Jeffrey's plan will be less successful with the second persona, who is only partially activated by talking about people in need. Instead of highlighting all the wonderful things the local business group has done in the past to help people in need, Jeffrey should first talk about all the wonderful accomplishments the individual people in the group have had in their own successful businesses. He should include some stories about famous people in the world who have given back to others after achieving their own business success. Activating this "Cream of the Crop" persona is more likely to result in a donation, and a higher donation.

Jeffrey's plan is a good starting point for the third persona, but it's important that he also include specific stories about what happened to individuals in the program. He needs to have stories that show how a person who was once struggling makes it to success. Stories like this will activate this "Pulled Up by the Bootstraps" persona.

The toughest sell will be to the fourth persona. In fact, this is such a hard sell that Jeffrey is unlikely to have success with this persona. He'll have to use some of the techniques later in this chapter, like story editing, to actually change this persona to a different one before he can expect positive results.

The more that Jeffrey can tailor the message to activate one of the personas, the more successful he will be. Ideally Jeffrey would be making a one-on-one pitch to people he knows well. He could then customize the message to fit the persona of that individual.

He is, however, probably making a presentation to the whole group. The more people he knows in the group, the more he can anticipate likely personas and change his message, stories, and presentation to fit. The less he knows about the people in the group, the more he'll have to guess about likely personas. Jeffrey is unlikely to be able to build the presentation to activate four or more different personas, but he could certainly plan the presentation to fit at least two or even three, and he should do this if he wants to maximize the likelihood and size of donations for his charity.

Activating an existing persona and targeting a message to that persona is a powerful and relatively easy way to get people to do stuff. Changing someone's persona, however, is a little more complicated. Because people like to be consistent in their personas, it's trickier to get someone to change an existing persona. But it's doable. The next section will show you how to change an existing persona.



STRATEGIES

Strategy 31: Before you ask people to do something, activate a persona that's connected to what you want them to do.

The “Crack” Strategy

In the previous section you learned that people want to stay consistent with their personas, and that one of the easiest ways to get people to do stuff is to first activate a persona that will effortlessly lead to the action you want them to take.

But we also saw that sometimes people don't have a persona that fits with what you want them to do. If you try to fight a strong, existing persona you won't get very far in getting people to do stuff. But it is possible to change a persona.

I'm writing this book in 2013 on an Apple MacBook Pro laptop computer. That may not sound surprising, but it actually is. Here's the story:

I first started using computers in graduate school in the 1970s. I learned how to program large “mainframe” computers, as well as smaller “mini” computers (that weren't all that small!). When the personal computer revolution started up in the 1980s, I was right there. I even sold personal computers one year. Eventually I started my consulting career doing interface design and usability work for Fortune 1000 companies.

Fortune 1000 companies in the 1980s and 1990s used primarily Windows-based computers—and, as of this writing, they still do. Very few of my clients used Apple computers. “Serious” computer users were Windows based (or Unix based if you were really serious). Apple computers were for artists. If you were a “techie,” you used a Windows-based PC. I was a techie. I was a PC person. My husband, however, was an Apple person. He was a newspaper editor, and he used Apple computers at work to lay out his newspaper pages.

Both my husband and I would archly defend our technology of choice. Over time, I learned to just ignore his comments about how horrible Windows PCs were, and how wonderful his Mac was. He learned to use a Windows-based PC, since our home computers were the cast-offs from my business. I was in charge of computers in our home, and they were all Windows-based machines. We learned to agree to disagree when it came to “what is the best computer.” My persona was strongly rooted as a “savvy technology user.”

Then Apple introduced the iPod. My children lobbied for us to buy them iPods and we did. Since I was a “savvy technology user,” I bought an MP3 player, but I didn’t buy an iPod. iPod was made by Apple. My persona didn’t fit being an Apple fan. But my MP3 player was hard to use. The iPod was cool. My MP3 player was ugly and unusable.

So, I bought an iPod. I actually did feel a twinge of dissonance when I broke a little bit from my non-Apple, all-PC persona to buy an Apple product. But it was only a type of MP3 player really, right? So it was a small action outside my usual persona, nothing too drastic.

That was the crack.

I had introduced a crack in my PC persona. I was now a PC person who used an Apple product. I loved my iPod. And over time my PC persona began to give way. I was becoming a person who believed in Apple products. My persona began to shift, and a few years later, when my Windows-based laptop was past its prime and it came time to purchase a new computer, I bought a Mac laptop. Within a year or so I was all Apple.

Interestingly, I wasn’t consciously aware of this whole process until my husband walked into my home office and stared. I was talking on my iPhone while typing on my Apple laptop. My iPad was next to me, and the Apple TV was on in the background. I had made an entire shift to Apple. When it comes to technology, I now have an Apple persona.

► **NOTE** Later in this chapter, in the “Start Small” section, we’ll talk about why these small changes are so powerful.

I don’t know if Apple planned to crack people’s Windows PC personas by introducing a non-computer product, the iPod. But that has certainly been the effect for me, and likely many others.

Once a persona is established and active, it’s easy to get people to take actions and make decisions that are consistent with that persona. If, however, the active persona is not consistent with what you want someone to do, you may need to figure out how to change the persona. If you launch an all-out assault on a person’s persona to try and get them to radically change who they are from the outside (you are the outside), you will not succeed. But if you can introduce a small crack in the existing persona, you have an opportunity to have a new persona enter and take over.

In the sections on commitment, story editing, and story prompting that follow, you’ll learn more about how to encourage personas to change.



STRATEGIES

Strategy 32: When you introduce a small crack in an existing persona, you’ll change the persona over time. When you change the persona, you can then change the behavior.

The “Anchor to a Persona” Strategy

What if you want to get people to do stuff, but there isn’t an existing persona you can crack? Can you create a new persona?

If someone has an existing persona, you can use that as an anchor and more easily create a new persona from it.

What if someone knocked on your door and asked if you would be willing to put a huge, and not very well constructed, billboard in your front yard that said in large block lettering **DRIVE CAREFULLY**.

Do you think you would agree? Well, most people in Palo Alto, California who were asked to do so in a research study in 1966 said no.

Jonathan Freedman and Scott Fraser (Freedman 1966) had a researcher pose as a volunteer and go door to door asking homeowners to allow just such a sign to be installed in their front yards. They were shown a photo of

the sign that would be installed. The signs were quite large (they essentially would take over the front yard) and were fairly ugly. This was not an attractive object to have in their yards! Fewer than 20 percent agreed to have the signs installed in their yards. No surprise there. (Well, actually it is surprising that as many as 20 percent would agree at all.) That was the control group (Group A) of the experiment.

Here's how the rest of the experiment went:

Group B was created, comprising random people who were contacted by an experimenter who asked them to put a small (three-inch) sign in the back windows of their cars that said "Drive Carefully." Then, three weeks later, a different experimenter showed up to inquire about their interest in having a large DRIVE CAREFULLY sign installed in their yards.

Group C comprised people who were contacted by an experimenter who asked them to sign a petition to "Keep California Beautiful." Then, three weeks later, a different experimenter showed up to inquire about their interest in having a large DRIVE CAREFULLY sign installed in their yards.

In the control group (Group A) only 20 percent agreed to have the large DRIVE CAREFULLY signs installed in their yards. What about Groups B and C?

In Group B, which had been asked to first put the small Drive Carefully signs in their car windows and then were approached later to put the large signs in their yards, 76 percent said yes to the signs in their yards.

For Group C, which had been asked first to sign a petition to Keep California Beautiful (a totally different cause than Drive Carefully), 46 percent agreed to the big, ugly signs.

It's important to note that in both B and C, different experimenters returned to make the second request—people in those groups were not agreeing simply because they had a relationship of any sort with the person asking.

Twenty percent versus 46 percent. Twenty percent versus 76 percent. Why were people much more willing to put a big, ugly sign in their yards in these two other conditions?

The first reason has to do with activating an existing persona, as we discussed earlier in the chapter. By agreeing to the request to put the small Drive Carefully sign in the back windows of their cars, a persona was activated in Group B. They were telling themselves the story that they are a person who cares about the community at large; they are someone who cares about safety. So when they were later asked about installing the big, ugly signs, well, for most people that request now fit the persona they had about themselves.

But what about Group C? Group C people were first asked to sign a petition to “Keep California Beautiful,” and later asked to put up the **DRIVE CAREFULLY** sign. The agreement was double that of Group A (46 percent, compared to 20 percent), but still not as high as the condition of Group B (76 percent).

That’s because the petition activated a persona that says, “I’m a person who cares about the community,” but didn’t necessarily activate a persona that says, “I’m a person who cares about safety.” The “I’m a person who cares about safety” is a new persona that was created from the original anchor persona. Because it’s new, it’s not as strong—but it’s a start.

When you activate an existing persona, you then create an opening where a new but somewhat related persona can be introduced. When they were asked later to do something a little bit different (to install the huge **DRIVE CAREFULLY** sign in their yards), that request activated a new persona that was somewhat related to the existing persona. The original persona of “I’m a person who cares about the community” is different from “I’m a person who cares about safety.” But the two are consistent, and easily connected.

You can use someone’s existing persona as an anchor and more easily create a new persona from it. Make a request that activates the existing persona. After the person has agreed to that, then make a request that fits with the persona you are trying to create. Here are some examples of persona pairs:

- Existing persona: “I’m someone who takes care of my body.”
- New persona that would be easy to create: “I’m someone who cares about healthy children.”
- Existing persona: “I’m someone who is frugal with money.”
- New persona that would be easy to create: “I’m someone who votes to keep down government debt.”
- Existing persona: “I’m someone who is creative.”
- New persona that would be easy to create: “I’m someone who likes to try new things.”

In the next section we’ll expand on this idea by showing how to get small commitments, even to actions that are inconsistent with existing personas.



STRATEGIES

Strategy 33: To get people to do something, use an existing persona and anchor a new—but related—persona to it.

Start Small

Small actions, over time, can lead to large persona change. In the previous section we showed how you can create new personas by anchoring them to existing personas. In that case we were using an existing persona as an anchor.

But what if you want people to make a decision or take an action and there isn't an existing related persona you can anchor to? Can you get someone to do something that is inconsistent with an existing persona?

The answer is yes, but you have to start small. Remember my story earlier in this chapter about switching from a Windows PC persona to an Apple persona? I had a persona that I was a Windows person. If someone had started by suggesting that I become an Apple person, I would have laughed. If someone suggested I buy an Apple laptop, I would have said no. All these requests were too large. My persona was "I am a Windows person." It's unlikely that I would make a big switch from "I am a Windows person" to "I am an Apple person" in one leap. If we want people to make big changes like this, we have to start with small actions.

What does small mean? Small is an action that, even though it's inconsistent with an existing persona, doesn't set off alarm bells. A small action request doesn't make me feel that I'm going against an existing persona.

If the action is small, it's possible for people to take an action that is inconsistent with a strong, existing persona. Once they take *that* action, they actually will adjust their persona a little to fit the new action they just took.

When we take a small action that's inconsistent with an existing persona, it actually starts a new persona. We probably aren't aware that this has happened. But now that the new persona exists, the next thing we're asked to do along those same lines will fit the new persona, and it will be easier for us to continue to take action consistent with this new, revised persona.

If you ask people to take small actions, then you can use this small commitment/stair-step approach to create a brand new persona. If you want someone to take action, you need to first get a commitment to something small. It can be something that fits with one of their existing personas, or something that's inconsistent with an existing persona. The more inconsistent it is, the smaller the action and commitment need to be.

For example, if Corinne thinks of herself as "someone who gives to charity," you might be able to get her to donate money and an hour or two of her time for the charity you're promoting. But if she thinks of herself as

“someone who has pulled myself up like everyone should do,” then you’ll need to start really small. Instead of asking for both money and volunteer action, you’ll have to start with just one of those.

Whether you’re asking people to do something that fits with an existing persona or not, if you get people to take an action, even a small one, that action can lead to larger actions later on.



STRATEGIES

Strategy 34: To change a persona, get people to take one small action that is inconsistent with their current persona.

Going Public

In the experiment described above from Freedman and Fraser, some of the participants put a sign in their car window. Their commitment (to driving carefully) was a public commitment. The more public a commitment people make, the stronger the influence that action has on future actions. The more public a commitment that people make, the stronger the persona change will be.

When we take an action that only we know about, we aren’t showing our commitment. When we’re not showing our commitment, there will be less long-term persona change than when we take an action that others see.

When the people in the Freedman experiment posted a sign in their yard or put a sticker in their car window, they were making a public commitment. Public commitments lead to stronger and faster persona change.

How to Get Public Commitment

Besides asking people to put signs up in their front yards, how can you get people to make a public commitment, and by doing so, make it more likely that they’ll take even more action?

If someone has made any commitment at all to your organization, company, product, or service, you can strengthen that commitment by asking them to make a more public show of support.

As an example, let’s say that you run a hotel chain. When customers stay at your hotel you send them a survey to fill out. This survey is a form of public commitment. If they rate your hotel well, then they have made a public commitment. Be sure to ask as one of the questions how likely they will be to stay at your hotel again. A survey can be a way for you to get data

and feedback about your products and services, but it's also a way to get people to publicly commit.

You can even send a survey to people who are not yet customers or associated with your organization. If you ask them about their perceptions of your organization, products, or services, and they indicate positive responses, then they have just committed publicly and will be more open to dealing with you in the future.

The more public the commitment, the more it will stick—and the more it will affect your audience's current and future behavior. Asking your audience to complete an anonymous survey is better than getting no commitment at all, but asking them for a testimonial or recommendation, or asking them to write a review that is posted online, earns an even stronger show of commitment from your audience.

When people give a recommendation, testimonial, or write a review, they are saying, “I am a person who believes in this product,” or “I am a person who donates to this organization,” or “I am a person who buys from this company.”

Reviews act on others as a form of social validation (see Chapter 2, “The Need To Belong”), but they also act on the self as a form of commitment. If we write a positive review, we'll then want to stay consistent, and that means we'll take more action to interact with the site, the company, the organization. If you want to build commitment to your brand, your company, or a product, then make sure you give visitors the opportunity to write a review.

Don't Pay People to Commit

Robert Cialdini (Cialdini 2006) reports that if a public commitment is not “owned” by a person but is instead made in order to gain a large reward, the individual is not deeply committed and will not show deep commitment in future behavior. If we believe that we have voluntarily chosen to act in a certain way because of our inner beliefs rather than strong outside pressures, we feel more committed. A large reward, for example, may lead us to act, but it will not create inner responsibility for the action and we won't feel committed.



STRATEGIES

Strategy 35: When you get people to commit publicly, it's easier to get them to do stuff.

Strategy 36: Don't pay people for their commitments.

Writing Increases Commitment

When we write something down, especially longhand, then we're more committed to it. Writing compared to, for example, thinking or talking about something increases our commitment to the idea and to taking action.

Morton Deutsch and Harold Gerard (Deutsch 1955) asked people to estimate the length of some lines drawn on a piece of paper. They were looking at the effect that others' opinions might have on decision making. They had other people, who were part of the experiment, purposely estimate the length of the lines incorrectly.

Would the participants in the experiment go along with the incorrect estimates they were hearing from others, or would they stick (commit) to the answer they felt was correct?

What they found was that people would change their estimate of the line lengths based on what the other people in the room estimated. This goes along with the idea of social validation that we talk about in Chapter 2, "The Need To Belong."

But Deutsch and Gerard also looked at whether there were situations in which commitment to a decision would be stronger than in other situations. Before hearing what others had to say on the length of the line:

- Group 1 wrote their estimates on paper. They were told *not* to sign the paper, and that they would not be turning in the sheets of paper.
- Group 2 wrote their estimates on a "magic pad," and then lifted a sheet and the estimate was erased without anyone seeing it.
- Group 3 was told to write their estimates on paper and to sign the paper. They were told that their papers would be collected at the end of the experiment.

Did the groups vary in terms of how strongly they stuck to their commitment of the length of the line?

Group 2 was most likely to change their decisions and to give incorrect estimates. Groups 1 and 3 were both five times less likely to change their answers. They were more committed to their original estimates, regardless of what they heard others say.

Signing their names or being told they were going to hand in their estimates did *not* seem to make a difference. Just the act of writing it on something relatively permanent was enough to make them commit.

Writing Longhand Changes the Brain

When I wrote my Ph.D. thesis in graduate school, my first draft was done by hand (OK, now I've admitted that I'm quite old!). Most writing these days is done by typing on a keyboard. I'm writing this book on my laptop, and most of my communication with friends and family is done via emails that I, of course, compose at my laptop keyboard. There are still a few things I write by hand—my most important daily to-do lists are done by hand, as well as most of my business planning. It's interesting, when you stop to think about it, which things you write by hand versus on a keyboard. But does it matter?

Research by Reza Shadmehr and Henry Holcomb (Shadmehr 1997) looked at brain activity when people wrote longhand (for example, with a pen or pencil) as opposed to typing on a keyboard. Writing involves different muscles than typing, and Shadmehr and Holcomb found that there was more memory consolidation when people were writing in longhand.



STRATEGIES

Strategy 37: When people write their commitments longhand, they are more committed.

Prompt a New Story

In the beginning of this chapter I related my experience with how I changed my story of being a “strong survivor” to someone who has an “easy and graceful” life. In his book *Redirect*, Timothy Wilson describes a large body of impressive research on how stories can change behavior in the long term. Wilson calls this technique “story editing.”

If you can get people to rewrite their story related to what it is you want them to do, this is likely to result in large and long-term change. Story editing has been used to help with post-traumatic stress disorder, and with teens at risk. But it can also be effective in getting an employee to come in to work on time, or to switch from being a solo “hot dog” to being a collaborative team player.

The technique of story editing is so simple that it doesn't seem possible that it can result in such deep and profound change. In other chapters I describe some strategies for getting people to do stuff that are a lot of work, even to change a somewhat simple behavior. If it's that much work to change a simple behavior, then how can it be easy to change a whole life in a few minutes?

Story editing is so powerful that it can seem like magic, but it's not. When we write a new story that describes who we are, why we behave as we do, and how we relate to others, that story changes our persona, and we will, consciously and unconsciously, start to make decisions and act in ways that are consistent with that story. You also now know that it's even more powerful if you can get someone to write out the story on paper, in longhand.

But what if you can't get someone to stop, think, and write out a new story? Does that mean that you can't use the powerful effect of stories? Luckily the answer is you still can use stories to change behavior. Even if you can't get someone to sit down and write out a new story, you can provide a story for them, and that's almost as good.

Here's an example from Wilson's research on college students:

Some college students were not doing well in their first year of school. The students were getting low grades on one or more tests, and had started thinking things like "I'm in over my head," "Maybe I don't belong at this college," or "I'm not smart enough."

The students were falling into a self-defeating story about themselves. Because they began to believe that they were in over their heads, they started behaving that way. They stopped studying and started skipping classes. This, of course, resulted in more low grades, and convinced them further that they couldn't be successful.

Not all students react this way when they have trouble. Some students might create a different story, for example: "This course is harder than I thought it would be," "I guess my high school work didn't prepare me well enough for this class," or "I'm going to have to work harder, study more, maybe get a tutor." These students' stories led to more studying and getting more help, and therefore better grades.

But here's the question. Without asking students to write out a new story for themselves, can you quickly prompt a story for the "self-defeating" students that is more empowering and hopeful?

Wilson had the students with the self-defeating stories come in to participate in an experiment. They thought they were being asked to take a survey of first year students' attitudes about college life. Wilson told them that they would see the results from earlier surveys of older students, so they would know what kind of questions would be on their survey. In actuality

Wilson was showing them the previous survey results in order to prompt them with a new story.

The student participants then saw survey results of these older students that showed that many of the students had problems with grades during their first year, but that their grades improved over time. They watched video interviews of four older students who told the story about how they realized that the course work was harder than they thought it would be, and that they had to work harder, study more, and get help.

The students in the videos talked about their grades steadily increasing over time.

Altogether the participants spent 30 minutes hearing from other students who had problems with low grades, but then improved their grades. That was all they did. They didn't get any counseling or learn about better study habits. They just heard a different story.

The participants didn't know that the purpose of the study was to improve their grades. What Wilson hoped was that he had prompted a new story, even if the participants were not aware of it. He hoped that he had prompted a story such as "Maybe it's not hopeless. Maybe I'm like those other students. They tried harder and were able to raise their grades. Maybe I can, too."

The story prompting worked. Wilson reports that the participants achieved better grades in the following year than a randomly assigned control group who did not get the story prompting. The participants were also less likely to drop out of college.

Thirty minutes of reading and watching videos resulted in students working harder, improving their grades, and staying in school.

You can get people to change their behavior in big ways, and with a small amount of effort, if you can do a reasonably good job at

- Guessing the current story that is currently operating and currently influencing their behavior
- Coming up with an alternate story
- Figuring out a way to expose them to the new story

With story prompting, Wilson doesn't talk about the difference between telling people a new story versus letting them "discover" the story on their own. But my sense is that the latter is better. The key is that people have to change their own story. If you just give them another story and say, "Here's

the story you have and here's the story you should have," it likely has less impact than letting them discover a new story for themselves and comparing it to a story they may not even realize they have. With story prompting, it's more effective to tell them a story about someone else and let them draw the parallels. Sometimes less is more!



STRATEGIES

Strategy 38: Expose people to the stories of others so they'll be encouraged to create new stories for themselves.

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