Online persuasion - 7 ways to persuade people to buy

How many psychologists does it take to change a light bulb? None, the light bulb has to want to change. So the joke goes. However, it's possible that the light bulb could be persuaded to change. Persuading people to buy online (from TVs to groceries, holidays to services) can be achieved with techniques that marketers and psychologists have known for years.

Persuasion isn't rocket science; it involves understanding aspects of human nature that are often automatic and work at a subconscious level. Here are 7 ethical ways to persuade people.

1. Show what others are doing

People look to others and will often do what they're doing, especially when uncertain about something. This psychological phenomenon is called social proof. People feel reassured and often **make decisions based upon what other people are up to** - the assumption being that they possess more knowledge or are better informed than they are.

You can increase social proof online by showing:
- Most popular items
- 'Customers who bought this also bought'
- Top sellers
- Testimonials

Additionally, people will do what people that they like do.

2. Show user-generated reviews

User-generated reviews can have a massive influence on peoples' buying decisions. Fuelled by the rapid growth of web 2.0 and social media they're becoming an essential part of website design. Allow your site users to write reviews and express overall ratings for products and services on your site - after all, it's free content for your site. Web users are more inclined to **trust what people like themselves say**, compared to marketers. Reviews are especially critical in sectors like travel and electrical goods, although they're rapidly being adopted across all areas.

People generally want user generated reviews and if they can't find them on your site, they'll simply look elsewhere. There's no hiding online so you might as well keep them on your site. Sites like [Figleaves](#) and the [UK Apple store](#) website understand this and implement them really well.
Also, don't be scared of bad reviews - people can smell sites that have been 'edited' a mile away, forcing them to simply not trust anything you say. Instead, be prepared to act quickly on your customers' feedback.

3. Show scarcity of products

Scarcity generates demand and encourages people to buy sooner. People **want what they think they can't have** and social psychology would indicate that loss is a more powerful emotion than gain. So, a person who loses $100 is estimated to lose around twice as much satisfaction as another person will gain from a $100 windfall.

You can show scarcity online by displaying:
- 'For 1 week only'
- '2 items in stock'
- 'Sale ends today'
- 'Out of stock - Add to wish list'
- 'This offer ends in 2 days 4 hrs 3 mins 17 secs' (Count down timers)

Webcredible shows the number of places remaining on training courses on its site. The numbers decrease daily until all places have gone, giving visitors a sense of urgency to book their place before it sells out. Research on decision-making also indicates that people value something more so if they felt they lost out on it, rather than if they never had it in the first place.

4. Persuade with pictures & videos

Imagery is a very persuasive tool in increasing product sales especially for high value and luxury goods, so be sure to provide good quality images of products. They go a long way to reassure people about what they'll be getting.

Images should:
- Be of professional quality
- Offer different views
- Be enlargeable
- Show scale and context of use

Oli, which sells clothing online, has gone a step further. They have 15 second video clips of models wearing the clothing, walking down a catwalk enabling you to get a better feel for how a product looks and moves. With increased bandwidths, this may be the future for some types of sites. Watching videos requires less effort than reading and offers a richer experience - be sure to give users the choice and not to start videos automatically.

5. Cross- and up-sell

The person that suggested "Hey, why don't we ask customers if they want fries with that?" was on to something big. Once people have committed to a purchase, **persuading them to buy more becomes easier** as one foot is already in the door. The same applies online too.

Don't underestimate the potential profits to be had by up- and cross-selling. Display related items and extras near products like they do in real stores. This will make it quicker and easier for people to buy more items. If you browse for bagels on Ocado, for example, they also show you cream cheese and when you checkout they display any offers you missed out on - a clever tactic to persuade you to buy more.

6. Show authority

The principle of authority states that we're more easily persuaded by those with authority. If Tiger Woods gave you advice on your golf swing, you'd be more inclined to follow it compared to the same advice from your mate, Bob. Likewise, websites showing authority and expertise are trusted more. This is **particularly important for B2B sites**.

You can show authority by:
- Showing you're an expert
- Backing up facts with links to 3rd party sites
- Referencing governing & authoritative bodies
- Displaying symbols and imagery of authority e.g. VERITAS, padlocks for security

7. Allay people's fears

What if I need to return items? Are there any hidden costs involved? These are the sorts of fears web visitors may have and you need to reduce them if you want to persuade people to do business with you. Answering their concerns upfront and quickly will positively influence people and lower their fears.

Conclusion

Persuasion in its simplest form means giving users the information they need to make an informed choice, helping them to trust you and allaying any concerns they have. It's not about manipulation. Always remember, these persuasive tactics will only get you so far - your site still needs to provide a good service and be highly usable to guarantee success.

This article was written by Lisa Halabi. Lisa's crazy about usability - so crazy that she works for Webcredible, an industry leading **user experience consultancy**. When not developing **information architecture** she can often be found doing **interaction design**.