Ep #134: Unity: Robert Cialdini's Surprising Seventh Principle
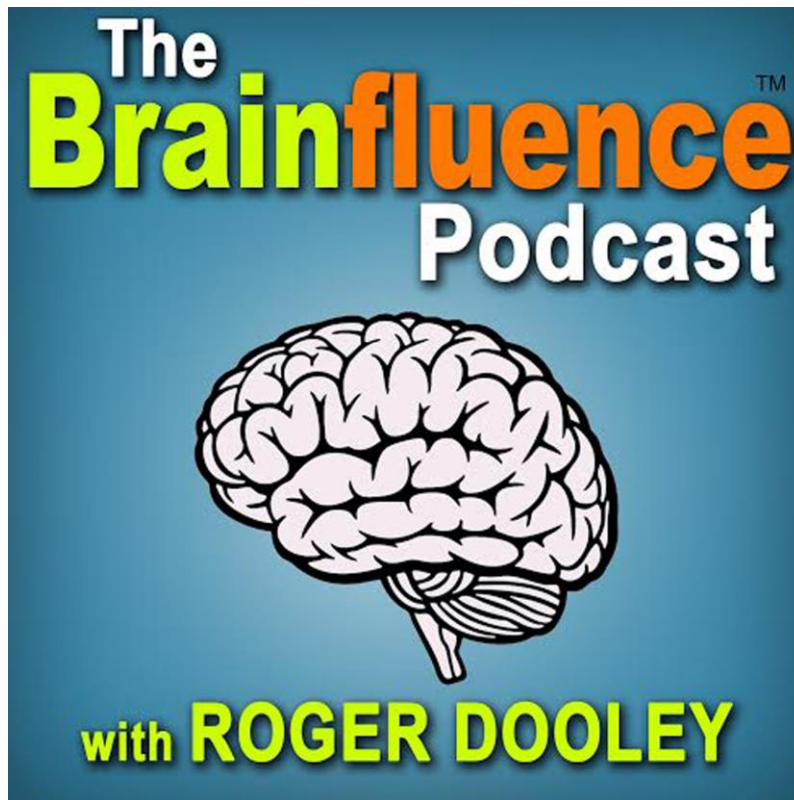

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Roger Dooley

The Brainfluence Podcast with Roger Dooley

Ep #134: Unity: Robert Cialdini's Surprising Seventh Principle

Welcome to the Brainfluence Podcast with Roger Dooley, author, speaker and educator on neuromarketing and the psychology of persuasion. Every week, we talk with thought leaders that will help you improve your influence with factual evidence and concrete research. Introducing your host, Roger Dooley.

Roger: Welcome to the Brainfluence podcast, I am Roger Dooley. This week it's just me. I wanted to cover a topic that I've heard a lot of questions about in the last few weeks and that is Robert Cialdini's new 7th principle, Unity. It was kind of a surprise to see that in his latest book "Pre-suasion" he actually added the 7th principle to his famous 6. Even as recently as a couple of years ago when I asked him if he thought that there were any other principles that have been discovered in the 30-odd years that his principle's been out there, at that point he said no. But in his new book he does talk about unity, and unfortunately when I spoke to him a few weeks ago in an earlier podcast we had so much ground to cover that we didn't actually get a chance to discuss his newest principle. I'm going to try and explain a little bit about it and answer a couple of the questions that have been posed to me.

Cialdini calls his new principal unity, and by that he means shared identity. He traces it all the way back to early humans and tribalism when being part of a community or being part of the group was an extremely important part of being able to survive. Fortunately there are other ways to create Unity beyond belonging to the exact same ethnic group or blood-related tribe. Some of the best-known work on shared identity was done by the French psychologist Henri Tajfel, and he found

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that he was able to produce in-group and out-group feelings, sometimes with the most minor distinctions. He could take a class of strangers, students who weren't particularly grouped in one way or another, divide them into two groups, and then creates a minor distinction between the groups. Within just a very short space of time Tajfel was able to get the members of the same group to like each other and support each other, and at the same time dislike and treat poorly the other group.

Cialdini points out that there are various ways to build this Unity, even simple things like doing the same thing together, music can build Unity, dancing or somehow moving in the same way, imitating, mimicry, all of these can build a sense of unity. Now perhaps the most powerful form of unity that Cialdini identifies is family or familial unity, and by that he means the shared identity of being part of the same family. He gives a great example of how he was able to use this in a very persuasive way with his students. In some of his classes he tried to get the parents of those students to fill out a survey, and in general his results were fairly mediocre. Even being the master persuasion he found that he got about a 20% return on that, so maybe 1 in 5 parents was actually filling out the survey for their student, but then he conducted a little experiment.

Instead of simply asking the parents to fill out that form, he added a small familial incentive. He said that he would give their student one extra point on one test if they completed the survey. Now, in terms of actual value that's almost meaningless. In a semester-long course one point on one test is extremely unlikely to have any effect whatsoever on that student's grade. Nevertheless, under those conditions almost

all of the parents completed a survey, so with that really inconsequential incentive Cialdini was able to invoke this familial Unity effect and dramatically improve his persuasive results. Now, in our own persuasive efforts most of us don't have a class full of willing students that we can use to persuade their mostly willing parents to help out, but what the findings does tell us is that it might be more powerful say to do a small favor for a family member than doing something similar for the person you're trying to persuade.

Another way that you can invoke familiar Unity is by using familial language, and here's a great example from Warren Buffett's famous letter to shareholders. They're all popular but one that was really important was when he was addressing the question of succession at Berkshire Hathaway, because obviously Warren Buffett is one of the world's top investors, probably of all time, but what happens when he's gone. He addressed that head on and talked about looking at the road ahead in his letter and, I'll read his words, "Bare in mind that if I had attempted 50 years ago to gauge what was coming some of my predictions would have been far off the mark." And then Cialdini goes on to highlight Buffett's very specific wording that invokes family language. Buffett goes on, "Without warning I will tell you what I would say to my family today if they asked me about Berkshire's future."

Now obviously this wasn't a controlled experiment, you can't really say that that particular phrasing was what made Buffett's letter so powerful, but it was considered to be one of his best letters ever. Also was considered to adequately address the succession situation of Berkshire Hathaway. That's something

that you can do as well if you are having a conversation with somebody, or even writing a letter, you can say here's what I would tell my brother, or my sister, my parents, depending on the situation of the person you're talking to and what you're telling them. Being from the same place can be a powerful unitizing factor to Cialdini, so it's a really interesting example from the days of World War II when the Germans were pressing the Japanese to pursue the same policy of exterminating Jews that the Nazis were.

There was a dramatic meeting between Japanese authorities, a representative of the German government, and a Rabbi. The German ambassador or messenger laid out his case for pursuing those policies, but then the Rabbi made one very simple statement that really turned things around completely. He simply said to the Japanese, "You shouldn't do this because we are Asian like you." That single statement invoking the principle of unity was enough to sway the Japanese to adopt a much more lenient policy toward Jews. Another way of invoking unity is what Cialdini calls co-creation. Now, you may remember the Ikea effect which is when you put something together yourself you're much more favorably disposed to that and value it more highly. This has an effect on Unity as well where if you feel that you were part of the team creating something you will be more likely to feel favorably disposed toward the team, and toward whatever it is that you're creating.

Cialdini gives us an example that to me is one of the really useful takeaways from pre-suasion. He describes an experiment where the scientists were proposing a new fast-casual restaurant named Splash, and as various groups of

subjects for advice, feedback, or recommendations. Now, those all seemed kind of synonymous but in fact psychologically they're not. The people who asked for advice were much more likely to then say they would eat at that restaurant than those asked for feedback or recommendations. Cialdini attributes this to the co-creation effect by being asked for advice they were part of the process of creating that restaurant. The moral of this particular story is always ask for advice rather than feedback, or something more neutral. If you can give people the idea that they are actually participating in creating it, whatever it is you're asking about, they will be much more on your side.

I think one of the great marketing examples of invoking unity is Steve Jobs and Apple. Over decades Job's managed to create the in-group and out-group perception of Mac owners, and PC owners, or everyone else. Now, this may be a little bit diminished in today's environment where Macs are actually fairly mainstream and everybody has an iPhone, but back in the earlier days this was really critical for Apple's success. Look at the 1984 ad where the PC owners are represented by these sort of grey drones mesmerized by the giant head on the screen, and of course the Mac person is the heroic young woman that smashes the screen. Then the following year, not nearly as good a commercial but definitely emphasizing the in-group and out-group where PC owners are portrayed as Lemmings marching over a cliff where the Mac owner is this heroic individualistic character that does not jump over the cliff. This continued with the think different campaign, and that I think was really highlighted again in the "I'm a PC, I'm a Mac" ads where the Mac guy was young, hip, cool, and the PC guy was always portrayed as being kind of dorky, and nerdy, and definitely not cool. The implicit question is, do you want to be

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part of the in-group of Mac owners or those other guys, the out-group?

One of the questions that I've been asking ever since the 7th principal came out is, isn't this a lot like liking, because we've been using the liking principle for years and that's highlighting shared attributes, and commonalities that you might have with somebody else to be more persuasive and influential? Well, I didn't get a chance to ask Cialdini about that specific question, but my take on it is that yes there is a similarity but it's a matter of degree. I think if you have something that you share with somebody else that's not necessary an inherent characteristic, or something you identify strongly with, then that is liking. For instance, if you both happen to own a dog, you happen to be from California long time ago, that probably is not so much a shared identity if you don't actually brand yourself as a dog owner, or as a Californian. Similarities like that can still create a liking effect and make you a little bit more influential with somebody, and anytime you can highlight those common characteristics that you have. Those little shared attributes, that can be quite powerful, but Unity I believe is a deeper thing. It's something that you really identify with, and I think it's not always the same, or it's not always consistent.

I'd use US colleges as an example. If you graduate from Notre Dame you are a Dommer for life, or at least you're likely to be a Dommer for life. There's an extremely strong alumni network where alumni will actively try and give other Notre Dame alums a boost, and so on where that same shared identity may not be as true for say a large state University and it really depends on the individual. Some may feel that quite strongly and others not

at all. Where they went to college may just be where they got their degree from, and they don't really identify themselves as being a member of that on-going community. While others, even a very large university, they feel very attached to it, and part of that group. Years ago I lived in Knoxville, Tennessee and that is the home of the University of Tennessee, and they are known as The Big Orange. Something that many businesses did there was adopt some kind of Big Orange motif in their advertising, on their trucks, in their buildings, in their offices and so on.

I'm sure that a good part of this was to show potential customers that, yes we have this shared identity. We are all part of the Big Orange group. To sum up, you might almost even say, and now this is my opinion not Cialdini's, that liking and unity are sort of a continuum. Where at the weaker end liking you're simply finding something that you have in common with somebody else. Where Unity, this is really part of your perceived identity. I guess parenthetically I'd had that to me at least, social proof and authority are also a continuum. When you have testimonials on your website they may be social proof showing that other customers like and use your product, or if you have an expert, or somebody well-known doing that testimonial then that would be authority. Clearly too, there's a continuum, there are folks who perhaps are a little bit more than a random person but not necessarily a true authority in their field.

If you want to learn more about Unity I'd suggest of course reading the book "Pre-suasion" itself, and also I've got a post on my neuro marketing blog about it, and Alex Birkett at

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ConversionXL wrote a really massive post about Unity. I'll link to you both of those resources as well as Cialdini's book on the show notes page at rogerlooley.com/podcast. Until next week bye for now.

Thank you for joining me for this episode of the Brainfluence Podcast. To continue the discussion and to find your own path to brainy success, please visit us at RogerDooley.com.

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