

How to Use the Law of Reciprocity for Effective Persuasion

When someone does something to help us in some way, we feel grateful. And when we feel grateful, we also feel like we want to do something for the other person. What you are feeling in these situations is the law of reciprocity. Here are some ways you can use the law of reciprocity for effective persuasion.

Can you think of a time when someone did something nice to you for no apparent reason?

It may seem like this happens rarely. And maybe that is why when it does, it really stands out. When someone does something to help us in some way, we feel grateful. And when we feel grateful, we also feel like we want to do something for the other person.

What you are feeling in these situations is the law of reciprocity. This feeling that we get from wanting to help others or give them something can be a useful tool to help you achieve a goal.

Here are some ways you can use the law of reciprocity for effective persuasion.

What is the Principle of Reciprocity?

The principle of reciprocity is a term in social psychology. To put it simply, it means that if someone does something nice for you, you have the built-in tendency to want to do something nice for them.

This is apparent in almost all social situations: personal relationships, in business, familial relationships, and just about every interaction with other people.

Here is one example.

Most years, my wife and I send out holiday cards. I always ask my wife why we send them to certain people.

I always ask my wife, 'why are we sending a holiday card to the Smiths?'. And she always answers, 'because they send us one', even though we have not seen them or spoken to them for over 10 years.

We feel obligated to send the Smith family a card because they send us one. They did something for us, we should do something for them.

According to Linda and Charlie Bloom from Psychology Today:

The rule of reciprocation 'has to do with the universal tendency in human beings to feel compelled to repay or reciprocate when given a gift whether it has come in the form of a material object, a kind

deed, or an act of generosity. There is a strong impulse in people from all cultures to repay gifts or favors with a gift of our own to them. This impulse expresses itself in reciprocation to invitations to parties, Christmas cards, birthday presents, or acts of kindness.^[1]

Law of Reciprocity and Business

Think of the companies you do business with. This can be your job working with your vendors or partners or other businesses. It can also be the companies you do business with on a personal level – the grocery store, coffee shop, dry cleaners, etc.

In almost all cases, we work with businesses that we trust.

I mean, would you work with a company you do not trust? I know I would not.

This is exactly where the law of reciprocity comes into effect.

Build Trust

When a company is still small and looking to gain more customers, they usually give away something for free to grow their business. These could be pieces of advice or services, but most of the time these are products.

This is very evident in the software industry. The reason is simple: people see new cool software, and they want to try it out before they buy it. Getting to try it for free for 2 weeks lets them check it out, play with it, and hopefully fall in love with it.

This is why you will usually see between 40% – 60% of free trails get converted to paid subscriptions. The company shows that you should trust them and their product by providing you with a new product to try out for a while.

Show Appreciation

Now that the trust has been built, well-run businesses will show ongoing appreciation for your patronage. Again, this is the law of reciprocity coming into effect.

In a study done by the U.S. Small Business Administration, almost 68% of customers will end a business relationship if they do not feel appreciated. Compare this to the 14% who leave a company because of a poor product.^[2]

When a company shows appreciation, customers feel like the company cares about them. This is why we love it when the companies give us 'special discounts' for being their loyal customers.

Incentivize Customers

This is where the referral programs come in.

How many companies do you know that will give you a \$50 or \$100 credit when you refer a new customer to them?

Exactly.

These kinds of programs are incredibly popular. You are doing something for the company, therefore they will do something for you. You know if you refer someone who signs up for the company's services, then the company will reward you financially. It is a great win-win situation.

How to Use the Law of Reciprocity for Effective Persuasion

Now that we know what the law of reciprocity is and how it is used in business, let us look at how we can use it for effective persuasion.

Remember, persuasion means convincing someone to do something for us.

This is not as terrible as it sounds; it is not like we are playing an elaborate game trying to be master puppeteers with other people. We all try to persuade others for things from time to time because it is human nature.

Just recently, I persuaded my boss into letting me go to a conference I wanted. The way I achieved this was by stepping up and completing a big project. I then asked about going to the conference while explaining how attending this conference will make me even better at my job. See how that worked?

Here are a few ideas for using the law of reciprocity for effective persuasion.

1. Give Something First

Being the first person to give something to someone else puts you in a position of power. It is like doing someone a favor before they ask for it. It then becomes the unwritten and unspoken rule that they 'owe you'.

It does not happen as often these days, but this is the exact reason why I am the first of my friends to buy a round at a bar when we go out. You always remember who bought the first round but rarely who bought the 3rd one.

This worked well in my example above with my boss and the conference. I gave my boss something first – a lot of assistance on a big project. My boss did not ask for my help; I volunteered it. Then a month or so after the project was complete, I asked about going to the conference.

Nothing was spoken about the extra work I did on the project, but I implied it when I stated how going to the conference would help complete similar projects more effectively down the road.

Give something first.

2. Give Something That Truly Benefits Someone

Your offer of assistance has to actually benefit the other party. If it does not, there is a chance it will feel like you are just trying to manipulate people.

Ensure that you are giving something that will help someone in a manner that comes across as no strings attached. If someone can further benefit from your product, advice or service, then you have given them a taste of what you can do.

If you have ever received an invitation in the mail for a nice steak dinner hosted by a financial advisor, you are receiving 2 things – a great meal and some financial advice.

Just about all of us can use some sound financial advice and appreciate a nice meal. Once the presentation ends and your meal starts to settle, you may start to think about how this financial advisor can help you.

This person has given you something valuable for free, now you feel somewhat obligated to do business with him or her.

3. Make It Personal

A gift coming from a personal place makes the gesture more effective than coming from a faceless corporation. This is why we see real-life stories attached to big businesses so much. Companies take themselves to a personal level we can relate to.

We relate to other human beings, not gigantic companies.

I have personally received customized return address labels from the Humane Society on numerous occasions. When I am done marveling at how nice they are, I almost always write them a donation check. They make those address labels from those cute and cuddly puppies and kittens, making it immensely personal and heart-warming.

4. Keep the Giving Going

Now that you have given something of value to another person in a meaningful way, you will want to keep it going.

Do not just give something then walk away when you get what you want. To keep the good vibes going and continuously build goodwill, it is important to keep giving valuable things to people.

You can also change it up so it is not the same thing over and over. But the point is to continue to provide something that someone else can use.

As an example, I have been a recruiter for 15 years. Over the years, I have spoken to many people who have been laid off or downsized for one reason or another.

Many of these people have not looked for a job in a decade or longer, so they tend to flounder. Even if the skills and experience they possess are not fit for a position I am recruiting for, I am always happy to talk to them if they want to. The reason being is that I can leverage my years of recruiting experience to help them in their job search.

Talk to them about tips and ways to be more effective and get more interviews. I am not getting anything out of it, but I do it because I am knowledgeable in job searching, and my advice is helpful to people looking for a job.

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