

## SELLING WITH SCIENCE INSTEAD OF HIGH PRESSURE

Minnesota has some of the coldest winters in the United States. It is not uncommon for the temperature to drop below zero and remain there for weeks at a time. I have experienced the frigid temperatures, incessant snow and ice that a Minnesota winter can produce because I attended college there. Graciously, the college did not require its students to trudge across a snow ridden campus to get from one class to another. Instead, the school had built a series of underground tunnels that connected almost all of its buildings. The tunnels were approximately ten feet wide and running along the side of every tunnel were numerous large pipes. What was strange about these pipes was that each was covered with dents. Though the dents in the pipes looked odd, I would walk by them numerous times per week, never giving them much thought. Then a professor in one of my classes, in an attempt to illustrate an idea, explained why there were dents on the pipes. The professor shared how years earlier one of the school administrators noticed a scuff on one of the pipes. In an effort to keep the students from harming the pipes, he had signs put on the pipes which stated, "Please do not touch." However, when students saw the signs they felt an intense desire to do the exact opposite. It is reported that students would tap, strike and even kick the pipes. The result was that within a short time there were hundreds of dents on the pipes. Finally, someone on the college staff realized that the signs were having a negative effect and had them removed. Once the signs were gone, so too was the urge to touch the pipes.

Yet, why would signs that implore college students not to touch pipes actually generate the urge to do so? The reason is because of a powerful scientific rule called *reactance*. The principle of reactance, which has been formally studied by scientists since 1966, is essential in understanding the process of human persuasion.<sup>1</sup> Reactance is one of the primary psychological barriers that kill the impact of persuasive messages. This is vital for sales people to grasp because many sales have been lost because prospects experienced reactance. Furthermore, due to the fact that most sales people are unaware of this powerful principle, it is rarely ever identified or competently counteracted.

Reactance is the innate desire that occurs when one perceives that his or her ability to freely choose is being restricted by another. Feelings of reactance prompt a person to rebel against the restrictions. In fact, there is an overwhelming amount of scientific evidence that has confirmed that when people feel that they are being forced to adopt behaviors or beliefs they will often rebel against what is being imposed upon them.<sup>2,3,4,5,6</sup> For example, research published in the *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* found that when drivers returned to their parked car they move slower when there was another person waiting for their parking spot.<sup>7</sup> This response is intensified when those waiting for the parking spot honk their car horns or exhibit behavior that pressures the person to vacate the parking spot faster. Reactance is such a potent psychological trigger that it has been proven to limit the impact of attempts to reduce alcohol consumption,<sup>8,9</sup> decrease smoking<sup>10</sup> and encourage a healthy lifestyle.<sup>11</sup> In addition, reactance is also why signs that assert, "No littering" or "Don't litter" actually increase littering in comparison to more empowering anti-littering messages like, "Please pitch in?"<sup>12,13</sup>

Understanding the influence that reactance has upon prospects is an imperative for sales people since every sales person encounters reactance, whether they realize it or not. Many prospects experience reactance when they interact with a sales person because they are afraid the sales person will attempt to pressure them to purchase something. Now to be sure, to be successful in the profession of sales, a sales person must be able to build urgency, but not prompt the prospect to feel psychological reactance.

Although, sales people revel in exhibiting behavior that causes their prospects to feel high pressure as they naively believe that is what successful sales people do. This antiquated thinking is both sloppy and counterproductive. When sales people are accused of pressuring a prospect, it is due to the fact that the sales person is selling against the principle of reactance. This is highly detrimental because reactance is lethal to the success of a sales call. When prospects feel reactance they will be blinded by it. In an attempt to elevate those feelings they will reject both the sales person and the sales person's request.

The good news is that there are ways to decrease reactance. Just as there have been scientific studies conducted on what stimulates reactance, so too there has been research regarding how to diminish it. For example, behavioral scientists Guegen and Pascual studied how reactance can be counteracted when making a persuasive appeal. They placed panhandlers at a busy mall who would ask those who passed by for money.<sup>14</sup> Guegen and Pascual found that when the panhandler would end his or her request with a phrase that conveyed the person was "free to accept or to refuse," feelings of reactance lessened, which caused compliance to skyrocket by nearly 400%.

Likewise, when attempting to create urgency, it is important that sales people simultaneously reduce reactance. Some examples of phrases that accomplish this are: "of course, it's up to you" or "this is a great offer that you can participate in, if you choose."

There is no doubt that reducing reactance will transform the results that a sales person produces. I have personally created sales strategies for numerous organizations that guide prospects in feeling the urgency to purchase, but at the same time dissolve reactance. When these strategies are adopted, the companies' sales cycles shorten and closing rates skyrocket. Consequently, by being aware of the scientific principle of reactance and selling against it, sales people will find that prospects will respond more favorably to them and their persuasive appeals. This will translate into an increase in overall sales effectiveness and sales production.

## About the Author

David Hoffeld is CEO of the Hoffeld Group, a research based sales training, coaching and consulting firm that is the leader in the integration of proven science and sales. The Hoffeld Group takes the repeatable and predictable principles, which science has proven to create and enable influence, out of the laboratory and academic journals and apply them to selling. For a deeper look at the Hoffeld Group's groundbreaking research and innovative sales strategies visit [HoffeldGroup.com](http://HoffeldGroup.com).

## Notes

1. J.W. Brehm. *A theory of psychological reactance*. (New York: Academic Press, 1966).
2. F. Rhodewalt and J. Davison Jr. "Personal involvement as a determinant of argument-based persuasion." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 41, 1981.
3. J. Levav and R. Zhu. "Seeking freedom through variety." *Journal of Consumer Research*, 36, 2009. p. 600 – 610.
4. C.H. Miller, L.T. Lane, L.M. Deatrck, A.M. Young and K.A. Potts. "Psychological reactance and promotional health messages: The effects of controlling language, lexical concreteness, and the restoration of freedom." *Human Communication Research*, 33, 2007. p. 219 – 240.
5. S.S. Brehm, and J.W. Brehm. *Psychological Reactance: A Theory of Freedom and Control*. (San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 1981).
6. P.R. Nail, G. MacDonald and D.A. Levy. "Proposal of a four-dimensional model of social response." *Psychological Bulletin*, 126, 2000. p. 454- 470.
7. B. Ruback and D. Jweng. "Territorial defense in parking lots: Retaliation against waiting drivers." *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 27, 1997. p. 821 – 834.
8. J. Dillard and L. Shen. "On the nature of reactance and its role in persuasive health communication." *Communication Monographs*, 72, 2005. P. 144 – 168.
9. M.P. Karno and R. Longabaugh. "Less directiveness by therapists improves drinking outcomes of reactance clients in alcoholism treatment," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 72, 2, 2005. p. 262 – 267.
10. C. Miller, M. Burgoon, J. Grandpre and E. Alvaro. "Identifying principal risk factors for the initiation of adolescent smoking behaviors: The significance of psychological reactance." *Health Communication*, 19, 2006. p. 241 - 252.
11. C. Miller, L. Lane, L. Deatrck, A. Young and K. Potts. "Health messages: The effects of controlling language, lexical concreteness, and the restoration of freedom." *Human Communication Research*, 33, 2007. p. 219 – 240.
12. A. Horsley. "The unintended effects of a posted sign on littering attitudes and stated intentions." *Journal of Environmental Education*, 19 (3), 1988. p. 10 – 14.
13. R. Hansmann and R. Scholz. "A two-step informational strategy for reducing littering behavior in a cinema." *Environment and Behavior*, 35 (6), 2003. p. 752 – 762.
14. N. Guegen and A. Pascual. "Evocation of freedom and compliance: The 'but you are free of...' technique." *Current Research in Social Psychology*, 5, 2000. p. 264 – 270.