

Comparison Effect: Taking Their Temperature

The last form of contrast is the more general Comparison Effect. This is closely related to the Door in the Face technique except that instead of presenting an outrageous request upfront, the persuader presents his prospects with an undesirable form of what they are looking for. Then, when the good (or even mediocre) item is presented, the prospect grabs a hold of the offer a lot faster. The Comparison Effect focuses on how the prospect is able to compare two options simultaneously and come to the conclusion that the second option really is desirable.

Some real estate companies maintain what they call, “set-up” properties. These are run-down properties listed at inflated prices, which are used to benefit the genuine properties in the company’s inventory by comparison. Agents show customers the set-up properties first then they show them the homes they really want to sell, both of them listed at the same price. The latter home looks much better in comparison to the dump they first saw. This strategy works just as well when showing a \$120,000 home after viewing a \$90,000 home.

The comparison principle comes into play in our everyday lives. It can even influence how we perceive the physical attractiveness of our partner. A study at Arizona State and Montana State Universities tested to see if we might think our own spouses or partners were less attractive because of the media bombardment of very attractive models. In the study, students were first shown pictures of models before rating the attractiveness of members of the opposite sex who were not models. These students rated the non-models as significantly less attractive than students who had not first looked at pictures of models.⁸

In another study, sales for billiard tables were monitored to see whether “up-selling” or “down-selling” was more effective. For a number of weeks, customers were first shown the less expensive tables, and then shown the more expensive models. The average sale worked out to be approximately \$550 per table. For the second half of the experiment, customers were first shown top of the line tables, priced as high as \$3,000. After seeing the most expensive tables first, the customers were shown gradually less and less expensive tables. This time, the average sale turned out to be over \$1,000 per table. After seeing the really nice, high-quality tables, the low-end tables were less appealing, so customers tended to buy higher priced items.⁹

A similar example uses the same concept with a different product: funeral caskets. Funeral directors exploit the contrast principle to get families of the deceased to spend more money. Directors show the deceased’s family the expensive model first, and then they show them a very plain, cheap one. They know that the family members are grieving and will do anything for their loved one. The grieving loved ones are often shocked by the contrast in the two caskets and rebound back to the more expensive casket.

These principles also apply when you’re in a position where you have to compare people. The Law of Contrast is constantly at work, even influencing judgments in job interviews.

If you first interview an outstanding candidate, and then immediately following you interview someone who is less favorable, you will be inclined to underrate the second person even more than if you had not interviewed the outstanding candidate first. Certainly the reverse is also true: If an average candidate follows someone who has interviewed very poorly, you may view that individual as better than average.

We see diet ads that use contrast to convince us to use their products. The “Before” and “After” intentionally look like stark opposites. The “Before” picture is in black and white, with the person slouching, frowning, and pale. The “After” picture is of the same person in full color with a smile, erect posture, and tan skin. We look at the two pictures, see the comparison, and decide we want to be more like the “After” picture.

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