

Maintaining Psychological Consistency

We find what we seek. If we can't find it, we make it up. In politics, members of different parties will refuse to peaceably or tolerantly listen to opposing party commercials. Smokers won't read medical texts on the dangers of smoking. Drug users don't spend much time at clinics. We don't want to find information that might oppose our current points of view.

A Study by Knox and Inkster (1968) found interesting results at a racetrack. They interviewed people waiting in line to place a bet, and then questioned them again after they'd placed a bet. They found people were much more confident with their decisions after they had placed their bet than before the bet was made. They exuded greater confidence in their decisions and their chosen horses after their decisions were final and their bets were firmly in place.

Younger, Walker, and Arrowood (1977) decided to conduct a similar experiment at the midway of the Canadian National Exposition. They interviewed people who had already placed bets on a variety of different games (bingo, wheel of fortune, etc.) as well as people who were still on their way to place bets. They asked each of the people if they felt confident they were going to win. Paralleling the findings of Knox and Inkster's study, the people who had already made their bets felt luckier and more confident than those who had not yet placed their wagers.

Once we make the commitment of a bet or purchase a product or service, we feel more confident with ourselves and the choice we've made. This concept also holds true in persuasion and sales. Once the payment is given for your product or service, your prospects will usually feel more confident with their decisions. Have them make the payment or finalize the choice ASAP! This will increase their confidence in their decision and they will look for reasons to justify that decision.

These studies show that to reduce dissonance, we often simply convince ourselves that we have made the right decision. Consequently, we feel better about our actions.

Many times, even when we have made a bad decision, we become so entrenched in our belief that it was right that we will fight to the bitter end to prove it. We can't handle the dissonance in our minds, so we find anything to prove our decision was right. We become so embroiled in justifying our actions that we are willing to go down with the burning ship.

When buying and selling shares of stock, investors commonly stick with stocks that have recently slumped in price, with no prospects of recovery. Rationally, the best decision is to cut their losses and invest elsewhere. Irrationally, however, investors often hang on, ensnared by their initial decision.

McDonalds summonsed five London activists for libeling them in a leaflet entitled "What's Wrong With McDonalds?" The pamphlets asserted many claims, including that the franchise's food was unhealthy and that the company exploited its workers,

contributed to the destruction of rain forests through cattle ranching, produced litter, and sought to target children through its advertising. While three of the activists backed down, two of them went on to fight McDonalds in court. The case evolved into the longest court proceeding in the legal history of Britain. It came to be considered “the most expensive and disastrous public relations exercise ever mounted by a multinational company.”

Spreading negative publicity across the globe, two million copies of “What’s Wrong With McDonalds?” went into circulation. An Internet site following the case even received seven million hits in its first year. Having publicly asserted its stance that the company would challenge its antagonists, McDonalds was trapped. Forced to remain consistent to its position, McDonalds fought to the bitter end. This case took two and a half years and cost McDonalds over ten million dollars to fight. Given the ramifications, perhaps it would have been better if the company had just cut their losses and moved on.

© 2009 Kurt Mortensen