

Similarity Similar is Familiar

Similarity theory states that familiar objects are more liked than less familiar ones. The same holds true with people: We like people who are similar to us. This theory seems to hold true whether the commonality is in the area of opinions, personality traits, background, or lifestyle. Consequently, those who want us to comply with their wishes can accomplish that purpose by appearing similar to us in a variety of ways.

Studies show that we tend to like and are more attracted to those who are like us and with whom we can relate. If you watch at a party, you will see yourself (and others) instantly gravitate towards people who seem to be similar to yourself. I can remember walking in a foreign country, taking in the unfamiliar sights and sounds and then running into someone from my own country. Wow – it created an instant bond. We could have been from opposite sides of the nation, but there was an instantaneous bond between us, all because we had something in common in a mutually unfamiliar place.

Have you ever heard the saying, “People buy from people they like”? This is true not only in sales, but also even in the judicial system. If jurors feel that they share some common ground with you and, better yet, *like* you – even subconsciously – for that similarity, then you will have a markedly better chance of winning your case. Anytime we establish something about ourselves that others will identify with, we increase our persuasive powers. In one particular study, antiwar demonstrators were more inclined to sign petitions of those similarly dressed, and often didn’t even bother to read the petition before signing!⁸

Similarly, we gravitate toward people who dress like us. In the 1970’s, when young people tended to dress in either “hippie” or “straight” fashion, researchers studied the effects of clothing styles. Experimenters donned hippie or straight attire and asked college students on campus for a dime to make a phone call. When the experimenter was dressed in the same way as the student, the request was granted in more than two-thirds of all instances; when the student and requester were dissimilarly dressed, the dime was provided less than half the time. Numerous studies conclude that your audience is most responsive to individuals who dress and act similarly to them.

An especially apt illustration can be found in a study done by physiologists at Columbia University. Researchers placed wallets on the ground containing \$2.00 cash, a check for \$26.30, a personal ID of the “owner,” and a letter giving evidence that the wallet had already been lost before: The letter was written to the owner from the finder, expressing his intentions to return the wallet as soon as possible. The letter was sometimes written in perfect English, while other times it was written in poor English, as though created by a foreigner. Researchers wanted to see if instances involving the wallet’s return increased when finders felt some commonality with the writer of the letter. The study found that only 33% of the respondents returned the wallet when the person who wrote the letter was seen as dissimilar, while 70% returned the wallet when they thought they were similar to the letter writer.

Do you remember all the “cliques” in junior high, high school, or even college? People associate and interact with those they view as similar to themselves. Cliques are often based on such commonalities as gender, age, educational background, professional interests, hobbies, and ethnic background. In one study, researchers examined the social networks of prison inmates. Their “cliques” were typically centered on commonalities of race, geographical origin, and the types of crime committed. A group of three men once stood out to the researchers because they shared a tight companionship yet seemed to have no common backgrounds. Just as the study was coming to a close, the three men escaped together. This occurrence demonstrated that we also build alliances based on common goals.

Researchers McCroskey, Richmond, and Daly say there are four critical steps to similarity: attitude, morality, background, and appearance. When receiving a persuasive message, the following questions are subconsciously asked:

1. Does the speaker think like me?
2. Does the speaker share my morals?
3. Does the speaker share my background?
4. Does the speaker look like me?

Of the four similarity factors, attitudes and morals are the most important. Master Persuaders are always looking for similarities or common beliefs to form the basis of common foundations with their prospects. We want to be persuaded by those who are like us and with whom we can relate. We see real world examples of this in advertisements: We want to see people we can identify with and the advertising execs accommodate us. When we see a particular commercial, we think, “Hey, he is just like me! He doesn’t have time to pick up his socks, either. That couple has a messy, cluttered house, too.” We see ads with the average Joe or Jill because they create that similarity.

Your audience will connect with you as they perceive the similarity. O’Keefe (1990) found two important points regarding similarity and persuasion. First, the similarity must be relevant to the subject or issue being persuaded. Second, to persuade someone, the similarities must involve positive rather than negative qualities.