

Social Validation at Work

The Law of Social Validation is in action all the time, everywhere: publicly passing the donation plate to help with a community project; doing the wave at sporting events; going to popular dance clubs when you don't enjoy the surroundings; being afraid to raise your hand in class to ask a question; franchise owners having their athletes sign their contracts in public; stacking the top ten most popular books right in the entryway of a bookstore, the way we choose restaurants (the ones with the longest lines or the most cars); the way we choose movies (the ones everyone is talking about); washing our hands in public restrooms only when somebody else is watching; and restaurants seating their first patrons near the window for everyone else to see.

Sometimes theaters even employ "professional audience members" to start laughter, clapping, and even standing ovations! When audience members see others stand and cheer or applaud, they are more inclined to do so. Performers commonly "salt the tip jar" by placing some money in there themselves. When people see money in the jar and think that others have already made contributions, they assume this is the appropriate and acceptable thing to do. Salting the tip jar is done by pianists, bartenders, bus drivers, and even the homeless on the street. Even in churches, the practice of "salting the collection plate" is often employed. People are more inclined to donate if they are passed a plate that already holds some bills.

Before one of his crusades, researchers from Arizona State University reported that Billy Graham's organization had coached thousands of volunteers on when to come up front, when to sing, and when to clap, all to give the appearance of great, religious intensity. People manning the phones were even instructed to pretend they were talking to people when the camera came their way so it appeared as though they were getting a huge volume of calls. This would give social validation to the at-home audience that this charity was popular and an acceptable organization to which to donate your money.

Your video rental stores use social validity as a means of increasing rentals on high profit movies. Older movies return the highest profit for video rental stores. Storeowners noticed that many customers would check the return stacks to see what videos other people were watching. Since the older the movie was, the more profit the store gained, workers would put older movies into the return bin. Social validation increased the rentals of the older movies significantly.

Do you recall MCI's "Friends and Family" campaign? The result was a gain of 10 million customers in less than ten years! If we believe friends and family are doing it, then we feel social proof and family pressure from these people whom we know so well that it must be a good company or product. That's why referrals are some of your best prospects! Referrals are your greatest source of social validation.

Etiquette is also a form of social validation. When we eat, what we order, what we drink, where we put our napkins, and how we cross our silverware when finished are all forms of social validation. Have you ever noticed how no one wants to be the first to order dessert? If the majority does not want dessert, most of the time, no one will.

I recently attended a business opportunity seminar that was promoting a home business for \$4,000. Throughout the course of the event, I saw many elements of social validation. The organizers used testimonials from people who were successful. The testifier stood up and claimed that this business opportunity was the answer to his economic woes. Then, as a form of social validation, all those who were ready to sign up had to walk to the back of the room to do so. The first few people ran to the back sign-up table. This was proof enough of the soundness of the business idea, and a storm of people followed suit to sign up. Of course, once at the back, there was a gentleman with a credit card machine running everybody's card through, tempting everyone's ears with that familiar sound of the credit card machine's crunch.

Gangs exhibit a powerful manifestation of social validation. New initiates allow older members to beat them up just so they will be able to belong. Fraternity hazings also reduce the initiate to a subhuman level – all because of an overwhelming desire to belong to a group. One fraternity hazing forced new members to drink so much alcohol that one guy passed out. Members, oblivious to the seriousness of the situation, thought he was asleep and left him there to sleep it off. Unfortunately, it turned out he was found dead the next day, in the same spot as they had left him the night before. CNN reported on the vicious way in which some Marines are initiated into the military. The initiation ritual is called “blood pinning” where the recruits' badges are literally pinned into their chests. Psychologists have identified people belonging to these organizations with what is now called “gang syndrome.” Gang syndrome manifests itself when a participant feels shame for the crimes they committed, but went through with them anyway so they could finally have a sense of belonging, or a sense of family – typically a feeling they never experienced in their own home lives.

I once attended a college football game between two fierce, cross-town rivals. Emotions were high, and we all wanted our home team to win. One of the fans near me was using a megaphone to taunt the other team and its fans. He only meant it in good fun, but it was not too long before a rent-a-cop came up to the man and told him he could not use the megaphone during the game. The rent-a-cop stood in the middle of the aisle of the sold-out game. The fan said he was just having fun but the rent-a-cop stressed that it was strictly against the rules. Then the social pressure and validation kicked in. Other fans nearby told the rent-a-cop that the fan's overzealous actions were okay and that there was no problem. The rent-a-cop tried to persist, but the crowd only grew louder in their protests. Finally, the rent-a-cop decided it wasn't worth the hassle and left.

Even watching someone else “do what's right” will give your cause social validation. For example, one study asked 10,000 high school students to give blood. This study found that those students who were exposed to 38 photos of high school blood drive scenes were 17% more likely to donate blood than the students who did not see the photos. Seeing others do the right thing prompts us to socially validate the cause and jump on board.