

Using Dissonance to Create Action

Dissonance is a powerful tool in helping others make and keep commitments. In one study, researchers staged thefts to test the reactions of onlookers. On a beach in New York City, the researchers randomly selected an accomplice to place his beach towel and portable radio five feet away. After relaxing there for a while, the accomplice got up and left. After the accomplice had departed, one of the researchers, pretending to be a thief, stole the radio. As you might imagine, hardly anyone reacted to the stage theft. Very few people were willing to put themselves at risk by confronting the thief. In fact, only four people in twenty (20%) staged thefts made any attempt to hinder the thief.

The researchers staged the same theft twenty more times, only this time with one slight difference repeated in each scenario. The minor alteration brought drastically different results. This time, before leaving, the accomplice asked each person sitting next to him, "Could you please watch my things?" Each person consented. This time, with the Law of Dissonance at work, nineteen out of twenty (95%) individuals sought to stop the thief by chasing, grabbing back the radio, and in some cases, even physically restraining him.

Most people try to follow through when they promise they will do something – especially if it is in writing. This is why corporations sponsor writing contests about social issues or their products. They really don't care about your writing style. What they're really looking for is consumer endorsement. The writer puts down, in his or her own words, what they think the company wants to hear about its issue or product. Having made a written commitment to supporting and endorsing a product or issue, the consumer will now support the sponsoring company in their cause or will willingly buy their product.

In one particular study, 100 high school students were asked to write an essay on whether or not the voting age should be lowered. Half the students were told the speeches would be published in the school newspaper, while the other half were told the essays would be kept confidential. After completing the essays, researchers exposed the students to a persuasive speech arguing that the voting age should not be lowered. Of the students assuming their papers were going to be published, very few of them changed their original position. Of the students who believed their papers were confidential, most altered their stance on the issue to agree with the persuasive speech.

The Law of Dissonance in Marketing

The Ole' Bait and Switch

If you can get someone to mentally commit to a product or a decision, she/he will likely still be committed, even if the terms and conditions change. This is why stores advertise very low prices, for example, on a television set, and include in small writing, "Quantities Limited." By the time you get to the store, all the bargain televisions are sold, but you are mentally committed to buying a new TV. Lucky for you, there are more expensive models available. So, you go home having spent \$300 more on a television set than you originally planned, just because you needed to maintain a consistency between your desire for a new TV and your action of being in the store.

This tactic is also often used when goods and products go on sale. For example, a customer may be lured to a store by an incredible deal on a pair of nice dress shoes. Upon enquiring, the disappointed customer learns from the salesperson that her size is not in stock. Just as the customer is about to leave, the salesperson miraculously displays another strikingly similar pair, with the caveat being they are not on sale.

Think of a time when you purchased a new car. Have you ever noticed that when you're about to sign the contract the price is \$200 more than you expected? Well, someone conveniently forgot to tell you about the air conditioner or some other feature found in your car. They just failed to inform you about some extras that the salesperson conveniently forgot to clear with his or her boss. You pay the extra \$200 anyway because you're mentally committed to that car, and you don't want to go through the whole hassle and headache of trying to renegotiate the deal.

Often car dealers promise an incredible price, even a few hundred dollars below a competitor's price, all the while knowing it's not actually going to go through. The deal is offered only to motivate the buyer to purchase from their dealership. Once the customer decides to buy, the dealer sets up several conditions, each of them causing the customer to feel increasingly committed: lengthy forms are filled out, great lengths are taken to set up specific financing terms, the customer is encouraged to take the car home and drive it to work, to run errands, to cruise the neighborhood. The dealer knows that while the customer is out joyriding, he or she is thinking of all the many reasons their purchase is justified.

These tactics are even used when high school students and their parents are narrowing down the colleges they should attend. Just like car dealers, colleges often give a low estimate on your costs, and it's not until after you've signed up and registered that you discover your *actual* costs.

Brand Loyalty

It's a challenge getting consumers to remain loyal to a particular brand. Unlike the good old days when brand loyalty stood for something, times have changed. As a society, we no longer feel compelled to stick with a certain company or product. I grew up with Crest, Cheerios, and Tide being staples in my home. Now I buy whatever brands I feel like. I'm not likely to remain loyal to a brand unless they reward me for my commitment to them, for example, with frequent flyer miles, with the little cars you buy for your kids at Chevron, or with the Unocal 76 ball that wants to swing from your car antennae. Acquiring consumer loyalty is the reason the tobacco industry spends over \$600 million giving away paraphernalia with tobacco logos. We constantly see companies putting their logos on coffee mugs, t-shirts, pens, and mouse pads, to name just a few promotional items. Even though you might not have paid for these items, owning them creates loyalty to the product advertised on them. Most people don't wear a Budweiser T-shirt if they drink Coors beer.