

The Law of Social Validation: The Art of Social Pressure

We are social animals. We all have an innate desire to belong to the social group. It is precisely because we value this sense of belonging so highly that the more other people find an idea, trend, or position appealing or correct, the more correct that idea becomes in our own minds. The Law of Social Validation recognizes and builds upon our innate desire to be part of the main group. It also recognizes that we tend to change our perceptions, opinions, and behaviors in ways that are consistent with group norms. Even if we don't admit it, or maybe even realize it, we care about what others think. As such, we use others' behavior as a guide in establishing the standard for the choices and decisions we make. The internet is all about social validation and social networks.

We seek to find out what others are doing as a way of validating our own actions. This method is how we decide what constitutes "correct" behavior. We see the behavior as more correct when we see others doing it. The more people do it, the more correct it becomes. Professor Kirk Hansen of the Stanford Business School demonstrated this when he boosted downloads for best-selling files on the web by downloading those files over and over himself so the counter was artificially high. He and his team then observed that these boosted downloaded files were downloaded even more frequently. The high number on the counter indicated popularity, and people were most interested in downloading the files that were already ranked the highest. Whether the question is what to do with an empty can of soda at the park, how fast to drive in the city, or how to eat the soup at a restaurant, the validation of others give us our answer and therefore guides our actions.

We feel validation when we see others do what we want to do. We learned early in life that we make fewer mistakes if we follow the social norm. There are two types of norms: explicit and implicit. Explicit norms are openly spoken or written. For example, road signs, employee manuals, or game rules are all examples of explicit norms. Implicit norms are not usually stated openly. For example, you usually don't have to be directed

to say hello or to smile when you see someone, but you do it anyway. Or, somehow you know better than to put your feet up on the dinner table when you're a guest in someone's home, even though your host most likely will not request that you refrain from doing so.

If we don't know the norm, we look around and find it. The Law of Social Validation becomes a way to save time and energy in figuring out what is correct. We use others' behavior to guide our own actions, to validate what we should or should not do. We don't always have to look at the positive and the negative in every situation. This automatic trigger saves us from thinking. We compare what we do against the standard of what everyone else is doing. If we find a discrepancy between what we observe and what we do, we tend to make changes in the direction of the social norm.

Social Judo

This Social Validation compels us to change our behaviors, our attitudes, and our actions. Often this happens even if the things we observe don't really match our true feelings, style, and thoughts. We go against our better judgment because we want to be liked, accepted, and found in agreement with everyone else. When we are part of a crowd, we "no longer feel individually responsible for our emotions or actions. We can allow ourselves to shout, sing, cry, or strike without temperament imposed by personal accountability."

We seek out social norms to help us know what we should be feeling or doing. For the most part, this is not a conscious process. We subconsciously accept many ways of behaving that are determined by our surroundings and the actions of others, for example: raising our hands to speak in class, tipping in a restaurant, or how we behave at a concert. When we become part of a group, our once divergent emotions and feelings tend to converge.

Usually, as long as the majority of people agree with what we are doing or about to do, we feel social validation. For the most part, we are all conformists. We will do what the

crowd does. We might not like to admit that, but it is true. Only 5-10% of the population engages in behavior contrary to the social norm.

We see this law operating in groups, in organizations, in meetings, and in day-to-day public life. In all of these circumstances, there is a certain standard or norm. In churches, the moral code determines the standard behavior acceptable for the group. In organizations, the bylaws and years of tradition establish a standard operating procedure. Because we want to fit into these groups and maintain our membership with them, we conform our actions to the norm.

When we find ourselves in a foreign situation where we feel awkward or unsure of how to act, we look for those social cues that will dictate our behavior. This could be at a party, during freshman orientation, or even while attending a family gathering. When the social information we are seeking is at all ambiguous, we don't know how to respond so we continue seeking out social clues. Imagine if you were sitting in the movie theater enjoying your show when somebody shouted, "FIRE!" Do you think you would jump up and run for it? Well, if everyone else did, you would, too. If everyone remained seated, you would remain seated also. People will always believe somebody else (testimonials & endorsements) before they believe you, because you have something to gain.

The Law of 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. How can the visitors to your website know they are part of a group?

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.

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.

Social Validation: The Power of the Group

In one particular study, researchers had very young children who were terrified of dogs watch a little boy play with his dog for twenty minutes a day. After only four days, 67% of the children were willing to sit in a playpen with a dog and even remain with it when everyone else left the room. The results were lasting too: One month later, the same children were just as eager to play with dogs. In another similar study, children who were afraid of dogs were influenced just as readily by *films* of a child playing with a dog as they were when watching a *live* child play with a dog.

In another study, a group of participants were asked to identify the longer of two lines displayed on a screen. One line was clearly longer than the other, but some had been privately instructed prior to the study to state that the *shorter* line was longer. The surprising results were that several of the unsuspecting participants actually gave in to social pressure and changed their answers! Over the course of the entire study, 75% of the participants gave the incorrect answer at least one time. In a related study conducted by Asch, it was determined that even when the correct answer is obvious, individuals will knowingly give the incorrect answer 37% of the time, just to go along with the consensus.

You know how you often hear all that canned laughter on sitcoms even when there isn't anything really funny happening? Studies prove that using canned laughter actually influences audience members to laugh longer and more frequently, and to give the material high ratings for its "funniness." Even for the portions of the show that seem to have no humor at all, producers use laugh tracks to get us to laugh along. The sad part is that it actually works! There is evidence that canned laughter is most effective when the joke is really bad. When two audiences watch the same show, and one hears a laugh track while the other doesn't, it's always the audience who hears the laugh track that laughs the most!

Another study was set up to see if passersby would stare in the same direction and look up if there was another group of people already doing so. The researchers arranged groups of 1-15 people to congregate in New York City on 33 W 42nd Street. A video camera was set up on the 6th floor to catch the results on tape. Sure enough, the more people in the group who were already gawking and looking into the air, the more passersby who stopped, came over and stared, and looked up themselves!

When participants were asked to view a political debate among George Bush, Bill Clinton, and Ross Perot, it was found that the mere presence of a confederate who cheered for one of the candidates influenced the participant's overall evaluation of that candidate in a positive manner. Obviously, when receiving information in a social setting, the audience can be skewed to perceive the information the way the group tends to hear it.

In yet another study, researchers wanted to see if mothers who had just given birth to their first child would be more likely to adhere to guidelines for their new babies' nutrition when instructed individually or in a group. The mothers were told that it could be important to give their new babies cod-liver oil and orange juice. The mother's were either taught one-by-one by a nutritionist associated with the hospital or in groups of six. The study found that when taught in a group setting, the mothers were far more inclined to give their babies cod-liver oil and orange juice than those who had been taught individually.

The Dark Side of Social Validation

Bystander Apathy

Numerous studies demonstrate that when someone is in trouble or in need of help, as the number of bystanders increases, the number of people who actually help decreases.

Termed "Bystander Apathy," this effect occurs because, in almost any situation, the more

people that are present, the more we feel a diffusion of responsibility. Our sense of social pressure is lessened when we feel that there might be any number of people more capable of helping than we are.

Have you ever been in a situation where, because of the numbers in your group, you didn't really give it your all? For example, maybe on an academic group project you noticed you weren't as diligent as you would have been had you been solely responsible for the assignment. Or, maybe you've helped push a stalled car to safety with some other people and you realized you didn't really push your hardest. When we find ourselves in groups, there is a diffusion of responsibility. Sometimes we don't know if we should even involve ourselves in the first place, since there are so many other people who could take action. Have you ever seen someone pulled over on the side of the road, but you just kept driving along with all the other cars speeding by? When there are large numbers of people involved, we tend to assume someone else will respond and take action first, or we might conclude that our help is not needed.

One particular case in history stands out as a classic example of Bystander Apathy. Catherine Genovese, a young woman living in *New York City*, was murdered one night when she was coming home from work. The unfortunate truth of the matter was that, in a city like New York, her death was just another of countless murders. Consequently, the incident didn't receive any more coverage than a few short lines in *The New York Times*. Genovese's story would have remained an obscure and incidental case had it not been for one, small incident.

A week later, A.M. Rosenthal, editor of *The New York Times*, went out to lunch with the city police commissioner. Rosenthal asked the commissioner about another homicide in the area, but the commissioner, mistakenly thinking he was being asked about the Genovese case, revealed a shocking piece of information that had been uncovered by the police. Genovese's death had not been a silent, hidden, or secretive occurrence. Rather, it had been a loud, drawn-out, public event. As her attacker chased her down and stabbed

her three separate times in a 35-minute period, 38 neighbors watched from their apartment windows and didn't even call the police!

Rosenthal promptly assigned a team to investigate this incidence of "Bystander Apathy." Soon following, *The Times* came out with a lengthy, front-page article detailing the incident and the alleged reactions of the neighbors:

"For more than half an hour, 38 respectable, law-abiding citizens in Queens watched a killer stalk and stab a woman in three separate attacks in Kew Gardens. Twice the sound of their voices and the sudden glow of their bedroom lights interrupted him and frightened him off. Each time he returned, sought her out, and stabbed her again. Not one person telephoned the police during the assault; one witness called after the woman was dead."

Everyone was completely stunned and baffled. How could people just stand by, witness such a scene, and do absolutely nothing? Even the very neighbors alluded to in the article didn't know how to explain their inaction. Responses included, "I don't know," "I was afraid," and "I didn't want to get involved." These "explanations" didn't really answer anything. Why couldn't one of them have just made a quick, anonymous call to the police? Different branches of the media – newspapers, TV stations, magazines, radio stations, etc. – pursued their own studies and investigations to explain the incredible scenario, all of them finally arriving at the same conclusion: the witnesses simply didn't care. They concluded that there was just no other explanation, or so they thought. Do you really think 38 people did not care enough to make an anonymous phone call? Did the researchers not understand the diffusion of responsibility? The neighbors did not react, thinking someone else would help or someone else would call the police. Most of us are good people. If each individual neighbor knew it was up to them to phone the police and get help, I guarantee they would have made the call.

Another experiment conducted in New York highlighted this tendency for "Bystander Apathy." It determined that when a lone individual observed smoke leaking from under a

door, 75% of those studied reported the smoke. In groups of three, however, reporting incidences dropped to 38%. If in that group two people encouraged the third person to do nothing, reporting of the smoke dropped to 10 %. Often the problem is that we don't know if we are really witnessing an emergency or not. For example, if we see a guy collapsed on the floor, we might waver between two conclusions: Did he just have a heart attack or did he pass out because he'd been drinking too much? So, bystanders may appear to be "apathetic" more because of uncertainty than insensitivity. And if they are uncertain, then they often don't help because they don't know if they're responsible to do so. Everybody else observing the event is likely to be looking for social evidence, too. Because most people prefer to appear poised and levelheaded when in the presence of others, they are likely to search for that evidence with brief glances at those around them. Therefore, everyone sees everyone else looking unflustered and failing to act. When people clearly know their responsibilities in a recognized and obvious emergency, however, they are remarkably quick to respond.

De-individuation

Festinger, Pepitone, and Newcomb coined the term "de-individuation" in 1952. De-individuation refers to how, when we find ourselves in a group, we become less self-aware and also less concerned with how others will evaluate us. Think of all the people you've heard yell obscenities at sporting events. Do you think they would do that if they were in a small, intimate group watching that same event? Basically, de-individuation means that when in a group, we feel more anonymous and therefore less individually responsible for our actions, often causing us to say or do things that we would not normally feel comfortable with.

Diener, Fraser, Beamnan, and Kelemn conducted a study that showed how de-individuation can lead to antisocial behavior. On Halloween, researchers evaluated 1,352 trick-or-treaters – either alone or in groups– who had the chance to steal candy from 27 Seattle homes. The researchers figured that Halloween would be the perfect occasion to conduct such a study because the children would be in costume, making them more anonymous. When the children came to doors where they were greeted by

experimenters, they were told they could choose only one piece of candy. In some cases, the experimenter asked the children their names, while in other cases the children were allowed to remain anonymous. The experimenter would then leave the room, as though they had to go get something. Unseen observers took careful note of how the children responded: When alone, 7.5% took more than one piece of candy; when in groups, 20.8% took more than one piece! It was also interesting to observe that the children who remained anonymous stole more candy than did the children who gave out their names. De-individuation prompted many of the trick-or-treaters to go against what was socially acceptable and steal more candy.

Social Validation and Conformity or Groupthink

Anytime we find ourselves part of a group, we feel some susceptibility to peer pressure and/or the opinions of others in the group. The more esteem we feel for the group, the more their opinions matter to us, and therefore the more we feel pressured to align our own opinions with those of the group. Even if we don't really agree with the group, we will often go along with them so we are rewarded instead of punished, or liked instead of scorned.

In a way, this is an obvious observation. Anyone who has ever been to the movies knows that the size of the crowd in the theater has a big effect on how good the movie seems: The larger the crowd, the funnier the comedies are. The larger the crowd, the scarier the horror flick is. Consider the following other examples:

- Conforming because you believe everyone else is correct.
- Conforming because you fear the social rejection of not going along.
- Conforming simply because it's the norm.
- Conforming because of cultural influences.

Social Validation and Marketing

Certainly a huge part of advertising is to make a product seem very popular. Marketing professor Max Sutherland explained:

“The more a brand is advertised, the more popular and familiar it is perceived to be. We as consumers somehow infer that something is popular simply because it is advertised. When people are buying gifts for others, social proof is one of the most effective tactics that a salesclerk can use.”

Many salespeople find great success in telling clients that a particular product is their “best-selling” or “most popular” on hand because such a tactic increases the social validation of the product in the mind of the buyer. When customers feel like something is more popular, they spend more money to acquire it, even if there is no proof other than the salesperson’s word. So it is with advertising: Simply asserting that a product is in super high demand or that it is the most popular or fastest selling, etc., seems to provide proof enough! When consumers *think* a product is popular, that’s often all they need to go out and buy it.

The creation and use of social validation is rampant: Clubs make their spots look like “the place to be” by allowing huge waiting lines to congregate outside their facilities, even when the place is practically empty inside. Salespeople often recount the many other people who have purchased the item in question. Sales and motivation consultant, Cavett Robert, said it best when he stated: “Since 95% of the people are imitators and only 5% initiators, people are persuaded more by the actions of others than by any proof we can offer.”

Making Social Validation Work

The power of Social Validation can be used to your benefit in any persuasive situation. If your product or service is socially validated, people are most likely to use it or to switch over to it. People are always looking around and comparing themselves to see if they line up with everyone else. If they feel a discrepancy between where they are and where everyone else is, they will most likely conform to the group standard. Consider the following ways you can enhance the effects of social validation to your benefit:

1. The larger the group, the better.

The larger the group, the more people will conform. Social theory shows us that when a group grows, so does conformity to that group. How can you make your website part of a community?

2. The greater the familiarity, the better.

The more a person can identify with the group, the more that person will be influenced to change their behavior and/or opinions. Social validation is more powerful when we observe people we consider to be just like us. How can you attract people to your website that are all similar?

3. The clearer the principle of social validation, the better.

Find the best use of social validation on your website. Is it the best selling, the most popular, used by the elite, the fastest growing? Is it part of a trend or is it the industry standard? Who uses it? Do you have testimonials from other clients or users?

Law of Social Validation Questions

We are social animals. We all have an innate desire to belong to the social group. Because we value this belonging so highly, the more people find an idea, trend, or position appealing or correct, the more correct that idea becomes in our own minds. The Law of Social Validation recognizes and builds upon our innate desire to be part of the main group. It also recognizes that we tend to change our perceptions, opinions, and behaviors in ways that are consistent with group norms.

1. How can you create more social validation and proof on your website?
2. We feel validation when we see others do what we want to do. How can you develop that validation and proof on your website community?

3. Why and how will your internet audience conform to the social norm of your website?

4. Which of the following can help increase your web social validation? Why?

Conforming because you believe everyone else is correct.

Conforming because you fear the social rejection of not going along.

Conforming simply because it's the norm.

Conforming because of cultural influences.

5. What can you do to make your product, service, and website:

Popular

Best-Selling

A Trend

In High Demand

6. What can you do to make your product, service, and website:

The Norm

Industry Standard

7. The power of Social Validation can be used to your benefit. When your website is socially validated, people are most likely to use or switch to your product or service. People are always looking around the web and comparing to see if they line up with everyone else. If they feel a discrepancy between where they are and where everyone else is, they will most likely conform to the group standard. Brainstorm the following ways you can enhance the effects of social validation:

The larger the group, the better.

The greater the familiarity, the better.

The clearer the principle of social validation, the better.

8. How can you help your audience identify with your product, service, and website?

9. Think of three relevant examples about your product or service that will create social validation on your website.

10. Gather and post 20 testimonials on your website to create powerful social validation.