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MichaelAaron: [00:00:00] Welcome back to Behavioral Science for Brands, a podcast where we bridge the gap between academics and practical marketing. Every week, Richard and I sit down and go deep behind some of America's most successful brands. I'm Michael Aaron Flicker.

Richard Shotton: And I'm Richard Shotton.

MichaelAaron: And today we're sitting with Steve Martin, an internationally recognized expert in influence and persuasion and CEO of influence at Work uk.

Let's get into it. So Steve, welcome to Behavioral Science for Brands. Richard and I, as we were talking about before the show started, are on a little hunt, a little mission to bring behavioral science to the world of American marketers. And we're thrilled to have you on the show today. But before we get into our conversation, if you'll indulge me, let me give the listeners a little bit of background on you.

So don't blush while I do this but you are. [00:01:00] Speeding authority on the fields of influence and persuasion. Your co-author of a New York Times and Wall Street Journal bestseller. Yes. 50 Secrets from the Science of Persuasion which is sold over 1.5 million copies. And your most recent book, *messengers*, who we listen to.

Well, we don't. And why delves into the factors that make certain individuals more persuasive than others And beyond your writing you are a faculty director at the bi behavioral Science at Columbia Business School and a guest lecturer at Harvard London School of Economics. You are also the chair of the Global Association of Applied Behavioral Scientists.

And for those of our listeners. who May have not gotten the chance to look at your books yet. You are a regular contributor at the New York Times BBC and Harvard Business Review. And you also have a little column we were talking about that I'd love to [00:02:00] share more with our listeners during today's conversation.

Thanks for being with us today. Our listeners love stories, so maybe we could start with. Well, how did you get introduced to the world of influence, to the world of persuasion? Maybe you could just share with us how that all started.

Steve Martin: Sure. Well, first of all, thank you very much indeed for the very kind invitation to join you on your podcast.

It's a movement that I support. Consider me a fully paid up member. Now my story is steeped in good fortune and good timing. I Started out working in the corporate world. I worked for a big healthcare company and I was in one of those roles where, you know, you, you change roles every 12, 18 months. And I rapidly found myself in a position that I had really little experience or capability for.

And one of the roles that I was responsible for was our sales and marketing [00:03:00] effectiveness. And it struck me that we didn't really have any good playbook for how to do that well. But you know, I studied psychology. I read about Robert Cialdini's work and on a whim I contacted him and said, Hey look, you know, we've got this program of work.

I think you have some interesting insights that you could contribute to us. Do you consult, do you provide advice to commercial organizations? And I ended up speaking to one of his postdocs and the conversation over email. Went on for a couple of weeks and then a few weeks later I, I ended up speaking to the man himself.

We thought that we could do some work together. And then the company I was working for was acquired by another company and I dunno if you've ever been in that sort of situation before, but every project, every program stops. Yes. And what there we are thinking, well, we maybe had a good project going there and then nothing's gonna happen now for six [00:04:00] to 12 months.

And, , Cialdini said, well, look, you know. You seem to have an aptitude for this. This ability to take insights from academia, peer reviewed research, field studies, randomized controlled experiments, and look for the gold, connect the dots to the real world where it could be applied. You know, maybe we could do something broader together.

And that was in 2000, so it was 25 years ago. It was a very lucky moment for me. I ended up going over to the US. I trained with Bob, we. Work together. We've become very dear friends, pretty much family now, I guess in a way. And 25 years on, we're, we're still working together. We write together. He's long retired now.

But I've had the good fortune to kind of pick up the batter, if you like, and keep moving things on where where, where Bob took the influence research. So that's the story.

MichaelAaron: It's a lovely story and for some of our younger [00:05:00] listeners maybe something to pluck from what you've shared is. There's never a reason to not reach out, to put yourself out there and to make a chance because you never know if you're reaching someone at the other end of the line at a moment where there could be a connection, where there could be an opportunity.

I don't know if you've reflected on that in the last 25 years, but but for those listening there, there's, it, it, it's only luck. In that it, it was a chance that it, that the connection occurred. Everything else is your own good doing, isn't that right?

Steve Martin: Well, I have two stories to add to that. The first is this is gonna make me sound like a real humble bragger kind of name dropper, but it, I mean, it, it's just the case of a few years ago, I was fortunate enough to spend the day with Daniel Kahneman and we were walking on the South Bank in London.

It was the launch of the paperback of thinking fast and slow and we chatting away and. He was talking about success and I said, well, what's the [00:06:00] definition of success? And he said, well, success is a combination of two things talent and good luck. And I said, well, that makes sense. I've had my fair share of good luck.

I said, but what about supreme success? What about those people that are just like, not just successful, they are uber successful.

And he turned around and he looked at me and he went, they have more luck. And your point, I think about asking and not being, you know, scared about just picking up the phone to people.

Actually there's evidence for this. A good friend of mine, Vanessa Bohns at Cornell, she wrote the book you have more influence than you think, you know, primarily Muslim research. The fact that most of us underestimate the likelihood that if we do ask someone for something, they'll actually help us. We typically underestimate our ability by about half.

I think Vanessa's [00:07:00] advice is extraordinarily sensible and highly applicable. She, she basically says, look, I find it super helpful to go into situations with the mindset that they're going to say yes to me. And, and two things happen. Oftentimes, they do say yes to me and I find myself in less arguments.

Richard Shotton: Does she speculate as to why people underestimate?

Steve Martin: Yeah, there's, there's a couple of reasons. So the first is, is that we, we think about asking for help differently if we are the requester compared to if we are the person that's being asked. So when we think about, well, I'm gonna ask Michael to help me out here.

Maybe my mind goes to the thing. It might be the barrier to Michael helping, you know, Michael's a busy guy, you know, he is got lots of other things going on. He probably doesn't have the time. I don't want to kind of disturb him, so I'm gonna underestimate the likelihood he's actually gonna say yes, because I'm paying attention to all the kind of largely [00:08:00] economic costs that Michael is likely to incur if he says yes to me.

Of course, if someone asks you to do something, you're not necessarily paying attention to the economic aspects of that request. You are probably more minded to be thinking about the social costs. If you say no, you know, am I likely to come across as you know, someone that's unhelpful? Am I likely to be seen as someone that's distant disconnected if I say no?

And so you get this bizarre situation where the people that are doing the asking are underestimating. The likelihood yes is more likely to say yes. And so you get the situation where. Networking events don't happen. Those opportunities in business where a meaningful exchange could lead to something happen less often.

So I think Vanessa's right on the money you know, go into situations with that mindset of someone is probably gonna say yes to you. You might get yes more often, but you'll suddenly [00:09:00] be less argumentative. You'll be in situations where there's less conflict between you because. If you're gonna go into a situation thinking that somebody's gonna say no to you, it's almost like you are preparing the argument to overcome the objections, to kind of get over those barriers, and that seems to be disconnecting from a relationship perspective.

Michael Aaron: You know, what's lovely about this opening conversation is it's so much like all of our podcasts, which we look at a situation and we look at the academics behind it to uncover more of the human truth that exists. And Steve, you've just, you can naturally done that. What will, what we want for everyone to maybe take away from this in addition to Vanessa's recommendation that you should go, that you went through.

Is you can never know what the other side that you're requesting, what, how they've prioritized their, thinking into their response. [00:10:00] So being more open to asking and being more encouraged to go in and do it, it can only lead to better outcomes. I'm minded to agree with that. Yeah.

Thank you for sharing that. And so as we, as we, as we think about all the work that you've done, Steve, Richard and I were particularly drawn to your book *Messengers* because I. It has so much applicability to brand marketers and to those of us who are interested in growing healthy companies, growing healthy brands.

And when Richard and I were preparing for today's episode, we were talking about something you've said quite often that the Messenger is the message. Maybe you could just take a step back, tell us what you mean by that, and maybe tell us a little bit about, about the book overall and your thoughts on it.

Steve Martin: Well, sure. We have to start with Cialdini again. Robert Cialdini, who wrote the Bible on [00:11:00] social influence and specifically what you put into a message that is likely to influence the recipient, to say yes to it, to lead into it, to to trust it, to accept it. And there's no way I'm gonna write a book that trumps that one.

Joe Marks, who is one of our PhD students at the time was working for me at Influence at Work, and I would often find ourselves discussing over lunches and beers and things like this was a shift in society. This was around 20 16, 20 17, and we started to notice how often times it wasn't what was being said that seemed to carry sway, that seemed to connect with others.

There seemed to be something about who was saying it. What was really interesting was the number of examples that we could immediately come up with that demonstrated this perspective, and we've all [00:12:00] experienced it. By the way, you know, every one of your listeners, I'm sure will have had that situation, that experience where they've got into a room, they had an idea, a proposition, a presentation to make, and it's landed on.

Frustration will quickly turn to annoyance when a couple of days later someone else comes along with pretty much the same idea that you had. And when they present it, it's almost miraculously everyone says, this is the best idea ever. And if you think about that, that makes no sense. When you think about the content and the conduct of the message, because it's the same.

It must be something about who is saying it. And when you start to pay attention to things oftentimes what happens is it's all you see, you know, you look around and everything and you know, we start to see [00:13:00] examples of how is it our politicians can lie, yet they still listen to 'em, people take them credibly.

How is it that this idea manage to kind of get hundreds of millions of pounds or dollars in investment? And the idea sucks and other good ideas get largely ignored. And so Joe and I started to explore this idea that there must be something here in the psychology of influence and persuasion where it's not necessarily the features or the truth or wisdom of what is being said that causes it be to be successful.

It's something about the messenger that sent that message and the characteristics of those individuals. It seemed to have a big impact. And so, you know, we coin this term increasingly now we are living in a society where the messenger has become the message and we are paying less attention. We are scrutinizing less the relative truths and wisdoms [00:14:00] of what is being presented to us, and we're simply using the messenger status or connectedness.

As our, as our decision triggers, our well, if, you know, if Richard Shotton says it's true, then it absolutely needs to be true. And and that's helpful. It's easy. It makes decision making more efficient and effective. And of course, in the context of society, our politics and trust, it's absolutely disastrous.

MichaelAaron: .

Yeah, so, well, it's hard to hear you speak of this and not immediately go to as an American the political climate in early 2025. Regardless of the side of the spectrum that you're on. This is almost apolitical in terms of the party that you're in. But just the moment that we all seem to be in, in society I have a personal passion for politics. Steve, Richard knows this very deeply but we'll [00:15:00] keep on message and maybe we can do a separate episode about the impact of this thinking on politics. You've talked about how there's eight characteristics, sticks that we should look at, but they fall into two main buckets of horror.

Soft maybe you could talk about the split of these characteristics and how do we look through those hard and soft characteristics in understanding how in understanding this?

Steve Martin: Sure. Yeah. So you're exactly right. We largely categorize messengers and the likelihood that they are going to be heard, regardless of the truth or wisdom of what they are presenting in one or two ways.

Messages are. Essentially characterized by the fact that they are perceived by their audience to have some status over that audience. They are rich and famous, so that's, they have socioeconomic power or they're seen as [00:16:00] competent. They have instrumental value. They have an instructive ability that their audience do not have.

They could be dominant. So we know from the literature that there are certain characters in life that are just dispositionally dominant. They're *modus operandi*, if you like, in, in the world is to win to, to the, to the victor goes to the spoils and to hell with everyone else. And so they, they take this predominantly dominant position.

And in other instances we're influenced by the, the messenger that we just see as attractive to us, typically physically attractive to us. And so those four characteristics of socioeconomic position, dominance, competence, and physical attractiveness, all signal some status that that speaker, that Messenger has over the audience.

And that might require that audience to be more willing to accept and listen to what.

Now, that sounds Hard. That [00:17:00] sounds autocratic. That's not full picture of course, because those aren't the only messengers that we listen to. We also listen to messengers that are characterized by what we term as soft traits. The definition of a soft trait is a messenger who is able. To demonstrate they have not status over their audience, but a connectedness with their audience.

And these are typically signaled in one of four ways. They're seen to be warm, they are seen as vulnerable, they are seen to be trustworthy, or they are seen to be charismatic. So those are the kind of. Two broad categories of messengers and then the four hard and four soft traits. Of course, it's also important to point out here, but it's unlikely that it's any one single messenger trait that will essentially carry sway over all.

Audiences will often kind of pivot between [00:18:00] those different approaches of hard and soft, and certain contexts are gonna demand our likelihood to listen more to a, a status driven messenger over a connected one. In terms of the research and the work that Joe and I have actually done, we can largely account for the overwhelming majority of messengers who are heard in Society

we'll be drawing on one or more of those fundamental principles and traits.

Richard Shotton: Yeah, and I think it's that split into the eight characteristics that makes *Messenger* such a, a, a useful book. It's all very well and good to talk about the messenger effect and no.

The messenger can be more important than the message,

but it's then saying what characteristics lead to a persuasive messenger that makes it such a, such a practical book.

We're probably not gonna have time to go through all eight of those characteristics. And maybe, as you say, 'cause the hard ones still a little bit autocratic because focus on some of the, the, the softer part and one that I'm particularly interested [00:19:00] in. 'cause I think it's a challenge that both people have on a personal level, but also a commercial level is your point about trustworthiness.

Yeah. Brands and business always talk about, well, how can we be trusted? How can we be trustworthy? So could you elaborate on what makes for a, a trustworthy messenger?

Steve Martin: What I'd be happy to talk about trust, but also maybe talk about some of the misconceptions of trust as well. Because, you know, I'm calling in from central London, Oxford Circus is just down the road from me.

I reckon if I went out of the office now and just randomly went up to a hundred people in the street and asked them what trust meant to them, I'd likely get dozens of different definitions and answers. And so that's the starting point I think for, for studying trust, is that it means many things to different people.

We have a clear definition of what we mean by trust. Trust is essentially in our world how confident someone feels about predicting the future behavior of someone else. And that could be a really [00:20:00] helpful definition because

what it immediately signals is that trust has nothing to do with truth. You often find people say, well, you know, I, I trust this person.

'cause they, they tell the truth, you know, they're always straight with me. These kind of things. Well, those things might actually be true, but what is also true is we know, and we have got lots of data on this, both from the US and the UK and other democracies as well, is that our politicians can lie to us.

Clearly objectively telling mistruths and people's trust in them will often go up, not down. There's the first point about trust is trust has nothing to do with truth. Trust is essentially a risk, a future bet that we take on someone else's future behavior. And if, if I feel confident that I can predict how you are gonna behave in the future, Michael, I'm more likely to trust you.

That's the first thing. The second thing that I think is important to recognize is that we trust people and we [00:21:00] trust our brands, and we trust our institutions for different reasons. Sometimes we trust brands and companies and people because we see them as competent. They're like a safe pair of hands.

You know, we trust Amazon because we know that when we click that buy now button, that product is gonna be there within 24 hours. They tell us it's gonna be, and they deliver time and time again. So we, we trust them for their competence, but we often also trust people for their integrity or their benevolence.

We're probably less likely to trust Amazon for their integrity and their. It would be kind of important to trust your bank for their integrity or trust, you know, a, a brand for their benevolence. And so there are different ways in which we can demonstrate and we can measure trust. And there are different reasons why people will trust different brands and they're not always the same.

So it's, it's simpler.

Richard Shotton: I find that super useful, Steve, in the trade press, trust. It's defined, I think, or, or people maybe [00:22:00] never define it, but how they use it reflect a belief in, it's all about integrity. It's all about morals and ethics, and I think realizing that's half of it, but the other half or that, you know there, there's the integrity part, but the other half is competence.

That's another way to build trust. That's a really useful, I think split.

Steve Martin: I think it's a third of it, not even a half of it. Because you know, not only have we got integrity, we've got benevolence as well. But here's the other challenge that we find, and this is why I've got a whole team working on this now, is how do you know if you're trusted?

How do you know if people trust you? And there's the classic annual survey that comes out. And one of the things that I've noticed that brands and organizations be their governments, big companies, brands do, is they look at where they are on that list and they do. One of two things, which largely results in them doing nothing at all.

If you know these are the top 10 banks and my bank is in the top three, then happy days I don't have to do anything. If I'm in the bottom three, then maybe I might need [00:23:00] to start thinking about doing this. And if I'm in the middle, then I'm probably safe because you know, I'm not the worst. So, but the problem, the problem with ratings like that is they're founded on a simple question, which is, do you trust this brand?

Do you trust this person? Do you trust this? And because trust means so many different things to so many different people, I, I, I, I do have to question how reliable, you know, a simple rating question is. And so there are behavioral measures now, and you two as behavioral scientists will, I guess be kind of intrigued at this, but we can actually quantify trust and we can measure it and we can put specific metrics and numbers on a brand's perceived competence, integrity, and benevolence.

Perhaps arguably even more importantly, also say whether things that they are most trusted on actually matter the most to them. You know, you may be seen as highly competent, but actually one of the things that we recognize is that, you know, there's lots [00:24:00] of companies in industries that are seen as highly competent banks are largely in the main seen as mostly competence.

And so differentiations between competence in banks makes no meaningful difference at all. Doesn't matter how much they do trust and confidence, it's not gonna have any impact in terms of a market share or whatever outcome or metric they're looking for. And so diving deeper into these features of trust and having reliable measures and metrics that not only tell you how trusted you are, but actually what specifically you need to do as a brand to.

Maintain that trust or build it if you've lost it. That's, that's where the, the research is now going. That's super exciting.

Richard Shotton: Yeah.

I, I, I think you're right. The, the idea of being able to know how you can get someone to trust you, rather just trying to, you know, flail around, claiming that you're a trustworthy person.

One of the bits I've loved, that I've seen you discuss before is the, the stolen thunder effect [00:25:00] to this idea. If you admit that your argument isn't perfect, if you draw attention to a floor or your drawback, that can boost the trustworthiness and the trust of other messages. Could you talk a bit about what you know with the stolen thunder effect and, and how, how, how people can use that?

Steve Martin: Sure. And let's define it in a, in a number of ways. 'cause I think, you know, it's described, I've heard it described in a, a multiplicity of different ways, but generally speaking, the. The universal truth is, is that no one has any proposition point of view argument that is a hundred percent perfect and you know, every idea, every product, every proposition is gonna have its downsides and essentially one way in which messengers can increase their perceived trustworthiness.

And interestingly, their perceived competence as a, as a side effect of this as well, is to actually recognize that there are downsides to their proposition and actually present them first. [00:26:00] The best known cases that we actually have come from law. We know, for example, that attorneys, lawyers who point out flaws, drawbacks, weaknesses in the proposition, the case they're about to make, do two things.

Not only do they assign in that audience's mind greater credibility and trustworthiness to them as a communicator, but what they also do is they pull the rug from underneath. The opposition who are about to attack them on those weaknesses. In that instance, it, it, it acts in a zandar, Vander Linden. The kind of fake news guy over at Cambridge would describe this as an inoculation.

You know, in the same way as you're gonna shot, you are introducing, you know, a, an attenuated form of a virus to kind of protect you against being attacked. This happens in the same way that's your stolen thunder or your. Double-sided arguments approach there. [00:27:00]

Richard Shotton: And, and you mentioned the example of that being used in court cases.

Is that something you think could be used in commercial situations? Well, have you seen businesses employing this at, at, at scale?

Steve Martin: Well, yes, but, and, and actually you've cited nu numerous examples in your books as well, Richard. You know, the ugly is only skin deep from Volkswagen. Avis, you know, we're only number two, so we try harder.

L'Oreal we're expensive, but you are worth it. You know, each of those examples in the world of branding essentially is constructed in the same format. You take a a drawback or weakness, something you'll like to be attacked on and use it as a persuasive strength by presenting it first, usually. The transition is that word, but, and you know, with all our performance reviews where your manager turns around and says, you know, Michael, you did a pretty good job there, but you know what you're gonna have to pay attention to next.

Right? So there's a linguistic structure to it as [00:28:00] well. What's interesting, I, I wonder if in a world there we are so quick to judge whether or not there is any impact in a marketing perspective, a branded perspective. In terms of the relative potency of this approach, given that you know, we're not measuring our exposure to messages in absolute numbers anymore, we're actually measuring it in distance.

It's literally meters scrolled on a screen. Now, we don't measure influence in terms of oh thousand ads that you've seen in a day. We literally measure it in terms of of meters. And so if all you see is the weakness and you don't get the opportunity to say.

But, and then here, the upside, whether that

kind of scarcity of attention might make the execution of a strategy slightly more problematic in a, in a branding, in a, in a court of law, in a [00:29:00] debating society, in the house of laws or whatever the case may be.

Absolutely. It's still rings true. I do wonder about that. Maybe, maybe Richard and I, we should do some,

Richard Shotton: I think that's a fascinating question 'cause I think you could take it the other way around. Say. Start from that same premise of there is a scarce attention, there's phenomenal clutter. Well, you could say, we know that one of the surefire ways to grab Google's attention is to behave distinctively one rest back.

So if every other competitor is bragging and saying they're amazing, and not admitting those downsides that you mentioned, well, if you admit a flaw, you're distinctive. And that should increase noticeability. So you're right, there's a trade off it. It could increase the probability of being noticed, and that's a.

Phenomenal step forward in effectiveness of your messaging, but for that partial attention group. Well, yeah, that's a very fair point, that they only taken weakness and not the strength. That's not so good.

Steve Martin: Well, I've been doing this, I've been doing this for 25 years, and one thing I can tell you, regardless of the [00:30:00] relative effectiveness and on the balance of probability, I would always choose to do it rather than not do it.

But that doesn't make it any less.

Michael Aaron: And, and I would say for marketers who spend a lot of time saying, how do we stop you in the scroll? How do we pause your thumb in those meters and meters of scrolling? There's only so much there's only so much there's only so many tactics that one can use, and if the Von Roff effect or an unexpected message stops you in the scroll, then it gives you that introduction to deliver the full message.

So the challenge is how do brands break through? I. In the in, in the scroll. And what are the tactics that they can employ to do that? An unexpected admission of a flaw may be one of the ways to stop people in the scroll and get their attention to deliver the rest of your message,

Steve Martin: potentially. Yeah, I think I, I maintain that it's probably [00:31:00] still gonna be a hard sell.

Hey, Mr. Marketer or Mrs. Mark here, or Mr. Marketer, whatever it is these days. You know, billions of dollars spent moving your brand, getting your tone of voice right? You are positioning this, that and the other. And then the first thing we want you to do is admit a weakness about it. That's a pretty tough sale when people are scrolling, but I think there's a broader point and

that point about unexpectedness and particularly is a good, good attention grab.

But the reason why. It's a good attention grabber, and it's not for the reasons that people typically think. They go, oh, if I surprise people, I get into pause. Well, that might be true and you grab their attention. But here's the interesting thing

about unexpectedness and surprise, our brain doesn't have a way out of surprise and unexpectedness.

We don't have a, oh, when I first fear, this is what I do when I'm, [00:32:00] when I'm happy I act in this way. When I'm surprised, there's uncertainty when I'm. Experiencing something that's unexpected. I have no emotional response. I have nothing in my data bank to tell me what I should do. In the context of surprise, what surprise does is it opens the door and allows a brand, a marketer, a message to, to then say, now

you are surprised this is, or how you should think.

And that is real attribute of surprise and unexpectedness. Yes, it catches attention, but it

doesn't complete the answer. It, it, now you've got that attention, you know, your, your brain, your emotional reaction to surprise. There are no answers to that. You have to be told what to do in that instance. That's where I see the opportunity.

Richard Shotton: So you're saying the surprise creates a degree of malleability in the audience? That they're, there's an element of that people will be slightly [00:33:00] more. Persuadable, would that be, would that be the argument?

Steve Martin: Oh, yeah. Sounds slightly manipulative. They, their, their minds are open.

Richard Shotton: Yeah. Yeah. That, that's a more positive spin, right?

Steve Martin: That, yeah. And their minds are open to be directed in a certain channel or a certain way.

Richard Shotton: One of the things I've always loved about psychology and behavioral science is that there are many different ways to get a positive outcome. And it's up to communicators to pick which one, which one they use. So we've talked about surprise as an upside.

The other thing I found fascinating in Messengers was your argument that one way to build trustworthiness was through simple contact. So familiarity as being an another angle. Could you talk about how simple contact can build, build trustworthiness? What? What you meant by that?

Steve Martin: Yeah. So the way I describe trust is trust is a contact sport. Okay. It's hard to [00:34:00] understand and to recognize without really doing a lot of research and homework and spending lots of time and resources, it's hard to kind of come to an objective decision about who is competent, who has integrity, who demonstrates benevolence, these kind of things. And so we do what we all, you know, we all do the same thing, right?

We are faced now, with a situation where we are asked increasingly difficult to answer questions, and the one thing that we all do when we're faced with a difficult to answer question is we answer an easier one that no one asked. Okay? That's, that's, that's a way we do it so that, you know, do I, do I trust this person for their competence?

Well, I don't know about that, but what I do know is this, I've spent quite a bit of time with them recently and I've got a bit of contact with 'em, so there are what I. Almost kind of enablers of trust and, and the enablers. There's two of them. And they work regardless of the domain of trust that you are trying to elevate, whether it's competence, integrity, or [00:35:00] benevolence.

The first is frequency of contact. Okay? So hence my point that trust is a contact score. You know, others in psychology might regard that as kind of mere exposure effects, you know, just regularities and these kind of things. So, so that's one. The other though, which is really important for the maintenance of trust, is consistency of those effects.

So let's go back to where we were a few moments ago talking about, you know, why is it that people can lie and their trust actually goes up in some groups? We've got really good data on this, so we know, you know, the, the us for example one well known broad sheet. In the US actually had a totalizer of lies that a president made over the course of his term.

I think it was in the first term about 33,000. We're eight weeks in and counting at the moment on the, on the current one. But we have our own example of this in the United Kingdom. [00:36:00] So it seems without doubt that Boris Johnson, when he probed Parliament in October, 2019 lied to the Queen in order to kind of probe parliament.

And the surveys that we and others conducted afterwards. You know, when we asked people, you know, do you think he lied to the queen? 90 odd percent of the people said, yeah, absolutely he did. What was really interesting was the follow up question. '

cause we then asked, what has that done to your level of trust in the Prime Minister and the government?

And for half of the people it went up and we're like that head scratching moment. We say, hang on a minute, you've just told us that he lied. Now you are saying that your trust in him has got up and their answer was really instructive. They said yes. He told my lie, he told my truth, and that [00:37:00] I think is hugely illustrative of what's actually now happening and why trust.

I'm increasingly convinced is one of, if not the single most important thing to, to any institution, organization, or brand, which is we are in a society now

where we are not being asked to decide anymore. We're being asked to choose a side

and we now have data in our trust research that's actually showing that some people are choosing to just reject trust completely.

And just to say everyone's lying to me, I have no faith in anyone and in the latest research, so I'm pulling in from our office in London, we have a partnership here with MHP Group that run the trust analytics and polarized tracker With us, we do this every, every four months, we run it. We now have Michael and Richard really compelling [00:38:00] data that shows that close to three in 10 people in the uk.

Characterize themselves as a super distrust. They actively seek ways to distrust brands, institutions, organizations, and what's really fascinating about this group is they defy every lazy stereotype. They're not men 55 years of age that voted for Brexit that live in rural or northern communities that don't have degrees.

They are more likely to be Zoomers than they are boomers. They skew slightly more males versus female, but not too much. And they represent both sides of the political spectrum. They're just as likely to vote left as they are. Right. And what's really important about 'em and why they're so important to institutions and brands is they are loud, they have money and they have a [00:39:00] voice.

That's kind of super interesting to me, that trust is a fundamental it's a messenger trait. It's what we look to in, to determine how confident we feel in whether someone's gonna come through with their service, their product, their delivery, their promise, whatever the case may be. How we have close to a third of the electorate that are characterizing themselves as super distressors and

what's perhaps most relevant all to brand leaders and marketers is this is not a UK phenomena, it's a Western phenomenon.

So we are finding the same in the us, Holland, Germany, that's where we're at. It's, it's almost like we are in a society now where we're not dividing people on political affiliations. We have high trust people, we have low trust people. And if you're a brand that's trying to essentially present your product, your offering, your service to that kind of community, you need to build that into your thinking and understand.

What are they [00:40:00] gonna trust about you? Is it about your competence or is it about something else? That is kind of fascinating.

Richard Shotton: Guess there's two angles you could take. As a, as a, as a business. You could say, well, let's employ some of these tactics that Steve mentions, like frequency contact, admitting a floor, or you could say advertising communications that often to a weak force.

Let's ignore the super trust as if they're really cynical. One of the targeting metrics we should have is people who don't exhibit that characteristic, who are on the on, on the trust end. Do you think either of those could be a, a, a fair approach? Is there one that you would, or other ones that you would add in?

Steve Martin: I'm not sure. It is the honest answer. I, I can see some, I can see some upsides to both and I can see some downsides to them as well. You know, clearly the upsides of, well, let's employ some of these. Influence tactics to kind of see if we can mediate these, these challenges. The challenge with influence, of course and [00:41:00] the reason it's very different to persuasion, which is another thing that I think we often forget about, is that influence is about impact in the moment.

It's about the effect that a marketer, a message, an incentive, some external force can have on an individual or group in a specific moment in time. It causes them to change a decision act, these kind of things, right? And, and so short term, that could well be a good option, Richard, but that's very different to persuasion.

And persuasion is not an external change. Persuasion is all about interchange that occur within people over time. It's that difference between kind of changing behaviors and changing minds. It's a lot easier to change behavior than it is to change people's minds. And in some instances, and for some markets, you don't really care about changing people's minds.

You know, do you really care if the public love your product? If they just use shit loads of it? You don't. But what you're talking about in that other arena is, is that, you know, how do you change [00:42:00] the whole market? People are persuaded by. And in that instance you may actually have to make a decision and say, look, there are certain people that we're just not gonna be able to serve here.

There are certain people that just don't fit our profile and there's lots of tools and mosaics to be able to do that. And that might be an option as well. But I guess it's a super interesting question.

I don't have an adequate or helpful answer to it. Yeah. And it might well vary by product. Like if. Coca-Cola you can afford maybe just to ignore, hard to persuade groups. If you are the government and you want to get people vaccinated, you can't, you don't have that liberty. You know, you're gonna have to try and persuade and, and or influence that, that resting group.

Richard Shotton: Yeah. Or Or mandate.

Steve Martin: Yeah. Or mandate. Or mandate. Absolutely.

Richard Shotton: And the problem mandating is that there's already a third of the people in the country that are gonna go, well, they're making us [00:43:00] doing it now, and that's more evidence that I should not be trusting them. And I'll probably, you know, recruit more into my, my movement as a result of doing that as well. So there are no easy there May.

Steve Martin: Yeah.

MichaelAaron: And Steve, something you did not, you did not touch on that would be helpful to hear. This growth of super distressors, is it a growth over time that we're observing more and more are opting into this group? Or has it always been 30% in the Western world are super distrusted? So the, so the question is, is it growing over time? Is there a, is there any reason to believe it will slow down or stop growing this amount of people that are super distrust us?

Steve Martin: Yeah. So again, I do not have a definitive answer to that question, but here's what I can tell you that is definitive. All the time we've been measuring it. It's been growing. How much of it was in existence before we

[00:44:00] started measuring it? I have no idea. So whether it been on that kind of even trajectory and there's been a trend over. 15, 20, 30 years. But here's a

couple of things that I think can be quite instructive. It's not evidence, it's anecdote, and I'm always cautious about anecdotes, but these in particular seem to be quite, I think, instructive to us.

Let's take Net Zero as an example. So one of the things that we know from this group of super ERs, these three and 10. is that Five or six years ago, they would've seen net zero and climate and the opportunity, the environment as an aspiration, as inspiring. Now they see it as an imposition. That I think is instructive because what it's actually saying is, is that this is a group that is not only growing, it's a [00:45:00] group that's changing.

And here's a group that Some of them are democratically minded, they're young, they're smart, they have degrees, and they fall in they, they absolutely fall into that obvious stereotype of these are gonna be supporters, the environment of climate, they're gonna mobilize behind all these different kind of things. The fact that they've actually switched now and they're seeing it as an imposition, and I think there's certain things that have happened societally in these last 15, 20 years.

I have no doubt contributed to this. I the extent to which they have contributed and how much one thing has contributed versus another. I have no idea. But, you know, we started in the late 1990s to, you know, suggest that half of our 18-year-old should go to university because the promise is if you get a degree, you earn more [00:46:00] money, you know, you get a better job.

These kind of things. Well, there are people now that are saying, well, I'm sitting here unemployed. I've got a degree. There's someone that left school at 16 that's actually now got six or seven years of work experience is earning more than I, and I don't even actually have a job. So that, that there's a lie.

That's a promise that wasn't met. You know, the financial crisis of 2008 had a devastating effect as well. You know, you've got graduates that have got loans in the tens of thousands of pounds. You know, it costs now. Perhaps 500 times the amount to buy a house than it does a car, when usually it was 10 to one was the ratio.

So there's all these things that have actually, we've had 15 years of stagnation. In the West. We've had politicians that kind of, and leaders that lie to us, and we don't know the truth. We've had COVID. We've had lockdowns. There's a whole host of really destructive, huge societal, geopolitical events.

That of no doubt contributed the extent to which they [00:47:00] have that have created this. I don't know, but it's a kind of long way round of answering your question, Michael, which is actually saying, my hunch is,

and it is a hunch that it's a growing group. It's grown since we started measuring it. The extent to which it existed

before we measured.

I don't know, and maybe someone else was measuring it that I don't know about. In which case, call us and let us know. Yeah.

MichaelAaron: Always looking for that. I think the challenge for brand marketers is to appreciate that we exist beyond our brand, beyond even our category, and that we are delivering messages to humans who have other things on their mind and have other predispositions than just, do I wanna buy your mouthwash or do I wanna buy your candy bar?

And. The opportunity to one of the takeaways that I am having from our conversation, Steve, is that we have to be more students, more academically aware of the world around us and the people that we're, that we're talking to. If we [00:48:00] want our work to be effective, if we want for the things that we put into market, whether we're the brand owners of a Fortune 500 brand or we're a, a, a.

Single store on the corner of a neighborhood. How to make, how to be effective in our work goes beyond just the products that we're selling and the advertising we're doing. It goes to the ti, to the people that we're reaching out to and their mind states and what we, and where we're meeting them, where they are.

So I think that this is all very helpful to help expand our minds and think more broadly about how we can be effective with our influence and our persuasion.

Steve Martin: I Like , to summarise know your plate.

MichaelAaron: Yeah. Pithy and Smart, Steve. Thank you. Yeah, that's exactly it. So Steve, as we come to a close two things. Number one, could you just talk to us a for a minute about Influence at Work? This is the the show that you and Cialdini has [00:49:00] started together and a place that you're spending a lot of your energy and focus.

Can you just let everybody know what Influence At Work is focused on right now? And and if people want to know more. We'll put the website in the show notes. People can come and click, but can you just give us a little bit of a summary of what, where your focus is at Influence?

Steve Martin: Sure. It hasn't changed actually.

So 25 years we've been operating, we're a team of behavioral scientists led by Bob Cialdini and myself. I've got ridiculously smart, clever people. But what's really interesting about our people is that they're not just smart, they are applied. We have an impatience for a theory that has no meaningful applicability in the real world.

We also perhaps controversially don't describe ourselves as behavioral scientists. We describe ourselves as applied influence researchers. And what I mean by that is if you think about, and Richard, I'm sure rather hoping you'll agree with this, is that when you look at all the vast majority of successful applied behavioral science strategies, [00:50:00] I basically, it's basically influence because influence is everywhere.

You know, if you think about it. By every measure survey, whether you LinkedIn, Forbes, Harvard Business Review, and they say, what's the most important skill you need in your business? Influence is always in the top three. Last year was number one. This year it looks like it's gonna be number one again.

So if you have a situation or a challenge where you need to influence an outcome, whether it's a single person or in the case of some of the work we do in the environment in whole countries and societies, it might be millions of people. How do you do that? How do you do that effectively? How do you do that ethically?

And most importantly, how do you do it sustainably? So that's a big focus of our work. Another part of the work that we actually do is, and this is a difficult question to answer because you know, we're asked, well, you've written all the books, what influence, what's the antidote? What if I don't wanna be influenced?

What is the, yeah, what is the defense mechanism that, and you know, in certain instances, if you think. Online scams, financial [00:51:00] fraud, these kind of things where, you know, unethical agents are actually using these insights against us to kind of defraud us, steal our money, these kind of things. That's a big focus of, of, of workforce.

And primarily at the moment I'm kind of a obsessed with this kind of truth and super distrust, the stuff. The other thing that I'm really focused on is, is how, and our organization is not how we can have impact in the moment. How do we make change last? So it's the persistence of influence and persuasion.

Just the, the momentary impact and lots of opportunities to do that at the moment, particularly in things like sustainability environments where, you know, our work is actually touching millions of people in that instance. So that's what we do and it's cool. And I don't think I'm gonna be retiring anytime soon. It's, it's too fascinating, too enjoyable.

MichaelAaron: Well, Steve, we can't thank you enough for spending time with us today. I think we, there was so many topics we could [00:52:00] make a whole nother episode on just to go deeper on some of the things we touched, but it gave our listeners a broad sense of your work and where they can go to learn more.

Richard and I, as we always do, we'll drop down a lot of the topics today into the show notes so people can go deeper. We thank you for spending time with us for our listeners. If you found today's conversation interesting and insightful, please give a like and follow, and of course share this episode with others who are passionate about influence, persuasion, behavioral science.

Until next time, I'm Michael Aaron Flicker.

Richard Shotton: And I'm Richard Schon.

MichaelAaron: Thanks for listening.

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