



## 7 Secrets of Persuasion

Leading-Edge Neuromarketing Techniques to Influence Anyone

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### Rating

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8 Style

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### Take-Aways

- People think two ways: they use a largely “nonconscious” automatic mental system and a more deliberate, conscious system.
- Consciousness may not play a pivotal role in choice.
- To be persuasive, work with the lizard facet of people’s minds by applying the “seven secrets of persuasion”:
- “Speak the language of the lizard.” Use the lizard mind’s terminology and syntax.
- “Aim at the act, not the attitude.” Seek to change how people act, not what they want.
- Instead of trying to change desires, “fulfill them.” Help the lizard get what it wants.
- “Never ask, unearth.” Learn why people who do as you wish make that choice.
- “Focus on feeling.” Emotions are vital in well thought-out decision-making.
- “Create experience with expectation.” If you can change what people believe will happen, you can change what they experience when it does.
- “Add a little art.” How you communicate may matter more than what you say.

# Relevance

## What You Will Learn

In this summary, you will learn: 1) How the “conscious” and the “nonconscious” parts of the mind interact, 2) What crucial functions the nonconscious or “lizard” mind performs, and 3) How to become more persuasive through understanding the lizard mind’s language and preferences.

## Review

To understand the art of persuasion, you can turn to cognitive science for guidance in dealing with the unconscious “lizard” mind. Advertising strategist James C. Crimmins investigates the cognitive science behind motivation to show you how to persuade others more effectively. The “automatic” part of the human mind – the lizard brain – affects many decisions. To persuade the lizard to cooperate, learn its language. To be persuasive, help it fulfill its desires. Crimmins explains how to unearth the lizard’s drives and change its expectations so they match the consumer’s experience of your message. Note that the way you convey a message may matter more than the message itself. *getAbstract* recommends this fascinating overview to marketing professionals and anyone seeking insight into how people think and what motivates them to act.

# Summary

*“Because our automatic, nonconscious mental system directs us to do what we enjoy, we pay a little more attention to messages we enjoy.”*

*“Choosing carrots instead of a candy bar can contribute to weight loss. But weight loss is a long way off. Right now, a candy bar will taste better than carrots.”*

## Understanding the “Lizard” Mind

To persuade people, you need to understand how the mind works, whether you’re asking consumers to choose a certain mobile phone, shun junk food or support your candidate. In the past, scientists believed people made choices consciously. However, cognitive science now indicates that the unconscious mind plays a pivotal role in decision making.

People use two different methods of thinking: an almost instinctive approach that remains largely “nonconscious” and a more deliberate “conscious” approach. The nonconscious or “automatic” part of the mind affects many decisions. Experts refer to this aspect of the brain as the “lizard inside.” The conscious mind has limited processing capabilities. The lizard – “automatic, nonconscious mental system” – has almost limitless capabilities. Your unconscious lizard mind could have 25,000 times more capacity than your reflective, conscious mental system.

You use the conscious part of your brain for activities that evolution didn’t prepare you to carry out, such as “dieting, calculus and science.” The lizard does what evolution primed it to do in order to keep you alive, such as ensuring blood circulation, breathing and digestion. To persuade people, address the lizard facet of their minds by applying the “seven secrets of persuasion”:

### Secret 1: “Speak the Language of the Lizard”

To impress the lizard mind, use its terminology and syntax in these areas:

- **“Mental availability”** – The lizard mind tends to highlight objects and people it can remember quickly. Cognitive science experts Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky suggest that the lizard mind uses shortcuts. It focuses on and judges as superior whatever it recalls most easily. Politicians and marketers rely on the power of iteration: The more often people hear something, the greater their willingness to accept it.

*“A persuasion attempt becomes more powerful when we focus on feeling and transform a reward that is delayed, uncertain and rational into one which is immediate, certain and emotional.”*

*“Show people that your recommended option is the best path to what they already desire.”*

*“Symbols, through the power of association, inspire soldiers to risk their lives, incite religious conflict and build commercial empires.”*

*“Unless the target is physically deprived – hungry, thirsty, sleepy, and so on – emotional rewards are often more motivating than physical rewards.”*

- **“Association”** – When you think of an idea, your mind links it with other thoughts, which in turn call up associated thoughts. You can’t prevent this association, but you can modify it. Seeing your nation’s flag evokes a number of emotions, and few people will have the same ones. Because such symbols have the ability to evoke a range of associations, they can cause people to risk their lives for a cause.
- **“Action”** – The automatic mind considers actions, not motivation. People assess others based on what they do. For instance, if a law student defends racial discrimination in an assigned classroom exercise, this association with that point of view will taint other students’ perception of his or her character. Psychologists call this phenomenon “the fundamental attribution error.” Toward the end of the 1980s, The Limited retail clothing company bought Abercrombie & Fitch, which sold sporting goods. To make the brand more upmarket, The Limited redesigned Abercrombie & Fitch stores to communicate a new sense of fashion; in time consumers came to see the brand as fashionable.
- **“Emotion”** – The lizard uses feelings to express what it wants – whether approval or disapproval, fear or joy. If you think favorably of an idea, you’ll conclude that it’s a good idea even if you lack evidence to bolster your preferences. If you don’t like something, you can generate reasons why. As a result, you may see the world as more manageable and easy to understand than you should.
- **“The preferences and behavior of others”** – Other people’s preferences strongly affect the lizard mind. Human beings love to emulate others. For example, females of many animal species tend to prefer a male that already has a mate. People use other people’s choices to form their own tastes and to evaluate something they’ve already done.

To increase the attractiveness of your brand, maintain its uniqueness. A leading brand promises to provide something people want. For instance, many people like seeing themselves as athletic, so Nike and Gatorade help them bolster that self-image. If these two brands “watered down their athletic drive,” most of their buyers would feel shortchanged.

### **Secret 2: “Aim at the Act, Not the Attitude”**

Persuasion seeks to change how people act. If you want to change people’s actions, you might think you need to change some of their attitudes first, but with effective persuasion, you can change people’s behaviors in ways that don’t conflict with their deeply seated beliefs. For instance, you may have little chance of convincing your spouse not to eat junk food. But if you provide enough healthy food, he or she will have little inclination to eat unhealthy food.

If you get someone to change his or her actions, your persuasion has succeeded no matter what the person continues to believe. In fact, changing people’s actions is easier than changing their attitudes. “When you change the act, there is a good chance you will affect the attitude,” but “when you change the attitude, there is a good chance you will not affect the act.” Conventional wisdom suggests that people’s behaviors originate from their intrinsic values and preferences. But most people react without deep deliberate thought about the way events unfold around them. So if the environment changes, people can alter how they act and still retain their old attitudes.

Causation is another reason to focus on what people do, not what they believe. Researchers who studied whether behavior causes attitude or vice versa found that causation runs from actions to belief, rather than the other way around. No strong correlation emerges between changes in attitude and changes in activity. Yet, the link in the way people’s actions affect their thinking is stronger. When people act in conflict with their beliefs, they tend to modify what they believe.

*“What springs easily to mind, whether it is people, phrases, ideas or products, will be more liked, more believed and more influential in our behavior.”*

*“The reflective, conscious mental system has limited capacity, whereas the automatic, nonconscious mental system has enormous capacity.”*

*“The lizard...has a strong preference for immediate and certain rewards.”*

*“Our automatic, nonconscious mental system has access to far more information than our reflective system, and our automatic system is quite skilled at interpreting that information.”*

You may decide to try to affect a single stage of activity in your strategy rather than shooting directly for your final goal. For instance, Microsoft gave away its Windows 10 operating system to anyone who had Windows 7 or 8. That made its users less likely to defect to Mac computers. And, users who feel better disposed toward Microsoft might buy other Microsoft products.

### **Secret 3: “Don’t Change Desires, Fulfill Them”**

Most people think persuading someone means changing their preferences. The lizard mind doesn’t want to change what it desires. Instead, for your persuasive efforts to work, try to show the lizard the best way to get what it wants. For example, when you want to buy a car, you create a list of prospective cars you might want, research these cars and their capacities, talk to people who know about cars, compare various cars, visit a showroom, test drive cars, negotiate a price, and buy a car. If you understand why many prospects drop out of the car-buying process along the way, then you can discover possible strategies for affecting their choices.

When buying cars, men typically want a thrill. Women value security. To sell a Volvo to a man, show how thrilling driving it can be. You don’t need to change what men want in a car. Marketers often offer conservative incentives. Think about how the lizard wants its life to go and offer that.

Choose something most people want as an incentive. “Who doesn’t want to be seen by others as sophisticated, as smart, as healthy, as a good parent?” Offer positive encouragement, such as promising that an action will inspire other people’s admiration.

Psychologist Abraham Maslow established a hierarchical ranking of human desires. He placed physiological needs like food and sleep at the bottom and self-actualization needs at the top. Anthropologist Donald E. Brown examined a number of cultures to identify common human behaviors. By looking at Maslow’s classification of needs and Brown’s “list of human universals” or “universal desires,” you can derive powerful incentives to use in your persuasion attempts.

### **Secret 4: “Never Ask, Unearth”**

Find out what the people who already act as you want them to act associate with the decision to act that way. Discover the answer with basic research, either informal or formal. Decide whether the same association would also motivate your persuasion “target.” If so, build the association.

The way people act affects their brains, yet the conscious mind remains ignorant of this interaction. If you ask people why they’ve done something, they might not know, and yet they might answer and point you in the wrong direction. To gain a better understanding of why people act, approach the subject obliquely. Do background research. Speak to people who do what you hope more people will do. Request their opinions of the option you like, but don’t ask why they pursue that action.

This will give you a better sense of people’s motivation than you’d get if you asked them directly. Examine the satisfaction people gain from the action you want them to take. If you think others could feel the same way, build an association between the action and the outcome. If you feel that might not work, look for other ways to make people feel satisfied with the desired action.

*“If we expect voting to be a little more fulfilling, it will. If we expect driving a Mustang to be a little more thrilling, it will. If we expect using public transportation to be a little more enjoyable, it will.”*

*“Repetition and familiarity breed acceptance. As [Daniel] Kahneman said, ‘A reliable way to make people believe in falsehoods is frequent repetition, because familiarity is not easily distinguished from truth.’”*

*“People don’t know the answer, but they think they do. Bad information is worse than no information.”*

### **Secret 5: “Focus on Feeling”**

Emotions play a vital role in well thought-out decisions. Most discussions on human preferences focus on attributes like price, the traits of the item being sold or its emotional impact. To persuade, examine how these attributes make people feel. The lizard mind reacts to the feelings an attribute evokes not the attribute itself. When you focus on feelings, you offer an emotional prize instead of a rational justification for the buyer’s action. This works better because “facts won’t alter an emotional choice.”

### **Secret 6: “Create Experience with Expectation”**

When you expect to experience something a certain way, your expectation shapes the experience. So if you can change what people believe will happen, you can change what they experience when it does, even if the experience shifts only marginally. For example, experimenters gave children identical carrots, but some bore labels from McDonald’s and the rest had no labels. The children reported that the carrots – and almost anything else labeled McDonald’s – tasted better.

### **Secret 7: “Add a Little Art”**

The words you say to persuade may be less important to your listeners than how you say them. As you transmit information, your communication mode plays a more important role than the content of your message. Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, co-authors of *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, suggest that every time you engage in a conversation, you make a commitment to the other person. You pledge that the other person will benefit from hearing what you’re saying. The lizard mind expects that specific benefit and will be unhappy if you don’t deliver it. To increase the persuasive impact of your message, leave out whatever the recipients can fill in themselves. You insult people if you spoon-feed them when you communicate. If you let them fill in parts of what you want them to understand, they’ll feel happier and more ready to accept your message.

### **“Personal Persuasion”**

You can use persuasion techniques to try to change the behavior of millions of consumers, a small group or one person. The same techniques apply in all three cases because the lizard brain controls behavior in each instance. You might have to vary your emphasis, but if you can persuade 20% of a large number of people to do something, you’ve done an extraordinary job. It doesn’t matter if you fail to convince a few individuals. If you’re selling to individuals or small groups, reaching each person becomes more important. You want to help each one feel the way he or she wants to feel about.

When you try to persuade people close to you that they need to change a behavior, you’ll often spark emotional resistance. Your friend may see your behavior as criticism. Try to change what people do, not how they think, by helping the lizard mind fulfill its wishes. Most people define persuasion as the art of using logic to appeal to other people’s good sense. Using logic doesn’t work when the lizard mind is in control. You can get the lizard to accept what you say only if you use its syntax and show it how it to get what it wants.

## About the Author

A sociologist and statistician by training, **James C. Crimmins**, PhD, worked for 27 years as a strategist with Needham, Harper & Steers and DDB Worldwide, working with such brands as Budweiser and McDonald’s. He also taught integrated marketing communication at Northwestern University’s Medill School.