



UNTANGLING THE OPPRESSIVE ROOTS OF ONLINE MARKETING

RECIPROCITY

1. Learning Objective

In this 5-day intensive, we're reviewing social triggers one-by-one because the persuasion marketing/content marketing framework they are enmeshed in was developed by The Usual Suspects (cis straight white men) who, because of their privilege, do not attend to the inequitable bias and social consequences baked into their assumptions and tactics.

That means as culture making marketers, we have to question everything.

Today, in Day 2 of our intensive, we're questioning the social trigger of Reciprocity.

The entire framework of content-marketing or gift-marketing is based on the assumption that when people receive things for free, they feel obliged to reciprocate with a sale. The risk of misusing reciprocity (so that it disadvantages people rather than creates relationship and justice between the offerer and recipient) is acute.

So having more information about what reciprocity is and how it is used and misused will help us navigate deliberately away from abuse and towards justice.

2. What Reciprocity Is, and Persuasion Marketing Uses (and Abuses) Reciprocity

Reciprocity seems so lovely. You share, I share. You offer, I reciprocate. Fairness for all!

Reciprocity is fundamentally about justice. I'm talking about it like it's a concept, but it's a practice, and it's not something you have to consciously choose to do or rehearse. Reciprocity is ingrained so deeply into us that it's often automatic.

Some people talk about it like it's an engine or mental programming: once it's activated, the fairness dominoes automatically fall into sequence.

That's the thing about reciprocity: it's a sequence and it's automatic. Reflexive.

If someone offers us a gift, we feel compelled to accept it and compelled to reciprocate. If we either refuse the gift or fail to reciprocate, we feel deeply, viscerally uncomfortable. The reason? We've violated a social contract.

Our human social programming insists, on a subterranean, psychological level, that we participate in this sequence once it's activated.

That's why sometimes, instinctively, we want to refuse certain offerings or gifts. Because we don't want to be drawn into this particular dynamic with this particular person.

Still, we hesitate. Even if we don't want the gift, we'll accept it to avoid the visceral discomfort that comes with violating our social programming.

I'm saying social programming like it's nefarious, but again, reciprocity is about justice. It's a lever we've developed as communal animals to keep things fair and harmonious. That's why it feels so bad - awful - to deviate from it.

Dr. Robert Cialdini writes about reciprocity in his book *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*. He calls it one of the six persuasion principles. The people he calls "compliance professionals" strive to activate these persuasion sequences - our human, social programming towards cooperation, justice and harmony - in us in order to get us to comply with their interests and agenda. Compliance professionals are marketers, sales people, politicians, pick up artists, activists, parents, me. Anyone with an interest in changing people's minds or getting people to say yes and comply is a compliance professional.

We are all compliance professionals.

But some of us are predators and use persuasion to feed our pleasure and profits at the expense of other people and the social good.

(If you Google big name marketing gurus + Cialdini, you will find lots and lots of people praising his insights about persuasion and bragging about how they successfully apply these social triggers in their marketing.)

When it comes to reciprocity, a justice lever, some of us activate the need to reciprocate in order to disproportionately advantage ourselves over other people. We use the human instinct and social programming towards justice in order to construct an asymmetrical and unjust transaction.

And this gross abuse of our social justice programming is ubiquitous, online.

Jeff Walker, the author of *Launch*, for example, takes the six principles of persuasion mapped out by Cialdini and embeds them in his launch sequence - and, arguably, his model is the foundation of most online marketing **including the business models of many significant Female Lifestyle Empowerment Brands.**

Walker argues that reciprocity is a powerful "mental trigger" and therefore if you want to be successful as online entrepreneur, you need to activate it in your marketing.

Here's how you do it: offer lots of free content, instruction and gifts, including a bribe to sign up to your email list, and people will eventually feel obliged to reciprocate by buying your product.

I want to pause a moment a mark that. *Leveraging reciprocity is the foundation for all content marketing.*

And I am a content marketer.

Does this mean I now abandon content marketing?

I believe it's not such a stark choice. Just because a shovel was used for a nefarious purpose doesn't mean I must now oppose and avoid all shovels. In this case, it means I have to be careful about how I use a framework based on reciprocity. In other words, **I have to personally attend to the risk that my own content marketing could abuse reciprocity.**

To mediate that risk – a risk that's built into my choice of marketing framework – I have to return to the purpose of reciprocity: it's a justice and relationship-building lever in humans. Whenever I use it, I need to ask myself, *does this advance justice in this relationship and in our culture?* When the answer is no, I need to rethink my approach.

3. How The Abuse of Reciprocity Props Up Rape Culture

When someone offers you a gift to initiate a sales sequence, it is essential that resist your own compunction to reciprocate and carefully assess whether the outcome serves *both of you*. As Cialdini explains, when a compliance profession is attempting to oblige you into a transaction that is inequitable, it is essential that you reframe the

"gift". **It is not a gift; it is sales collateral.** It's no different than a brochure or a business card. If you accept it, you are *not* obliged to counter with a favour of your own because it is not a favour, it is a trigger.

Exploitative compliance professionals are ***trying to force you to receive***.

They know that once you receive a gift you will be triggered - compelled, viscerally, by your deep social programming and tendency towards justice - to offer your own gift in return.

This is what sexual predators and romantic con-men do, too. They love-bomb. They offer so much time, attention, affection and gifts that their prey - women and girls and vulnerable peoples - eventually feel obliged to reciprocate and give the exploiter what he has been grooming them to provide.

Obliged isn't quite the right word. It's deeper and more visceral than obligation.

Exploitative compliance professionals in marketing, sales and politics also **try to force you to receive** so you are compelled to reciprocate in a way that disproportionately serves them. Sexual predators, romantic con-men and pick-up artists **try to force vulnerable peoples to receive** so they are compelled to reciprocate.

Force you to receive.

This is what we need to scan for and counter, in both real relationship situations; the marketing directed at us; and the marketing we direct at others.

Once someone receives, they are in a sequence in which they will feel compelled to reciprocate.

I want to also pause to remind us that some of the people teaching us to market online got their start as professional pick up artists (or a wing woman to a pick up artist) who teach men how to profile and exploit women. Abusing social triggers for profit and pleasure is an acceptable part of their method.

When some people talk about the apparently essential nature of women (I will save my long-form comments about that for now but insert a loud harrumph here, ok?), they often say one of the characteristics of femininity is being receptive. In the most binary and simultaneously broadest caricature of masculinity and femininity, there are men and women; and men do and women receive.

In other words, men trigger the reciprocity sequence in women.

Men offer a gift so that women will reciprocate.

In this broad (and bullshit) interpretation of femininity, to be a woman is to be receptive.

To receive means being obliged - compelled by reciprocity AKA our deep social programming towards justice - to reciprocate.

And this equivalence - femininity means being receptive - means that when men offer women a gift, they are obliged to reciprocate whether they wanted that gift or not.

Consent and desire are irrelevant.

Entitlement and automatic obligation govern this sequence.

This is rape culture.

If we say there are only two genders and we construct one gender as innate receivers who are then obliged to reciprocate once the reciprocity sequence has been initiated, then men are entitled to extract offerings from women.

They initiate. Women receive and reciprocate whether they want to or not.

Smile! Looking goooooood, girl. Do you have a boyfriend? Why are you being so rude, I'm trying to give you a compliment. But I bought you dinner.

I believe it's essential for the safety and dignity of girls and women and marginalized peoples that we interrupt the association of being receptive with femininity and femininity with women.

When we counsel women and girls to be receptive, when we tell them *that's who they uniquely are, their role in our culture and their source of feminine power*, then we train them to comply with reciprocity sequences designed to harm them.

Let's return for a moment to the principle of reciprocity. Do Cialdini and Walker et al say that reciprocity *only* works on women, because women are innately receptive?

No.

They say it works on everyone and given the success of online marketers, this seems to be true.

All humans are receptive.

Receptive is not the same thing as feminine and feminine is not the same thing as women.

What happens though, is that girls and women and people who do not conform to the gender binary (and so can't be marked as men, with the protection that comes with that status) in our culture are marked as prey and so many of us - too many of us - have experienced gender-based violence and violation.

Being the target of exploitative transactions triggered by an abuse of reciprocity is unpleasant and dehumanizing for *anyone* but is especially familiar to and awful for trauma survivors.

Maybe that's why I viscerally recoil when I see online marketers exhorting people to evoke reciprocity and shower people with free gifts in order to extract sales. If there is no fairness and conscious choice and social good achieved by the transaction, then it feels like grooming to me.

And that's why, like Cialdini, I want us to understand how those levers and sequences are being deliberately triggered in us **and have the skills to recognized and resist them *when they are exploitative***.

I also want entrepreneurs, *especially those who sell to women and marginalized peoples*, to be very conscious and careful about how they use reciprocity in their marketing and sales - especially when they are high-risk transactions. As [Dr. Michelle Mazur](#), who taught persuasion at the university level, explained to me:

The six principles [of persuasion] do have a benefit to us. They help us make decisions quickly in low risk situations. Imagine if you had to go to the grocery store and thoughtfully choose which brand of coffee buy. It would suck the life out of you and you'd be mentally exhausted after each trip to the grocery store. **The real issue is that people are using these principles in HIGH risk situations** (big investments). [emphasis mine; from an email correspondence]

IF you're initiating a sequence that is low-risk, serves everybody in the transaction *and* the social good of harmony and fairness, then you're in integrity with the principle of reciprocity *which is fundamentally about justice*. **This is how reciprocity is supposed to function and there is no shame in that game.**

However when we use reciprocity in high-risk transactions to disadvantage people, especially marginalized peoples, we are undermining rather creating the conditions of collective empowerment.

When we use reciprocity to disadvantage the people acting in good faith with us and whom we claim to serve, we are contributing to the degradation of justice in our culture.

That's why we're investigating each of these social triggers one-by-one, so that we can be deliberate about how we use them and attend to the social impact we create with our choices.

4. Going Forward

Although the evangelists of social triggers use Cialdini's work on influence and persuasion to profile and disadvantage people, **Cialdini wrote his book in order to counter exploitative marketing**. He wanted us to read the book and realize how marketers and sales people were triggering these sequences in us - and, when it was dishonest or disadvantaging us, push back. Argue. Write letters protesting certain techniques and campaigns. Boycott. Unsubscribe.

Cialdini says he is a proponent of ethical marketing.

In my understanding of his work, he wants us to be conscious of how people try to manipulate us to serve their ends *without respect for our well-being or the social good*.

He worked as a consultant for a chain of hotels, for example, who wanted to reduce costs and environmental impact by asking guests to reuse their towels. They experimented with different methods. The rule of reciprocity suggests that in order to get guests to do a favour like this, the hotel needed to offer a gift first. To accomplish this first-offer that triggers the reciprocity sequence, the hotel made a donation to an environmental organization and then put a card in each room saying, roughly, *we're committed to reducing our environmental footprint by using less water, electricity and detergent. As a testament to our commitment, we made a donation to an environmental org and could you do us a favour? Please reuse your towels as it helps us saves money and recoup the cost of that donation. Plus it's good for our world!*

Guests started reusing their towels at a significantly higher rate. The hotel made the first offer: the donation. The guests reciprocated with a gift of their own: they reused their towels.

No doubt the hotel saved more money than they donated. But, arguably, **the guests were not disadvantaged** by this transaction *and* a social good - environmental

preservation - was served. The reciprocity sequence, which is meant to regulate social interactions and tilt them towards justice and the social good, was consistent and achieved its intent.

Reciprocity *can* be used in daily interactions and marketing to achieve positive ends. Persuasion is not inherently evil.

But when people are crowing about using reciprocity to trigger unconscious obligations that **primarily and disproportionately** serve their interests **without due consideration for the other party** and which is **inconsistent with the social good - justice!** - then that is a sign they are exploiters and predators and they need to be countered.

And we can counter it in our own marketing, too.

Interestingly, this is not necessarily a sacrifice. It doesn't mean we play small or get less results from our marketing. When I feel good about my marketing because it doesn't violate my principles and my social vision, then I market more, with more enthusiasm. So pruning my marketing of things I oppose doesn't mean I get less results or generate less influence. In fact, I become more effective. Doing it my way and deleting tactics that violated my soul meant that I wasn't swallowing my principles to market. When I had to swallow my principles I would inevitably retreat because I couldn't do it anymore. Now I feel good about the way I'm sharing my work and the marketing and selling infrastructure I've created, *so I use it*. I do it. As a result, I've made more of an impact, grown my reach and made more money in the last two years than I ever had in the previous seven years.

Here are some things that can help us use reciprocity in a way that's consistent with justice and the interests of the people we work with:

- Remember that we are all compliance professionals, which means we need to be very conscious and deliberate about how and why we're using reciprocity.
- Remember the high risk/low risk distinction and check to see if your own use of reciprocity is high risk or low risk for your audience and potential clients.
- Deliberately reframe everything you're "giving away". In fact, we're not giving anything away. We're trading ideas for attention so that we can book speaking gigs, secure new clients, sell books. Personally speaking, this can help us both be more strategic about what and how much we contribute so that we do not exhaust or sacrifice ourselves on the altar of community and do not feel exploited by our own content marketing. Casting the net wider, it can also help us attend to where we are in the power position so that we use that power carefully, not to disadvantage but to construct mutual gain with our clients and in our culture.
- Take a careful look at your own marketing. Where are you trading a "free" gift in your own marketing? Can you make it explicit & transparent so that people do not

feel obliged but understand the invisible contract they're consenting to? Can you make sure it's constructing mutual advantage? Are there tactics or trip wires that might need to be eliminated?

- To mediate the risk that you might be misusing reciprocity, remind yourself of the purpose of reciprocity: it's a justice and relationship-building lever in humans. Whenever you use it, ask yourself, *does this advance justice in this relationship and in our culture?* Apply that test.

Reading & References

Launch by Jeff Walker

Influence by Robert Cialdini

Technically Wrong by Sara Wachter-Boettcher

Dr. Michelle Mazur, <https://drmichellemazur.com>