

## THANK HEAVENS FOR WEAKNESSES

(Science proves that weaknesses can actually help you be more persuasive)

### TURNING WEAKNESSES INTO STRENGTHS

Do you have competitors? Do you find that they take great pleasure in poking holes in your arguments or finding creative ways to tell clients about your weaknesses (perceived or real)? Apple™ has raised this practice to an art form with the “cool” Apple Guy effortlessly lampooning the “not so cool” Microsoft™ PC Guy. The campaign is funny but the impact is serious.

Addressing weaknesses is often the difference between success and failure. Fortunately, extensive research has proven that communicating weaknesses effectively can actually help you be more persuasive and more successful. Microsoft™ PC Guy, pay close attention....

### IN LIFE, TIMING IS EVERYTHING

If you have a product, service, or idea that has both strengths and weaknesses (and let's face it, who doesn't?), when should you present the weaknesses — early in your presentation, or towards the end?

Many people tend to front-load their messages with the positives in order to get people moving in their direction. Only afterward do they “come clean” and reveal the drawbacks. That is a very human response but it turns out to be wrong.

According to Dr. Cialdini, the world's foremost expert on the science of persuasion, this is because “our audience doesn't necessarily believe the strongest arguments until we have demonstrated that we are *credible sources of information* and that those arguments are coming from someone who is indeed *expert and trustworthy*.”<sup>1</sup>

### CREDIBILITY FIRST

Dr. Cialdini has shown that persuasion is not just an art, it is a science. He has categorized the factors that enhance persuasion under six distinct principles. One of the principles is **Authority**, which states “people are more likely to follow a *credible authority*”. The credible authority possesses two attributes: expertise and trustworthiness. Unless both of these components are in place any effort to persuade will fall short. Revealing weakness upfront will significantly enhance your credentials as a credible authority. The following case studies show these findings in action.

## CASE 1: THE (FAVORABLE) VERDICT IS IN

In 1993, and again in 2003, social psychologist Kip Williams conducted experiments and found that “when a lawyer mentioned a weakness in his or her case before the opposing attorney mentioned it, jurors evaluated the admitting lawyer as more trustworthy and were more favourable to his overall case in their verdicts because of that perceived honesty.”<sup>2</sup> This persuasion technique is referred to as *Stealing Thunder*. Simply stated, Stealing Thunder is defined as revealing negative information about oneself before it is revealed or elicited by another person. *Research has proven that this significantly reduces the impact of the negative information.*<sup>3</sup>

## CASE 2: GETTING THE JOB

Let’s look at evidence of how this approach works in a business setting. It comes from a study that was done to investigate the effect of letters of recommendation on candidates for managerial jobs at Fortune 500 companies. In half the cases, the researcher sent letters that were uniformly positive containing no negative information about the candidate. In the other half, the researcher first mentioned a weakness in the candidate and then continued with positive remarks. *The letters with the weakness produced significantly more requests for an interview than the letters without.*<sup>4</sup>

As Dr. Cialdini will reveal in his forthcoming book, *Moments of Power*, admitting a weakness early on in your presentation creates a time when your strengths are “more deeply processed and believed.”

## CASE 3: FINDING YOUR “DREAM” HOME

Additional anecdotal evidence comes from the real estate market. As recently reported in the *New York Times* “in this down-turned market, as more houses stay unsold for longer and longer, a decidedly small niche has emerged in residential real estate marketing: accentuating the negative. Instead of highlighting a home’s attractive features, some sellers are going straight to the bad news, advertising houses as being ugly, having sinkholes or even smelling bad, with the thought that sellers who are forthcoming about a property’s flaws may attract more potential buyers.”<sup>5</sup>

## YOU DECIDE

The lesson is clear – your ability to persuade successfully is enhanced to the extent that you are willing to pro-actively address your weaknesses. It not only demonstrates that you are operating from a base of security, it also allows you to contextualize the weaknesses in your offering or argument. The research is clear: putting your worst foot forward leads to success – thank heavens for weaknesses!

## SOURCES:

<sup>1</sup> Excerpted from Dr. Cialdini's keynote address at the RSA (January 25, 2007)

<sup>2</sup> *Yes! 50 Scientifically Proven Ways to Be Persuasive* (Cialdini, Goldstein & Martin, Free Press, 2008)

<sup>3</sup> The Effects of Stealing Thunder in Criminal and Civil Trials (Williams, Bourgeois & Croyle, 1993) in [Law and Human Behavior](#) 17:597-609. See also: Stealing Thunder as a Courtroom Tactic Revisited: Processes and Boundaries (Williams, Case & Dolnik, 2003) in [Law and Human Behavior](#) 27:267-287.

<sup>4</sup> Excerpted from Dr. Cialdini's Keynote address at the RSA (January 25, 2007)

<sup>5</sup> New York Times "Accentuating the Negative" by Carla Baranauckas. Published: December 9, 2007.

*Heath Slawner, CMCT, is a training consultant and public speaker based in Montreal. He is the only professional in Canada certified by Dr. Cialdini to deliver the **Principles of Persuasion Workshop**. E-Mail: [heath@hrdpop.com](mailto:heath@hrdpop.com)*