

## **Sales Compliance Principles, Strategies and Tactics**

Social psychologists have undertaken considerable research into what causes “compliance”—creating what is generally referred to as compliance theory. This model describes why the selling skills covered in this text actually work. Compliance theory is at the heart of selling. If salespeople master basic tools for gaining compliance, they will be able to sell more.

**Definition: Compliance: The capacity to yield under an applied force.**  
**--Oxford Dictionary**

Humans are born with compliance traits programmed into their thinking. Compliance traits—or compliance principles— exist because they contribute to the survival and evolution of the species. There are at least eight compliance principles important to selling.

### **Authority**

The principle of authority states that people will generally follow the advice of someone who is recognized as having expertise or who holds an important position within a hierarchy (e.g. specialist, consultant). For instance, babies tend to respond favourably to (or comply with) loud, deep voices. This response has helped infants to survive. In the same way—perhaps as a result of the same programming—adults tend to comply with the suggestions of experts such as doctors, lawyers, and other professionals who are perceived as knowledgeable. We follow the advice of people we respect. Perceived authority elicits respect and, ultimately, compliance. For example, research shows that drivers are more likely to allow a jaywalker to pass in front of them if the person is dressed in a nurse’s uniform or a postal uniform than if he or she is dressed casually. For some reason, we perceive that a uniform projects authority. Similarly, when your customers perceive that you “know your stuff,” they will have more confidence in you.

- How effective are you at projecting competence or authority?
- Here are some things to consider:
- Does your business card show a title that projects expertise, seniority, or authority?
- Do you pay attention to your appearance?
- Do you know your products and services well?
- Do you help your customers solve problems and reach goals?
- If you have a lot of experience in your industry, do you mention it to your prospective customers?

### **Reciprocity**

Research indicates people feel inclined to reciprocate when someone does them a favour. This is a human tendency that is nurtured by parents and by society and contributes to the survival of the species. Reciprocity goes to the very core of the capitalistic spirit.

We adhere to the notions “give and you will receive,” “what goes around comes around,” and “scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours.” It is incumbent on us, therefore, to serve our established customers well and to act in their ultimate, long-term best interests in order to create and sustain this bond. By also going out of our way to bring value to potential new relationships, we create bonds that can eventually lead to new business. Note that reciprocity is used here to describe legitimate and legal activities, and does not mean bribery.

### **Rapport**

The principle of building rapport is based on the fact that we generally follow the advice of people we like. This derives from another ingrained human tendency: to assemble into clans or groups with shared values or missions. We are drawn to people with whom we have something in common (people who are like ourselves). The feeling between people that they hold things in common is known as commonality.

There are four accepted levels of commonality that salespeople can attempt to achieve.

- **Shared interest.** The first level concerns shared interest, which is generally arrived at by what is known as “small talk.” For example, at the outset of meetings with clients and prospects, salespeople will often spend time building rapport by discussing everything from the weather to last summer’s fishing trip. They do this to build a bond.
- **Style of speech.** The second way in which salespeople can build commonality is through their style of speech. If a customer perceives, consciously or unconsciously, that the salesperson speaks in the same way or uses the same jargon as he or she does, a bond is likely to be built between the two parties.
- **Mirroring posture.** The third way to establish conscious or unconscious feelings of commonality is by mirroring posture. The idea here is that people who stand, sit, or hold their bodies in similar ways will feel a kind of bond with one another.
- **Shared style of thinking.** The fourth (and most subtle) way to build rapport with customers is to share their style of thinking. If two people feel that they share similar perspectives, then they are likely to build a common bond.

### **Reason**

As a compliance principle, reason is based on our natural tendency to respond to requests that make sense. Why humans tend to comply with sensible arguments is virtually self-explanatory: we are motivated by survival and if a particular act helps us to survive, we will generally perform that act.

The challenge for salespeople in employing the compliance principle of reason is to ensure that their logical arguments are clear to the customer. The consultative selling process uses this principle very effectively.

### **Efficiency**

The principle of efficiency states that people tend to do things the easiest way possible. It goes hand in hand with the principle of reason. To use a simple example, let’s say that you want a chocolate bar. It’s rational for you to go to the nearest store to buy one. Going

to a store on the other side of town, however, would not be rational because it's not efficient.

Demonstrating to customers the efficiency of your product or service allows you to use the compliance trait of reason to gain agreement. Making something easy for the customer gains compliance.

### **Consistency**

As a rule, people behave consistently with their self-concepts, their previous behaviour, and commitments they have made. Salespeople should therefore remind customers how their product or service is congruent with the way the customers see themselves, how it is consistent with previous steps taken, and how it fulfills previously cited intentions and promises.

Animals in nature tend to behave in ways that follow how they've acted in the past, as long as that behaviour was not harmful. A moose in the forest takes the same path to the water's edge when it seeks a drink; this practice has been successful for the animal so far, so its continuation is sensible. For the same reason, humans tend to behave consistently. Life is somewhat easier when we do as we did before, or when we do as we intended or promised.

Of course, this is not to say that customers won't decide to break away from established patterns. Indeed, a customer's decision may be made just for the sake of change or because of other compliance phenomena. Sometimes it is simply the strongest impulse that wins.

On the other hand, the impulse to fulfill a commitment can be particularly strong. The clearer the commitment, the stronger the sense of urgency to fulfill it. By deliberately eliciting a commitment to proceed, salespeople aim to ensure that customers will be less likely to change their minds. A "wishy-washy" suggestion of intention, in contrast, provides little motivation to act, as we will see later.

Salespeople are using the consistency compliance principle when they find a way to remind customers of how they've continually satisfied their customers' needs. When salespeople behave consistently with their commitments, they also encourage (through the principle of reciprocity) their customers to act in kind.

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### **Social Evidence**

Research shows that people tend to do what others do, particularly if there is an element of envy at play. It is this principle that makes the use of testimonials and reference so effective.

### **Scarcity**

When something is in short supply or there is a chance that supply will run out, people have a tendency to want it more. Salespeople often use this principle legitimately. One example is the use of limited-time offers.

### **The Ethics of Compliance**

Various ethical issues arise when the tools or tactics employed to cause customer compliance are considered. An unethical salesperson, for instance, might make a false statement just to make a sale, even though it is counter to the best interests of the customer and the community.

This text assumes that salespeople will adhere to one of the basic rules of social and business protocol: be honest. For example, if it is clear to you that by telling customers your product is in short supply (compliance principle of scarcity) you will increase their interest in that product, then you are able to cause compliance simply by making the claim. Clearly, however, such a tactic should be used only if the claim is in fact true. Ultimately, the ethics of selling are left up to salespeople themselves, who are frequently faced with ethical dilemmas regarding what they say. Resolving these dilemmas is often simply a matter of telling the truth.

The following has been excerpted from CPSA's *Professional Selling* textbook.