

**Case Study: PR Principles of Volkswagen**

Cortina J. Caldwell

Full Sail University

### Abstract

The public relations' campaigns and strategies of Volkswagen are analyzed in order to compare tactics to various social, psychological and branding theories that are the underlying factors of buying decisions and brand loyalty. The *Six Universal Principles of Influence* were founded by Robert Cialdini, Professor Emeritus of Psychology & Marketing at Arizona State University. The principles aim to help professionals understand the motivating factors that result in buy-in from target audience(s). In today's world of media and public relations, online presence is vital for brand credibility and public communication. Father of the humanistic psychology movement, Abraham Maslow, studied and coined the concept that human development is the progression of the demonstration and meeting of various needs over the course of a lifetime. This progression are known today as 'Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs' and hold a respected place in the history of human development and psychology. The Asch Conformity Experiment, as series of studies originally performed by Solomon Asch, concluded that people sometimes yield to group based on a distortion of judgment; and people will distort their responses in order to avoid the discomfort of disagreeing. Al Duncan helps to identify the distinctions between persuasion and influence, which lead to the hypothesis that although persuasion is a part of influence, influence is not necessarily a part of persuasion. The examination and combination of all theories is needed for thorough investigation of media and effective public relations.

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### Introduction

Public relations is an art form that consists of knowledge on brand development; communications; and relationship building. Brand sustainability requires the foundation of knowledge about individual need, influence, persuasion and how to impact decision-making. In order to make the case for the work that public relations involves, an in depth examination of the Volkswagen brand ensued with critical connections to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs; Al Duncan's distinction of persuasion and influence; findings of the Asch Conformity Experiment; and Cialdini's Six Principles of Influence.

### Cialdini's Six Principles of Influence

Robert Cialdini, Professor Emeritus of Psychology & Marketing at Arizona State University, extracted *Six Universal Principles of Influence* from a two-year study that was purposed to research the underlying strategies that professions use to get the public to 'say yes'. The Principle of *Reciprocity* is the desire to give something back to once an initial investment has been made (i.e. the food sampling station in grocery stores; sample massages at shopping malls, etc.). The Principle of *Scarcity* is the desire to have things that you have less access to on a regular basis; connecting with those things that seem rare or uncommon. The Principle of *Commitment and Consistency* is the desire to be congruent with our internal values and what we've said we're going to do. The Principle of *Social Proof and Consensus* is the idea that people want to follow the lead of others that they are similar to socially. The Principle of *Authority* is the desire to be obedient and compliant with those that we see as authority figures and leaders. The Principle of

*Liking* is the desire to say ‘yes’ to those that we know and like; or the desire to have individuals like us based on our affirmative response.

In December 2012, a video of “The Piano Stairs” appeared on YouTube.com which was a staged PR event hosted by Volkswagen designed to prove that making things more ‘fun’ was a way to influence and change human behavior. In their experiment, they redesigned a regular set of subway stairs to mimic the look of a piano. As a result of their efforts, 66% more people than normal used the stairs rather than the convenient, adjacent escalator (Longlife Happyness, 2012). This social experiment is an example of Cialdini’s Principle of *Scarcity*, which is rooted in the idea that an opportunity or decision is more valuable because it is less common (Zimbardo, 2015, pg. 5). Volkswagen, a global brand and auto manufacturer based in Germany, often connects with consumers using authentic marketing that is relevant – ultimately influencing buying decisions for long-term brand loyalty. “The Piano Stairs” – a video product of a previous branding campaign of Volkswagen – shows that the lesser occurrence of a human-sized piano leading from the subway caused 66% more people than normal to decide to take the stairs as opposed to the more frequent escalator. The Volkswagen brand offers additional exhibitions of influence via the “Darth Vader” Super Bowl commercial, which is an example of the Principle of *Liking*; and the “Polo Dad” advertisement, which is an example of the Principle of *Social Proof*.

In the example of the “Darth Vader” Super Bowl commercial (Volkswagen-darth vader, 2011), a young child dressed like Darth Vader – a popular culture, mainstream character from the Star Wars saga – attempts to exert his control over various objects in the house by using only his hands. For the majority of the commercial, the child is

unsuccessful in his attempts to control things, until his father arrives. As his father pulls up in the family's Volkswagen Passat, he runs outside to give one last attempt at invoking his inner Darth Vader. The car starts just as he raises his hands, which unbeknownst to the child is happening because his father has pressed a button on the car remote from inside the start, and the child looks back toward his parents in a moment of awe and pride. The commercial comes to a close with this strategic display of the remote start feature on the Volkswagen Passat and a more subliminal message that the Volkswagen Passat should be the vehicle of choice for those that believe in 'the force' of Star Wars. For those die hard fans and loyal Star Wars viewers, this is a direct hit. In the example of the "Polo Dad" advertisement (Eastern Western Motor Group, 2012), we see the progressive timeline of the father-daughter relationship from birth. As a viewer, from the interactions between the two in the commercial, you get a deep sense of love, trust and security between the two of them. In a climactic moment in the commercial, as the daughter is packing to go off to college, she walks outside to find a Volkswagen Golf in the driveway. All is right with the world and the father is able to continue his care of his daughter in spite of her journeying away from home. For those watching the ad with father or daughter roles themselves, a deep sense of credibility for the Volkswagen brand is created and ultimately the viewers perceive that this vehicle would be a perfect gift from fathers who love their daughters.

### **Volkswagen's Online & Social Media Presence**

The online landscape is a critical indicator of credibility and communication for any brand seeking to connect with their publics of today. When using the search engine to find out more about the Volkswagen brand, the first site to appear (i.e. the most

optimized site) is <http://www.vw.com>, which is the consumer/retail site primarily used for purchasing a vehicle (Volkswagen, 2015). After a bit more research, the site for the German affiliate of the parent organization can be accessed at <http://www.volkswagenag.com>, which houses information on brands and products; innovation; sustainability and responsibility; investor relations; stock information; human resources; and press about the umbrella brand – Volkswagen Auto Group (Volkswagen Auto Group, 2015). On November 3<sup>rd</sup>, an official press release (Wolfsburg, 2015, pg. 1) regarding CO2 emissions reporting and investigations was issued by Volkswagen and as a result and once a visitor lands on the site, a notification pops up stating that the issue is undergoing resolve. Public reliance on information currently listed about CO2 emissions on the Volkswagen sites should be approached with due caution (Volkswagen Auto Group, 2015). The American affiliate of the parent organization can be accessed at <http://en.volkswagen.com>, which is where links to brand developments and active social media pages can be found (Volkswagen Das Auto, 2015).

As a global brand, Volkswagen recognizes the importance of connecting with consumers using authentic marketing that is relevant to the current times. For example, on Twitter Volkswagen often marks important national holidays or social markers (i.e. International Men’s Day, Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>, Halloween, Mother’s Day, etc) with a branded video or graphic to their 52,000 followers (Twitter, 2015). On the Volkswagen Facebook Page, the same graphics or videos that are used on Twitter are often shared at the same time to their 17 million fans (Facebook, 2015). Occasionally, the brand will maximize the Principle of *Social Proof and Consensus* by posting an invitation for fans to share stories, photos or moments with their personal Volkswagen (Zimbardo, 2015, pg. 3). In

addition to Facebook and Twitter, the brand also utilizes YouTube to share 1-2 minute videos that show how Volkswagen is a part of everyday living to its 49,000 subscribers (YouTube 2015); Instagram to post photos and videos (that have also been used on Facebook and Twitter) to its 98,000 followers (Instagram, 2015); and clustered boards on Pinterest to its 779 followers (Pinterest, 2015). All in all, Volkswagen has the power to both persuade (Duncan, 2006, pg. 1) and influence its combined total of 17,199,779 social media fans and followers on a global scale in spite of founding and continued roots in Germany.

### **Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs**

Abraham Maslow, American pioneer of the humanistic psychology movement, founded the hierarchy of needs as the socio-psychological evidence that every human being has a shared development toward inherent goodness (CounsellingResource, 2011). Maslow believed that people were inherently good and almost always achieved more than was originally was thought possible. In the hierarchy of needs, the progression of needs can only happen once the level prior has been fully met; they include: physiological; safety; love and belonging (intimacy); esteem; and self-actualization (CounsellingResource, 2011). According to Maslow's hierarchy, when we make decisions it is out of a demonstrated need. To connect this back to public relations – when brands engage the publics and potential buyers on an emotional level, there is a direct appeal and correlation to a personal need. Volkswagen appeals to physiological needs (as well as the need for intimacy) through the physical design of their vehicles by creating with bachelors, families, mothers and other buying groups in mind. Volkswagen appeals to the needs of safety by performing crash tests on all vehicles and ensuring all

information on emissions, recalls and new technologies remains transparent and accessible to the public. Volkswagen appeals to the need for esteem by maintaining a brand that is both credible and respected by critics and consumers alike. Finally, Volkswagen appeals to the need for self-actualization by facilitating ad campaigns that express the ownership of a Volkswagen as the ultimate decision to a more fulfilling life.

### **Asch Conformity Experiment**

The Asch Conformity experiment is a psychological experiment that displays the power of group influence in our ability to make decisions. The two major conclusions of the test were that: people sometimes yield to group based on a distortion of judgment; and people will distort their responses in order to avoid the discomfort of disagreeing. Volkswagen uses subliminal messages – often featuring well-known characters, locations and social cues – that send advertisement viewers the message that everyone else is consenting to buying and owning a Volkswagen, and they should too. Normative conformity states that we comply with the group to avoid the disapproval from others when we are deviant (Eqivideos, 2007), which is somewhat similar to the Principle of *Social Proof and Consensus* (Cialdini, 2011). Through review of Volkswagen’s public relations and media campaigns, there is direct evidence that the goal is for the brand to be considered socially acceptable and that if one wants to be a part of the “in crowd”, purchasing a Volkswagen is the way to achieve that goal.

### **Examining Persuasion & Influence**

According to Al Duncan, there are two distinct differences between persuasion and influence (2006). Influence views decision through the lens of cause, specifically



related to human change via behavior, attitude and belief. Persuasion views decision through the lens of emotion by which change happens through influencing the heart and mind. Persuasion is a part of influence, however, influence is not necessarily a part of persuasion (Duncan, 2006, pg. 1). Volkswagen's public relations campaigns attempt to change attitudes and behavior by persuading the publics that by purchasing one of their vehicles, they are investing in a brand of high integrity, environmental responsibility, safety, credibility and high social status. Videos and photos on their social media channels indicate that through the 'VW' emblem alone, the overarching expectation is that the audience would have high brand recognition (Twitter, 2015). Additionally, as Volkswagen attempts to reach a newer, younger demographic, bridges to relevancy can be crossed through the feature of other respected brands or storytelling with normal human milestones (i.e. parenthood, graduation, marriage, first date, etc). These strategies can be improved by creating more synergy with other brands and milestones through increased use of hashtags, endorsements and humor – all of which create a content feed and fan following so that they might then 'go viral' and reach a wider audience.

### **Conclusion – Overall Impression of Volkswagen PR**

Effective public relations is about the art of communicating and reaching target audience in order to build relationship, rather than simply share a message. Establishing and sustaining healthy relationships with the publics begins with the understanding of how decisions are made and what influences can help persuade toward the desired course of action. By further examining Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs; Al Duncan's distinction of persuasion and influence; findings of the Asch Conformity Experiment; and Cialdini's Six Principles of Influence – a clear conclusion can be drawn. Brands must first invest in

being clear on their positioning in the market in order to make the distinction between their model and those of competitors. From that point, authenticity can be established which will help establish appeal with the publics and influential leverage to sustain the mission and reach desired goals for the long-term.

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