

The Boring Truth About How To Get People To Do Things

“You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink.”

I’ll grant that this folk saying has some wisdom, but it doesn’t quite match my experience.

In my experience, you *can* make a horse drink. You just have to lead it to water at least several times until it finally gets the point.

I spend a lot of my time asking, pitching, selling, cajoling, and negotiating with people to do things differently or to help me get things done within the workplace. Within a startup company especially, knowing how to ask for help is an essential skill. There are few if any formal processes for getting help from other departments, so you have to really know how to sell to your coworkers.

What I’ve learned over the years is that you have to be a little pushy, and you have to be a little patient.* You might call this art “patience persuasion,” (oh, I do love me some paradoxes) though it’s basically what all salespeople have used for all time. It would just be really cool if all the rest of us used it for things, too. I have been on the giving and receiving end of this sort of persuasion strategy, and I am a believer.

Patience persuasion relies on two extraordinarily mundane and dirt-cheap things – reminders and time. Of course, this all assumes that you have a good reason to want someone to do something, and that you have clearly articulated how it is in their best interest to also do that thing. Don’t skimp here.

Be “pushy”*

Salespeople know that it can take many, many emails and phone calls and other reminders before a lead becomes a prospect and a prospect becomes a signed customer. Marketers also know that it takes multiple brand impressions and interactions before someone makes the decision to buy (just think about how many Coke ads you see).

Often enough, persistence is all it takes to get someone else (let’s call him/her your “prospect”) to do what you’re asking them to do.

Usually if you have your preliminaries down (a good pitch and a good value prop), the reasons people don’t take the action you want them to take are just matters of priority or even forgetfulness (in the age of internet distractions, forgetfulness is WAY more common than you might think).

Sometimes what they agree is a good idea gets lost in the mix, or it falls to the bottom of an inbox or a Slack channel or to-do list. Sometimes people get busy. Sometimes people procrastinate. Sometimes if you just mention the ask once, your prospect may not get that you really care that much about it.

You've got to remind them, and you have to remind them several times sometimes.

The key here is to not assume that a lack of action or response means outright rejection. And you should also not assume that you are being "pushy" by following up.

Just send a friendly reminder. Try to restate the request in new terms to give more or better reasoning for the request.

You'll often be surprised by how positive the response can be. What you imagined in your mind was a "pushy" reminder email can often be received as a welcome reminder of a good idea by your prospect.

Be patient

While you're being "pushy," it's quite important that you also be patient. You have to understand how people work, and you have to allow for their delays and doubts and forgetfulness and lack of understanding and distraction. Generally speaking, it's going to take more time and effort than you expect to persuade someone to get around to doing what you want them to do – and the initial agreement that "oh, this is a good idea" is less than half the battle.

Instead of letting the passage of time be a source of frustration, let it work in your favor. After all, time breaks down obstacles better than just about anything. An idea someone doesn't care to act upon one month may suddenly become worth doing when it comes up a few months later.

Sometimes an added straw breaks the camel's back, and after asking or making the case several times over a period of months or years, someone experiences a dramatic change of opinion. That's rarer, but it's a nice experience. And it does happen. Sometimes you just have to ask one more time.

Plan to be patient. Set reminders for yourself to follow up on conversations and asks. Don't put the burden on the other person to follow up. This is your responsibility, so play the long game.

I hope these tips help you as you go out to get things done with your teams and with your clients.

** Try not to actually be pushy, guys and gals.*