

Maximum Influence: The 12 Universal Laws of Power Persuasion by Kurt W. Mortensen

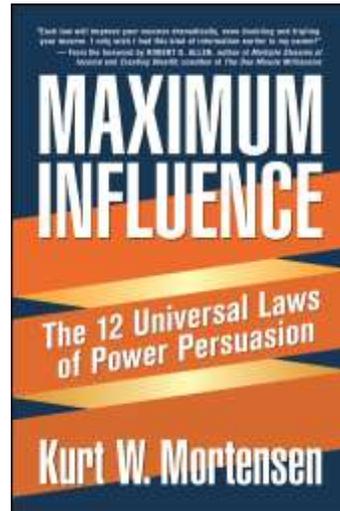


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Maximum Influence: Chapter 9

The Law of Contrast How to Create Extra Value

In the long run, men hit only what they aim at. Therefore . . .

they had better aim at something high. —HENRY DAVID THOREAU

HAVE YOU EVER TAKEN YOUR CAR to your mechanic and he tells you that you might need new brakes, a new transmission, a new fan belt, and that the timing sounds off? You go away thinking, "Oh man, I'm sunk. I might as well just buy a new car." Then when you come back, he tells you, "You just need new brakes." You feel as free as a lark, only having to pay \$300 for what could have been a \$3,000 repair job. Imagine if he had told you he thought he could fix it for \$50 and the bill ended up being \$500. That is the Law of Contrast in action.

The Law of Contrast explains how we are affected when we are introduced to two vastly different alternatives in succession. We know that contrasting two alternatives can distort or amplify our perceptions of things. Generally, if the second item is quite different from the first, we will tend to see them even more differently than they actually are. As a Master Persuader, you can use this contrast to steer your audience toward the object of your persuasion.

The use of contrast is based on our perception of items or events that happen one right after the other. If you've had a rotten day because you found out you're losing your job and you come home to a new scratch on your car, you will have a vastly different reaction than if you were having a great day because you're getting a promotion and then came home to the scratch on your car. It's the same scratch, but there are very different perceptions and reactions to it, depending on your personal circumstances.

Time can erode your ability to use the Law of Contrast. The key to this law is that the two contrasting items must be presented one right after the other. This has an effect on group meetings and decision making: If in a meeting you put forth your great idea right after another great idea, it won't have the impact it would have had if it had followed someone else's poor idea. Likewise, if we are talking to a beautiful woman or man at a party and we are then joined by an unattractive woman or man, the beautiful person will seem even more beautiful, and the less attractive person will seem even less attractive.

This is all about human perception. The human mind has to find a benchmark of comparison to make judgments, especially when we are talking about unfamiliar situations. People need to make comparisons with their past experience and knowledge. By presenting your prospects with contrast, you are creating those comparisons for them. The mind can't process everything at once and so it develops shortcuts to help make decisions. Instead of making a completely internal judgment, we look for boundaries, patterns, and polar opposites. We want to know the difference

between our options, so we naturally contrast the two items. We mentally place things in our mind from best to worst, first to last, or highest to lowest. Do you want your prospects to compare your product or service to a second-hand used car or to a Rolls Royce? You get to decide where you want them to start their benchmark.

When using the Law of Contrast, keep in mind the powerful differences between positive and negative information. Psychologists have asserted for years that people automatically and subconsciously have extremely high expectations for the good over the bad. Because of this consistent tendency, negative information, when it comes, always seems to be given considerable weight because it is such a jarring contrast to what was expected.¹ For example, have you ever had a salesperson get you all excited about some incredible product you were about to purchase? You're totally thrilled with all the things this product is going to do for you, and then BAM! The salesperson hits you with the ghastly price. Suddenly the hefty price tag, just one negative detail, outweighs the product's twenty terrific features. Negative information has taken precedence over all the positive information. In fact, now it's consuming your thoughts. You drive home able only to think about how the precious item is going to cost you an arm and a leg.

Contrast works in many arenas. You can contrast just about anything and immediately see its effects. Try this experiment: Fill three buckets with water, one with hot water, another with cold water, and the third with tepid water. Simultaneously soak one foot in the hot bucket and the other one in the cold bucket for thirty seconds. Now place both feet in the tepid bucket and you will be shocked with the results. The water in the third bucket is considered warm, but to the hot foot it feels cold and to the cold foot it feels hot. It is the same water but two completely different reactions. This is the Law of Contrast. Any product or service can be contrasted to appear very different from what it actually is.

Types of Contrast

Some examples of the Law of Contrast fit into different categories. Let's examine the relationship among these categories and look at some examples of each.

Sweetening the Pot: Triple the Value

"Sweetening the Pot" is a technique often used by salespeople to make the deal seem "sweeter" than it really is, that is, making the prospect believe they are getting an exceptionally good deal. What can you add on as an incentive? What can you give as a bonus? What do you have that will add value to your product or service? It could be an added feature, a larger discount, free delivery, gift-wrapping, batteries, an extended warranty, or free consulting. Whatever it is, use it to create and contrast a higher value.

Think about the last infomercial you saw on late-night TV. You watch the salespeople display and demonstrate the product and you start to get interested. You begin to think about how this product will really make your life easier. They have not told you the price, but when they finally

do, it is much higher than you thought. You were hoping to spend around \$99, but the announcer said it was \$499. Your heart drops but you keep watching because you are really getting into this product and how it will change your life forever.

Oh, now wait a minute—they are giving a special deal today. There is a temporary price reduction. This is your lucky day! Now they are offering it for \$297! It's a good deal, but still a little expensive. Wait, they are adding three additional items to the package, an added value of \$350. You can hardly believe it—you'll get over \$800 worth of products for only \$297. You are really interested now and you're just about ready to buy, when wait—it gets even better! If you order now, you can even make three easy payments of \$99 for the next three months. You can't believe your luck so you order right away.

You were thinking of spending only about \$99 and you ended up spending triple that amount—\$297 to be exact. Why? Because of the Law of Contrast, you were going to get over \$800 worth of product and the deal kept getting better. This law is critical for you to understand when showing others the value of your product. No one buys unless they feel like they are getting value for their money.

When you "sweeten the pot," you add bonus items to make the deal more and more valuable. We can all learn from the example of a high school bake sale: When the cashier told one group of customers they could purchase one cupcake and two cookies for a total cost of 75 cents, 40 percent of customers bought. The cashier then told another group of customers that they could purchase one cupcake for 75 cents. However, a few seconds later she added that because of a special they had going for that night, two more cookies would be thrown in as a bonus. By the end of the night, 70 percent of the customers purchased cupcakes and cookies when the "three for the price of one" technique was used, even though it was really the exact same deal.² It's all in the presentation—you have to "sweeten the pot"!

You see this technique used in supermarkets and in other advertisements when a company plans their packaging strategy to show the contrast between before and after prices. You may see diapers that have the "save 20 percent" slashed out and replaced with "save 30 percent." Or maybe their method is "buy five, and we'll give you another one free." It might also be that they have the 16 oz. slashed out and the new 20 oz. written in for the same price. Whatever the form it takes, this is an example of "sweetening the pot," the Law of Contrast in action. It isn't the actual price that is paid, but the add-ons that seem to make it such a better deal.

The same thing happens when an insurance sales rep presents you with the initial offer and then begins to give you special deductions based on your circumstances. Look, you are getting a better deal! If the opposite were to happen, you would feel cheated.

Put yourself in the mall candy store buying one pound of chocolate candy for your sweetheart. The young lady at the counter scoops up the chocolates and places it on the scale. She notices

she does not have enough and starts to add more. The other alternative is that she dumps all the chocolates on the scale and begins to take them away. Which one will leave you the most satisfied? In the first scenario, you would feel as if you were getting more and that the deal was being sweetened, whereas under the second set of circumstances you would feel like you were being robbed.

Reducing It to the Ridiculous: Create Perspective

This technique involves paring down your request to something that seems manageable to your prospect. Let's say you are trying to convince someone to purchase a life insurance policy. The client wants a \$250,000 policy and you feel that is not high enough for his needs. To adequately take care of his family, you suggest a \$500,000 policy. He feels that the monthly payment for a \$500,000 policy is too high. So you break it down for him, telling him that for an extra 50 cents a day, or the cost of a can of soda, he can insure himself and adequately take care of his family if something were to happen to him. With this contrast, your client can see that the extra 50 cents is worth it to have the extra \$250,000 in coverage. You have reframed your request into simple terms to help your prospect see it fitting into his way of life.

Shifting Focus

Sometimes it is a good idea to simply give your prospects a different frame of reference, or to merely shift their focus slightly. This is kind of the "glass is half full" idea. University of Iowa researchers Levin and Gaeth conducted a study where they gave samples of ground-beef burgers to two groups of tasters. The burgers were exactly the same, but one slight difference in advertising strategy was employed: One group was told the burgers were 75 percent lean, and the other group was told the burgers were 25 percent fat. The group that was told the burgers were 75 percent lean rated them significantly leaner, of higher quality, and better tasting than the 25 percent fat group who rated the burgers as fatty, greasy, and of low quality.³

In the following example, notice the two different ways the doctors present the patient with the diagnosis:

Doctor One: I hate to tell you this, but the tests confirmed that you have extremely high blood pressure. You are most likely going to face some serious complications, and it could turn into a life-threatening situation. You've got to make some dramatic changes in your lifestyle immediately. You need to change your work situation, your sleep patterns, how you eat, and your exercise program.

Doctor Two: Well, overall, you're in pretty good shape except your blood pressure is a little higher than we want it. I'm really glad you came in so we can work together on some preventative measures. Actually, there are millions of Americans who have high blood pressure too, so we know of some steps you can take to bring it back under control. If you follow the steps I'll outline, you will quickly see and feel an improvement in your health overall.

Both doctors were talking about the same thing, but their presentations were very different. Doctor Two made sure her delivery was positive and did not overload the patient with all the negative details all at once. The patient will need to understand the reality of the situation and all its implications, but an initial positive and general discussion will better prepare the patient emotionally and psychologically to properly deal with the issue.

A university in Colorado was having trouble getting their grass to grow on campus because the students kept walking on it. They tried placing signs on it that read, "Don't walk on the grass," but the students ignored the requests and walked on the grass anyway. The university subsequently took a different approach. They put up another sign that said, "Give Earth a Chance." Like magic, the students stopped walking on the grass. The university simply changed the perspective of its students by making the issue an environmental one.

One last example of shifting the frame of reference comes from an experimental questionnaire administered to physicians:

A group of physicians were posed with the following scenario: "Imagine the United States is preparing for the outbreak of an unusual Asian disease, which is expected to kill 600 people. Two alternative programs to combat the disease have been proposed. Assume that the exact scientific estimates of the programs' consequences are as follows: If program A is adopted, 200 people will be saved. If program B is adopted, there is a one-third probability that 600 people will be saved and a two-thirds probability that no people will be saved. Which of the two programs would you favor?" Notice that in the wording, the focus was on the "lives saved." Seventy-two percent of the physicians chose program A over program B.

The same experiment was conducted again with a different group of physicians. This time, the focus was on how many people would die: "Imagine that the United States is preparing for the outbreak of an unusual Asian disease, which is expected to kill 600 people. Two alternative programs to combat the disease have been proposed. Assume that the exact scientific estimates of the programs' consequences are as follows: If program A is adopted, 400 people will die. If program B is adopted, there is a one-third probability that nobody will die and a two-thirds probability that 600 people will die. Which of the two programs would you favor?" You can see that this scenario is exactly the same as the first, but there was a dramatic difference in the results. This time, with the shift in focus, 22 percent of the physicians voted for the more conservative plan, plan A, while 72 percent voted for the risky plan, plan B!⁴

Door-in-the-Face

"Door-in-the-face" is one of the most common techniques for implementing the Law of Contrast. Basically, an initially large and almost unreasonable request is made, likely to be declined—hence the "door-in-the-face" as the prospect rejects the proposal. Then a second smaller and more reasonable request is made. People accept the second request more readily than if they'd just been asked outright because the relativity between the two requests makes the second one

seems so much better. The technique is effective because social standards state each concession must be exchanged with another concession. When you allow a rejection, it is considered a concession. The person you are persuading will then feel obligated to agree with your smaller request.

Demonstrating this point, researchers first asked college students to donate blood every two months for three consecutive years. Requiring a long-term commitment of not only time, but also of physical and emotional responsibility, the request was overwhelmingly turned down. When a day later the same students were asked to donate blood just one time—on the following day—49 percent agreed. The control group, wherein students were only approached with the second request, only demonstrated a 31 percent compliance rate.

The study continued the next day. As students showed up to donate blood, they were asked if they would provide their phone numbers so they could be called to see if they'd donate again later on. Of the first group (those who'd been given both requests), 84 percent consented to giving their phone numbers. Of the students in the control group, only 43 percent agreed to give their phone numbers.⁵

The main reason the door-in-the-face technique is so effective is because the contrast between the two requests makes your prospects feel like they are getting more/or less than they would have if they'd gone with the original offering. They feel like they've made a fair compromise, while you get exactly what you wanted in the first place. Alan Schoonmaker, author of *Negotiate to Win: Gaining the Psychological Edge*, makes an especially interesting point:

A conservative first offer also creates the bargaining room needed for the mutual concession ritual (you give a little; they give a little; you give a little; and so on). You may regard this ritual as silly, but many people insist on it. If you do not perform it, they may feel you are not negotiating in good faith. . . . It is far better for them to feel that they have defeated you, that they have driven you right to the wall. Lay the foundation for their victory with an initial offer that creates lots of bargaining room."⁶

By way of example, pretend your local scout troop is canvassing door to door to ask for donations to the scouting program. They ask you to donate \$200, saying that all the other neighbors have donated this amount. After some discussion, the scouts ask for a \$50 donation. You feel relief and give them \$50—and you feel lucky that you got away with giving less than your neighbors.

In these examples, the second request seems much more logical and reasonable in comparison to the outrageous first request. We are creating a perceptual contrast whereby we are defining what we think the standard of comparison should be. When the second request comes along, it seems much smaller than the first request, and in our case, much smaller than the request would seem if presented alone.

In my university class, students learning about the Law of Contrast were asked to write letters to their parents requesting money. They were instructed to create a scenario so the request seemed inconsequential.

Dear Mom and Dad,

I hope this letter finds you both well and happy. I wish I could say that is how I feel. I know you love me, but it is hard to come to you in such an embarrassing situation. Now, I don't want you to worry too much. I can see Mom now, already skimming through this letter to find out exactly what is wrong, so I guess I'll cut right to the chase. I'm really worn out, but I'm getting better. At least I have a place to stay, especially during this cold winter weather.

The last couple of weeks I have been sleeping on the streets, looking for food and shelter. I finally met this nice man who is letting me stay in his room for free. It sure is nice to have a roof over my head. Sometimes I still get wet at night though, because there's a crack in the wall on my side of the bed. But with five of us sharing the room, we've got some body heat going and that helps out. We hope that between the five of us, we can make rent this month. They sure have been nice letting me stay here, and letting me keep out of sight. It seems there is some type of warrant out for me and I am unfortunately "on the run," as they say.

I'm afraid I can't tell you exactly where I am; I don't want to endanger you with too much information in case the authorities come to question you. As you may guess, I am in desperate need of a large sum of funding so that I can settle my accounts before another, more ruthless party begins to hunt me down. I was hoping for, but not counting on, your assistance. I know I have done wrong, but I plead for your forgiveness and prayers.

Just kidding! I wanted you to see my problems in the proper perspective. I crashed my car last weekend. No one was hurt. I did have \$300 in damage to my car though. I was wondering if you could send me the money so I could get back on my feet.

I love you forever,

Jill

In the negotiation process, the door-in-the-face technique can be a powerful tool. Watch a skilled property developer. He may look for quality properties that have been on the market for some months, often because of the seller's high asking price of \$500,000. To drive down the seller's expectation, the property developer employs an agent who, acting anonymously, displays great enthusiasm for the property and then makes a very low aggressive offer—say \$350,000—which the seller angrily rejects. The developer then moves in and offers a much more reasonable price—say \$430,000—which, after some negotiating, is accepted. Labor negotiators frequently deploy this tool as well. They begin with extreme demands that they expect to be turned down.

Abruptly, they repeat a series of smaller demands, or concessions, which will then be more easily accepted. These smaller demands are the real target of the labor group.

The door-in-the-face technique can also save you from lots of headache and hassle. You can get people to go from hating you to thanking you for the same exact thing. For example, when I assign my college students a ten-page final paper, it makes the students tense and vocal. They complain about time, length, font size, etc. You name it; they'll bring it up. I was getting tired of the complaining, so I changed the way I approach the subject of the paper. I use this principle: I bring up the paper and wait for the moans, but then I tell them this twenty-page paper will have to include the following. . . . The uproar starts: "Twenty pages! I won't have time for that!" I then graciously acquiesce and tell them if they promise to do a great, concise paper with the proper research, I will make it only ten pages. The cheers erupt and everyone is happy. The students see the ten-page paper as a great deal compared to the twenty-page paper. Now the students thank me rather than hate me.

Many times, we can fly under the radar with the contrast principle. There is a theory called the "Just Noticeable Difference" (JND),⁷ which means the minimum amount of difference in the intensity of the stimulus that can be detected. What does this mean? How much can you raise the price of a product without anyone noticing? How many ounces can you take out of a can of soup before people start to catch on? Can we really tell the difference between 21 ounces and 20.25 ounces? Many marketers would rather change the packaging and offer less of their product than resort to charging more. When we don't notice the difference, we think we are getting the same deal.

Just the opposite is true if we want to promote a new, larger-size product or a significant price reduction. In this case, we want to pass that threshold and make the change extremely noticeable. This is also true for taste. Companies want the best taste for the lowest cost. The quality of the ingredients causes people to notice or not notice the quality of the product.

Comparison Effect: Taking Their Temperature

The last form of contrast is the more general Comparison Effect. This is closely related to the door-in-the-face technique except that instead of presenting an outrageous request upfront, the persuader presents his prospects with an undesirable form of what they are looking for. Then, when the good (or even mediocre) item is presented, the prospect grabs hold of the offer a lot faster. The Comparison Effect focuses on how the prospect is able to compare two options simultaneously and come to the conclusion that the second option really is desirable.

Some real estate companies maintain what they call "set-up" properties. These are run-down properties listed at inflated prices, which are used to benefit the genuine properties in the company's inventory by comparison. Agents show customers the set-up properties first, then they show them the homes they really want to sell, both of them listed at the same price. The latter

home looks much better in comparison to the dump they first saw. This strategy works just as well when showing a \$120,000 home after viewing a \$90,000 home.

The comparison principle comes into play in our everyday lives. It can even influence how we perceive the physical attractiveness of our partner. A study at Arizona State and Montana State Universities tested to see whether we might think our own spouses or partners were less attractive because of the media bombardment with ads showing very attractive models. In the study, students were first shown pictures of models before rating the attractiveness of members of the opposite sex who were not models. These students rated the nonmodels as significantly less attractive than did students who had not first looked at pictures of models.⁸

In another study, sales for billiard tables were monitored to see whether "up-selling" or "down-selling" was more effective. For a number of weeks, customers were first shown the less expensive tables, and then shown the more expensive models. The average sale worked out to be approximately \$550 per table. For the second half of the experiment, customers were first shown top of the line tables, priced as high as \$3,000. After seeing the most expensive tables first, the customers were shown gradually less and less expensive tables. This time, the average sale turned out to be over \$1,000 per table. After seeing the really nice, high-quality tables, the low-end tables were less appealing, so customers tended to buy higher priced items.⁹

A similar example uses the same concept with a different product: funeral caskets. Funeral directors exploit the contrast principle to get families of the deceased to spend more money. Directors show the deceased's family the expensive model first, and then they show them a very plain, cheap one. They know that the family members are grieving and will do anything for their loved one. The grieving loved ones are often shocked by the contrast in the two caskets and rebound back to the more expensive casket.

These principles also apply when you're in a position where you have to compare people. The Law of Contrast is constantly at work, even influencing judgments in job interviews. If you first interview an outstanding candidate, and then immediately following you interview someone who is less favorable, you will be inclined to underrate the second person even more than if you had not interviewed the outstanding candidate first. Certainly the reverse is also true: If an average candidate follows someone who has interviewed very poorly, you may view that individual as better than average.

We see diet ads that use contrast to convince us to use their products. The "Before" and "After" pictures are intentionally made to look like stark opposites. The "Before" picture is in black and white, with the person slouching, frowning, and pale. The "After" picture is of the same person in full color with a smile, erect posture, and tan skin. We look at the two pictures, see the comparison, and decide we want to be more like the "After" picture.

How to Use the Law of Contrast

By reviewing the examples that were just outlined, you can guess the steps you need to take when employing this law. But let's try to simplify the process a little bit by looking at a few different elements of the Law of Contrast.

Starting High

As the name "Starting High" suggests, make sure your initial request is really big—not so big that it is totally unrealistic, but big enough that you know you will get a "no." Then, follow this initial request with smaller offers that will bring about the result you really desired all along.

For example, fundraising organizations often send letters asking for donations in amounts that are usually pretty high for most people's pocket books. Soon after the letter is sent out, the organization places a follow-up telephone call. The person making the call asks whether the letter was received and then makes a request for a smaller donation.

Timing

For contrast to be effective, it is important that the two scenarios, options, or offers are presented one right after another. Researchers Dillard¹⁰ and Fern¹¹ argue that the timing between the initial and follow-up requests influences the successfulness of using this technique. Specifically, in order to increase compliance, the delay between the two requests must be short. If there is too much of a delay between the first and the second request, your prospect may not remember that you are comparing the two items or requests, and your ability to persuade will falter.

The effects of timing play a key role in people's reactions and the actions they take. Let's say that you just found out your twelve-year-old son took the family car for a joyride and was brought back by the police. You might be understandably upset. However, what if you just found out instead that your nineteen-year-old son had taken your car out for a joyride seven years ago? In both scenarios you discovered the same news, but your reaction would be entirely different. You can see how the passage of time dulls the impact an event or situation can have. The same holds true with your requests—the passage of time will dull their impact.

Situation

"Situation" applies to most of the persuasion laws, and certainly to the Law of Contrast. You have to think about the situation that you are in before you can choose which method to use and to what degree to implement the law. It is easy to see that the feelings of a funeral attendee will be different from those of a wedding guest. Each event puts the attendee in a different frame of mind. So, if you approach the funeral attendee with a happy, fun presentation, obviously their sentiments will not compare to yours, making the approach totally inappropriate.

You can also determine the best time to bring up your topic by assessing each individual situation. Should you ask close to the time you want someone to take action, or as far in advance as possible? The answer is, "the sooner the better." Make your request as far in advance of an

event as possible. As the event approaches, and as the "realness" of what the prospects have to do sets in, the greater will be their anxiety and the less likely it will be for you to gain cooperation. If you need help with something right away, studies suggest that you should find someone who is not rushed or preoccupied with something else. The ability to gain cooperation from someone who is not under a time constraint goes up dramatically when compared with someone who is preoccupied or rushed.

Automobile dealers use the contrast principle. They wait until the final price for a new car has been negotiated before suggesting one option after another that might be added on. After committing to \$15,000, what is an extra \$200 for undercoating, an extended warranty, or a CD player? The trick is to bring up the extras independently of one another. After you've already decided to buy a \$1,000 couch, what is \$70 for fabric protection? Your prospects will always pay more for accessories or add-ons they buy after the purchase has been made.

Airlines also contrast news to you one piece at a time. They will say there is a slight delay, but they add that they should be ready to go in a few minutes. Then a later announcement comes stating that while everything is fine, they don't want to take any chances, so they are going to replace the part. They come back on loudspeaker and say they are close to being finished and will announce when they are ready to go. The next announcement you hear is that they are waiting for final clearance and will be taking off shortly. These small announcements, in relation to each other, keep the passengers calmer and more peaceful than if the airline had just come right out and announced a two-hour delay.

We also see the contrast technique used at large amusement parks. If we hear ahead of time how long the lines are going to be, we won't stand in them. You look to see how long the lines are, then, finding them reasonable enough, you get in. After you think you are almost there, you see another section of ropes and people. This happens three more times until finally, two hours later, you are at the front of the line.

Here is another charity example: Often when solicitors call for a donation, they begin by asking you how you are. Usually you reply, "Fine," or "Doing well," or something like that. After you have announced that your circumstances are favorable, the solicitor then proceeds to say, "I'm glad you're doing so well. I'm calling to see if you would make a donation to help the unfortunate victims of . . ." Now what? You don't want to seem stingy or unfeeling, especially now that the solicitor has reminded you of your easy life compared to those that his company is soliciting for. In one study, 18 percent of the people donated when they were approached without the initial "How are you doing this evening?" while 32 percent donated when the initial greeting was employed.¹²