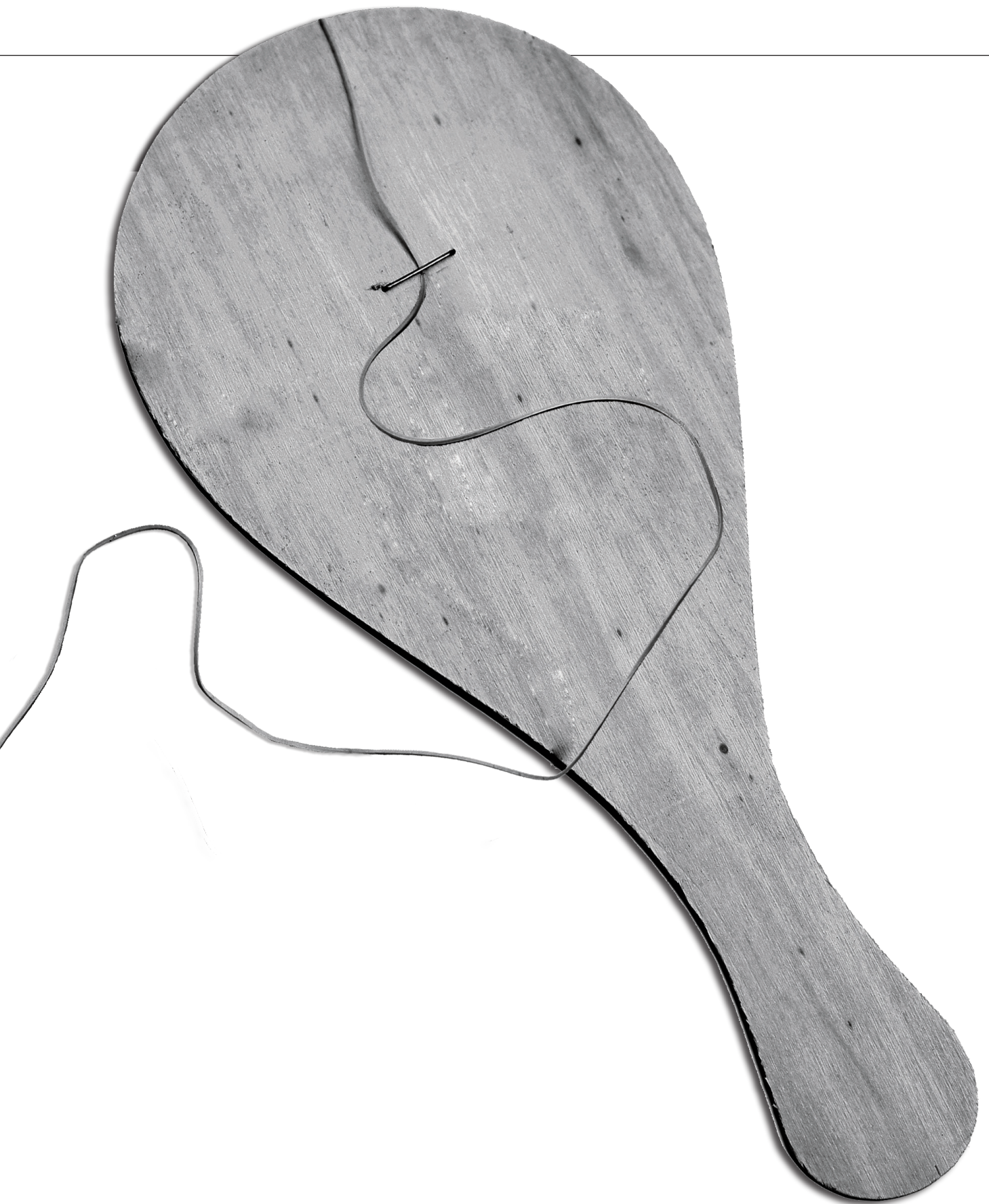



HOW CERTAINTY TRANSFORMS PERSUASION

by Zakary L. Tormala
and Derek D. Rucker

Certainty profoundly shapes our behavior. The more certain we are of a belief—regardless of its objective correctness—the more durable it will be and the greater its influence on what we do. Across dozens of studies spanning more



than two decades, consumer and social psychologists have shown that people who are certain of their beliefs are more likely to buy, buy sooner, and spend more. They're more likely to sign petitions and to vote. They're more willing to express their

opinions, endorse products, advocate for causes, and try to persuade others to adopt their views. They're better able to withstand attacks on their own beliefs and more inclined to challenge opponents.

In short, certainty is the catalyst that turns attitudes into action, bringing beliefs to life and imbuing them with meaning and consequence.

Imagine, for example, that two customers flying Virgin America give the carrier the same high rating—a 9 out of 10—on a satisfaction survey. Most marketers, seeing that the customers are both highly satisfied, assume they'll behave similarly—that they're equally likely to fly Virgin America again, recommend it to friends, and so on.

But their behavior often depends less on their stated opinion than on how firmly they hold it. Suppose that one of the Virgin customers is a frequent flier and has had reliably good experiences. She is likely to be very certain of her favorable attitude and to remain a loyal customer. The other may have flown just once on the carrier. She's probably less certain of her opinion—wondering whether future experiences would be different—and therefore less likely than the frequent flier to choose Virgin again. They may hold the same view, but if one of them is more certain of that view than the other, she'll be the better customer. Similarly, two board members who have the same high opinion of their firm's embattled CEO may differ in their efforts to advocate for him if their feelings of certainty about their opinion are different.

Such is the power of conviction. But despite the voluminous body of research on the topic, it is poorly understood in business and rarely measured or put to use. As a result, organizations overlook one of the most potent tools of persuasion they have at their disposal.

We've spent more than a decade systematically exploring the sources, nature, and impacts of certainty. Our research shows that by increasing people's certainty about the opinions and positions they hold, individuals and organizations can more successfully turn those beliefs into action. In this article, we offer four levers that can be applied at all levels—from one-to-one pitches to sales and marketing efforts to leadership initiatives—to enhance your company's persuasion strategies.

What Is Certainty?

Certainty is the confidence we have in our beliefs, including the sense that something just “feels right.” Though purely subjective, certainty can be measured empirically. In our research we've found that direct questions such as “How certain do you feel about your attitude toward X?” followed by a numerical scale—ranging from, say, 1 (not certain at all) to 9 (very certain)—provide a reliable gauge. Using this simple measure, it's possible to accurately assess the strength with which a person holds a belief.

Understanding how to build certainty starts with appreciating its foundation. The factors affecting certainty can be organized into categories according to how people make evaluations or appraisals. Broadly, these appraisals are formulated on the basis of accuracy, completeness, relevance, legitimacy, perceived importance of information, and “affective validation”—whether something feels right. Each assessment can be based on objective, or factual, information as well as subjective perception. For example, you might gather objective information about a car (say, its fuel efficiency) from various data sources and get subjective impressions, such as a sense of its comfort or styling, after test-driving it. Both objective and subjective information affect

Idea in Brief

THE CHALLENGE

People who are certain of their opinions are more likely to buy, buy sooner, and spend more; more willing to recommend products; and more apt to resist challenges to their beliefs. And yet the power of certainty as a tool of persuasion is largely overlooked in business.

THE SOLUTION

The authors identify four levers for increasing certainty: *Consensus* (perceiving that others share your opinion); *repetition* (expressing a position many times); *ease* (how readily an idea comes to mind); and *defense* (standing up for your beliefs).

IN PRACTICE

Companies should apply the certainty principles systematically: at the tactical level (for instance, in marketing programs and customer satisfaction surveys), as a managerial tool in interpersonal or team settings, and strategically (for instance, in negotiations with partners and other stakeholders).

perceptions of certainty. (For a more detailed discussion of how people make appraisals, see “Consumer Conviction and Commitment: An Appraisal-Based Framework for Attitude Certainty,” in the January 2014 issue of the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*.)

Much of our research, and that of our colleagues and collaborators, focuses on understanding the subjective factors that affect certainty—influences that have little or nothing to do with the evidence underlying a belief. Consider the effect of perceived credibility: Research by one of us (Derek), in collaboration with Richard Petty and Pablo Briñol, shows that when consumers evaluate product information, they feel more certain of their opinions if data is presented in a way that demonstrates that both benefits and limitations have been taken into account—even when only benefits are described. For example, formatting a mostly favorable product review as a list of pros and cons increases the perceived legitimacy of the evaluation and people’s certainty about it.

In other research, members of the same team found that people are more certain about their beliefs when they feel they are in a position of power—for instance, when they are taking the role of a boss and sitting in a big chair at a big desk.

Certainty as a tool of persuasion can be applied effectively at any level: interpersonal, managerial, or organizational. Let’s now look at how this works in practice.

Four Levers of Certainty

Here we present four levers companies can use to boost certainty: consensus, repetition, ease, and defense. Each lever can be applied to reinforce the persuasiveness of an argument, whether it’s an internal effort to generate buy-in for an initiative or a mass marketing campaign for a new product. These levers may be familiar to managers; however, their

THE POWER OF SUBJECTIVE FACTORS

Certainty—the confidence we have in our beliefs—is deeply influenced by subjective factors that have little or nothing to do with objective evidence or factual data. Consider the subjective factor of how information is presented. Research shows that people feel more certain of their opinions when information considers both pros and cons—even though the data presented is identical.



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SOURCE “WHAT’S IN A FRAME ANYWAY?” DEREK D. RUCKER, RICHARD E. PETTY, AND PABLO BRIÑOL, KELLOGG INSIGHT, MAY 2009

application to certainty as a tool of persuasion is new, potent, and underappreciated.

Consensus. It's well known that people naturally follow the crowd. Our research reveals that in the context of certainty, people become more confident of their opinions when they think that others share them. We call this kind of social validation the attitude consensus effect.

In a study conducted with John Petrocelli, we asked undergraduates to state their position on a fictitious university policy requiring students to swipe ID cards to enter campus buildings. Immediately after they reported their opinions, we told half of them that 89% of surveyed students shared their opinion; we told the other half that only a minority (11%) held their view. Then we asked how certain they were

of their positions. The students who believed that most people agreed with them reported significantly greater certainty—even though they had the same information about the policy as the other group. This heightened certainty had clear consequences: The students who received high consensus feedback were more resistant to our efforts to change their position. Ongoing research with Lauren Cheatham also finds that people who are certain of their beliefs because of consensus feedback are more willing to try to persuade others to adopt their view.

Organizations and individuals can apply the consensus lever in a variety of ways. When your audience already holds a desired opinion—say, a positive attitude toward your position or product—reinforce that opinion by showing that it is widely shared. Chevron's "We Agree" mass marketing campaign is a great example of this. As part of its corporate social responsibility efforts, Chevron invites people to click an "I agree" button on statements such as "The world needs more than oil" and "Protecting the planet should be everyone's job." A counter on the page shows the growing tally of people who hold common views (about 600,000 at press time), underscoring the strong public alignment with Chevron's message, which may help build certainty in those who visit the site.

The consensus effect can also be applied using customer satisfaction surveys and online reviews of products and services. Surveys and reviews have long been used by businesses not just to gather data but also to boost customer or employee engagement. Our research suggests that, in addition, surveys could reinforce customers' certainty about their positions and thereby promote behaviors that are aligned with the firm's goals. For example, consumers filling out an online satisfaction survey are likely to feel more certain of their high rating if they receive feedback showing how many people agree with their assessment. To increase certainty in online reviewers, a firm might respond to those who give a product or service positive ratings with data showing that others share their view. "Thank you for your four-star review! 85% of our reviewers feel the same way!" This feedback could increase certainty and shape customer behavior.

Finally, the consensus effect can be applied in interpersonal and organizational settings. Whether you're closing a sale or rallying your team around an idea, find ways to reinforce any endorsement of

THE CONSENSUS EFFECT

People become more certain of their opinions when they think that others share them. Chevron's social responsibility campaign reinforces consensus by inviting people to click "I agree" buttons to show support for goals central to Chevron's mission. A growing tally of people who hold common views is prominently displayed and may help build certainty in those who visit the site.



Persuading with Uncertainty

your position. Listen for favorable comments such as “I’ve never thought of it that way” or “I can see how that might help us” and respond with something like “I hear that a lot” or “Another client just said the same thing yesterday” or “Most people I’ve talked with agree with you.” In doing so, you increase people’s certainty about the matter at hand—and the likelihood that they will defend and advocate for it. A version of this tactic is commonly applied (sometimes disingenuously) by restaurant wait staff when they confirm customers’ selections with a comment such as “That’s one of our most popular dishes!” Their aim is to make customers feel even more certain that they’ve made the right choice.

Repetition. Marketers are well aware of the power of repeating their message. A related effect occurs when people repeatedly express their own opinions. Our research shows that such repetition increases people’s sense of certainty about their position and, therefore, their willingness to promote, defend, and act on it.

In one experiment conducted with John Petrocelli, we asked participants where they stood on gun control. In one group, we had people simply state their position; in the other group, we first asked six questions that explored their general attitudes toward gun control and then asked them to state their position. When we later asked all the participants to rate how sure they were of their stance, those in the second group reported higher scores. The mere act of expressing their position many times had increased their certainty about it. Moreover, as we had hypothesized, the repetition increased subjects’ resistance to changing their positions and, in follow-up research conducted with Lauren Cheatham, we’ve found that it boosts their willingness to share those opinions with others—even with strangers.

To apply the repetition lever, managers should encourage customers, employees, and other stakeholders to express positive opinions or positions aligned with corporate goals as often as possible. Social media offers marketers rich opportunities to do this. Companies already commonly invite customers to “like,” share, or otherwise endorse their brands as a way to promote them to new customers, but often they provide just one opportunity to “like” a brand on a given platform. Marketers should design their social media strategy to

Sometimes injecting a dose of uncertainty can increase the persuasiveness of your message. That’s because a slightly ambiguous message can be more engaging than one that’s crystal clear, sparking curiosity and getting people to pay closer attention to the content being presented. But uncertainty should be used selectively and with caution.

Here are three situations in which uncertainty can boost persuasion:

When it’s used by expert sources.

When a message comes from a nonexpert, the more certain she appears to be, the more persuasive she is. However, messages from experts can be more persuasive when they acknowledge some uncertainty. For example, in several experiments, subjects read a restaurant review more carefully, and were more interested in trying the restaurant, when an authoritative critic expressed some uncertainty about his favorable review. In practice, brands employing expert spokespeople may benefit by having people start out with statements such as “Even I had some doubts...” or “Although it’s hard to be completely certain...”

When it highlights potential.

People can be better persuaded by ads, recommendations, and even résumés that emphasize uncertain but exciting potential rather than impressive and certain accomplishments. The uncertainty piques subjects’ interest, causing them to read more carefully and ascribe great value to uncertain future impacts.

When it is introduced by means of interruption.

Interrupting a message (even by inserting a pause for loading a video in a presentation) can make an audience more curious about the unfolding argument, reengaging its attention and making the message more persuasive. In essence, an unexpected pause creates curiosity, prompting people to wonder what’s coming next, and tuning them in to that information when it arrives.

Getting people to defend positive views of your brand can be an effective managerial and marketing tool. Resisting attacks can bolster certainty, increase advocacy, and fortify resistance to future challenges.

enhance existing customers' certainty about their opinions and make sure customers have multiple opportunities to express their approval or loyalty.

Peet's Coffee, for example, periodically invites customers to fill out a satisfaction survey in exchange for a discount on a subsequent order. Loyal customers may fill out the same survey several times over a period of months, providing a positive rating each time and cementing their certainty in their opinion.

As with the consensus effect, repetition can be put to use in survey design. If a customer provides a favorable rating on an initial survey question, for example, follow that with additional questions that induce repetition. For instance, those satisfied Virgin America customers who gave the carrier a 9 out of 10 might be invited to get more specific: How do they rate the cabin crew, the entertainment options, and so on. Each of those responses can be expected to increase their certainty about their overall positive rating. Of course, the risk is that such exploration could uncover sources of dissatisfaction, potentially creating repetition and certainty around the negative reaction. Therefore, such surveys should be designed to re-route questioning or end if responses turn negative.

In interpersonal or organizational contexts, provide opportunities for people to repeat desired views. For example, in a meeting at which you are advocating for a particular job candidate, encourage others to restate your position. If another attendee endorses your candidate, you might say, "Interesting point. Can you say that again so that everyone can hear you?" or you might return to a key decision maker later and ask her to elaborate on her earlier thought. This technique can be used to translate personal support for your idea into

increased certainty about it—and then into greater public endorsement. Consider a case in which you're trying to get a colleague to commit to a new program you champion. If he expresses qualified support—for instance, suggesting, "That could work if we line up a sponsor"—you might ask him how he'd go about doing that and give him additional opportunities to express his opinion. For example, paraphrase your colleague's position and then ask, "Is that what you're thinking?"

Ease. The third lever companies can use to boost certainty is ease. When asked "What is your favorite brand of soft drink?" some consumers respond instantly, while others have to think about it. A large body of research shows that the more easily an idea comes to mind, the more certain we are of it. When it is easy to make a decision or form an opinion, we are more confident that it's valid.

In our research, we've examined the impact of subjective feelings of ease on the persuasiveness of ideas and people's certainty about them. In a study one of us (Zak) conducted with Carlos Falces, Pablo Briñol, and Richard Petty, undergraduates were introduced to a hypothetical university policy requiring seniors to pass comprehensive exams in order to graduate and then asked to generate arguments in favor of it. Some participants were asked to list two arguments (which was easy), and others to list 10 (much more difficult). After completing this task, the participants were asked how confident they were in the arguments they had generated and whether they supported the policy. The study revealed that the participants who generated just two arguments were more confident about their validity and more supportive of the policy than the other group.

Visual ease produces similar effects. Rebecca Norwick and Nicholas Epley presented subjects with

questionnaires in fonts and colors that were either difficult or easy to read and found that though the questionnaires were otherwise identical, participants reported that they were more confident of their responses when the questionnaire was easy to read. This is an untapped opportunity: Although our research, and others', suggests that uncluttered slide decks, easy-to-read fonts, and simple graphics are more persuasive—and make viewers more certain about the truth or validity of the message—companies continue to overlook this potentially powerful insight.

Defense. As we've discussed, people are more likely to defend attitudes they feel certain about. Likewise, people feel more certain of their attitudes after defending them.

In the 1960s, social psychologist William McGuire proposed that just as our bodies can be inoculated against an infectious agent by exposure to a minor dose of it, our beliefs can be inoculated against attack by exposure to a small dose of that attack—provided it can be successfully refuted. In our work, we built on this idea by demonstrating that when people resist messages attacking their attitudes, they become more certain of them. Psychologically, withstanding an attack on one's position suggests that it must be right (otherwise we would have changed our minds!), increasing confidence in its correctness.

In a representative experiment by one of us (Zak) and Richard Petty, undergraduates received a message promoting a policy they opposed and were instructed to craft a counterargument. Though all received the same message, some participants were advised that the points made in the message were strong, while others were told that they were weak. All the participants successfully defended their opposition to the policy, and their attitudes remained unchanged. However, those who believed they'd defended their position against a strong attack became more certain of their beliefs.

Across multiple studies we have found that the increased certainty that follows from mounting a defense shapes future behavior. People who have defended a position from attack are more likely to effectively resist stronger attacks later, vote in line with their initial position, and be willing to take action to promote their views.

Thus getting people to defend their views—presuming they already hold the desired position—can be an effective managerial and marketing tool. When



ABOUT THE RESEARCH

The ideas presented in this article draw on our more than 20 years of research in the field of consumer and behavioral psychology. The studies presented in these articles are particularly relevant:

“Consumer Conviction and Commitment: An Appraisal-Based Framework for Attitude Certainty”

Derek D. Rucker, Zakary L. Tormala, Richard E. Petty, and Pablo Briñol
Journal of Consumer Psychology, January 2014

“Unpacking Attitude Certainty: Attitude Clarity and Attitude Correctness”

John V. Petrocelli, Zakary L. Tormala, and Derek D. Rucker
Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, January 2007

“What Doesn't Kill Me Makes Me Stronger: The Effects of Resisting Persuasion on Attitude Certainty”

Zakary L. Tormala and Richard E. Petty
Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, December 2002

people already like your idea, product, or brand, judicious attacks can bolster certainty, increase advocacy, and fortify resistance to future challenges.

In an organizational setting, such inoculation can strengthen people's conviction—and, therefore, effectiveness—in situations in which they may be challenged. Consider a scenario in which you are preparing colleagues for an upcoming pitch. Be a devil's advocate. Challenge them with mildly aggressive questions such as “why do you think that?” and “what will you say if the team disagrees with you?”

For marketers, creating (or seizing) opportunities for customers to defend the brand may effectively build certainty and, therefore, support. Research by Neeru Paharia, Jill Avery, and Anat Keinan shows that when consumers feel that a smaller brand is under threat from a larger one, they rally behind it, buying more and providing more favorable reviews online. Paharia and colleagues suggest that this “purchase activism” is triggered by consumers' desire to express their views. Our work suggests that when a favored brand is under attack, consumers who defend it by staging such “buycots” grow increasingly certain about their position—further cementing their loyalty.

MOST COMPANIES sporadically apply the principles of certainty, but not in a conscious or strategic way. Given the ease with which certainty can be measured and influenced, we see this as a massive missed opportunity. At a tactical level, certainty principles can readily be introduced into existing marketing programs—for instance, in satisfaction surveys and customer reviews. At a managerial level, we'd recommend shifting from the occasional and often accidental application of consensus, repetition, ease, and defense to a deliberate and structured use of these levers in interpersonal and team settings. Finally, senior executives might think strategically about the role certainty can play on a broader stage—for instance, in negotiations with partners and other stakeholders. At any level, certainty is a new and potent tool of persuasion. ▀

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