

Understanding Influence and Why Customers Follow

Identify your personal strengths to tap into your potential as an influencer and partner.

I remember when I was a brand new sales rep — I was fresh from college, just out of the training program and I had the logo shirt. I had studied EVERYTHING I could about the product lineup, including the phonebook-size product manuals, full of boring, technical fine print.

One of my first jobs was settling complaints for a product that had damaged crops from residual effects from the previous season. I had to assess the field and work with growers to determine a percentage of crop damage on which to pay. It was totally subjective, but by my third week, I had a system. As you might expect, I had several difficult conversations with farmers but one individual in particular sticks with me to this day.

Let's call him Bill. Bill and I went through the motions of evaluating his field and the payback program. He told me what he wanted, but his request seemed unreasonable compared to my other — albeit limited — experiences. He would not budge on his demands. I felt things heading south, so I wrote out my process for making the determination and explained where he fit in my model and what I could offer.

Then, a surprising thing happened. Bill started to chuckle. He said, "I'm impressed, you know your business and you're sticking to it. I respect that, so I trust your judgment." In my two subsequent years in that role, Bill was always my advocate and bought exclusively the brand I represented.

What we call influence

Was my encounter with Bill beginner's luck? Maybe, but as our relationship developed, I realized

I had influence with Bill and had gained his trust — and *trust* is a critical aspect of influence.

This year has brought us unprecedented challenges. Many of our customers — be they buyers of show cattle, bulls or replacement females — will not be spending freely. As they evaluate their budgets, decisions about which breeding program they want to invest in will not come lightly. Today, the ability to effectively influence our customers and prospects is absolutely essential in order to stand out in the marketplace and even to help our customers feel comfortable enough to make a purchase.

But what is influence? First, please realize cultivating influence doesn't mean you have to be a charismatic speaker or an extrovert. It doesn't mean you are arrogant or have a big ego or you're "in it for yourself." On the contrary, influence simply means your customers and prospects recognize you as a solid source for information and solutions. Building your capacity to influence others can be improved by working on two primary areas: focusing on your strengths and understanding the needs of your followers.

Strengths

A person's or business' strengths can be determined with a simple equation:

Strengths = natural talent + learned skills

Ask yourself what you're really good at or where you are most effective with the least effort. If you're not sure, ask peers, family and even customers to identify where

your program really excels and the best market you serve. If you're really interested in the topic, I recommend taking an online assessment about your strengths using a tool I often use called Gallup Strengths Finder at [Gallup.com/cliftonstrengths/en/home.aspx](https://www.gallup.com/cliftonstrengths/en/home.aspx).

The needs of followers

In a survey of 10,000 people, research and consulting giant Gallup discovered the four basic needs of followers:

- 1) Trust
- 2) Compassion
- 3) Stability
- 4) Hope

As you read in my story about Bill, *trust* was Bill's main driver in his situation. It may sound strange at first, but your customers and prospects *are your followers* in the cattle business. Yes, they need solid genetics and sound phenotypes, but those things are the base minimum to be successful and the value placed on these assets is highly subjective and individualized. In order to become loyal, customers seek one or more of the four basic needs above. *When you establish influence, you move from supplier to partner.*

In a tough year like 2020, people are especially seeking something to get behind that makes them feel comfortable. So, as you approach fall sales, consider the best way to influence your market. Your customers need you now more than ever. **HW**

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