



# Social Norms

## A Sales Rep's Best Friend

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It's widely known people primarily shape their behavior by the actions and manners of those around them—what behavioral scientists call “social norms” or “social proof.” In particular, people become motivated by their desire to conform with the group, especially if it's a group with which they identify. Another less formal term equates to the “herd theory”, because of the way many animals travel. Think about cows in a pasture for a minute. Sometimes a cow will start slowly meandering across the field, and other cows begin to follow. If, metaphorically speaking, one of the followers happens to speak English, and you ask her why she walks with the others, she undoubtedly would say, “*I'm moving in this direction because everyone else does.*” Irrespective if we're talking about a herd of cows, a school of fish or a flock of birds, the conduct remains the same. The direction of some can significantly influence other individuals in a group.

Social proof has existed throughout time, and commercial advertising executives have taken advantage of this. We frequently see ads for goods and services attempting to motivate us by showing how “everyone else” benefits from a certain product.

### **Credibility – Popcorn Style**

We all know the unmistakable sound of popping popcorn. The parallelism of this activity relates to naming references with a certain amount of fast-paced commentary. Client names should sound like exploding popcorn when confidently reciting an impressive customer list. My experience indicates many salespeople name maybe one or two accounts, but then their “popcorn stops popping.” You can boost your skills by memorizing a list of “herd” references (e.g., 5), thereby establishing greater credibility and authority. The best way to enrich your “popcorn credibility” translates to improving your recall. You want to easily enumerate client references from memory—and it's simply a function of *practice*. Depending on your geographic situation, it might be appropriate if you include the city, as well. When done properly\*, it's impressive, and your credibility will take several steps forward in a single bound!

\*A word of caution: obviously, don't bore the customer with a long recitation (5 should be sufficient to make your point). It's the account names in *rapid succession* that produces an effectual portrayal of your lab's penetration.

### **The Doctor's Doctor**

If your lab has fairly strong penetration within the surrounding market, you may want to inquire what medical practitioner this doctor's office refers patients when on vacation, has an illness, attending a conference, etc. Additionally, you could ask what physician this doctor uses as a primary care provider. If it happens to be a practice that uses your lab, explain that to your contact, because it immediately raises your lab's credibility. It's social proof on steroids!

### **Using Percentages**

In today's world, many companies send electronic feedback forms to customers who recently used their service. Similarly, some laboratories send/drop off customer questionnaires to gain honest feedback on various aspects of their laboratory (courier, turnaround time, result quality, client services, billing, field rep value, overall satisfaction, etc.). Assuming your lab receives high grades (especially in "general level of satisfaction"), you can use this percentage as another way of conveying popular opinion during customer interactions. *"In this year's client survey, X% rated our laboratory as excellent in overall experience."*

Additionally, if you market within an area in which you have a high percentage of customers, you can say, for example, *"X% of the \_\_\_\_\_ specialty in this town use our lab."* To repeat: social norms become very compelling when people see evidence that other offices—just like them—use your lab.

### **Leveraging the Herd—And More**

By explaining this "everyone else uses our lab" situation, it raises the crucial question to ask a prospective customer: *"Would you like to know why we have so many satisfied clients?"* What's happening here divides into three fractions: (1) you leverage other clients (i.e., the herd), (2) you build credibility and (3) you generate *curiosity*. Whenever you engender client curiosity about your laboratory, well.....need I say more?

### **Summary**

During the sales process, you need to aim for two important components: (1) credibility and (2) a sense of momentum. You accomplish this objective by employing social norms. Since time immemorial, it has always been easier for people to follow the crowd, and that's why leveraging social proof becomes such a powerful strategy. You *challenge* the prospect's thinking by reassuring them they are, indeed, moving in the right direction (and minimizing risk).

Practice memorizing your "herd" roster so there is no hesitation. Your client list of five or six names translates to "arrows in your quiver."

Using percentages—if they're good numbers—allows for another good motivational methodology. People easily relate to numbers.

Building curiosity distills into the *sine qua non* of selling just about anything. Using social norms exploits this, especially when you ask the question, *"Would you like to know why all of these clients are so satisfied with my lab?"* If they say No, you have a crystal-clear understanding of your position (more specifically, with that particular individual). But, in most cases, human bias

pries people's curiosity—and they say Yes. In this case, the client has just handed you a golden opportunity.

As a post-script: even if your sales territory places you in a brand-new geography for your lab, you can still employ social norms by saying something like, "In the \_\_\_\_\_ area, X% of \_\_\_\_\_ specialty use us (or, "we have \_\_\_\_\_ number of clients"). Our business initiative involves transferring the same high service levels to physicians in \_\_\_\_\_ (city)."

The message stands tall: every sales rep's tool kit should include insights into the power of social norms.

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