



Opinion Science Podcast

Hosted by Andy Luttrell

Influence on the Ground with Brian Ahearn

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Andy Luttrell:

Happy New Year, everyone! Welcome to 2022. Which sounds like version 2 of 2020—2022—which is kind of how it's shaping up anyway.

But welcome back to the show! Since things are still coming together in the new year, I'm just gonna jump right into what this episode's all about.

Back in May, I shared my conversation with Robert Cialdini who's contributed a lot to our understanding a bunch of psychological stuff, but he's most famous for distilling the research on social influence into several key principles of how people influence others. These are things like the principle of reciprocity—when you do something for someone, they feel compelled to return the favor.

But at the end of the day, Cialdini is a scientist. He's interested in the fundamental questions about how influence works. But he's built a mini empire, teaching these psychological concepts to people who want to leverage them to meet all sorts of practical goals. And it's caught on, finding applications people who have a real interest in having influence. Like salespeople, marketers, and...insurance agents.

You're listening to Opinion Science, the show about our opinions, where they come from, and how they change. I'm Andy Luttrell. And my guest today is Brian Ahearn. Brian specializes in teaching the psychological principles of influence, carving out a unique niche communicating these ideas to insurance agents. But his work extends far beyond that, too. His first book, *Influence PEOPLE: Powerful Everyday Opportunities to Persuade that are Lasting and Ethical*, was named one of the best influence books of all time by Book Authority. That was followed up by his second book, *Persuasive Selling for Relationship Driven Insurance Agents*. And he just released a brand new book, *The Influencer*, which conveys important lessons in influence through a fictional narrative. He's also been on more than a hundred podcasts, so we're adding another notch on that belt, too.

So Brian knows his stuff and has a knack for bringing basic science into applied domains. And as it turns out, our paths had already crossed! I got connected to Brian through mutual friends, and

only later realized that he'd given a talk in my grad program at Ohio State like 10 years earlier. Small world.

Anyhow, I had the chance to meet up with Brian to get the scoop on how he got swept up in the world of behavioral science, and how he goes about translating research findings to non-academic audiences.

Andy Luttrell:

I'm gonna start with a hard-hitting question, which is what is this bodybuilding thing all about? How did that get started and what did you actually... What were you doing that was competitive? What was it? Powerlifting and bodybuilding.

Brian Ahearn:

Yeah. Well, when I was in high school and playing football, I was small and slow, and not a good combination, and I got into weightlifting one year and saw marginal results, but it was at the end of my junior year in high school. We had been beaten pretty soundly by another school and our coach said, "We need to get a lot bigger and a lot stronger," and so they brought in some guys from the YMCA, who were competitive powerlifters, and they were running a program for high school students, and so we started driving downtown from Dublin three days a week, myself and a bunch of guys who played football, and started-

Andy Luttrell:

This is Dublin, Ohio, for folks who don't...

Brian Ahearn:

... and started listening to their advice and working out the way that they said, which was radically different than what your coaches were telling you, because coaches really knew nothing about strength training back then. And my body took to it. I put on over 20 pounds in three months. And the year before, working out, probably overtraining, I'd put on maybe five pounds. So, you're a teenager, you put on this 20 pounds, everybody's going like, "Holy cow, what's going on with you? You look so different." It's big for your ego and I really enjoyed it. And then the next season in football, the results were amazing. I mean, the first time I hit a guy and lifted him off the ground, I was like, "Whoa! I can't believe this."

And I got so into the working out that I was looking forward to football ending because I just wanted to get into the gym, and so through college, I was the president of the Miami University Weightlifting Club for three years. I was competing in powerlifting. When I got out of college, I gave bodybuilding a try for three years and loved it. I love dieting, and the gym, and everything about it. I just... I loved it. And Andy, my goal, my dream was to own a gym one day. That's when I was in college, I was taking a lot of general business classes, entrepreneurial classes, thinking that one day I would own a gym. And I don't know when it was that I let go of that dream, but I do realize that I fulfilled the dream, because I have a really nice gym in my basement.

So, I didn't fulfill the dream in the way that I thought I would, but all of a sudden I realized I fulfilled it. Every day I can go downstairs and do something I've loved since I was a teenager and I'm very blessed in terms of that.

Andy Luttrell:

You're describing all the things that I would hate to do. This sounds miserable. And when did the gym owning dream... When did that get retired?

Brian Ahearn:

I don't know because there wasn't a day when I thought I let go of it. Especially when I was competing, I had graduated, I was working with Travelers Insurance, I had a nice paying job and was really into working out. My wife now, who I was dating at the time, was totally supportive, so I don't know what happened to that where I said, "I'm just not going to pursue that any longer." I jokingly tell people I got a job, I got married, I bought a house, and all of that went away, but I think the priorities probably changed and became much more focused on career and family.

Andy Luttrell:

So, we both live in and around Columbus. Is the Arnold Classic a thing that you've made it out to?

Brian Ahearn:

I've only been to it one time, believe it or not. And that was a couple years before the pandemic hit and I went down with a friend to watch some of the strength competition and things like that. I'm glad I'm not in that scene anymore. I mean, you step away from it, and I loved it, but it's a very narcissistic sport, because it's all about self. It's looking at yourself all the time, and how do I look compared to you, and these other people, and that part I don't like. But I did love going in and putting your training plan together, and then seeing my body change, and dieting, and all of those things, because they were so tangible to be able to notice the difference of your hard work. And so, I've always been competitive like that.

After I gave up bodybuilding, I wasn't really doing anything competitive for years, but then I made a radical shift into marathoning and it was the same thing, where I could see the results of my effort and I loved getting up every morning and going out and running anywhere from 5 to 15 miles before I'd go to work, and I don't know, I've just always been involved with physical things like that.

Andy Luttrell:

You know, you've described yourself as analytical before and I have the same sort of penchant for the data, and the measures, and it always strikes me that this is the kind of thing that I would love, right? To track everything, write it all down, get the nutrient testing and all that stuff, and if it weren't just so viscerally unpleasant to actually do these things, I think maybe I would be into it. But...

Brian Ahearn:

I've got workbooks going back to when I was in high school of when I worked out. That shows my analytical nature. I was writing down all the things that I was doing, and then when I was competing, all the things that I was eating. I had this massive spreadsheet before you could download apps that was tracking my heart rate, distance, weight, everything, so that I could correlate like, "Wow, as my miles go up, my weight's coming down, my heart rate's flattening

out,” and that for me was really gratifying. That was like the icing on the cake to see that information after I’d been training for two or three months getting ready for a big race.

Andy Luttrell:

As my way of transitioning into the core of what we’re talking about today, there’s part of that that makes me think that it’s a similar mindset to being like implementation of a certain strategy, but tracking it, and seeing whether or not it works, right? Like too often we go, “Well, I don’t know, let’s try these 15 things.” And then, “Oh, we saw that there was maybe a minor change,” but you don’t actually know what did what, right? But it’s that commitment to tracking and paying attention that would seem to matter.

Brian Ahearn:

Yeah. That’s probably why Cialdini’s work appealed to me, because it was research based and I felt confident I could get behind it. When I started to read about the studies, or hear him talk about the differences, it was like, “Wow.” And I know that a lot of times people will say data doesn’t change opinions because we make decisions more on an emotional basis, but I can say for having presented Cialdini’s material and with my own spin on it for nearly 20 years, when you bring in the right studies and you can talk about them in a compelling way, you get the wow factor with people.

Andy Luttrell:

To a point that I think you’ve ended up making in terms of how best to communicate with people, I would say that data may not change minds for everyone, but for the right person, data is the perfect way to change a mind, right? Emotions might be leaned on more for some, but data for others, and certain strategies for some versus others. So, you mentioned kind of coming to these strategies that Cialdini pioneered, but what I think is so interesting about your story is that you have this very specific niche of insurance selling where there was this untapped opportunity to apply persuasion science to maximize whatever outcome, so what were the... How did you get into this game in the first place in terms of insurance to start, but then also noticing, oh, we could probably do this job more effectively if we lean on empirical strategies?

Brian Ahearn:

I got into insurance completely by chance, which is probably what you’ll hear from 95% of people who are in insurance.

Andy Luttrell:

Sure.

Brian Ahearn:

I have yet to meet somebody who said, “All I wanted to do when I grew up was get into insurance.” I had accepted a job while I was down at school with another organization and the last week of school I got a letter from the Travelers, and I knew nothing about insurance, but I decided to go to the interview because the job was in Columbus and I had grown up in the Columbus area, had been dating a girl for a long time, and I thought, “Well, I owe it to her to look for this job, and hey, if I get the job I’m gonna be able to stay around friends, family, and the girl I’m dating,” so that sounded great.

I went to the interviews, liked everything that I heard, accepted the job, and then the irony of this, Andy, is the very first day of work, I met my wife. So, within a few weeks I wasn't going out with the other girl anymore, and then Dana and I started dating, and the rest is history there. But that's how I got into the insurance industry and then once I got in, I realized it's a great industry to be a part of, especially in Columbus, Ohio, with all the companies that are headquartered here. You know, at the end of the day, you do a couple things that are really important. You help people when they've suffered a loss and the insurance industry really helps the economy because the guarantees that the industry makes allows people to build more homes, sell more building materials, a whole ripple effect.

So, once I recognized that I thought, "This is a great industry," and I stayed in it for the entirety of my career until I stepped away to do Influence PEOPLE. But I came across Cialdini's material back in... I think it was early 2003, and it was a coworker had given me a video. She was studying for her master's at the Ohio State University, saw this video of Cialdini in a marketing class, gave it to my boss and I because I was involved with sales training, and she said, "I think you guys will really like this." I watched the video. The lightbulb comes on. I'm like, "Holy cow, the stuff that he's talking about is the foundation of selling." The psychology he talked about explained why certain approaches worked, why certain approaches don't, and I was so enamored with it that I began to use it in training around the company. I'd show it and we would talk about it.

And I knew back then, Andy, that this is what I would do with the rest of my career. I was fascinated by the research. I loved to read about it. I was especially intrigued by looking for opportunities within the organization to put it into application to get to better results and then eventually started broadening out and working with independent insurance agents, very specifically in their sales capacity, teaching them what their principles were so they could utilize them through their sales process and be more effective in terms of interacting with the public. Because the problem isn't that most people buy too much insurance, it's that they don't buy enough and then a loss comes, and so it's a tough sell for agents sometimes.

Andy Luttrell:

Yeah. The interesting part of that story is, and what Cialdini's stuff has done so well at, is reaching out to the folks who are in a world to apply it, right? And so, I come to his stuff as like curiosities of how people work and going, "Ooh, I wonder how it can be moderated by these other factors or why it works the way that it does." And if you read his book, it is pretty science oriented, right? There are hints at application, but Cialdini's not himself selling insurance, and so I'm curious when you started to come across these methods that he had sort of isolated from the research literature, how did you go about linking them to the actual process of selling that you were engaged with? To see like, "Oh, this is how we could do our actual jobs better."

Brian Ahearn:

Well, one clear example came up when he wrote the book Pre-Suasion. And as he talked about pre-suasion and how we can do certain things before we actually make our ask and how setting the stage can make a big difference in people's willingness, right away my mind went to something that the insurance industry was having difficulty with at the time, and that is what's called telematics. And telematics is the technology that you either can install in your car, maybe

download on your phone, or maybe it comes already in the car, but it monitors your driving. So, if you drive at a slower rate, you don't accelerate fast, brake hard, do things like that, you're a safer driver and you can get a much lower rate. But the problem was people don't want to. They would say, "I don't want big brother tracking me," so that was always the pushback. I don't want big brother tracking me.

So, as I thought about Pre-Suasion and what could you do to set up the conversation to make it easier, for me, because my mind just worked this way, the lightbulb comes on and I clearly saw that some of the problem that the agents were having is they would use the term tracking. Nobody wants to be tracked, right? You never want to say, "Well, Andy, we can put this in your car. It'll track your driving." But the word monitor is a lot less scary to people. You don't want to talk about new technology because that's a little frightening to people, too. Not everybody is a new adopter, so by talking about there's technology in place that monitors your driving, that's what they needed to start saying.

But the other thing that really was intriguing to me was to simply ask the question. Do you consider yourself to be a good driver, at least better than average? Now, you've studied psychology for a long time, and I've studied it too, and we both know that the vast majority of people when they're asked about averages will say that they are better than average. Smarter, better looking, kinder, more charitable, whatever it is, most people will say, "Yes, I'm better than average." And of course, somebody who wants to buy insurance is not going to tell the insurance agent, "No, I'm really a bad driver. You want to insure me because you're gonna get a lot of money." So, by simply asking that question, you put them in a pre-suasive state of mind that they are a better than average driver, and once they've put themselves in that position, that insurance agent can step in and honestly say, "There's technology that will monitor your driving and if you are a better than average driver, the reality is you're probably paying more than you need to."

Now, that's a loss frame instead of a save, because more people will be motivated there, and if that agent has experience to bring in that principle of authority and say, "You know, Andy, I've done this now for more than 30 years, and I'm recommending this to all of my clients." Social proof. Everybody's doing this. So, you start to see how this short conversation is packed with psychology to make it easier for somebody to see the merits of this tool, which quite frankly is gonna save the vast majority of people a lot of money. You're not gonna come back to me and say, "Darn you, Brian. I saved 150 bucks this year on the auto insurance." You're gonna say, "Thank you." But I've gotta get you to try it and I've gotta avoid the things that are preventing people like you from taking that step.

So, that's one clear example that once I read it, it just hit me. Oh my gosh, this will be gold for them if they understand how to approach their clients and why they want to use the psychology in very specific ways, and it ultimately benefits them more than it does the insurance agent because the insurance agent actually is gonna get a slightly lower commission rate if you save money on your insurance.

Andy Luttrell:

So, that was a case it sounds like where you were reading the research literature, right? Reading about what psychologists have found. And it reminded you of a problem that was relevant. Is that

right? That was sort of the process? Are there times, like let's say you go, "Okay, I know these principles." Someone comes to me and says, "I have this problem." Is there a method, either that you use... I mean, you've done this enough times that it's probably fairly intuitive, but you teach people constantly how to do this. Is there a method that you would advise people to go like, "Okay, you know the basic principles. You know the problem." How do you look at that problem and say, "Okay, here's... I can advise at least a potential solution."

Brian Ahearn:

Well, there's three methodologies that I might default to, so it will depend on the situation. The first methodology when I'm talking with a salesperson might be looking at the sales process, and if they're having trouble in a specific part of the process, then I know there are certain principles of influence that will be more helpful in that process, so that's how I might analyze that situation. Somebody else may come to me and they might not be in anything related to sales, but they're trying to work with their boss, or somebody in another department. I may default to my ideal model of dealing with people, which is are they a driver, an expressive, an amiable, or a logical person? Because I have done some surveys with blog readers many years ago and found that it looks like there are certain principles that might be more effective with a driver versus an amiable, et cetera, so that's another methodology of looking at that.

And then there's also what we talk about when we do these workshops, which Robert Cialdini's partner at Influence at Work, Dr. Gregory Neidert, came up with what he calls the core motives model, and the core motive simply looks at are you trying to build or strengthen a relationship, are you trying to help people move past a state of uncertainty? Because you might say, "Strong relationship. They really like me. They're just not sure what to do." Well, there's a few principles that are effective there. And maybe they're not unsure what to do, they're just not taking action. I mean, quite often we know what we should do. We'll even nod our heads and then we won't do it, so what principles can we use to motivate action?

So, those are three methodologies of looking at these seven principles and saying, "How would it be best to implement them?" Is that what you were looking for?

Andy Luttrell:

Yeah. Yeah. Just to be able to sort of as a... It sounds like what you're saying is maybe step one is to diagnose, kind of diagram the problem in terms of what is the root problem, and that will sort of give us a cue into like, "Okay, let's focus on these three." And then once you have these three, let's say principles that are most closely tied to this kind of problem that we're working with, in some ways it's just sort of a creative knack to go like, "Okay, how can I turn this abstract principle which has been validated in lots of studies, but no study has ever looked at this problem," right?

Brian Ahearn:

Right.

Andy Luttrell:

How can I devise? I go, "Okay, the scarcity seems to be a viable principle. How could I use this here?" Do you have any advice for people in terms of going from this abstract principle that would seem most relevant but that doesn't already have an exact tool that I can use?

Brian Ahearn:

Well, I would sit down with them and the first thing I would say, too, is who's your audience and what's your goal? And then from there, how can we use any of these principles to ultimately support that goal? And part of the reason this is important, too, is because I may go into a situation where I've got an ask of you, Andy, and if the sun, moon, and stars, if they all aligned, this is what I would love to have happen. I want A to happen with you. But once I know that A is what I want and recognizing for example you mentioned reciprocity, the principle where we feel an obligation to give back to those who first give to us, I recognize that part of that principle is concessions. That when someone says no, if I'm ready in the moment with another request, it's perceived as my giving a little bit, and quite often that other person gives in return.

So, this is why the goal is so important. I know I want A, but I might not get A, and if I don't, what's my fallback position to B? What's my fallback position to C? Maybe even D. I want to strategically think that through so if I hear no, I'm ready in the moment. And that's important because if I leave the situation and I come back sometime later, well, we've broken off that conversation and it's probably not perceived as my giving. It's perceived as me making a brand-new request.

So, these are the kind of things that in a conversation with somebody, I'm gonna ascertain what that goal is, and I'm gonna start saying, "Well, what's your fallback?" And I don't want to hear somebody say, "Well, I'd love to have A happen, but it'll never happen. I'm gonna start with B." No, no, no, no. You start with A because you might get it. But if you don't, B looks a lot better by comparison. That's where people start going, "Wow, I never really knew that." So, that's how I can start helping them structure what their request is going to be and how they're ready in case there's something that's said no to.

Now, beyond that, as we talk, one of my other questions is gonna be which principles are naturally available. Do you have expertise that you can bring into the conversation? Or can you rely on experts? Can you bring in information from experts that will help your case? Is there social proof available? Are lots of other people doing this right now? Is scarcity at play? What happens if they say no? What's the downside and how can we frame that in not a fearmongering way, but a way that honestly let's that person understand that by not taking this action, there's a downside for me? So, these are all the kind of things in whether I'm coaching somebody, or if I'm working with a client in terms of looking at their processes, these are the kind of questions that we have to go back and forth, because I don't have a magic wand. Just because I have some expertise in this doesn't mean I can look at it and just wave it. They have all the information that I need to understand to help them see what their options are in terms of using the psychology.

Andy Luttrell:

Yeah. There's a good point in there too, which is that not all of the principles are naturally... They can't just plug into everything, right? The theoretician in me wants to say, "Okay, I want to come up with an example of how all seven of these principles could be used." But you know, maybe you're just forcing it if you're trying to use the one because you go, "I don't... There's just... This isn't really relevant to this problem."

And you've done some work as you mentioned isolating the motivations that are relevant, right? Borrowing from other people's work, but also like you said, the stages in the sales process to say, "Well, at this stage, here are the three principles that are most relevant." And I'm curious, I didn't quite get a great sense of where those came from, right? Is that sort of just an experience thing and thinking through lots of problems? Or is there sort of like... Were the empirical bases for saying like, "Oh, no, these three are just like the most strongly tied to these kinds of outcomes?"

Brian Ahearn:

Well, so when it comes to, for example, the sales process, when I look at the sales process, there are eight steps. Some organizations have sales processes that last years. Others can be one meeting. Everything is condensed down. But there are still certain things within that process. You're looking for referrals. Hopefully, you get a first meeting. You're gonna qualify the person or organization that you're speaking to. You're going to make a presentation. You're going to deal with objections. You're probably gonna negotiate on price, terms, conditions. You're gonna have to close the sale. And ideally, you'd like to ask for referrals, right? Each of those is a distinct part of the process. And again, some of those may be squeezed into the same conversation, but they still merit thinking about what's the goal and then what psychology would best support that? So, for example, if somebody is prospecting, the question is what's the goal here. You just want to get a meeting with somebody to have an opportunity to find out more about them and have them find out more about you, decide can we even maybe do business together.

So, I always tell people when you're looking at prospecting for new clients then, what are they gonna probably want to know? They're gonna probably want to know that you're good at what you do, that you have some expertise, so I can use the principle of authority to highlight that. They probably would like to know too that others have benefited from this, so if I can bring social proof in by talking about lots of clients that I've already dealt with or clients who are very similar to you, that becomes compelling. And then the third thing would be scarcity. What is it that I offer that maybe nobody else is offering or a combination of things that nobody else is offering that might make you say, "Hmm. I don't want to pass up this opportunity. The guy's got some expertise. Other people sound like they're benefiting from doing business. And he's offering something that I'm not sure I can get somewhere else."

Those are compelling reasons to say, "I'd like to give you 30 minutes to sit down and have a conversation." So, however that individual organization is prospecting, those three principles are key to getting that next step, so that's how I look at every step in the sales process. Okay, what's your goal now when you get this first meeting? So, an example there is I always tell people you might not get the sale just because somebody likes you, but you'll probably never get the sale if they don't like you. And so, the principle of liking becomes really important at that point. How can I connect with you on things that we have in common? Can I pay you genuine compliments? Can I do something that might get you to say, "I like that guy, Brian?" But more importantly, can I get myself to say, "I really like Andy?" Because when you start to see that, Andy, that's where everything begins to change. And reciprocity is another relationship builder, too. If I can do something that genuinely benefits you and I have nothing on the line, you probably feel good about that. That might be the thing that gets us the second meeting.

So, those are just two quick examples of parts of the sales process and the thought that goes into which principles are going to support the goal.

Andy Luttrell:

I wondered. My favorite principle, if we are able to have favorites, is consistency, and I think it's just because it just is so clever. I think it's... You know, scarcity, you go, "Yeah, okay. People want what's scarce." Social proof. Yeah, people do what other people do. Where consistency is this little dance that you play that builds... This is the nerdy part of me. There's these whole theories of cognitive consistency that I find interesting that are sort of the basis of that principle. And you give what I think is a clever implementation of it in the sales process. I think it's at the presentation spot in terms of using careful listening as a persuader as a salesperson and then capitalizing on that in terms of leveraging consistency. Could you sort of give just another peek in terms of how these principles go from the broadest, right? If you could sort of do a quick overview of what consistency is and then how we could actually use that tangibly to get a result.

Brian Ahearn:

So, a question comes up a lot. Which of these principles is most powerful? And I always say it depends. It depends on the situation you're in. But I do say on the whole if you look at the sales process, the principle of consistency I believe is the most important principle. Because it's predicated in large measure on asking good questions. Asking good questions, if you were a potential client in whatever field somebody is working, asking you the right questions to get you to state what it is that you want, what it is that you need, aspirationally what you would hope for, if I learn that, and I come back and then very clearly show you how I've met the things that you said, Andy, were important to you. Not things that I said are important with my product, but that you said, that becomes very compelling for you to say yes when we ultimately get to that closing part of the sale.

Because it's hard to say no when that person has done everything that you've asked of them, when they maybe have given you the three top features that you needed, and they've done it within a price range that you said was acceptable. So, asking questions, especially early in the process of qualifying, does so many things. It engages the principle of consistency later on when I can come back and say, "Well, Andy, remember when you told me," and then I come in and I show you what I'm doing. But it informs my giving. The more specific my giving is to you as an individual and not just generic, the better you feel about the giving. The more I learn about you, the better job I can do using social proof by bringing in, "Hey, Andy, I remember when you said, and I've got a customer who is just like," and you start to think, "Wow, if they're benefiting, then maybe I will."

And then the other thing it informs, too, is the principle of liking. When I'm asking those questions and you tell me things about yourself, then I can step in and say, "You know what? I do that too." And all of a sudden, we're engaging liking. So, questions support this principle of consistency, but they also inform so much else of what we're trying to accomplish, and the good thing is when you ask the right questions, you don't have to carry the conversation. You ask a question, you allow the person the space, you display good listening skills, it piques your curiosity, you ask another question, but you really are relieved from having to carry this conversation. And I know this is an unfortunate thing to say, but I'm sure the vast majority of your listeners are thinking, "I've never

talked to a salesperson like that,” because they usually show up and throw up, and they hope something will stick to make me buy their product or service.

Andy Luttrell:

You know, as you’re saying that, I wonder if that also leverages liking too, or maybe you said this, but when you get the person to talk, this is just like harkening back. I remember I read the *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, or a little... When I first saw it, I was like, “Oh, influence,” but before I knew the science of it. And part of it was get the person to talk, right? Don’t talk more than the other person. And I remember doing this. I was having lunch with someone sophomore year of college and I just asked a couple questions and let him talk, and at the end, he said, “This was a great conversation.” I was like, “Yeah, because you did all the talking.”

But that’s another way in which that leverages like. We created rapport and I got to just sort of sit back and not have to drive the show.

Brian Ahearn:

Right.

Andy Luttrell:

And so, there too. But to get back to consistency, just to make sure that this is clear, this is something where someone says, “These are the three things that are the most important to me,” right? You can deduce that from what they’re saying. And so, you can come back and say, “Well, you’ve told me that if we could do these three things, you’d be good to go, and as it happens, we have this road forward that accomplishes those three things.” And so, you essentially sort of lock in this commitment of, “Well, you said this. It would be kind of weird for you right now to all of a sudden backtrack from it now that it’s right there on the table.” Is that... That’s the idea, right?

Brian Ahearn:

Yes. And I don’t want listeners to think that you’re trying to box somebody into this decision, because if you’re doing this the right way through the sales process, if we’ve gotten to the point where we had the first meeting and I’m really thoughtfully engaging this principle of liking, because first and foremost I say, “You know what? I want to like the people that I work with.” And that rests more on me than it does them. It’s about my curiosity, and asking questions, and getting to know them, and paying the genuine compliments, doing these things that not only might get them to like me, but convince me what a good person they are. And as I do that, and I really come to like you, Andy, then I naturally am gonna put out what I believe is in your best interest, and you’re gonna receive it that way. Not that you’ll always agree it’s the right product or service, but you receive it differently.

So, by the time we get to the presentation part, and I say, “You know, Andy, when we met the first time and I was talking about what we do, and what you’re looking for, and you told me you need A and B and C, and I think by the end of this short presentation you’re gonna see that we did A, B, and C, and we’ve done a couple of other things too that I think are gonna really make you excited about what we have to offer.” Again, I’m thoughtfully doing that, because I want to remind you that you’re the one who put these forth, and now you’re thinking about that. You’re like, “Yeah, Brian’s done A, B, and C, and I didn’t even expect D and E. This is awesome.” Those are

the kind of things that make the whole process that much smoother, and you feel like you really are getting what it was that you needed and wanted, and I'm feeling good about giving you something that I know is genuinely helping you. That's a win for both of us.

Andy Luttrell:

That's a good transition to talk about ethics, so a core part of the training, and writing, and by the way, I looked at some of your LinkedIn courses this morning, and they're real good.

Brian Ahearn:

Thank you. I appreciate it.

Andy Luttrell:

I was like, "Oh, this is great." The production, it just flowed very well, but a cornerstone of all of that is this idea of implementing these strategies ethically.

Brian Ahearn:

Right.

Andy Luttrell:

And in the first book, you do this analysis of Bernie Madoff as an unethical implementer of all of these principles. So, this is one place where I want to sort of highlight that a lot of the work that you would do in influence is about engaging with people, and really is a contrast to when I think about persuasion as changing minds and changing opinions, and this podcast, Opinion Science, is about that kind of communication, and I would say the perspective you take is just slightly off from that in terms of you're a little less interested in changing someone's opinion about some issue. But I think the question of ethical uses of persuasion strategies cuts in both directions, and so for you, what does it mean for persuasion and influence to be implemented ethically versus unethically?

Brian Ahearn:

Okay. Well, first of all, I will say when it comes to persuasion, I love Aristotle's definition. The art of getting someone to do something they wouldn't ordinarily do if you didn't ask. Sometimes we're not so concerned about what somebody thinks about something, we just want them to do that. And so, you've got a young daughter, and there's gonna be a time when she gets older, and you're not gonna care if she thinks a clean room is a good idea or not, or you're gonna just say, "I want the room clean." And so, you want to change the behavior.

The industry that I came out of, insurance, huge problem with distracted driving, and I could share stats with people that would change their thinking, like, "Wow, I didn't realize it's such a big problem." But if they get in their car and they pull their phone out, they're still part of the problem, right? I want to make sure that we change the behavior. So, that's how I view that. Changing hearts and minds along the way is awesome, and sometimes doing that is what leads to the lasting change, but sometimes we also just need to get somebody in the moment to do that thing, so that's how I view it.

But when it comes to the ethics part, there's three things that we focus on. The first thing is am I being truthful? And Andy, it's not enough to simply tell the truth. We can't hide the truth. If I have information that I know would change your decision and I withhold it, and then you say yes, and down the road you find out that information and you say, "Brian, why didn't you tell me?" My saying, "You didn't ask," is not defensible. But what you learn when you understand these principles is I can talk about shortcomings in my product, or weaknesses in my case, and actually, if I do it the right way, I can give you... I can inform you. I can gain credibility. And then I can transition and start talking about what my strengths are and you begin to focus more on that, but you're still fully informed.

So, that's the first thing. We tell the truth, and we don't hide the truth. The second thing, we only utilize principles that are naturally available. So, you talked about that earlier. No gold star for using all seven principles. We use the principles that are naturally available to more fully inform somebody into what we hope is a yes decision. And then the third thing that we talk about is it can't just be good for me, the requestor, it also has to be good for you. And I like to put it this way: Good for you, good for me, then we're good to go.

Andy Luttrell:

When I was reading the Madoff article, the article that you had written, the piece of the book, what I wondered was how much of the ethics come from the use of the strategy itself? So, a lot of this seems to be kind of what you're hinting at, and I know what Cialdini's talked about too, where it's like I can't lie, right? I can't tell you 300 people have bought my product if nobody's ever bought it. I can't use social proof if it's based on a lie. But I also don't want to... The Madoff article is more like, "Okay, well, maybe all of these strategies were actually used fine but to an unethical end."

Brian Ahearn:

Yes.

Andy Luttrell:

So, I'm curious where you come down on that, right? Are those both what you're concerned about? Or do you go, listen, I may disagree with your goal, but as long as you're using the strategies without lying to people, I guess good for you, good for me is maybe where this breaks down.

Brian Ahearn:

That's exactly where it breaks down because he knew that what he was selling was fraudulent and that at some point, the string could be pulled and the whole house of cards could come down. If what he was selling was truly legitimate and somehow he had some understanding about the market that nobody else had, and if every one of his clients wanted to withdraw their money, they would have that money there, then I'm not sure that any of the particular approaches that he used would have been unethical.

The scarcity thing, you couldn't just pick up the phone and call Bernie Madoff. He dealt with the wealthy and the powerful. You had to get a referral. That made people want to do business more. At one point, you could have considered him an expert. I mean, he helped found Nasdaq and some of the ethical components. I don't know where it was that he left that path, but he had real expertise.

Within his community, there was the principle of unity, because being a man of Jewish descent, there was a deeper trust among people who were Jewish. That's not unethical to leverage those things the way that he was, but it all fell apart in that it was good for him, but it wasn't good for the other people. At least the majority who ultimately got stuck holding. There were some people who got their money out and they were like, "Yeah, fine." But that was all made on a house of cards too, so I think somebody can utilize these principles, but what is the motive behind it? What are they offering? And they can lead you to a bad end there.

Andy Luttrell:

So, this question's gonna make me sound terrible, but it's just a thoughtful exploration, which is why does it matter? Ultimately, what is the importance of doing this ethically? In some ways, as a scientist, I go, "Well, all I care about is how these principles function." You're gonna use it how you want to use it. But from your perspective, why is it such an important thing to emphasize the ethical use of these things?

Brian Ahearn:

Because I think when trust breaks down, then we're all harmed, because if somebody had listened to this podcast and only focused on how people could use this unethically, there could be people who legitimately have a desire to help them through their product, or their service, or maybe through their friendship, whatever it may be. They legitimately have something that would make that person better off, and yet that person is saying, "No. I know that there's strings attached here, there's something ulterior. I don't trust you." And when trust begins to break down as society on the whole, then we all start losing. I mean, we see a lot of that with the politicization of COVID and who we are trusting and who we aren't. There's people who legitimately have decades of experience, but all of it is under question now, and so people are like, "Well, who can I trust?" And what are they doing? They're just going into their own tunnel for people who are giving them information that will confirm what they already believe.

In other words, there's no chance of maybe persuading some of those people. So, that's why I think it's so incredibly important that we do this ethically, and then when we see people do things unethically, that we call it out. And I try to do that sometimes in my blog posts. When I see things, especially like what politicians are doing, I do my best to call it out, because it ultimately will hurt us all.

Andy Luttrell:

There's another wrinkle of it, too, so that's sort of a grand, ra-ra humanity, let's be good, moral people, and not let the fabric of our society just completely be torn asunder. But there's another part of it too that I gathered from your writing, which is that you, the seller, have a lot to gain by doing these things ethically, and I think that stems from your perspective of selling as a relationship, right? So, just some psych background, from the moral psychology literature, there's some people who say that what morality really is doing is it's helping these relationships churn, and that the most important component of moral character, and me actually affiliating with another person, is that perception of trust, right? So, the moment you lose trust from a person who sees through your shady practices, you've lost the claim. You've lost the sale. And so, in addition to the fuzzy "let's all be good, virtuous people," message, there's also the selfish utilitarian explanation, too, which is like if you actually want to win, you have to play the game ethically,

right? You can only get ahead so long before it breaks down if you're leveraging these principles in the wrong way.

Brian Ahearn:

Right. You know, you can never fully separate yourself from your own interests, I guess, because I said before that using the principle of liking shouldn't be just about me getting you, Andy, to like me so you'll do what I want. I selfishly say I want to like the people that I work with. People that I interact with, customers, clients, whoever it is, I really want to, so I am going to put myself out there. Now, does that benefit you? Yeah, I think it does when you start to really sense that, "Hey, this guy Brian really does like me." It's not about me trying to get you to like me. It's like, "Wow, he's doing things, saying things, I can tell, he likes me." But there is still I guess I self-component there, because I already said I want to like the people that I associate with, and I recognize that making that happen rests more with me and the decisions that I will make about what I do, what I say, how I think about those people, than it will those people.

And I'll give you a personal example that on my phone, I have a playlist for my wife and a playlist for my daughter. When I'm going to spend time with them, it's not uncommon for me to spend time listening to those songs that make me think well of them. Do they benefit? Absolutely, because I come home and I am in a much more loving, engaging mood, so that's better for them. Is it better for me? Absolutely, because they treat me better too. I recognize that. So, there's always a little bit of a self-component, but I hope people can recognize it's a little more selfless because there's no guarantee that they will treat me well that day. There's no guarantee that you will like me as much as I would hope so that we could have a relationship. But I've learned enough now that I don't let that discourage me, because I'm not gonna win over everybody. That's okay, but I still get to practice these skills that ultimately benefit me and other people that I come in contact with.

Andy Luttrell:

Yeah. That's great. As a way of wrapping up, I wanted to give you the chance to talk about a new book in your pipeline, so if you want to just give folks an overview of what that project is all about and what they could expect from it.

Brian Ahearn:

Okay. Well, my first book, Influence PEOPLE, was very psychology driven with an emphasis on application. The second book, Persuasive Selling, it's about selling, and I recognize there are some people who will not pick up a psychology-based book, and there's a lot of people who won't read a sales book, and so having read books that were business related but story formats gave me this idea, and since I had more time with COVID, I thought, "I wonder if I could write a story that would teach these principles that I've taught in these first couple of books, but to a whole new audience." So, I've written a book. I'm tentatively calling it The Influencer with the subtitle "the secrets to success and happiness" because I really believe if you learn how to ethically influence others, you'll enjoy a lot more success at the office, and your relationships will be better at home, and so you'll have more happiness.

So, this book follows the life of a young guy named John Andrews. From the time he's born, he goes off to college, he takes a psych 101 class, learns a little about these principles, but doesn't

really fully get the application until he gets his first job and he's out in the real world, and he begins to see the application because he's learning from coaches, and mentors, and clients, with his personal relationship, and so it really follows his journey where he is learning about these things. It's coming from head to heart. And the other thing that's been interesting, Andy, is it's been a way for me to honor people that I've learned from, because the more I wrote, the more I started to realize, "Oh, this chapter, it's because I learned this from Al. This chapter, it's because I learned this from Loring." And so, it's a way to honor these people too, to say I really took away something that impacted the entirety of my life, because I still remember it decades later.

Andy Luttrell:

Well, good. Well, folks can keep an eye out for that, and I really appreciate you taking the time to talk about all this stuff and the work that you've done, so thanks for being here.

Brian Ahearn:

Oh, you're welcome. It was my pleasure. I'm glad we finally connected.

Andy Luttrell:

Alright that'll do it for another episode of Opinion Science. Thanks to Brian Ahearn for having a lovely chat. To learn more about him and his work, you can go to influencepeople.biz, which has links to his books and other information. The new book again is *The Influencer*—you can find a link to it in the show notes.

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Okeedoke—that's it for me. Hope your year's off to a good start, and I'll see you in a couple weeks for more Opinion Science.