



# The science of the hard sell

SO you think this would never happen to you? You'd never sign a contract for a product that you didn't really need or want?

Paul Harrison, a social psychologist and consumer behaviourist at Deakin University, will make you think again.

In a speech to a conference of Australian consumer groups last July, Dr Harrison, showed how marketers use basic concepts about human behaviour to manipulate consumers.

The first of these concepts described by Dr Harrison is that human beings would prefer to trust others than to distrust them.

The second is that humans also have faith in institutions and people in positions of authority that they will do the right thing and act in our best interests.

The third is that our brains are vain, deluded, untrustworthy, bigoted, pigheaded and easily flattered. "We want to believe nice things about ourselves, and what's more that we don't make mistakes. Our ego is very protective."

And fourthly, while we like to think we can make rational decisions based on information provided to us, this is not always so. Our decision-making is incredibly flawed, subject to prejudice and stereotype, and our ego works to filter any information that might challenge our current attitudes, Dr Harrison said.

All this makes us vulnerable to clever sales techniques. Add to this the fact that our society is based on the ideology of the individual, which assumes that as individuals we all have control over our behaviour, and therefore must take the blame when things go wrong, and you have a recipe for consumer problems, Dr Harrison said.

This is especially so when people are asked to make a decision under stressful conditions. People under stress, or some form of pressure, are less able to think clearly or rationally, he said.

This is even more pronounced when they are given lots of information on a complex

topic that they don't understand or haven't had any experience in.

In these situations, people often rely on what is called "peripheral" information to make their choices. This includes things like colours, previous experience with similar situations; even how the information looks on the page or screen, or the way the person giving them the information is dressed.

"Put a person under stressful and unexpected conditions, such as being at a shopping centre with children, surrounded by competing sensory factors, such as noise and bright lights, and our ability to reason or rationally consider all the options is seriously depleted," he told the conference.

That's why, parents at a shopping centre who are confronted with emotional slogans such as "Why should other kids be better at maths than yours?" Or, "Maths = Confidence = Success" are more easily persuaded, he said.

"Personally, I think that marketers need to be more careful when dealing with vulnerable groups and individuals, and should be taking a lot more responsibility for the problems that are created as a result of affluenza, and over-consumption."

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