

00:04

Imagine you're on a shopping trip. You've been looking for a luxury-line dinnerware set to add to your kitchen collection. As it turns out, your local department store has announced a sale on the very set you've been looking for, so you rush to the store to find a 24-piece set on sale. Eight dinner plates, all in good condition; eight soup and salad bowls, all in good condition; and eight dessert plates, all in good condition. Now, consider for a moment how much you would be willing to pay for this dinnerware set.

00:39

Now imagine an alternate scenario. Not having seen this 24-piece luxury set, you rush to the store to find a 40-piece dinnerware set on sale. Eight dinner plates, all in good condition; eight soup and salad bowls, all in good condition; eight dessert plates, all in good condition; eight cups, two of them are broken; eight saucers, seven of them are broken. Now consider for a moment how much you would be willing to pay for this 40-piece dinnerware set.

01:10

This is the premise of a clever experiment by Christopher Hsee from the University of Chicago. It's also the question that I've asked hundreds of students in my classroom. What were their responses? On average, when afforded the 24-piece luxury set, they were willing to spend 390 pounds for the set. When afforded the 40-piece dinnerware set, on average, they were willing to spend a whopping 192 pounds for this dinnerware set. Strictly speaking, these are an irrational set of numbers. You'll notice the 40-piece dinnerware set includes all elements you would get in the 24-piece set, plus six cups and one saucer. And not only are you not willing to spend what you will for the 24-piece set, you're only willing to spend roughly half of what you will for that 24-piece set.

02:08

What you're witnessing here is what's referred to as the dilution effect. The broken items, if you will, dilute our overall perceived value of that entire set. Turns out this cognitive quirk at the checkout counter has important implications for our ability to be heard and listened to when we speak up. Whether you are speaking up against a failing strategy, speaking against the grain of a shared opinion among friends or speaking truth to power, this takes courage.

02:48

Often, the points that are raised are both legitimate but also shared by others. But sadly, and far too often, we see people speak up but fail to influence others in the way that they had hoped for. Put another way, their message was sound, but their delivery proved faulty. If we could understand this cognitive bias, it holds important implications for how we could craft and mold our messages to have the impact we all desire ... to be more influential as a communicator.

03:28

Let's exit the aisles of the shopping center and enter a context in which we practice almost automatically every day: the judgment of others. Let me introduce you to two individuals. Tim studies 31 hours a week outside of class. Tom, like Tim, also spends 31 hours outside of class studying. He has a brother and two sisters, he visits his grandparents, he once went on a blind date, plays pool every two months. When participants are asked to evaluate the cognitive aptitude of these individuals, or more importantly, their scholastic achievement, on average, people rate Tim to have a significantly higher GPA than that of Tom. But why? After all, both of them spend 31 hours a week outside of class.

04:27

Turns out in these contexts, when we're presented such information, our minds utilize two categories of information: diagnostic and nondiagnostic. Diagnostic information is information of relevance to the valuation that is being made. Nondiagnostic is information that is irrelevant or inconsequential to that valuation. And when both categories of information are mixed, dilution occurs. The very fact that Tom has a brother and two sisters or plays pool every two months dilutes the diagnostic information, or more importantly, dilutes the value and weight of that diagnostic information, namely that he studies 31 hours a week outside of class.

05:21

The most robust psychological explanation for this is one of averaging. In this model, we take in information, and those information are afforded a weighted score. And our minds do not add those pieces of information, but rather average those pieces of information. So when you introduce irrelevant or even weak arguments, those weak arguments, if you will, reduce the weight of your overall argument.

05:55

A few years ago, I landed in Philadelphia one August evening for a conference. Having just gotten off a transatlantic flight, I checked into my hotel room, put my feet up and decided to distract my jet lag with some TV. An ad caught my attention. The ad was an ad for a pharmaceutical drug. Now if you're the select few who've not had the pleasure of witnessing these ads, the typical architecture of these ads is you might see a happy couple prancing through their garden, reveling in the joy that they got a full night's sleep with the aid of the sleep drug. Because of FDA regulations, the last few seconds of this one-minute ad needs to be devoted to the side effects of that drug. And what you'll typically hear is a hurried voice-over that blurts out "Side effects include heart attack, stroke, blah, blah, blah," and will end with something like "itchy feet."

07:02

(Laughter)

07:03

Guess what "itchy feet" does to people's risk assessment of "heart attack" and "stroke"? It dilutes it. Imagine for a moment an alternate commercial that says "This drug cures your sleep problems, side effects are heart attack and stroke." Stop. Now all of a sudden you're thinking, "I don't mind staying up all night."

07:26

(Laughter)

07:28

Turns out going to sleep is important, but so is waking up.

07:32

(Laughter)

07:35

Let me give you a sample from our research. So this ad that I witnessed essentially triggered a research project with my PhD student, Hemant, over the next two years. And in one of these studies, we presented participants an actual print ad that appeared in a magazine.

07:56

[Soothing rest for mind and body.]

07:58

You'll notice the last line is devoted to the side effects of this drug. For half of the participants, we showed the ad in its entirety, which included both major side effects as well as minor side effects. To the other half of the participants, we showed the same ad with one small modification: we extracted just four words out of the sea of text. Specifically, we extracted the minor side effects. And then both sets of participants rated that drug.

08:33

What we find is that individuals who were exposed to both the major side effects as well as the minor side effects rated the drug's overall severity to be significantly lower than those who were only exposed to the major side effects. Furthermore, they also showed greater attraction towards consuming this drug. In a follow-up study, we even find that individuals are willing to pay more to buy the drug which they were exposed to that had both major side effects as well as minor side effects, compared to just major side effects alone. So it turns out pharmaceutical ads, by listing both major side effects as well as minor side effects, paradoxically dilute participants' and potential consumers' overall risk assessment of that drug.

09:23

Going beyond shopping expeditions, going beyond the evaluation of the scholastic aptitude of others, and beyond evaluating risk in our environment, what this body of research tells us is that in the world of communicating for the purposes of influence, quality trumps quantity. By increasing the number of arguments, you do not strengthen your case, but rather you actively weaken it. Put another way, you cannot increase the quality of an argument by simply increasing the quantity of your argument. The next time you want to speak up in a meeting, speak in favor of a government legislation that you're deeply passionate about, or simply want to help a friend see the world through a different lens, it is important to note that the delivery of your message is every bit as important as its content.

10:27

Stick to your strong arguments, because your arguments don't add up in the minds of the receiver, they average out.

10:37

Thank you.

10:38

(Applause)