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Reciprocity /

How gifts, including free samples and giveaways, can lead to a feeling of obligation



What is it?

People feel obliged to return favours.

Where does it come from?

Sociologist Alvin Gouldner is sometimes credited with establishing reciprocity as a general societal norm in his 1960 [preliminary statement](#). But of course people knew about reciprocity long before then. In fact Gouldner began his paper by quoting Cicero, a Roman statesman born in 106 BC, who said, 'All men distrust one forgetful of a benefit.'

Why is it important for marketers?

Robert Cialdini named reciprocity one of the six principles of persuasion in his 1984 book, *Influence*. He explained how businesses can exploit the norm by offering prospective customers small gifts and favours to create an obligation that increases the chance of a sale.

Is it well-established?

Very much so. Sociologist Phillip Kunz conducted one of the most-cited [studies](#) in 1974. He sent handwritten Christmas cards, complete with a friendly note and family photo, to 578 strangers, 20% of whom responded with a card of their own. But there's an entire library of literature exploring the effect of reciprocity from different angles, including [one](#) that suggests the obligation to reciprocate weakens over time.

Are there any good advertising examples?

Every free sample and giveaway is an example of reciprocity. Amid the Covid-19 Pandemic, Dettol in Pakistan [distributed](#) over-sized prayer mats to encourage people to stay a safe distance from one another while worshipping.

In another creative example of reciprocity in marketing, [Google Cloud](#) spent a considerable sum to produce biographies of some of France's most powerful – and most elusive – business executives, and then used the books as ice-breakers to land sales meetings with the bigwigs. When we wrote about the campaign, two of the 10 contacted executives had signed deals with Google Cloud.

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