

The Persuasive Role of Incidental Similarity on Attitudes and Purchase Intentions in a Sales Context

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Introduction

As any well-seasoned agent knows, creating a connection with the client is essential. Connections can be made in a variety of ways and usually hinge on some common value or shared demographic. The intent of our research was to explore the effects of incidental similarities, or chance similarities, such as a shared name, birthday or birthplace, on the buyer-seller relationship. Our findings revealed that these types of connections enhance the client's favorable attitude and increase their intention to purchase.

Defining Incidental Similarity

Incidental similarities refer to the trivial aspects of our lives that we share with another person. Examples of incidental similarities include a shared birthday or a common hometown. These "coincidences" aid in meeting a person's need to belong and may appear trivial on the surface, however, within the context of a buyer-seller relationship, can be building blocks for success. In the context of real estate, being aware of this phenomenon can assist agents as they strive to make those vital connections with the client.

How Common are Incidental Similarities?

While it often seems uncanny when you meet someone who shares an incidental similarity with you, the truth is these chance similarities are not as rare as they sound. For example, the chance for at least two people to have the same birthday is greater than 50% in a group as small as 23 people (McKinney 1996). Often times, these incidental similarities may go unnoticed, if the agent does not investigate such questions. Develop a set of casual questions to ask the client when making introductions. This way you can easily identify any incidental similarities from the onset of the relationship and thus benefit from the positive effects.

Effect of Incidental Similarities on Buyer-Seller Relationship

Research has shown that the existence of incidental similarities attributes to such positive outcomes as increased liking, persuasion and cooperation between individuals (e.g., Burger et al. 2004; Miller, Downs and Prentice 1998). Furthermore, our research shows that within the context of a sales relationship, buyers' favorable attitudes and intentions to purchase both increase when a incidental similarity exists. These two positive outcomes show that incidental similarities have both an immediate and a long term benefit to be gained. For the immediate sale,

agents will benefit from an increased willingness to purchase. Agents will also gain long-term rewards as client's increased favorable attitude will increase future activities.

Social Connectedness

An important element to our study was the idea of social connectedness, or what is known as the emotional expanse connecting the self and others (Lee and Robbins 1995). This connectedness is the foundation that paves the way for the positive results arising from incidental similarities. Social connectedness involves the need to form and maintain strong, stable interpersonal relationships (Baumeister and Leary 1995). The need to belong is universal because it is a need that all humans share. Incidental similarity is one way to fulfill our need to belong because it closes the emotional distance between two people.

Consider How to Find Incidental Similarities with Clients

Many businesses have begun to capitalize on the positive effect of incidental similarities by providing personal information about their agents or employees on their homepages. For example in another industry, we find many fitness clubs providing full bios of their fitness trainers, citing information to potential customers that does not necessarily speak to their credibility as a professional, but instead opens the door for customers to make connections. As a real-estate agent, consider how you might market yourself to those clients who may share some common ground. A client may be more inclined to work with you if he or she knows that you share a similarity.

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