

An Interview with Blair Warren by Jo Han Mok - on The Forbidden Keys to Persuasion

JHM: Blair, you've been shrouded in mystery, and hardly anything is known about you. Even Joe doesn't really reveal much about you. Is that deliberate? Or is it just smart marketing?

BW: Actually, it's neither. The "mystery" surrounding me is simply a byproduct of the work I do. Since the beginning of my work in television back in 1984, I've been behind-the-scenes as a photographer, writer, director, producer or whatever role I happen to be fulfilling at the time. And when I really started pursuing my research into human nature about twelve years ago, I found that playing the role of an "invisible observer" was one of the best ways to learn.

I probably won't get invited to too many parties after I say this, but I'm always watching and studying people around me. What they say versus what they do, where they sit in relation to others, how they respond to pressure, whatever, and I draw lessons from all of this. You should see the notebooks I have filled with this type of material. Of course, to do this effectively those being observed must never know they're being observed or else they become self-conscious and fail to act naturally.

So in a sense, I've always fostered a degree of anonymity, not as a marketing strategy, but as a necessary condition of the type of work I do. Of course, when Joe Vitale encouraged me to "step out" and begin teaching others what I have learned, I found that this anonymity had an additional benefit as well. It has made a number of people enormously curious about my work.

JHM: What qualifies you as the expert on Persuasion? I mean hardly anyone knows you. How do we know what you preach is true?

BW: This is a great question and one that should not only be asked of an "unknown" like myself, but of anyone to whom we look for information.

First off, I don't consider myself an "expert" on persuasion. The reason I avoid the label "expert" is that I don't believe that persuasion, or any other aspect of interpersonal communication, can be "mastered". Since the human element is always in play in these situations and is always unpredictable, the best we can do is increase our understanding and appreciation of the principles involved, but we do not "master" them. The moment we think we have is the moment we stop learning.

I have, however, spent an enormous amount of time and energy in studying and applying these principles and find that much of what I have learned is of value and interest to others who wish to improve their persuasion skills.

As for what I "preach" being "true", that is ultimately a question for those with whom I work to decide.

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JHM: You call your material *The Forbidden Keys to Persuasion*. It sounds sinister. Can you explain how you developed it and what it is designed to accomplish?

BW: As you can probably already tell, I've long been fascinated with human nature, and like others who share a similar interest, I began studying everything I could find on the subject. Then, about six years ago, I became interested in how cult leaders and con artists were able to wield so much power over their followers and get them to engage in the most bizarre behavior when the rest of us had trouble peddling things that other people actually need. In other words, I wanted to find out what it is that cult leaders know that the rest of us don't.

As I began to explore this question, I began to realize that rather than being based on "sneaky" tricks or techniques, the power these people hold is largely due to a very clear understanding of human nature. Rather than dealing with people the way they should be, or the way they would like them to be, they deal with people the way they actually are and the results they achieve reflect the power of this approach.

When I realized that the same principles and ideas they had used for negative purposes could be used for positive ones, I decided to teach what I had learned to others - not only to increase their own powers of persuasion, but to protect themselves from the same powers they might encounter in others.

JHM: In your material, you discuss Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, then claim to have discovered a "need", specifically the need for mental engagement, that, well, almost makes a "mockery" of Maslow's work. How did you come about discovering the missing "need" of mental engagement?

BW: First, I don't believe I made a mockery of Maslow's work at all. His work has stood the test of time and is of tremendous value for those interested in human potential. And the fact that his hierarchy of needs is so well known is precisely the reason I make reference to it in my work. You see, the needs Maslow identified were related specifically to the realm of human potential and were meant to describe a spectrum of behavior over the course of an individual's life. I found this fascinating when I first learned of it and can see its usefulness in studying the process of self-actualization. But when I tried to apply the needs Maslow identified to persuasion, I didn't find his distinctions to be of much value as it was almost impossible to determine where on the scale an individual was at any given time. This led me to reconsider just what, if anything, people tend to pursue that, if understood, would give us a greater ability to persuade them. And with this question in mind, I didn't have to look any further than my own work in television to find the answer.

People need mental engagement. They don't want it. They don't prefer it. And they don't desire it. They NEED it.

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Just watch how people go through their lives and you will see that there is truly only one thing they cannot tolerate, boredom. We can learn to adjust to and tolerate just about any other psychological state, fear, stress, desire, or whatever. But boredom cannot be tolerated. In a very real way, boredom equates to death. We will do almost anything to alleviate it. And the irony is, as we all know, it is exceedingly difficult to alleviate one's own boredom without an outside stimulus. Television, radio, books, friends, the internet, even a telemarketer can do the trick. This is great news for those interested in persuasion.

I once came across the following quote from a biography of Voltaire, "...mankind, who dreads boredom even more than anxiety, is eternally grateful to those who make life throb to a swifter, stronger beat." Those who mentally engage us do just this – they make life throb to a swifter, stronger beat.

Now, is mental engagement a "real" need? I'll leave that for the philosophers, psychologists and psychiatrists to sort out. What I do know is, when one comes to think of mental engagement as a bona-fide need, one treats it with more respect and consideration. And this directly leads to a profound increase in one's ability to capture, control and direct other people's attention. And this is the first step in all persuasion.

JHM: How do we apply the power that Jim Jones and David Koresh wielded to online marketing? Can the very same power be used in such a cold digital environment?

BW: Absolutely. It's already being used all the time. Pay attention to the news and you'll frequently hear stories about people who leave their families for "strangers" they met over the internet. The son of one of my friends is currently considering dropping out of college and moving from Texas to Colorado to join a religious group that he has only corresponded with over the internet. He's never talked to them on the phone, seen pictures of them, or held a letter they sent to him through the mail. The relationship was built entirely through e-mail and it was done so in a way that was strong enough for him to consider leaving his family and friends of nearly twenty years.

Now, as to how to do this online, there is far too much involved to cover in an interview, but there are a few points that can help us move in this direction.

First, most people have a much too narrow idea of how to build such a relationship online. They think that having an autoresponder stick someone's first or last name in the subject line of an e-mail is "personalized" marketing. This may be an improvement, but it is far from personalized marketing.

These types of relationships are built over time and can't be hurried with a two or three-step sales process. So one of the first ideas is to slow down and allow the relationship to build more naturally. Of course, this is almost sacrilegious given the hyper-speed at

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which not only technology is moving, but our attempts to communicate with one another as well. Everyone wants the instant answer to their persuasion problems and in searching for it, overlooks the true power that a slower, more personalized approach provides.

A second point is to become more sensitive to the nature of e-mail itself. I don't think many people have a very deep appreciation of just how much room for misinterpretation exists in cyberspace. E-mail messages tend to lack one thing that most other written forms of communication have, and that is an implied context. In other words, when we read something in a book, magazine or newspaper, we automatically have some expectations about what we will read before we've ever read a word. Is the writer conservative or liberal? Is this an ad, editorial or news? Etc. And these expectations help us to interpret the writing properly. E-mail, however, often lacks this context and thus, when there is ambiguity in the writing there is no way to predict how the meaning will be interpreted. In building a relationship with others, whether in person or over the internet, it is critical to minimize misunderstandings.

Now, for those people who rely on mass mailings and don't have the luxury of developing such relationships over time, they can still help strengthen their relationships simply by hitting on some other aspects of human nature, specifically our hidden addictions, which I'm sure we'll touch on in a bit.

JHM: Is there anyway we can "train" ourselves to have such a power. Like a pianist who practices hours a day at the piano, is there any drill we can do?

BW: Yes. We can awaken our sense of curiosity about human nature and realize that some of the most valuable persuasion lessons we will ever learn are already all around us just waiting to be grasped. Watch movies. Listen to comedians and talk radio. Go watch a magician perform on stage. Eavesdrop on a teenage boy talking to his girlfriend. These are the types of places where you will uncover some of the real secrets of persuasion because these are the places where the consequences of our actions are real.

Textbooks, tapes and seminars can give us valuable information, but I believe it is the people and events we encounter in our own lives that hold the most powerful secrets of all.

That is why I have been so reluctant to simply write down what I have learned and let other people absorb it. I don't believe that is an effective way to learn anything. When I work with others, I not only want to teach them what I have learned, but encourage them to go out and spot the principles being used all around them. When they come to see that persuasion is not something that happens once in a while, but is a never-ending aspect of human interaction, everything we encounter can teach us something of value.

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JHM: You describe our need for mental engagement as the Achilles Heel of the human mind, can you give us specific examples on how to use it in marketing?

BW: I believe the most important thing we can keep in mind when preparing our marketing materials is that just because something should interest another person, doesn't mean it will. Another way of saying this is, just because something is important to us, doesn't mean it will be important to our prospect.

I am always amazed at how far off base some clients can be when it comes to understanding their customers. I routinely hear clients who are almost obsessed with communicating some piece of information that is vitally important to them, but of no interest to their customer.

A number of copywriters such as Joe Sugarman, Dan Kennedy and others have rightly pointed out that the purpose of the first line of any copy is to get you to read the second. The purpose of the second is to get you to read the third, etc. And while we all nod our heads when we hear this advice, if we falsely believe that what interests us will interest our prospects, it's as if we're using the right weapon, but the wrong bullets.

To break out of this trap, we must gain a sense of objectivity about our product, service, or message and truly consider it from our prospects perspective. Though this may sound like common sense, it is far from being common practice. I often tell clients it is okay to fall in love with another person, a type of food or a style of music, but never fall in love with your ideas when it comes to marketing.

JHM: What can we learn from Brother John Hammon? I'm a BIG Fan of his. The 2 card trick is SHEER genius. Can you tell our readers out there more about what you learned from him?

BW: For those who don't know of him, Brother John Hammon was a legend in the world of card magic. He developed a number of techniques that are used by some of the biggest name magicians in the world. When I began to study magic in an effort to learn the psychological aspects of the magician's trade and I learned that Brother Hamman lived right in my hometown of San Antonio, I immediately arranged to meet him.

We met probably a half a dozen times over the last two years of his life and discussed magic for hours on end. And in that time he completely changed my understanding of exactly how magicians perform the miracles they do.

I remember asking him to help me understand the mechanics of his effects, to show me what moves to make, when to make them, and how to make them look natural. And while he explained these things to me, he routinely pointed out that I was missing the point. Yes, the "moves" and "techniques" were important, but what was more critical was to

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understand that the real magic was made possible by controlling the attention of the spectator. When I came to understand how important this was to the magician, I realized it was equally important to the persuader.

At that point, I began to focus less on the tricks and techniques of persuasion and more on understanding how to control the attention of those whom we wish to persuade.

JHM: I've become fascinated with Leni Riefenstahl, the woman who directed the infamous Nazi propaganda film, *Triumph of the Will*. You have studied her film and what made it so effective. How can we use her techniques and apply them to marketing?

*BW: First of all, anyone who is interested in marketing and persuasion would do well to watch and study *Triumph of the Will*. I first watched it simply to study Riefenstahl's techniques as a filmmaker, but was immediately struck by the persuasive power of her film. If there has ever been a truly hypnotic film, this is it.*

As a propaganda film, you might expect it to be packed with powerful arguments designed to drive home all the reasons people should support the cause and offer their support. And if you expect this, you'd be wrong.

Of course, the film does touch on these areas, but not nearly to the degree you would expect. Instead, the film is almost a nonstop stream of majestic music and powerful images designed to do nothing less than deify Hitler and equate his cause and his followers with all things glorious and invincible. Though there are periodic speeches interspersed throughout the film, there is little doubt that it is Riefenstahl's magic that lifted this film out of the realm of simple propaganda and into the realm of legend.

When we consider the fact that Hitler and his Minister of Propaganda, Josef Goebbels, had so much faith in this film that it was shown in German theaters during the entire reign of the Nazi Party, we can begin to appreciate the power and potential the imagery and symbolism in this film held over those who viewed it.

For marketers I would say the lesson from this film is to focus at least as much time on the context of your message as on the content of the message itself. Too often we struggle with the words, the bullet points, the offer, and such, and pay little attention to the context in which our information will be presented.

JHM: In your work you discuss three concepts that you've discovered cult leaders, conartists and others use in persuading others. You also discuss how we can utilize the same techniques in ethical ways in our own marketing endeavors. Can you describe these 3 concepts and give us some idea of how we might use them online?

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BW: The three concepts you are referring to are Hidden Addictions, Isolation and Gaslighting.

The idea of hidden addictions refers to the exploitation of a series of drives that govern our behavior usually without our awareness. The drives to which I refer aren't the drives most people think of such as the pursuit of love, sex or money. Though I agree we have such drives and they clearly play a large role in our behavior, I think there are other, more basic, less noble drives that are of much more value and interest to the persuader.

Teaching these drives, or hidden addictions, is a large part of my work with clients so I'm not going to simply list them here. However, I will say they focus largely on the maintenance of our self-image and the models we have developed to explain reality to ourselves. In other words, they have to do with the way we see not only the world, but our role in it. When these hidden addictions are met, we automatically have a deep feeling of satisfaction and comfort.

Isolation refers not only to the physical separation of our targets from outside influences, but the psychological separation as well.

And gaslighting is an old term that refers to the process of convincing another person to value your judgment more than their own by making them doubt their own thoughts.

At this point, some people may be wanting to throw rocks at me, but I promise I wouldn't be discussing or teaching this material if it couldn't be used in ethical ways as well. Consider the course of a typical romantic relationship. The first stage is often infatuation. The other person seems to fill our every need and desire. As the relationship continues, we invest more and more time with person and turn our attention away from things that had previously held our interest. And of course, in time, as our lover discovers we aren't perfect, the unconditional love and attention they initially gave us begins to slip away and we clamor to satisfy them as we once did in an effort to regain the "magic" we felt in the beginning.

Though not every relationship follows this path, many of them, too many of them, perhaps, do. And yet, even knowing this type of outcome is possible isn't enough to prevent it from happening to us again the next time we meet that "special someone."

Well, the three steps I mentioned earlier mirror the sample relationship I just mentioned to a tee. Our hidden addictions are met – the other person fulfills our every need and desire. We become isolated from others – we spend more time with our special someone to the chagrin of those we leave behind. And we are gaslighted – we look to the other person to show us how to correct the circumstances of our relationship.

The three concepts I discuss are merely a systematic way of understanding, compensating for, and utilizing what is otherwise a natural process that few people recognize much less

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do anything about. Of course, when we don't recognize and compensate for these aspects of our relationships, we are leaving an awful lot to chance.

As for utilizing these concepts on line, I think there is little doubt they can be, and often are, effectively used whether it's done consciously or not. You can greatly improve your powers of persuasion by simply being aware of these concepts and considering your persuasion and marketing efforts in light of them.

JHM: One of the main concepts you teach is something you call Psychological Ventriloquism. It is such an accurate term. How did you derive the concept? How can we use it online? And how can we use it in an ad where there is no room for "technicalities?"

BW: Like the other concepts we've discussed, Psychological Ventriloquism simply came out of my observation of human behavior. In a nutshell, this concept, which I like to call the secret of conmen, conjurers and comedian, is the art of inducing unconscious assumptions in others. It is an art that can yield great power to those who set out to practice it.

One way I often use to illustrate the power of Psychological Ventriloquism is to relate the following joke, which I once heard on late night television:

My grandmother has been walking three miles a day for the last five years, and now, we don't know where the hell she is.

The audience exploded with laughter. But why? Because at the end of the first part of the joke, they had made the unconscious assumption that the grandmother is walking for exercise. It is only when the punchline hits, that the audience realizes their mistake and the joke hits home.

Those who can induce us to make the assumptions they want us to make, can cause us to unconsciously accept ideas we would otherwise reject out of hand.

Years ago I used to frequent a used book store and as a regular, became friends with one of the managers. Toward the front of the store there was a glass display with a number of older, high-priced paperback books in it. Each of these books was wrapped in clear, protective plastic. Over time, I noticed that many of the books were just common, mass market paperbacks that could be purchased for next to nothing in any other used book store. When I asked the manager what made these particular books so special, without batting an eye, he admitted there was in fact nothing special about them. But he had found out that if he put them in plastic and put them behind a glass counter, he could sell them several times their actual value as people would assume they were more valuable than they really were.

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We are constantly making assumptions and yet rarely make the distinction that that is what they are until they are revealed as being false. Until that time, our assumptions often sit in our minds as unevaluated “truths”. The reason I refer to Psychological Ventriloquism as the Secret of Conjurors, Conmen and Comedians is because these are three fields that rely heavily on the practice of inducing unconscious assumptions in others.

If a comedian cannot get a majority of people to make a faulty assumption, when he springs his punchline his joke will fall flat. If a magician cannot get us to assume his hands are really empty, that nothing is up his sleeve, or that the saw blade really cut through his assistant, he will never make us gasp in wonder. And if the conman cannot get his victims to assume the scam he has concocted is genuine, his game is over before it has even begun.

Now, how can we employ this in real life and online? By becoming more aware of the role assumptions play in not only our own daily lives, but in the lives of our prospects as well. Constantly ask yourself, what causes people to come to the conclusions that they do? When I communicate with others, which aspects of my message are the hardest to get others to accept? Now, tie what you learned in the first question with your answer from the second. What can I do that will cause the person to assume what I want them to believe rather than try to simply rely on my saying so?

This is a strategy that can be used in direct communication, in copywriting or online. Wherever people consume information, they are making assumptions. If you pay attention to how the assumptions are being made and to the points of your message that meet resistance, you will soon discover the magic to getting others to arrive at the conclusions you want them to without your ever having to say so directly.

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