

OCD-STUDIOS DESIGN

VOLKSWAGEN ADVERTISING:

2025



Arranged By
Charles Spady

VOLKSWAGEN ADVERTISING: INFLUENCE, MOTIVATION, AND SOCIAL PROOF

by Charles Spady

Volkswagen's advertising campaigns brilliantly combine psychological influence, motivational appeals, and social dynamics to shape consumer attitudes. By applying Cialdini's Six Principles of Influence, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and the theory of compliance/social proof through the Asch Conformity Experiment, Volkswagen creates ads that resonate on emotional, cultural, and behavioral levels. This analysis explores how these three frameworks are strategically woven into three iconic commercials—the 2011 “Darth Vader” Super Bowl ad, the VW Polo “Dad / I’ll Watch Over You” ad, and the 2012 Beetle “High Five” ad—to drive brand connection and consumer persuasion.

Cialdini's Six Principles of Influence

Cialdini (2009) outlines six principles: reciprocity, commitment and consistency, social proof, liking, authority, and scarcity.

- **Reciprocity:** This principle involves giving something to create a sense of obligation in return. In the “Darth Vader” commercial, Volkswagen offers viewers emotional delight—a heartwarming, humorous scene of a child discovering “power.” This emotional gift generates goodwill toward the brand.
- **Commitment & Consistency:** People strive to act consistently with their prior commitments. The Polo Dad advert shows a father reinforcing his commitment to protecting his daughter, aligning with Polo’s reliability messaging. Viewers associate the father’s consistent care with the car’s dependability.
- **Social Proof:** Individuals look to others’ behavior to determine their own. In the Beetle High Five ad, everyone the driver passes enthusiastically gives him a high five, demonstrating widespread approval. This implies “everyone loves this car,” encouraging viewers to want to join in.
- **Liking:** People are more likely to be influenced by those they like. All three ads use likeable characters: a cute child in “Darth Vader,” a loving father in “Polo Dad,” and an effortlessly cool driver in “High Five.” Their charm builds affinity for the brand.
- **Authority:** People follow credible or powerful figures. “Darth Vader” taps into the authority of a cultural icon—Star Wars—while positioning Volkswagen as the “wizard behind the curtain” controlling the power (remote start). Similarly, in Polo Dad, the father embodies authority and protection.
- **Scarcity:** Scarcity drives urgency and value. While not overt, Volkswagen implies uniqueness—e.g., the Beetle’s charismatic design draws admiration from everyone, signaling its desirability and limited coolness.

VOLKSWAGEN ADVERTISING: INFLUENCE, MOTIVATION, AND SOCIAL PROOF

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs explains how human motivation progresses from basic survival to self-actualization (McLeod, 2018).

- **Safety:** The Polo Dad ad strongly appeals to safety needs—both literal (the car) and emotional (the father's protection).
- **Love & Belonging:** Vader emphasizes family connection, while Beetle High Five emphasizes social inclusion.
- **Esteem:** In Beetle High Five, the driver receives public validation, elevating status and self-worth.
- **Self-Actualization:** The imaginative child in Vader represents aspiration and creativity, symbolically "powered" by Volkswagen technology.

Social Proof & Asch Conformity

The Asch Conformity Experiment demonstrated that individuals often conform to group behavior even when they know it's incorrect (Myers, 2014). This is the foundation of social proof. Volkswagen leverages this in the Beetle High Five ad by showing a unanimous, enthusiastic group response. The message: "Everyone loves this car—don't be the one left out." In Polo Dad, cultural norms of protection and responsibility invite viewers to align with shared family values, reinforcing conformity to societal expectations.

Comparative Analyses / Critiques of the "Darth Vader / The Force" Ad

"How VW's The Force Changed Super Bowl Advertising" — Time Magazine

This article describes how Volkswagen broke norms by releasing the ad early online and how it became one of the most shared Super Bowl ads of all time. It also compares traditional Super Bowl ad strategy vs. what VW did, which is great for comparative angles. [TIME](#)

"Bad Ads — VW's 'The Force'" — Branding Bullsh....!

This is a critical take. It argues that the "Vader kid" character isn't versatile enough to carry all of VW's messaging, and that overusing the Star Wars tie risks overshadowing the VW brand itself. Useful for contrasting strengths vs. pitfalls. [brandingbullshit.com](#)
"Rhetorical Analysis: **VW commercial**" ([blog/golfand](#))

Provides a breakdown in terms of ethos, pathos, and logos in the ad, plus narrative structure. Good to compare how VW uses emotion vs logic, and how those tradeoffs play out. [golfand](#)

VOLKSWAGEN ADVERTISING: INFLUENCE, MOTIVATION, AND SOCIAL PROOF

Conclusion

Through these three ads, Volkswagen demonstrates how effective advertising goes far beyond product features. Using Cialdini's influence principles, the brand leverages emotional reciprocity, social proof, and authority to engage viewers. By aligning its messaging with Maslow's hierarchy, Volkswagen appeals to human needs ranging from safety and belonging to esteem and self-actualization. Finally, by applying social proof and conformity theory, the ads encourage viewers to adopt group behaviors and cultural norms that reinforce the brand's desirability. Together, these three approaches form a layered persuasive strategy that makes Volkswagen's campaigns memorable, emotionally resonant, and psychologically strategic.

References

AdLand. (2012, May 18). VW Polo – Dad / I'll watch over you [TV Advert].
<https://adland.tv/vw-polo-dad-ill-watch-over-you-2012-90-uk/>

Cialdini, R. B. (2009). Influence: Science and practice (5th ed.). Pearson.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. (n.d.). Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Overview [PDF]. Available from the course learning management system.

McLeod, S. (2018). Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Simply Psychology.
<https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>

Myers, D. G. (2014). Social psychology (11th ed.). McGraw-Hill Education.

Wikipedia. (n.d.). The Force (advertisement). In Wikipedia. Retrieved from
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Force_\(advertisement\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Force_(advertisement)).

Time Magazine Article

How VW's The Force Changed Super Bowl Advertising

Time Magazine. (2015, January 30). How VW's The Force changed Super Bowl advertising. Time. <https://time.com/3685708/super-bowl-ads-vw-the-force/>

Branding Bullshit Article

Branding Bullshit. (2023, July 17). Bad Ads — VW's "The Force".

<https://www.brandingbullshit.com/p/bad-ads-vws-the-force>

Rhetorical Analysis Blog (Golfand)

Golfand. (2015, November 19). Rhetorical analysis: VW commercial.

<https://golfand.wordpress.com/2015/11/19/rhetorical-analysis-vw-commercial/>