



Australian Skeptics

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COLD READING

Have you ever bought something that you didn't really want, because the salesperson was so nice, so persuasive, so helpful? Chances are that the salesperson (whether they knew it or not) was using some of the techniques of a skilled Cold Reader.

What is Cold Reading?

"Cold Reading" is a term invented by stage magicians. It refers to psychological techniques used by certain people to influence the beliefs and behaviour of other people.

The term was coined back in the days of live variety theatre and carnival side-shows to distinguish it from "Hot Reading", where the magician or mystic used bits of specific information that they already had, but pretended that they were discovering for the very first time. A good Cold Reader needs no such prior knowledge.

You'll find Cold Readers well represented among the ranks of faith healers, fortune tellers and astrologers, for example. It's possible that some of these people are "natural" Cold Readers, and genuinely believe that their powers are mystical in nature. On the other hand, there are cynical Cold Readers out there who are quite prepared to exploit the trust of the public for financial gain.

Cold Reading received local media attention in late February 2004, when the sceptical community in Australia challenged visiting spiritualist John Edward to back up his claim to be able to communicate with dead relatives of selected audience members.

What a Cold Reader does

A Cold Reader sets the scene.

In an audience attending a public event, there is a prevailing enthusiasm and willingness to believe. It is infectious and powerful.

In a one-on-one situation, there may be more reliance on props such as astrological charts or tarot cards.

A good Cold Reader comes across as confident, but modest. He or she may imply at the outset that their success rate is very high, so if there is any difficulty in communication, it's probably the subject's problem, not a lack of ability on their part.

A good Cold Reader is aware of polls or surveys that can be used to make informed guesses about what a particular person is statistically likely to think or feel about any given topic.

A Cold Reader listens and observes.

The way the Cold Reader's client dresses, their speech, mannerisms and jewellery provide a wealth of information about them.

The Cold Reader makes a series of guesses about the individual they are reading, but frames them as questions. This process is called "fishing". From time to time, the Cold Reader may gain a new and important piece of information about his or her client, and this is referred to as "a hit".

Hits may not happen very often, but the skill of the Cold Reader lies in convincing the client that his or

her “hit rate” is actually quite high.

A Cold Reader absorbs and uses information.

Most of the questions that a Cold Reader poses are vague and open-ended. The client is usually the one who fills in the details. The Cold Reader will then feed back this information a bit at a time, with a few embellishments. At some stage, the client forms the opinion that the Cold Reader is telling him or her things that the Cold Reader “couldn’t possibly know”. A skilled Cold Reader will suggest that there is still more factual information at hand about the client. This prompts the client to open up and confide in the Cold Reader to an even greater degree.

A Cold Reader flatters the subject at every opportunity, and above all, tells them what they want to hear.

Cold Reading: A two-way process

What does the person who is undergoing a Cold Reading bring to the situation?

Firstly, we are all human beings. We share many common emotions and attitudes. Surprisingly, we often prefer to think that some of these emotions and attitudes are unique to us as individuals. That provides a Cold Reader with a convenient starting point.

Secondly, a person who visits a Cold Reader will have a large amount of emotional capital already invested in a “successful” outcome: grief for a dead loved one, anxiety over the future, and so on. This person will volunteer all sorts of information to the Cold Reader in the hope that it will help things along. It may be quite unusual for that person to have anyone at all listening to them attentively, and for an appreciable period of time.

Why be concerned?

A significant number of people in our community seem ready to believe that there are specially gifted individuals who possess paranormal ability. They base this belief on little or no real evidence. To a Skeptic, that’s always a worry.

If a Cold Reader pretends to have paranormal ability for financial gain, that’s fraud.

People who seek the advice of a tarot card reader, crystal ball gazer or psychic may need professional help. Instead, they get the advice of an unqualified lay person dressed up in New Age jargon.

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How Come TV Psychics Seem So Convincing?