

THE SOURCE TEST

Three questions to run before you trust a headline, a sales pitch, or a favor. Use it anywhere something wants your attention, your money, or your agreement.

THE TEST

RUN IT IN ORDER. TAKES ABOUT TEN SECONDS.

FIRST MOVE

Fill in the blank.

Say what happened and who did it, in one plain sentence. Can't? You haven't been told yet.

STAKE

Who gains if I believe this, or if I stop paying attention?

Name who gets paid or followed. A big stake doesn't mean false. It means check harder.

SOURCE

How do they know?

Look for names, the original source, numbers with a starting point, and full quotes.

STEELMAN

What's the strongest honest case on the other side?

Put it the way its own supporters would. If you can't, you're not done yet.

Four rooms to run it in

WHERE HIDDEN INCENTIVES SHOW UP

01 The Money Trap

INERTIA & DEFAULTS

LOOKS LIKE

Generous free trials and one-click sign-ups. "Cancel anytime."

HOW IT WORKS

The trial rolls into a paid plan unless you act. In a test with 1M+ newspaper readers, auto-renew kept more people paying right after the trial. Staying took no effort.

ASK

Who profits if I never think about this charge again?

DO THIS

Find the pre-checked boxes and the date billing starts before you confirm.

02 The Conversation

SOCIAL PRESSURE

LOOKS LIKE

Instant friendliness and a presumptive "we." "We're on the same team here."

HOW IT WORKS

Forced teaming. Your own politeness is used to make saying no feel rude.

ASK

Who profits if my manners keep me from pushing back?

DO THIS

Separate assumed alignment from cooperation you actually agreed to.

03 Your Feed

ALGORITHMIC OUTRAGE

LOOKS LIKE

Breaking news and urgent headlines that demand your attention right now.

HOW IT WORKS

Headlines are tested on readers at scale. In one archive of those tests, each extra negative word lifted clicks by about 2.3%.

ASK

Who sold the ad next to my outrage?

DO THIS

Treat a sudden emotional spike while scrolling as a sign of optimization, not importance.

04 The Workplace

UNSPOKEN DEBTS

LOOKS LIKE

Fast-tracked approvals or favors you didn't ask for, with no price mentioned.

HOW IT WORKS

An unstated debt is opened, then called in later when leverage is needed.

ASK

Who is holding the tab for this "favor"?

DO THIS

A real gift is finished once it's given. If it comes back as leverage, it was a loan.

THINK SHARPER. STAY SOVEREIGN.

Sources: Room 1: Miller, Sahni & Strulov-Shlain, randomized field experiment with 1M+ readers of a European newspaper (Stanford GSB). Room 2: de Becker, *The Gift of Fear* (1997), practitioner casework. Room 3: Robertson et al., *Nature Human Behaviour* (2023), Upworthy headline-test archive.

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SCAN TO WATCH THE VIDEO

Why You Clicked That Headline Even Though You Knew Better

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