



The Nature of Persuasion

As an adviser, you can look at persuasion in three basic ways:

- As a learning process, whereby you impart information and members of your audience seek information because they want to know something
- As a power process, whereby you attempt to “force” information on someone
- As an emotional process.

No single perspective of persuasion is likely to be adequate for every situation, since the formation of attitudes is a complex process. But some aspects of the process offer insight into using persuasion that can be applied to your everyday professional and public relations behavior.

Persuasion is a special type of communication. To understand persuasion fully, we must therefore understand something about communication. The paradigm of the communication process is this: Who says what, through what channel, to whom, with what effect? By using the paradigm, we can say communication involves a source, a message, a medium (channel), an audience, and an effect. Changes in the characteristics of any of these elements can cause differences in the communication’s persuasiveness.

Source

The source of a message is the initiator of persuasion. What qualities of the source of the message influence the effectiveness of persuasion? Credibility. Usually, the more credible the source, the more persuasive the source becomes. This means that you must constantly strive to remain believable if your message is to be effective. The best way to remain credible is to tell the truth—even when it hurts. Thus, even if you are trying to persuade, you must remember to be honest and accurate.

Credibility can be viewed as having two major elements: expertise and objectivity. The targeted audience is more likely to believe you if its members think you know what you’re talking about. But to believe you completely, they must also believe you are telling the truth.

Message

From the standpoint of the persuasive writer (e.g., authors of letters to the editor or to elected officials), the message is the one aspect of communication over which you have com-

plete control. In writing or delivering a message, you have to decide what to say and how and when to say it. Communication research suggests the following when developing your message:

- Address both sides of the issue. One-sided arguments are frequently dismissed, especially if an audience is highly sophisticated or tends to oppose your point of view at the beginning.
- In general, give the good news first. This approach will probably get you the widest overall agreement with your message.
- Make your conclusion explicit, especially when the issue under consideration is complex.

Medium

You must use a medium that will reach and get the attention of your targeted audience. Keep in mind that spoken communication is usually more likely than written communication to bring about change in thought. This does not mean that you should spend all your time preparing speeches or chasing television cameras while ignoring print media. But research does show that speech has more power to change minds than writing. The pen might be mightier than the sword, but the tongue can outdo both.

On the other hand, studies show that the written word achieves better comprehension. But complete understanding is not always needed for successful persuasion. The spoken word diminishes understanding a little, but it increases persuasiveness a lot.

Audience

In developing and delivering a message, you must understand your audience. Techniques that will work wonders persuading a student group may flop with a group of parents. What works with your peers probably will not work with your administrators. So, consider the characteristics of your targeted audience and adjust your message and delivery system appropriately.

Effect

When you develop a message about your activities for the public, you must have some objective in mind. Do you want the audience to think about an issue in a certain way, or do you want the audience to do something? In other words, be aware of motive, or intent, not only behind the message you want to convey, but also behind the way you will formulate and deliver it. Ask yourself: Did the audience do what you wanted it to do? Always begin the process with an intended effect in mind. You send messages to the public every day.

By considering each element of the communication process—source, message, medium, audience, and effect—you can ensure that your messages are persuasive in the ways that you intend. ■

For more communication tips, please visit: www.nasc.us/prtips.

Using Persuasion Effectively

The following guidelines should be interpreted as general guidelines, not rules, that may apply in many situations:

- Human behavior is both rational and emotional. Effective persuasion appeals to one or both characteristics.
- Persuasion can be viewed as a learning process, a power process, or an emotional process.
- As it involves the communication process, persuasion has five major considerations: source, message, medium, audience, and effect.
- It is generally better to address both sides of an issue than just your side, especially if your audience is sophisticated.
- When dealing with controversy, address your opponent’s views first then answer with your own.
- In general, tell the good news first, then the bad.
- It is safer to draw clear conclusions than to leave your message open to interpretation.
- The spoken word is more persuasive than the printed word.
- If you want to raise an issue for public debate, you have to get the attention of the media because they set the agenda.
- You must know your audience to be able to shape effective persuasive messages.
- A persuasive writer must know clearly what he or she wants to happen before writing the message, or the intended effect may be quite different from the actual effect.