

Persuasion: What the Research Tells Us

J o A n n e Y a t e s

We have seen that in all communication, whether persuasive or not, you should consider the audience, your credibility, your purpose, and the context of the communication to form an effective communication strategy. The communication strategy in turn has important implications for the structure of the message. These same factors are critically important in persuasion. While such factors have long been recognized as influential, in the last few decades much empirical research has studied their effects. This research can give you some insights that may help you design effective arguments. The following note summarizes some of that research.

In reading this note, you should keep several things in mind. First, the summary necessarily simplifies the findings. Moreover, most of this research has been conducted in artificial, experimental settings, rather than in real organizations. Consequently, you should use your common sense and your knowledge of your own firm's corporate culture to guide you in applying them. Finally, the various factors investigated and discussed separately interact in any given case. A few of the interactions are mentioned below, but many more are not. Thus you must be careful to weigh all of the relevant factors as you develop a persuasive strategy. Again, your common sense should guide you.

The findings and implications that follow are organized under audience involvement, audience bias, credibility, context, and other persuasive techniques.

Audience Involvement

Audience *involvement* refers to the audience's level of interest in and concern about the specific issue being considered. It is typically related to the extent to which the outcome directly affects the audience. In considering the examples below, remember that the audience's involvement relates only to a specific situation. The same audience that is highly involved in one issue may be much less involved in another.

Importance of Central Versus Peripheral Issues

Highly involved audiences are more likely to be affected by the central arguments of a persuasive communication, rather than by peripheral issues such as the credibility of the persuader. Less involved audiences, on the other hand, are more affected by credibility and context.

Implication: *Emphasize logic with a highly involved audience.* When your audience is highly involved, concentrate on building a good logical argument and don't depend too much on credibility or organizational politics to make your

argument. While your credibility may affect your structure (see the third point under credibility, below), the ultimate effectiveness of your persuasion will rest primarily on your logical arguments. When your audience is less involved, however, you should give added prominence to peripheral issues related to credibility and organizational context.

Permanence of Attitude Change

Less involved audiences are more likely to change their beliefs or attitudes towards an issue as a result of persuasion, but these changes tend to be short term, with the audience reverting to their previous attitudes after a short period. In contrast, highly involved audiences are less likely to undergo short term changes in attitude, though when they do change attitudes toward an issue, the change is likely to last longer.

Implication: *Capitalize on short-term and work towards long-term change.* You may need to work harder to change the attitude of a highly involved audience, but the change will be more genuine and long term when it occurs. With less involved audiences, on the other hand, once you have achieved the attitude change you want, you should act on it as soon as possible, or try to consolidate the change by using the “foot-in-the-door” technique mentioned below.

Extent of Attitude Change

If we view attitudes toward a position as a continuum from strongly opposed to strongly agreed, highly involved audiences are likely to move less far from their initial attitude in a given persuasive attempt than are less involved audiences. These highly involved audiences tend to be more strongly anchored in their pre-existing attitudes.

Implication: *Use follow-up strategies when audience is highly involved.* You should define your purpose and consequent strategy with the audience’s involvement in mind. When you want to change the attitude of people highly involved in an issue, design a follow-up strategy to continue the effort after the initial attempt at persuasion

Level of Involvement

An individual’s level of involvement in an issue is increased when he or she commits to some position publicly by act or statement. This effect operates even if the person doesn’t believe in the desired opinion and only speaks or acts to get rid of the persuader. After the point of public commitment, the person often begins to change his or her own position to come into accord with the actions. This effect is sometimes called the “foot-in-the-door” effect.

Implication: *Use the “foot-in-the-door” effect to increase involvement.* You can increase a skeptical person’s involvement in the desired direction by getting that person to make a public statement in favor of your desired position or to take a small step towards acting on it. Whenever possible, try to get this “foot-in-the-door” effect to work for you. If you are proposing a major program your audience is not likely to favor, for example, try to get the audience to accept a small pilot program first. The act of committing to the pilot program, however reluctantly, may make the person’s attitude more favorable to the program as a whole.

Audience involvement focuses on how much the audience cares about an issue, but not on what position the audience takes relative to the persuader. The next section turns to the latter topic.

Audience Bias

Bias refers to the audience’s initial position in regard to the persuader’s position. The bias can be negative, positive, or neutral (i.e., having no initial opinion), and it can be held more or less strongly.

Negative Bias

A negatively biased audience responds more favorably to a two-sided argument—one that considers and refutes the opposition to a position as well as arguing in favor of the position—than to a one-sided argument. A one-sided argument makes it easy for the audience to assume that the persuader simply does not understand the arguments for the other side. Of course, successful framing of the two-sided argument requires that the persuader understand the reason for the negative audience’s bias and address it. An individual is more likely to respond to arguments targeted at his or her own basis for opposition.

Implication: *Use a two-sided argument if audience is negatively biased.* If your audience is negatively biased, first find out why the audience holds the opposing attitude so you can emphasize relevant arguments and eliminate or scale down less relevant arguments. Then use a balanced, two-sided argument that clearly but tactfully refutes the opposing position held by the audience as well as argues in favor of your position.

Neutral or Positive Bias

With neutral and positively biased audiences, one-sided arguments are slightly more effective initially. If such audiences are later exposed to counter-arguments elsewhere, however, they are more likely to switch sides than are audiences previously presented with two-sided arguments. The protective effect of the two-sided argument is referred to as “inoculation” because those presented with two-sided arguments have been infected with an opposing view, then cured by the refutation, and are thus protected from future infection.

Implication: *Inoculate neutral/positive audiences if you anticipate opposition.* With positively biased or neutral audiences, choose a one- or two-sided argument based on the likelihood that the audience will later be exposed to arguments opposing yours. If you are arguing in favor of something not likely to raise any serious opposition, use a brief one-sided argument (unless you are trying to establish credibility by fairness). If you are arguing in favor of something that you think may raise serious objections at some point, “inoculate” the audience by presenting a longer, two-sided argument.

As the previous section suggests, the bias of a highly involved audience tends to be stronger than that of a less involved audience. Reversing a strongly held negative bias in an involved audience is, of course, the most difficult persuasive purpose. Reinforcing a positive bias and creating a positive bias in a neutral audience are both much easier purposes to achieve.

Credibility

The persuader’s credibility with a given audience (credibility is always in the eye of the beholder) frequently affects the success or failure of arguments. In her *Guide to Managerial Communication*, Munter shows five possible sources of credibility: rank or status, goodwill, expertise, image or identification, and morality or fairness.¹ You have a certain amount of credibility with a given audience before you communicate (though that amount may be zero or negative), and your communication itself can affect certain types of credibility. For example, if you are unknown to the audience, you can establish credibility through expertise by citing credentials and demonstrating knowledge. You can establish or enhance credibility through fairness by presenting a balanced argument. Conversely, you can damage your credibility in a communication that demonstrates lack of expertise or fairness, or that projects a bureaucratic and stuffy image.

The following findings concerning the impact of credibility on the effectiveness of a persuasive appeal must be applied with caution in an organizational setting because they have certain limitations. First, these findings treat credibility as already established, not considering any change in credibility as a result of the communication itself. Moreover, the studies on which the conclusions are based use only credibility derived from pre-established characteristics such as rank, expertise, and image. They do not consider the types of credibility based on personal relationships, such as those based on goodwill and demonstrated fairness. Credibility based on personal relationships is particularly important in business. Thus it may affect persuasion more strongly than credibility based on impersonal factors.

The first two of the three findings presented below are related to findings already presented under audience involvement.

Interaction with Audience Involvement

The credibility of the persuader (source credibility) matters most when the audience is least involved in the issue. When the audience is highly involved in the issue, credibility is not as significant.

Implication: *Don't depend on credibility with highly involved audiences.* Don't depend as heavily on high credibility when the issue matters greatly to your audience (when your audience is highly involved) as when it is less important.

¹ Mary Munter, *Guide to Managerial Communication: Effective Business Writing and Speaking*, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997).

Effect on Permanence of Change

Other things being equal, a more credible source is likely to engender more change in attitude in the short term, but the credibility effect tends to fade away in the long term.

Implication: *Act immediately on credibility-based change to consolidate gain.* When you are basing your persuasive appeal on high credibility, try to get action as-soon as possible, so the gain won't be lost.

Effect on Structure

A more credible source distracts the audience from the argument itself, and thus, at least initially, tends to suppress dominant reactions for or against the issue (i.e. positive reactions when the audience favors your position and negative reactions when the audience opposes your position). A neutral or less credible source may enhance or leave unchanged the dominant effect.

Implication: *Choose direct structure if your credibility is high.* If you have low credibility with your audience and they are negatively biased towards your position, you may want to use an indirect structure in which you build up to your position. If you have high credibility, you should generally present your position first, even if the audience opposes it. Your credibility distracts the audience from reacting negatively to your position, and direct structure is generally clearer and easier to understand and remember.

While the previous discussion has focused on the credibility of the persuader, the credibility of other parties mentioned in support of or in opposition to your argument may also play an important role. If another person (or group) is highly credible to the audience, mentioning that party may help your credibility by extension. Furthermore, that party's support becomes another argument in favor of your position. Conversely, however, if the other person (or group) mentioned is not highly credible to the audience, mentioning that party may harm your credibility and your argument. Thus you should be very careful that you understand how your audience views other parties before citing them in your argument.

Context

The organizational context also affects argumentative strategy in many ways depending on the precise circumstances involved. We can generalize about certain effects, however.

Reciprocity

People typically feel obligated to reciprocate positive actions with other positive actions and to reciprocate concessions with concessions. This principle is an integral part of organizational politics; though it may not be spelled out in a given case, it may underlie much of what goes on.

Implication: *Leverage reciprocity in persuasion attempts.* You can increase your chance of persuading someone to grant you a favor by doing a favor for that person. Similarly, when you are trying unsuccessfully to persuade someone opposed to your request, offering a concession in your request may gain a reciprocal concession from that person. In fact, some research shows that asking for more, being rejected, then asking for less can be a more successful approach than simply asking for less, unless the original request was viewed as totally unrealistic. Be careful in how you apply this finding in an organization where you have on-going credibility to maintain. People will notice if you try this technique too often, and you may lose some credibility.

The "Bandwagon" Effect

In general people are strongly influenced by the beliefs and actions of those around them. While the fact that "everyone is doing it" may not be a very good logical argument, it nevertheless influences people, especially when a certain critical mass of people have accepted a given belief or taken a certain action. The bandwagon effect should be distinguished from genuine network effects (e.g., if instant messaging requires everyone to use the same email system, a statement about the number of others who have adopted the system constitutes a logical rather than an emotional argument).

Implication: *Harness the bandwagon effect when appropriate.* You can use the bandwagon effect to enhance some arguments. In arguing your department's need for a new training program, for example, you can mention all of the other departments that have used this program and found it useful. The bandwagon effect can also be dangerous, however. Uncritical acceptance of some opinion or action because everyone else has accepted it can lead to bad decisions. Thus you should be careful both in invoking this effect and in responding to it yourself.

The politics so clearly present in all organizational contexts will suggest additional persuasive techniques to you.

Other Persuasive Techniques

Two other persuasive techniques not easily grouped into the previous categories emerge from the persuasion research:

Common Ground

Persuaders who initially express opinions held in common with their audience will be more likely to change their audience's opinions on other issues. This effect may work by increasing the persuader's credibility, or it may work by getting the audience started with a positive dominant response that causes them to generate positive arguments.

Implication: *Establish common ground to improve persuasiveness.* By starting from common ground, even on an unrelated subject, you can increase your chance of persuading your audience on your main subject. For example, refer to goals you share with your audience before focusing on your disagreement over how to achieve them.

Reinforcement of Change

Changes in attitude are, as stated earlier, generally transitory. The changes last longer when they are reinforced by repetition or by audience action.

Implication: *Repeat and reinforce successful arguments.* After you've worked hard to convince your audience on an important issue, don't rest on your laurels. Reinforce the audience's new attitude either by repeating the position and/or by getting the audience involved in acting on behalf of the position. Both of these courses of action will prolong and reinforce the changed attitude.

The persuasion research summarized here provides some interesting findings that can help you increase your persuasiveness.² Ongoing research will undoubtedly add to or modify the findings summarized here. Meanwhile, use these findings, but temper them with common sense.

² For further techniques, see Robert B. Cialdini's *Influence: Science and Practice*, 4th edition (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2001).