

Recruit the Student: Adapting Persuasion to Audiences

Robert E. Smith, Jr.

Objective: To create persuasive strategies based on the characteristics of the persuadee
Course: Basic

Persuasive speeches are a common assignment in numerous public speaking and hybrid communication classes (e.g., Lucas, 2001; Osborn & Osborn, 2003). One theme of persuasion is that the persuasive message should be tailored to the intended receiver. Not only do effective rhetors adapt to the circumstances in which they find themselves, but persuasive efforts are much more likely to be successful if they take into account the beliefs, attitudes, and values of the persuadee (Gass & Seiter, 2003; Larson, 2001). This “receiver-oriented approach” to persuasion (Simons, 2001) is one way in which students are provided with the opportunity to practice audience analysis and to create receiver-oriented persuasive strategies.

The Activity

This activity can be used as part of a unit on persuasion, which, in most basic communication courses, comes toward the end of the semester. In its simplest form, this activity takes 15–20 minutes but can be expanded to fill an entire class meeting. This activity may be graded or ungraded, depending on the instructor’s desires. The activity should follow lectures and discussion of the importance of adapting persuasive messages to specific audiences as well as readings in the course textbook.

In this activity, students work in groups of three or four members. Each group serves as a recruiting committee whose goal is to persuade potential students to enroll at their home university. To that end, the groups develop the persuasive appeals that best suit a range of potential students who are interested in attending the home university. As part of a recruiting program, the groups study the list of university offerings and the descriptions of the students. The groups then (1) choose

Robert E. Smith, Jr., Purdue University. Email: resmith@sla.purdue.edu

the offerings they think each recruit would find most attractive and (2) justify their choices.

Each group receives two handouts. The first handout (see Appendix A) is a list of activities, opportunities, and assistance offered by the university such as financial aid, extracurricular activities, support programs, and academics. The items on this handout can be easily modified to fit the environment at a variety of colleges or universities. The second handout (see Appendix B) is a description of four hypothetical students who are thinking seriously about attending the university. These students have different social, cultural, and financial backgrounds. Again, this list can be modified to fit the particular situation at a variety of schools.

Once the groups have made their choices, each group describes the matches it made between the opportunities offered by the university and each of the four students. Each group provides an example and then demonstrates why that offering would be attractive to a given potential student. For example, “location” would be attractive to a hometown student such as Carlos, who wants to save money. He could attend classes and continue to live at home. Although the groups tend to agree, the discussion introduces other choices backed by good reasons.

Debriefing

The implications of this activity can be pursued with several questions that ask students to tie what they experienced in the activity to other persuasive situations. These questions include:

1. What persuaded you to attend this university? Which opportunities in Appendix A did you find attractive?
2. Why is it important to match persuasive appeals with potential persuadees?
3. How could audience adaptation influence the outcome of a persuasive effort?
4. What examples of persuasive efforts focusing on individuals or groups have you seen? (A contrast of the ads on Lifetime and ESPN is a good example.)
5. In what instance might you have developed different persuasive appeals for different audiences with the same goal?

Appraisal

The activity is well received by the students. Students report they enjoy completing the activity, and they have become more sensitive to the individuality of persuadees. The discussion following the activity reveals students grasp the underlying principle of adapting persuasive appeals to the needs and desires of the audience in that a “one size fits all” persuasive message is not effective.

This activity can be expanded by asking each group to create a persuasive message for one of the potential students. The message could be a short talk, an interview, or a letter addressed to an interested student that features the most attractive offerings of the university. Another possibility would be for the groups to outline a

speech they would present to the four students simultaneously, which would require the group to craft a message that synthesizes the attractive possibilities for each targeted student.

References and Suggested Readings

- Gass, R. H., & Seiter, J. S. (2003). *Persuasion, social influence, and compliance gaining* (2nd ed). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Larson, C. U. (2001). *Persuasion: Reception and responsibility* (9th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Lucas, S. E. (2001). *The art of public speaking* (7th ed). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Osborn, M., & Osborn, S. (2003). *Public speaking* (6th ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Simons, H. W. (2001). *Persuasion in society*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Appendix A: Activities, Opportunities, and Assistance

- Financial aid: Loans, work-study, job opportunities in the community
- University studies: Program for students who are undecided about a major
- Clubs/Organizations: Sports (e.g., rugby, lacrosse, crew, intramurals), service groups, religious groups, hobby groups (e.g., photography, chess, ballroom dancing), honoraries
- Horizons: for students who are the first from their families to attend college and students from low-income families.
- SPAN Plan: guidance and support for older students
- Band
- Living facilities: dorms, cooperative housing, apartments, fraternities/sororities
- Location
- Town
- Honors programs
- Professional internships
- Intercollegiate athletics
- Convocation offerings (e.g., concerts, musicals, dance, lectures)
- Faculty
- Campus appearance
- Recreation possibilities
- Social life

Appendix B: Four Potential Students

Carlos Ramirez was born in Mexico. He came to this state with his family when he was 10, and they worked as migrant laborers harvesting tomatoes. After the harvest, the family stayed because they found jobs at the local candy factory and Frito-Lay. Carlos has three brothers and two sisters. The family lives in a small three bedroom rented house. Both parents work. Their annual income is around \$25,000. Carlos' father wants him to drop out of high school and go to work to help support the family, but Carlos wants to finish high school. He wants to be the first person in his family to graduate from high school. He contributes to the family finances by working after school and on the weekends. His grades have suffered, but they are still sufficient to gain him admission.

Sandra Turner was born in this state. Her mother is an attorney, and her father is a surgeon. She has an older sister who attends an Ivy League school. Sandra lives in a \$2 million house on the shores of the Geist Reservoir, a large artificial lake surrounded by expensive homes. She has never attended a public school. She has taken lessons in gymnastics, dance, and piano and was a high school cheerleader. Her main athletic interest is a horse she owns and cares for herself. She is a regular winner in jumping events at area horse shows. She is not sure what she will study when she goes to college next fall.

William Bartlett was born in this state and has lived his entire life on his family's farm. The farm is the main source of the family's income, and he has worked on the farm since he was a small child. He was on the basketball team in high school. He and his family are strongly committed to their church. He is thinking seriously about attending a small school in Arkansas affiliated with his church. It will cost much more than State University, but he has a chance at an athletic scholarship. He has a brother and a sister who are both in high school.

Alice Wing lives in Monterey, California, and is a fourth generation Chinese American. Her father is a physician, and her mother is a dentist. Alice is interested in studying engineering. Her grades are good enough that she has been accepted at Stanford, but she is thinking about going to school somewhere outside of California. She also has been accepted at Texas A&M and State University. She has never been to this state and wonders how she will fit into the social environment.

Copyright of Communication Teacher is the property of National Communication Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.