

The science of persuasion.

Part 1: Logic



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A lot of people have heard about the art of persuasion but few are familiar with the science behind it. As I was asked recently to put together a summary how our research-based approach can give people the edge when it comes to communicating, I thought I would share my findings with you. To give some context to what you are about to read, I intend to break the area of communication into 3 distinct areas of spoken communication: words, music and dance. By words, I mean the content of what's said, while "music" refers to sound of the voice and 'dance' relates to the face and body language of the communicator.

Firstly, most research conducted in the field of communication agrees on one thing: that what is said is often NOT as important as how it sounds or how it looks when it's spoken. Or that the words are often not as important as the music and dance. Now there are exceptions to the rule but, the strongest evidence shows that if there is a disconnect between how the words, music and dance work together then we are more likely to believe how the person looks and sounds when communicating the content of what they say. In fact, research has proven that when this is the case, the music and dance is twelve times as important than the words! Just think of all the times that someone has begun a presentation with "It's a real pleasure to be here with you today", but looked and sounded unhappy to be there and you get the general idea.

However, don't be fooled into thinking that words are not important.

Petty & Cacioppo (1980 onwards) suggested that there were 2 routes to persuasion. They identified a central and peripheral route which, depending on the audience, could both be put to effective but different use when communicating. The central route is characterised by the logical core to the argument which makes it practical and verifiable e.g. "Using our services you will cut your costs by 15%." The peripheral route was characterised by a more emotional appeal e.g.

By using our services you will beat your competition. What Petty & Cacioppo discovered is that people respond differently to each route but that it is imperative to be able to use both routes to be persuasive. So, how does this relate to words? Well, it implies that your content should have a strong, logical spine but President Obama is a master at delivering key messages that have a logical core but are wrapped up in powerful emotion to give them more impact. Try these examples from one of his Presidential TV campaign commercials "Plan for Change" back in 2008:

"Fast-track a plan for energy made in America that will free us from our dependence on middle east oil in 10 years and put millions of Americans to work.

Reform our tax system to give \$1000 tax break to the middle-class instead of showering more on oil companies and corporations that outsource our jobs."

Obama makes his key messages work. And then some. He skilfully gets people involved by remembering that an emotional context is going to get them angry enough to want to change things. He also cleverly plays on the fact that it helps to have a focus of anger to motivate people and he produces just enough pain in his referencing to get them into action.

And this reference to "pain" is something else that comes out in research when it was discovered that pain is much more motivating to people as opposed to pleasure. It's why dentists keep 25% of their diary flexible for last minute patients. It's also why businesses are invariably more scared of losing money than being excited by making it.

But be careful when planning your strategy using pain. Goldstein, Martin and Cialdini (2009) discovered that a fear based approach only works when you give people specific steps to follow. This was exemplified by 2 types of health information regarding tetanus. One leaflet merely showed the dangers of tetanus and little else while the other gave a plan of what to do to avoid tetanus. In the latter group the sign-up rate for vaccinations was significantly higher. So scaring people is not enough - you need to have a believable plan to help them through their fear.

Goldstein et al also discovered some interesting facts when it comes to decision making.

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They discovered that having too many unnecessary options caused frustration and a lack of decision making.

Their research was based on 800,000 pension fund investors and discovered overwhelmingly that 1 simple decision i.e. 2 options works better than 3 or more which involve multiple decisions. They also discovered that people were more inclined to change their decision if circumstances were presented as changing. They discovered that people will avoid being seen as inconsistent, so changing the circumstances gives them permission to change their decision without losing face.

So, how does this affect your content when it comes to winning new business in an evolving market for example? Well, it implies that you need not only to update your offering but also present the market conditions as having changed significantly since your last meeting if you're going to have more success. that it should be emotionally compelling too. The next article will explore the science of persuasion in more detail and looks at further research which will help you build more trust, leave better voicemails and design more profitable incentive programmes. Until then, good luck with putting these tips into practice!



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Advice *squeezed*
straight from the
experts

