

Part I

Attitudes and Persuasion



Chapter 1

The Importance of Persuasion

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Why Study Persuasion?

College students sometimes try to persuade their parents to buy them new clothes, a laptop, or a car. They may try to persuade parents to foot the bill for a Spring Break trip. Friends persuade each other about the merits of a new musical group or a particular movie. Students persuade one another about where to live on campus, which bars are the most fun, or what to do on the weekend. Spouses influence one another's ideas about where to go for dinner, which car or minivan to buy, or how to redecorate a room in the house. Persuasion abounds in interpersonal or dyadic relationships.

There are thousands of committees which discuss problems, make decisions, and then either recommend or implement action to address those problems. In those groups the committee members use persuasion to propose and support their ideas to other committee members, hoping to influence the outcome of the committee's discussion. When the committee reports to a superior in the organization, it seeks to

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persuade that person to implement the group's recommendations. When committees implement their suggestions, they often must persuade others to cooperate. Committees or group projects are common in the classroom, in the workplace, and in government (and can be found in other contexts, like academia). Members of committees constantly attempt to persuade one another – as well as the people to whom they report and the other people with whom they work. If you reflect on this question, you have probably experienced many groups in which persuasion occurred.

In larger groups, like school board meetings, parents stand up and speak for or against such ideas as outcome-based education, prayer in schools, or whether a student should be suspended for having an over-the-counter pain reliever in a backpack. Print media (newspapers, magazines, direct mailing) as well as electronic media (radio, television, the world wide web) positively thrive on advertisements that attempt to persuade consumers to buy certain goods and services. These examples illustrate just a few of the wide variety of situations you are likely to encounter in which persuasion flourishes. Thinking about the varied contexts in which communication occurs quickly reveals that persuasion exists throughout all human activity.

We can also see that persuasion pervades our lives by thinking about the activities that make up our daily lives. Persuasion is a part of education and learning. A college recruiter, alum, or parent may try to persuade you to attend his or her school. Once at school, students persuade their friends when to take classes (e.g. in the morning or afternoon) and which classes or professors to take (or which ones to avoid). Academic advisors and professors attempt to persuade students which major to select, which classes to take, and whether to go to graduate or professional school. Students try to persuade professors to accept an assignment late, to change a grade, or to permit the student to take a test early. Faculty members are asked to write letters of recommendation encouraging (persuading) employers to hire their graduates. Persuasion is a pervasive part of education.

Persuasion also lurks “behind the scenes” in academia. Faculty members one another what courses a department should offer, when to offer them, and who should teach them. Faculty members persuade each other which courses should be required and which should be considered electives. This example could easily be spun out further (for example, faculty members persuade their deans to let them add or replace faculty, or they persuade promotion and tenure committees to award tenure to faculty members; deans persuade provosts to increase their budgets; presidents of state-supported schools persuade legislators to increase their budgets). Persuasion is an important part of education in ways that might not be readily apparent.

Persuasion is also a large part of the working world. During employment interviews, applicants want to persuade the employer or recruiter to offer them jobs. When demand for employees outstrips supply, employers work to persuade applicants to accept job offers. At work, employees constantly persuade co-workers about projects, bosses about promotions (or raises, vacations, or other perks), and customers about the company's products or services. Workers may even try to persuade subordinates what to do or how to do it (rather than ordering them), in an effort to

improve morale. Furthermore, many professions – for instance sales, politics, and the law – are essentially about nothing but persuading others. Thus, persuasion is widespread in the workplace.

Persuasion is also a part of recreation and relaxation. We persuade our families, room-mates, and friends that we should go out to eat, and what kind of food to eat tonight. We persuade our friends that we ought to go see (or rent) a movie, and then which film to watch. Of course movies, whether seen in the theater or at home on rental tapes, contain previews that attempt to persuade us to see other movies (and, sometimes, to buy the soundtrack CD). We tell our friends about a new store or radio station or webpage that they really should check out. It seems that human beings do very little that does not involve persuasion in some fashion.

So we persuade each other while learning, working, and socializing. And this is not all! Most church services involve sermons, which clearly are persuasive messages aimed at the congregation. The fact is, most of us have never thought about just how much of our lives is spent in persuading or being persuaded. Rosseli, Skelly, and Mackie (1995: 163) estimated that people are “exposed to 300–400 persuasive messages a day from the mass media alone.” That figure has surely not dropped since they conducted their study.

It is important to realize that the fact that you so often persuade (and are targets of persuasion) does not mean you are already experts in persuasion. Of course, you have learned something about persuasive strategies through trial and error. However, literally thousands of scholars in disciplines like communication, psychology, and advertising have systematically studied persuasion for many, many years. In fact, rhetoricians or philosophers like Aristotle have written about how to persuade others since four centuries before the Christian era. Practitioners, like lawyers, politicians, and advertisers have also devoted an incredible amount of time and effort to understanding persuasion “in the real world.” Cicero, who lived about three hundred years after Aristotle, was one of the greatest orators in ancient Rome. He was also an accomplished lawyer and was elected consul in Rome, a position roughly analogous to that of President of the United States. Cicero wrote several books on rhetorics or persuasion. More recently, social scientists have conducted tens of thousands of experiments into the nature of persuasion or attitude change. Thus, there is an incredible wealth of knowledge about persuasion which has accumulated over literally thousands of years, from scholars and practitioners, in a variety of disciplines. There is much that is useful to be learned about persuasion.

It is important to realize that persuasion affects us in two very different ways. We may try to persuade others (we are the sources or senders of persuasive messages) and other people may attempt to persuade us (we are the targets or receivers of persuasive messages). Although we rarely have the opportunity to persuade others via the mass media, that is a context in which others develop vast numbers of persuasive messages aimed at us. In other contexts, as in the give-and-take of a conversation, we are both the sources and targets of persuasive messages. When two friends discuss the best movie, each one is alternatively a **persuader**, or source who creates short persuasive messages (about which movies are best), and an **audience**, or target of the messages from the other person. A moment’s reflection should convince you

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that understanding what persuasive communication is, and how it works, can be very important in both situations. Whenever we want to influence others through messages (speaking, writing, or using pictures and symbols), we need to understand how persuasion works in order to increase the likelihood that our messages will be successful. However, it is also important for us to understand that persuasion is aimed at us, so that other people may not unduly influence us. Informed consumers of persuasive messages ought to be able to ask themselves, “Should I be responding positively to this message?” “Does this advertisement give me a good reason to buy this product?” Understanding how persuasion works is useful to us because we both send messages as sources and receive persuasive messages as audiences or targets.

Persuasion Is an Alternative to Apathy or Coercion

Not only is persuasion present almost everywhere in human social activity, but persuasion can be a positive force. We frequently think about persuasion as propaganda, manipulation, or verbal trickery. It can be misused, like any other tool (and we will devote chapter 4 to ethical concerns). But persuasion should be thought of as a means to accomplishing something you (the persuader) want. If there is a goal that you want to accomplish – to make someone, say, go out on a date; let you hand in an assignment late; give you a raise; have your suggestion included in a report; buy your company’s product; or vote for you – that goal often depends on the actions of others. To obtain the cooperation of other people, you have only a few basic choices.

First, you can do nothing – have an attitude of **apathy** – ignoring your wants, needs, and desires and hoping that someone else will notice what you (secretly) want and spontaneously do it. Doing nothing gives up control of your own life, allowing your wants to go unmet, or met only at the whim of others. If a person wishes her room-mate would not let dirty dishes sit in the sink for days, she could hope her room-mate will realize how much better it would be to clean up after a meal more quickly. This approach (well, really a non-approach) is not likely to be very satisfying or very effective (if she does not say something about those dirty dishes, her room-mate is unlikely to wash them any sooner). Of course, there are times when we must realize that what we want is impossible or impractical and asking for it can be a waste of time. It can even be counter-productive if we make obviously unreasonable requests, if we make reasonable requests to people whom we know to be unreasonable, or if we make requests to those who do not have the power to grant our requests. These kinds of messages can irritate others and possibly even backfire. Still, while there are some specific situations in which it is better to do nothing, as a general strategy for trying to achieve our wants doing nothing is simply not very productive.

Second, you can use force, violence, or threats – that is, **coercion** – to get your own way. That frustrated room-mate could threaten to throw into the trash any dishes which sit in the sink for more than a day. She could threaten not to pay her half of the rent unless dishes are washed in a timely fashion. Assuming a person has both the ability and the willingness to follow through, coercion can be a means of

obtaining what you want. If the dirty dishes belong to her instead of the room-mate, or if she is worried about eviction for non-payment of rent, these might be empty (and ineffective) threats. But even if you are willing to follow through, coercion has a variety of drawbacks as a method of getting what you want. First, there can be both moral and legal problems with using force to get others to comply with our wishes. Furthermore, coercion can cause others to be difficult or slow in satisfying our demands, to do a poor job on purpose, and to dislike us and possibly retaliate against us. Creating bad feelings can be especially unfortunate if we have to work with those whom we are coercing. Some people just become obstinate in the face of threats, so it does not always work. Even when coercion works, it is not likely to be pleasant. Furthermore, if you lose your power or authority, are not willing to follow through and punish those you threaten, or cannot observe others' behavior to make certain they comply, threats can be ineffectual.

Third, one can use persuasion to try to satisfy wants and needs. This is far more likely to succeed than doing nothing (apathy). It may not always work better than coercion – but even coercion does not always work, and this book is about how you can make your attempts at persuasion more likely to be successful. Most importantly, when it does work, the people we persuade will cooperate willingly. This will make us more popular, or better liked, than if we use coercion. And, if others are doing what we want them to do willingly, they may do a better job than when they are being coerced.

So, not only is persuasion everywhere, but it is one of only three basic options for getting others to help satisfy our needs, wants, and desires. Arguably, persuasion is the best way for us to obtain the cooperation of others in achieving our goals. Persuasion is a way for us to exert influence or control over our own lives, so we have some measure of control rather than feeling helpless. Of course, like any other tool, it is not always appropriate. Sometimes we have authority over others, and giving them a simple or direct order, with its implicit threat for noncompliance, is the best thing to do. Persuasion can be abused, as demagogues like Hitler and con artists who trick the elderly out of their life savings show. Still, persuasion can be used for good as well as evil – and it can be used against con artists and demagogues – and it is usually better than the alternatives for getting our own way.

Key Concepts in Persuasion

We define **persuasion** as process in which a source (persuader) uses a message to achieve a goal by creating, changing, or reinforcing the attitudes of others (the audience). This definition has four important components, each discussed separately.

Persuasion is goal-directed

The first characteristic is that persuasion is goal-oriented, a means to an end. You can use persuasion when you want to influence an audience. Persuasion can be useful when you have a need or desire which you cannot satisfy by yourself (or

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which would be more easily or more quickly satisfied with the help of others). This means that the audience consists of people you believe can help you achieve your goal. Your persuasive message is intended to encourage your audience to comply with your wishes. For example, suppose that you decide that your family needs a new computer at home. If you and your spouse have an understanding that these kinds of purchases are not made unilaterally, you need to persuade your spouse to agree that you should get a new home computer. In this case, your goal is to buy a new computer. Because you have this understanding about purchases, satisfying your goal requires the cooperation of another person, your spouse. Your persuasive message, therefore, is the means to your goal: You want to use a persuasive message to convince your audience that you should realize this goal.

Some goals do not require the cooperation of others. For example, a person who is bored might decide to watch television, play a video-game, or walk over to the swimming pool for a swim. Ordinarily, persuasion is not needed in those situations (although you may have to persuade someone else to let you use the television, for example, if it is already being watched). But if you want to ease your boredom by going to see a movie with a friend, then you must persuade your friend to go along. So, often the goals that we want to attain are possible, but require the cooperation of others. When we have a goal that others might be willing to help obtain, identification of that goal is the first step in persuasion. We must know what we want before we can hope to achieve it. Do you want another person to go out on a date? Do you want a professor to change your grade? Do you want to sell your product to a customer? Do you want someone to vote for you?

We do want to note that some goals are unrealistic: You may want someone to give you a million dollars, you might want world peace today, you could want to fly on the next space shuttle mission. It is not likely that persuasion will help you achieve these goals.

The persuader must identify the right audience, the group of people who can help us achieve our goal. The audience is the recipient of the completed persuasive message, so in a sense it is the last part of the process of persuasion. However, an important principle (discussed further in chapter 5) is that a given persuasive message probably will not be equally persuasive for everyone. This means that, when developing your messages, you should think about the nature of your specific audience and what ideas might appeal to them. The audience must be a group that you can communicate with (you have to be able to get your message to them). Tom, who wants new clothes, would probably have more trouble getting to talk to a bank loan officer than to Jill, the small-business owner. The audience must also have what it takes to achieve your purpose, the means to obtain your goal. For example, your audience may have information, or money, or power that you need to achieve that goal. But for persuasion to truly be successful the audience must be able to grant your wish.

Persuasion is a process

Another important feature of persuasion is that it is a process. Persuasion begins with a person (the source or persuader), who has a goal. The source then creates a

message which, in the source's opinion, will encourage others (the audience) to accomplish the source's goal. This message must be delivered to the audience, those who can help achieve the speaker's goal. If the message is effective, then the audience will comply with the speaker's wishes.

Box 1.1 The process of persuasion

Source > Message > Audience [attitudes] > Outcome: ultimate goal
 (me) > (reasons to buy) > (customer: pro-DVD attitude) > (customer buys DVD)

For example, consider a sales person, Peg, who wants to persuade a customer to buy a DVD player. Box 1.1 shows a simplified version of this process. In this illustration, Peg uses a message to convey ideas about why the customer should buy a DVD player (or a particular DVD player). Peg hopes that this message (or a series of short messages as they talk back and forth in their conversation) will change the customer's mind, so that, instead of being undecided about buying a DVD player, the customer will decide to buy one today. It is important to realize that, in a very real sense, Peg has two goals. Her ultimate goal is to convince this customer to buy a DVD player. However, to accomplish that goal, she must persuade the customer to change his mind. Her customer probably does not already have a favorable attitude towards buying the DVD player (or he would not need to use persuasion). So Peg hopes that, if she can change the customer's mind (change his attitude toward buying a DVD player today), her ultimate goal will be accomplished and the customer will buy a DVD player. Changing the other person's mind (or attitudes) is the means to achieving the persuader's goal (selling the product). Persuasive messages have the potential to change attitudes and thereby to influence behavior.

For some goals, a simple request might be enough to achieve your goal. "Honey, the Superbowl starts in five minutes. Can I have the remote control?" For other goals, you will have to work to convince the audience to do what you want. It is very important to realize that it may not be enough to tell them why you want them to do something. Of course, the banker knows why Jill wants a loan: Being able to buy more stock for her shelves can make Jill higher profits. But she must convince the banker that this would be a good loan (one that will make money for the bank), that Jill will be able to pay back the loan with interest, and on time. Persuaders can be more successful when they can make the audience want to help achieve their own goals. You must appeal to our audience's self-interests, not your own. You can increase your chances of convincing them to help if you know your audience. Knowing what the audience knows, what interests the audience, what is important to them, and their attitudes on our topic, can be very helpful.

The message has to be conveyed to the audience. In interpersonal relations, this simply means meeting (or calling, or sending mail or email to) the other person. Other messages, like advertisements, require more elaborate preparation and distribution

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arrangements. But persuasion cannot possibly be successful if the message does not reach its intended audience.

So persuasion is a process that begins with a source and a goal. The persuader identifies an audience who has the ability or power to help accomplish that goal. Then he or she creates a message containing reasons that encourage the audience to comply with his or her request. Then the persuader communicates the persuasive message to the audience. Hopefully, the message will successfully persuade the audience to do what the persuader asks, and his or her goal will be satisfied.

Persuasion involves people

We may say that “the dark clouds persuaded me to get my umbrella,” or that “Fido scratched the screen door and persuaded me to let him inside.” However, this book is focused on situations in which one person (or a group of people) attempt to influence an audience. We do not mean to say that these uses of the word “persuasion” are wrong, but that when we use the word, we intend to refer to messages created by people (persuaders, sources) for other people (audiences).

Persuasion can create, change, or reinforce attitudes

Persuasive messages are designed to reinforce, create, or change the attitudes or behaviors of individuals. To understand this part of the definition, we need to understand the nature of attitudes.

Attitudes are the key to successful persuasion. An **attitude** is a cognition (a thought, a mental construct) which is developed through experience, is evaluative, and influences our behavior. Since they are cognitions or thoughts, attitudes are not directly observable. They are learned (we are not born with attitudes), which means that they develop (and change) as we experience the world, both directly and as we learn about it from other people. Attitudes are evaluative, which means we are favorably or unfavorably inclined toward the object of an attitude (if we have a favorable attitude toward a musical group, this simply means we like that group or enjoy its music). Finally, attitudes influence (but do not necessarily determine) our behavior. If we like a group, we are likely to buy CDs by that group, although we will not do so if we are broke.

Attitudes have two key parts: beliefs and values. A **belief** is a description of the world and of the people, places, things, and relationships in it. Roughly, a belief is a fact, something that is either true or false. These are examples of beliefs:

- The University of Minnesota enrolls more than 60,000 students.
- Los Angeles has a higher violent crime rate than New York City.
- The capital of Illinois is Chicago (this belief is wrong, but it is still a belief).
- Connecticut has the highest per capita state tax rate in the country.
- The moon is made of green cheese (another false belief).

Beliefs are potentially verifiable, or verifiable in principle. Now that we have visited the moon and brought back moon rocks for study, we have indisputable evidence

that the last belief was false. However, before the age of space travel, this belief could not be tested directly, so it was potentially verifiable. For a statement to qualify as a belief, we must be able, at least in principle, to verify whether it is true or false.

The second part of an attitude is a value. **Values** are judgments of worth. Because they are judgments, they are subjective and are neither true or false. Of course, some people hold a given value so strongly that they believe it is true. Examples of values include:

- Harvard University provides high quality education.
- Cities with high violent crime rates are terrible places to live.
- Connecticut is the most beautiful state in the Union.
- The best college degrees are ones with the most job offers.
- Chicago's blues clubs are the finest anywhere.
- Saturn is the most interesting planet.
- It is a waste of time to dream about the moon.
- Attending football games is the right way to show school spirit.

We can make arguments about these value statements. We could point to evidence about the number and salary of jobs obtained by Harvard University graduates – or we could point to the number of Nobel Prize winners on the faculty – to try to show that Harvard's education is the best. We can, for example, argue that Chicago's blues clubs are the finest because of which bands play there, and try to persuade people that the blues musicians who play in Chicago are more accomplished than other musicians. But none of these statements can be objectively verified as true or false in the same way beliefs can be verified. Reasonable people do not disagree about whether Chicago is the capital of Illinois, but reasonable people could disagree about whether Chicago blues are better than, say, Delta blues.

This analysis of attitudes into beliefs and values leads to several important propositions. First, it is important to understand that beliefs and values work together to form attitudes. Consider the statements shown in box 1.2, representing cognitions or thoughts from Cheryl.

Box 1.2 Cheryl's thoughts about Terrence Jones

Terrence Jones is a rap musician. (= belief)

+

Rap is the best kind of music. (= value)

=

Positive attitude toward Terrence Jones the musician. (= attitude)

This favorable attitude toward Jones makes it more likely that Cheryl would attend Jones' concerts or buy his CDs. However, Cheryl must have both a belief and a value to have an attitude (and the belief must be related to the value). Only if she accepts the belief that Jones is a rap musician and embraces the value that rap is better

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would she have a positive attitude. If Cheryl likes rap (has the value) but does not know whether Jones is rap, rock, or pop (lacks the corresponding belief), she does not have enough information to form a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward Jones. A value that rap is the best type of music cannot help her form an attitude about Jones unless she knows whether he does rap. On the other hand, if Cheryl knows Jones is a rapper (has the belief) but does not think that rap is the best kind of music (lacks the corresponding value), she still cannot have a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward Jones. Only if she knows his style of music (belief) and she has preferences about different kinds of music (value) is it possible for Cheryl to have an attitude about Jones as a musician.

Second, when you want to change someone's attitude, you can try to change either the belief or the value but not both. For example, take the example about Terrence Jones, in which Cheryl has a positive attitude toward Jones. If one of her friends develops a message that successfully changes her belief, the result is as shown in box 1.3. This persuasive message successfully changed her attitude, from one that is favorable toward Jones to an unfavorable attitude, by changing the belief.

Box 1.3 Cheryl's thoughts about Terrence Jones after her belief has changed

Terrence Jones is a rock musician. (= belief)

Rap is the best kind of music. (= value)

Negative attitude toward Terrence Jones the musician. (= attitude)

On the other hand, if one of Cheryl's friends creates a message that successfully changes my value, the outcome would be as shown in box 1.4. Here again, the new attitude after this successful persuasive message is unfavorable toward Jones, but this time Cheryl's attitude changed because her friend changed her value.

Box 1.4 Cheryl's thoughts about Terrence Jones after her value has changed

Terrence Jones is a rap musician. (= belief)

Rock is the best kind of music. (= value)

Negative attitude toward Terrence Jones the musician. (= attitude)

However, if a friend designs a message that changes both her belief and her value, Cheryl's attitude will remain unchanged (see box 1.5). Although Cheryl now holds her positive attitude for quite different reasons from before, she still has a positive attitude toward Jones after this third persuasive message. So, when you use persuasion, you can try to change an attitude (and, hopefully, subsequent behavior) by changing either the belief or the value component of an attitude – but not both.

Box 1.5 Cheryl's thoughts about Terrence Jones after her belief and value have changed

Terrence Jones is a rock musician. (= belief)

Rock is the best kind of music. (= value)

Positive attitude toward Terrence Jones the musician. (= attitude)

A third principle is that most attitudes are made up of a collection of belief/value pairs. The attitude is influenced by the number of positive belief/value pairs and the number of negative belief/value pairs (as well as by how important each belief/value pair is to the person). So let us consider Steve's attitude about a car, the Mini-Cooper (box 1.6).

Box 1.6 Steve's attitude toward the Mini-Cooper

The Mini Cooper is a sporty car. (= belief)

Sporty cars are the best! (= value)

I really like the Mini Cooper. (= attitude)

This belief/value pair, by itself, tends to lead to a positive attitude. But Steve also knows other things about this car. It is so small that it has little cargo room (box 1.7).

Box 1.7 Steve's belief and value about cargo room in the Mini-Cooper

The Mini Cooper has almost no room for cargo. (= belief)

Cargo space is very important to me in a car. (= value)

Price is also a consideration for Steve (box 1.8).

Box 1.8 Steve's belief and value about the cost of a Mini-Cooper

The Mini Cooper is relatively inexpensive. (= belief)

I prefer an inexpensive car. (= value)

It should be clear that Steve could have other belief/value pairs (about such ideas as gas mileage, anti-lock brakes, air bags, car audio) that would go together to shape his attitude toward this car. When Steve considers all of the belief/value pairs about the Mini Cooper together, he may end up with an attitude that is positive or negative depending on the make-up of the belief/value pairs he holds. The overall attitude will be positive if most of the belief/value pairs are positive, or if the belief/value pairs that matter most to him are positive (e.g. cost might be more important to Steve than cargo room).

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The point is, if a target audience member has many favorable belief/value pairs and few or no unfavorable ones, changing a single belief or value may not change the overall attitude very much. In general, the more a person knows about an attitude topic like a car or a politician (roughly, the more belief/value pairs he or she has), the more difficult it will be to create a substantial change in their attitude. The complexity of some attitudes (along with the fact that some attitude changes tend to be temporary) is one of the reasons why many persuaders develop advertising campaigns which repeat a message several times and/or use several different messages. For example, during a campaign, politicians seem to run ad after ad (repetition). They also usually make more than one ad, discussing different issues, telling us about themselves and/or their opponent (different messages). The complexity of most attitudes also means that we need to have realistic expectations about what a persuasive message can be expected to accomplish.

We will talk about the audience, and audience analysis, in chapter 5. However, the idea that most attitudes are made up of groups of belief/value pairs shows how important it is for a persuader to understand the audience. You need to know what beliefs and values, relevant to your persuasive goal, the audience accepts. If you are lucky, your target audience will already hold some belief/value pairs that help with your goal (e.g. if you want their attitude to be positive and they already have some positive belief/value pairs). If so, you do not want to change them accidentally! You also need to know which belief/value pairs are opposed to your goal, so you can try to change either the belief or the value. You can also change an attitude by adding new belief/value pairs (“Did you know that the Mini Cooper comes with heated seats? [belief] “That would be so nice in the winter” [value]). However, this will only help if the information really is new; restating what the audience already knows is not likely to help your cause very much. Again, knowing what beliefs and values your audience holds – which ones are helpful to your goal, which ones are harmful to your goal, and which ones are the beliefs or values the audience does not yet have – will help you discover ways to try to persuade them. If you know that Steve is worried about cargo space when he takes long trips, you could inform him about the Mini Cooper’s optional (cool-looking) car-top carrier.

With this understanding of the nature of attitudes, we can turn to the three purposes of persuasion. Persuasive messages can have three purposes:

- reinforce the audience’s attitudes and/or behavior
- create audience attitudes and/or behavior
- change the audience’s attitudes and/or behavior

Sometimes persuasive messages are intended to reinforce what an audience already believes, or the behaviors an audience is already likely to enact. For example, many political advertisements are aimed at reinforcing voters who have already decided to vote for a candidate – they strengthen the audience’s existing attitudes. Advertisers spend a large part of their advertising budgets to reinforce current customers, so they will repeat their buying behavior.

A form of reinforcement is **resistance**, in which you attempt to strengthen existing attitudes so that they will resist, or stand up to, persuasive messages from others which try to change those attitudes. Those who sell goods and services are concerned

that their competitors will steal away customers. General Motors would surely like to increase its share of the automobile sales market, but it also does not want to lose any of its current customers to Ford, Chrysler, or other automakers. Similarly, political candidates have opponents, so they both want to attract additional supporters and to key current supporters from bolting to the other candidate. William McGuire (1964) developed an important theory of resistance, **inoculation theory**, which is based on a disease metaphor (we use inoculations to increase resistance to infection; McGuire discusses how messages which refute opposing ideas and arguments can inoculate an audience against being “infected” with a contrary persuasive message).

Messages which create an attitude, or behavior, are planned for audiences who do not have pre-existing attitudes or behaviors related to the topic. Audiences may be neutral, or may have little knowledge of the issue. In these cases, the speaker’s challenge is to build an attitude or generate an action where apathy or a lack of awareness previously existed. For example, a speaker gave a speech on United Nations relief efforts in Africa. On the basis of conversations with members of the audience, it becomes clear that they have very little knowledge of, or interest in, this topic because most of the audience sees it as only remotely related to their own interests. To be persuasive, the speaker must first find a way to build interest for the topic and then educate this audience. Such efforts are necessary steps in creating a positive attitude for these relief efforts or in generating any action in support of the United Nation’s efforts.

Other messages are designed to change an audience’s attitudes or behavior. A speaker may know that the audience downloads music files and may want to convince them to stop using their university accounts to access these files. This persuasive message is designed to convince the audience to stop doing an action they were going to do. A message designed to change behavior would require some action on the part of audience members that they would not have taken without the influence of the speaker. In a speech on recycling, a speaker passed out the clear recycling bags from the city and asked the audience to take them home to their apartments and dorm rooms and fill them up with their pop cans. About half of the class reported later in the semester that they had used the bags and several had continued to recycle. Another speaker asked his audience to vote in the upcoming student government election. He gave everyone a mock ballot, a map of all of the polling places, and reminded the class on the day of the election. He even walked some people over to one of the polling places after class. Although this speaker was trying to change the students’ attitudes about student elections, he was also trying to change their behaviors by actually trying to get them to participate in the process.

So persuasion is a goal-oriented process in which a person tries to influence other people with a message. Persuasion can create, change, or reinforce attitudes, which are made up of belief/value pairs.

Attitudes and Behavior

In most attempts at persuasion, we want the audience to take some action or to engage in a particular behavior. Those in business want customers to purchase good and services. Politicians want to persuade you to give them your vote (or to

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contribute money to their campaigns). Special interest groups also want to influence your vote. Graduating college seniors want to persuade interviewers to offer them jobs. Employees want to convince their bosses to adopt their business recommendations – and to give them raises and/or promotions. We often try to convince our friends to go see this movie instead of that one, or to try a new restaurant. At times, behavior is a potential outcome even if we are not personally involved. For example, you may try to persuade my friend that Dave Mathews is a great musician. It probably does not matter to you whether your friend buys a Dave Mathews Band CD, but that could easily be an effect of your enthusiastic endorsement of his music. So, the audience's behavior is often an important desired outcome or effect of persuasive messages.

The fundamental assumption of persuasion is that, if a message changes your attitudes, your new attitudes in turn will influence your behavior. Commercial advertising, for example, clearly makes this assumption. Ads tell us about the wonderful features of a product (or how the product will help us become more attractive, successful, or healthy) because the advertiser wants us to buy this product (and lots of it!). For a time, there was a “crisis” in the literature on persuasion because some scholars raised serious doubts about whether attitudes really had anything to do with behavior (e.g. Wicker 1969). This led to a great deal of research which established that attitudes can be an important influence on behavior (Kim and Hunter 1993a, 1993b). However, our attitudes do not always shape our behavior, so we need to know when attitudes are likely to affect what we do and when they are not likely to affect us.

Chapter 12 will focus on the theory of reasoned action, which makes predictions about behavior (or behavioral intent). Here we will sketch several factors that influence the relationship between attitudes and behavior. First, the way an attitude is formed or created makes a difference. We can learn or develop attitudes through direct or vicarious (indirect) experience (Fazio and Zanna 1981). As you might expect, attitudes formed through direct experience have greater influence on behavior than attitudes we learn “second-hand,” from the reports or descriptions of others. For example, you can learn how the Mini Cooper handles by driving it yourself, or by reading about it in a car magazine. Or you might meet someone who is homeless and see where and how he or she lives on the street. The attitudes you form about the car or about the homeless from direct experience will probably have a greater effect on your subsequent behavior than if you read about them in the newspaper.

Another important factor in the relationship between attitude and behavior is the audience's level of involvement in the topic. Some topics appear to us to be more relevant or salient. When a topic matters to us, our behavior is more likely to be guided by our attitudes (Thomsen, Borgida, and Lavine 1995). In contrast, when a topic is less important to us, we are more likely to allow our behavior to be guided by other cues (situational norms, expectations).

Attitudes (and behavior) can be thought of at different levels of abstraction. We can talk about attitudes toward soft drinks generally or toward Coca-Cola or Pepsi specifically. We can talk about buying a car or buying a Honda Civic. Behavior will more closely reflect our attitudes when they are considered at the same level of

abstraction. That is, Sally's attitude toward Pepsi will predict her drinking Pepsi better than it will predict her drinking soft drinks generally (if she has a negative attitude toward Pepsi that does not necessarily mean she has negative attitudes toward drinking Coke™ or Dr. Pepper). Similarly, Joe's attitude toward buying a new car might not predict whether he is likely to buy a Honda Civic (it is quite possible that he could have a positive attitude toward buying a new car but a negative attitude toward Honda Civics). This idea is often discussed as the relevance of the attitude to the behavior (Kim and Hunter 1993a). The more relevant the attitude appears to the behavior (attitudes toward Pepsi™ are most relevant to the behavior of drinking Pepsi™), the more likely that attitude will influence or predict the behavior.

Human beings are social creatures; few of us want to be hermits. Accordingly, we sometimes care about what others expect us to do. At times our attitudes will encourage us to engage in one kind of behavior but our friends will expect us to do something else. When that kind of conflict occurs, we sometimes ignore our attitudes and conform to social norms or to the expectations of our friends and peers. The theory of reasoned action (chapter 12) discusses the effects of social norms on behavior.

This idea of conforming to social norms is related to the concept of self-monitoring (Snyder 1979). Some people pay close attention to how others react to them and to their behavior. They want to make a good impression on others and are willing (within reason) to mold their behavior to fit with others' expectations. These people are called high self-monitors (although it might be clearer if we call this idea something like "high monitors of others' reactions to self" instead of "self-monitoring"). Another way to describe these people is to say they are highly aware of social norms and believe it is important to comply with them whenever possible. Attitudes are less important in determining the behavior of high self-monitors. On the other hand, some people are what Snyder calls low self-monitors: They do what they want, regardless of what others expect or how they might react. We might call low self-monitors non-conformists. They are less aware or less concerned with social norms and, as a result, their attitudes are more likely to influence their behavior. We list four items from the self-monitoring scale (questionnaire used to measure this variable) in box 1.9, to illustrate this concept.

Box 1.9 Items from the self-monitoring scale

My behavior is usually an expression of my true inner feelings, attitudes, and beliefs.

I have trouble changing my behavior to suit different people and different situations. When I am uncertain how to act in a social situation, I look to the behavior of others for cues.

I laugh more when I watch a comedy with others than when alone.

Scoring:

Low self-monitors are more likely to agree with the first two than the last two statements.

Source: <http://pubpages.unh.edu/~ckb/SELFMON2.html>

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Another factor that influences the relationship between attitudes and behavior is our ability to engage in certain behaviors. In some cases, our attitudes incline us to do one thing (engage in a particular behavior), but yet we cannot. For example, you may like one candidate for public office (or you may want to buy a particular product), but if you do not have enough money you cannot contribute to that candidate's campaign (or buy that product). Perhaps you really like P.T. Cruisers, but you cannot afford to buy one right now. Here, your attitude is thwarted by aspects of the situation that you cannot control (lack of money). When circumstances prevent us from doing something we want to, the situation is one of lack of control, or lack of **volitional control** ("volitional" concerns the extent to which a behavior is "voluntary" in the sense of being controlled by one's will). These kinds of situational factors limit the ability of attitudes to influence our behavior.

Thus, research has demonstrated that attitudes do have a significant relationship with, or effect on, our behavior. However, attitudes do not completely determine our behavior: There are limits on their influence. Attitudes formed through direct experience are more likely to shape our behavior than attitudes formed vicariously. The more involved we are in a topic, and the more relevant an attitude is to behavior, the stronger the relationship between attitude and behavior is. Social norms can limit the effectiveness of attitudes in shaping behavior, especially with those who are high self-monitors. Finally, some behaviors are not completely under our volitional control, which limits the effect of attitudes on those behaviors. Attitudes can and do influence behavior, but there are limitations we need to understand.

Overview

This book is divided into four basic parts. First, we discuss several key preliminary matters. Chapter 2 introduces the cognitive approach to persuasion, which, we believe, is a very fundamental concept because persuasion attempts to change the cognitions of the audience (their beliefs, values, attitudes). We discuss how the source is important to the success of persuasive messages in chapter 3. Then chapter 4 introduces the idea of ethics. Because persuasion attempts to change other people, it raises important ethical issues.

The second section of the book is concerned with the mechanics of creating persuasive messages. First we discuss the relationship between the persuader's purpose and the audience (chapter 5). Then, in chapter 6, we explain how the ideas in a speech are organized. Chapter 7 discusses the content of persuasive messages, including evidence and factors of interest. Style (selection and arrangement of the words in a message) comes next, in chapter 8. Chapter 9 explains how to deal with different types of audiences.

The third section of the book introduces attitude change theory. Chapter 10 covers consistency theories, which hold that the amount of persuasion is determined by the extent to which a message disagrees with an audience. Cognitive dissonance is the most widely studied consistency theory. Social judgment/involvement theory (chapter 11) is useful because it focuses our attention on the fact that different audience members

can perceive the same message differently. Ultimately, audiences are persuaded (or not persuaded) by the message as they perceive it. The theory of reasoned action, discussed in chapter 12, picks up on the ideas of belief and value introduced in this chapter, adding in the idea of norms or expectation.

The final section of the book discusses persuasion in two particular contexts. Chapter 13 addresses persuasion in advertising. Chapter 14 concerns persuasion in political campaigns.

Glossary

Audience: the target for a persuasive message.

Apathy: not caring enough to work to encourage others to do what you want.

Attitude: a cognition which is developed through experience, is evaluative, and influences behavior.

Belief: a description of the world and of the people, places, things, and relationships in it.

Coercion: using force, violence, or threats to get what you want.

Inoculation theory: theory which explains how to “protect” those who agree with you from messages by those who disagree.

Persuader: the source of a persuasive message.

Persuasion: the process in which a source uses a message to achieve a goal by creating, changing, or reinforcing the attitudes of others.

Resistance: strengthening existing attitudes in order to resist persuasive messages from others.

Values: subjective judgments of worth, which are neither true nor false.

Volitional control: the ability to control our behavior.