



Transforming Language into Business Influence: A Tutorial in Persuasion

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Abstract. Do the choices that you make in the expression, content, and placement of ideas persuade others effectively in writing? Persuasion research has in fact demonstrated that thoughtfully selected influence strategies can result in potent language choices that convince others powerfully. This article offers a quiz on persuasion that is organized according to the structure of a written persuasive message: the beginning, the body and the conclusion. The choices you make for each section of a persuasive message will be decided in the context of an assigned business case. The final section of the article takes you through some of the basic research in persuasion that can guide the decisions you make in order to influence the recipient of your written message. By the time you end this tutorial, you will better understand how persuasive strategy in writing creates business influence.

Keywords: persuasion, influence, writing strategies, compliance-gaining techniques, responding to business cases, and communication with superiors.

1. Introduction

Change management, conflict resolution and product and services sales rank among the most challenging business interactions that managers face today. The shared element in these interactions is *persuasion*, the process of changing attitudes or motivating action through language or nonverbal means. Unsurprisingly, business people respect and desire to emulate those who are persuasive, who have the ability to convince clients, colleagues or senior management about desired business goals.

Unlike oral persuasion where the power of convincing facial expressions, self-assured bodily gestures, an earnest tone or moving vocal cadence can substitute for language, a real hurdle in written persuasion is the need to rely entirely on verbal cues, specific words to create compelling text that communicates convincingly. Such a challenge is heightened further when you are not in the same location as your receiver, when the issue is complex (as most business situations are), when communication must move quickly and when there are no clear solutions.

Fortunately, a vast body of research on persuasion, also known as *social influence* or *compliance gaining*, can help you to understand what effective persuaders do and why their preferred strategies work. This article is a tutorial in persuasion, consisting of a quiz which you should complete after reading the business case called “Teknosport: Communicating to Prevent Change” (Rogers,

1998) and a quiz which you should take after reading the business case. Since persuasion is a skill that must be modified to different contexts, audiences and objectives, the case will enable you to apply persuasive strategy to a specific context.

You should work out an answer to each of the six scenarios presented in the persuasion quiz that follows. Only when you have attempted all the six questions should you turn to the subsequent section that offers possible solutions to the questions posed. These suggested solutions apply research in persuasion to actual language choices. Your instructor will likely ask you to end this tutorial by creating an actual written response to the case. Once you have better understanding of the research supporting the use of particular strategies, you will be more confident in attempting the persuasion required in a written response to the Rogers case.

2. The Case: Teknosport

Rogers (1998) describes a successful sports business in Finland, known in the industry for its technologically innovative products and superb sales of athletic product packages. Teknosport's employees attribute its resounding success – 15% above industry average per sales employee – to its unique sales training program (STP). But in an effort to boost product development and technological enhancements in the firm, Teknosport's newly promoted CEO, Harri Karvinen, conveys to regional sales managers his intention to replace the costly STP with a buddy system pairing up more experienced sales people with new hires. The written assignments urge Harri to keep STP: one adopts the perspective of a regional sales manager while the second takes on the standpoint of sales employees informed about the impending change by their respective managers.

As with any case, the first and most important step for you is to thoroughly understand the existing context, impending proposed changes, and possible reactions from different publics, such as fellow employees or the Board of Directors. Once you have given some thought to the case, you can then test yourself on the questions in the persuasion quiz.

3. Testing Your Persuasive Power

Instructions: Read and answer all the questions below on your own or in small-group discussion after you have read the assigned case. Finally, feel free to turn to the suggested answers in the section titled “The Research Speaks.”

In the Beginning was ...?

After having read the case, how exactly should you begin? While you have Harri's complete attention, you should begin to devise an overall persuasive strategy. Should you begin by laying out a proposed solution or do something else?

Who Me? An Oracle?

Having kicked off your message as effectively as possible, you should enumerate all the persuasive objectives that you have for this communication. What is your most important goal? Writing down your objectives is a good way to be sure that you haven't omitted any of the important persuasive goals.

Shall the first shall be last...?

As you read the case and thought about important reasons to keep STP, you are convinced that the grounds for retaining STP are robust. Take a few minutes now to list some of these reasons. Does it really matter how you present these arguments? If so, take three or four of your best arguments and put them in the most desirable order you can think of. Be prepared to defend your arrangement to the class.

Whose side are you on anyway?

You know that Harri has objections to keeping STP. He has communicated his viewpoint in Sales Managers' meetings. Sales representatives too have heard about Harri's objections from their manager. As you communicate with Harri, should you explain both sides of the issue or offer a stronger case by presenting your most compelling arguments?

The Evidence Speaks... Appealing to the Heart or the Head?

What kind of evidence should you muster as you present your case? You decide to add one more set of evidence to bolster your case. Should you rely on startling statistics or an emotionally moving case study of an STP experience?

And the Verdict Is?

You recognize that your desire to keep STP is debatable in Harri's eyes. Even with members of the Board of Directors, who are likely to be reasonably well-informed and at best, have mixed feelings regarding STP, the opposing viewpoint that you hold is not likely to be totally transparent. As you end your argument, should you explicitly conclude your viewpoint? In other words, once you have presented your case to Harri and other potential readers that he may pass your message on to, such as the Board of Directors, should you close the loop with an impressive and meticulous summation of your viewpoint?

4. The Research Speaks....Answers to More Effective Persuasion

Each of the six questions you have answered pertains to features of persuasion that can be most directly applied to how you actually write. The purpose of this next section is help you become familiar with some of the research in rhetoric and psychology that explains the persuasive choices you can make in the *Teknosport* case.

It may surprise you to know that the roots of persuasion actually date back almost 2500 years to Aristotle, a Greek philosopher, who intuitively captured the different facets of persuasion into a tripartite taxonomy of persuasion: *logos* (the content of the message), *pathos* (the emotions of the audience), and *ethos* (the character of the message source). While the Aristotelean classification has seemed intuitively satisfactory for hundreds of years, experimental treatments of this classification occurred from the 1940s onward in psychological studies of persuasion at Yale.

A more contemporary and equally illuminating research strategy in persuasion has been to observe authentic persuasion encounters in daily life. For instance, social psychologist Robert Cialdini has observed car salespersons, Hari Krishna devotees, door-to-door salesmen, marketers and many others who daily use persuasion, crystallizing into six principles “the techniques and strategies most commonly and effectively used by a broad range of compliance practitioners” (Cialdini, 1993, p. xii). We will refer to some of these principles in answering the questions from the quiz. Another major resource we will use in clarifying the research is a useful framework developed by two social psychologists, Pratkanis and Aronson (2000) who offer a four-step process of persuasion: 1) pre-persuasion, 2) source credibility, 3) the message and 4) the emotions. At the end of this tutorial in persuasion you will find a brief list of resources that you can use to further your expertise in the basic research in persuasion.

The six questions in the quiz are arranged in the order one would develop a persuasive message. We begin with questions that you ought to consider right as you frame the beginning of your message, move on to develop the middle of a message and decide how to end. The table below will help you to see how the actual language choices you make as you create a persuasive message based on the six questions in the quiz dovetail nicely with the structure of a persuasive message from start to finish.

Table 1: Selecting different persuasive strategies to match the structure of a message.

Structuring a Message	The Quiz
Beginning a persuasive message	Pre-persuasion The source as oracle
Developing the core of a message	Primacy-recency
	Two-sidedness
Ending persuasively	Emotional Appeals
	Implicit or explicit conclusions

Pre-Persuasion: In the Beginning was . . . somebody else's viewpoint

Every communication textbook available today urges students to begin with audience analysis. Since Harri is your primary audience, some of you rightly understood the need to analyze Harri's motivations. One concrete technique for getting under Harri's skin is to first state Harri's position as accurately as you can.

It may intrigue you to know that the strategy of stating Harri's position taps a conflict resolution strategy advocated by psychologist Carl Rogers. In oral exchanges, Rogers recommends beginning with empathetic listening, so that you do not disagree with another's point of view before you have summarized accurately that person's argument. One description of the Rogers' technique crystallizes it as follows: "He trained people to withhold judgment of another person's ideas until after they listened attentively to the other person, understood that person's reasoning, appreciated that person's values, respected that person's humanity – in short, walked in that person's shoes (Ramage and Bean, 1995, p 179). The counterpart in writing is to summarize the opposing viewpoint so charitably that the reader feels the summary is as accurate as he/she would have stated it.

Why should you start with Harri's goals? Psychologists have noted that persons are often not swayed by a logical argument if it somehow threatens their view of the world. Therefore, your likelihood of arriving at a conclusion that moves to a new place and thereby satisfies both parties is greater if both can incorporate at least part of their earlier world view. Why is Harri intent on

eliminating STP and whom does Harri want to please in the process? Therefore what might you include in the beginning of your message to him?

Consequently, the most important reason for understanding Harri's goals is to frame the ensuing discussion in terms that are compatible to him. Pratkanis and Aronson (2000) term this initial step in the persuasion process as "pre-persuasion." By establishing how an issue is defined and discussed, the communicator can focus attention on those aspects most relevant to the hoped-for change.

Source Credibility: Who me? An Oracle?

Look back at your list of persuasive goals. Did you list as one of your goals establishing your own credibility as a reliable source? In fact, you should list source credibility as your foremost goal. Research from the Yale studies in persuasion (Hovland and Weiss, 1953) shows that receivers like Harri respond to messages from credible sources. So potent is the force of credibility that when the same message is attributed to two sources differing only in perceptions of expertise or trustworthiness, greater persuasiveness is achieved by the more credible source. If you wish to hold your reader's attention effectively, establish your credibility early so that you can sustain attention until the end of your message. Cialdini (2001) refers to this effect as *authority* – the magnetic influence of a knowledgeable expert.

Therefore, if you are a regional sales manager at Teknosport, for whom a major work objective has been to run analyses of sales growth, you need to tell Harri early about the work you do, so that you can speak with authority about likely future trends. Alternatively, if you can speak from personal experience as a beneficiary of STP and possibly even as one of the STP instructors when you became a more experienced salesperson, again you possess first-hand expertise that you should share early.

Lastly, it's nice to know that while experts get a lot of respect and persuade more easily than novices, all is not lost if you are not an expert on a given topic. Research about credibility has identified expertise and trustworthiness as the two most required characteristics in a source (O'Keefe, 1990). You achieved trustworthiness, and therefore credibility, in Harri's eyes when you made a concerted and sincere effort to summarize his viewpoint. You also unwittingly capitalized on the "liking principle" (Cialdini, 2001): we like those who are nice to us and find them more trustworthy and ultimately more persuasive. In research that investigates why we like some people and not others, Pratkanis and Aronson (2000) have identified the *granfalloon* effect: perceived similarity between you and the recipient of your message can help you to be perceived as more attractive. Similarity in race, family or educational background, or even where we were born generally produces a favorable view of the source of a persuasive message.

The next two questions in the quiz relate to some of the most important findings about the content of persuasive messages. Applying the research that

follows on primacy-recency and two-sided arguments gives an immediately discernible rigor to your reasoning.

The Message: And the first shall be last

Primacy-recency research in persuasion considers how the ordering of different reasons or points affects the development of an argument. A *primacy* effect occurs when the first reason is best remembered while a *recency* effect results from the most recent or last point made. While no general advantage has been obtained for either position, some suggest that “primacy effects are more likely to be found with interesting, controversial and familiar topics (O’Keefe, 1990). Given that the decision to remove STP has become controversial, it seems reasonable to start with the strongest reason, to capitalize on reader interest, energy and receptivity. Since memory research documents the best recall with the most recent information, the last argument is equally important. Middles in any message are least remembered, though still needed to create a logical flow of arguments or build a transition.

Where to place points is an even more important issue with two-sided arguments. Starting with opposing arguments would likely draw too much attention to them as would ending with them, possibly creating an irreversibly negative impression. By sandwiching the cons within the pros, you emphasize your strengths and mention the weaknesses but don’t dwell on them unnecessarily. Consequently, middles play an important structural role in two-sided arguments. Putting negative arguments in the middle delays the unfavorable impact, with sufficient opportunity to counteract the effect of the negative information before the text ends.

The Message: Whose side are you on anyway?

The most commonly used strategy of argument, particularly in sales and marketing contexts, is to present the positive reasons for supporting a certain viewpoint. If you know that the recipient to your message shares your viewpoint, running through shared arguments is usually sufficient. A less commonly used strategy in those contexts is to present both sides of the case, so that the reader is explicitly told about the negative aspects of a product.

Why should you raise both sides of an issue? If you know that your audience has reasonable objections to your viewpoint, it is best to acknowledge them explicitly. Otherwise, your audience might spend lots of time rehearsing their objections to the viewpoint you are advocating and end up devoting little time to your carefully crafted supportive claims.

Avoiding the negatives in your argument can also diminish your hard-earned credibility in two ways. Firstly, if the reader concludes that you are too narrow-minded or ignorant to see possible objections to the viewpoint you are advocating, then you might be deemed less knowledgeable. Secondly, if the reader gives you the benefit of the doubt regarding your intellect and concludes

that you are aware of objections to your viewpoint but still not raising them, then your trustworthiness becomes suspect.

Acknowledging an alternative to your viewpoint not only raises your credibility but also gives you an opportunity to refute opposing arguments cleanly, thereby fortifying your viewpoint further. Refutations have been investigated in real-life argument scenarios such as public-policy arguments. Ignoring alternative viewpoints is not an option, since raising a counter-argument and then providing a refutation confirms a writer's expertise with regard to a specific policy. In advertising contexts, in contrast, such a refutation isn't even necessary. Apparently, even finding an ad that mentions some of the flaws in a product is so novel that readers consider the credibility of the ad enhanced. One such example (Solomon, 2002) occurred with an Avis car rental ad that mentions that it is only No. 2 in the market, an unexpected admission, before discounting it by exclaiming, "We try harder."

The final two questions stress the vital role of both logic and emotions in persuasion. Research shows that when people agree with a message, we believe the message is rational or logical; when we disagree with it, we think of it as being more emotional (Lefford, 1946; Reuchelle, 1958). While the issue of keeping or eradicating STP may seem like a purely logical issue, a good persuader pays attention to the ways in which emotions can cloud or intensify likely reactions.

Appealing to The Heart: The Evidence Speaks in Stories

Good evidence not only enhances communicator credibility but also strengthens the persuasiveness of your standpoint. The core of your message works if you can substantiate the position you are advocating through plausible evidence.

In assembling evidence to build your case, you ought to consider how different types of evidence really work. Should you use hard, cold facts or more personal narratives? Research shows that those who are analytical and intelligent, as Harri seems to be, prefer technical data as substantiation (Reinard, 1988). For instance as a manager, you could opt to display statistics that contrast the sales figures achieved with STP with those that predate STP. If you can compare current and pre-STP profits directly, you have the data to show that without the training cycle, it is reasonable to project possible falls in profits.

If you are writing from the perspective of one of the sales employees, anecdotes from your own experience could well be your most persuasive evidence. Why do anecdotes work? First of all, graphic descriptions of personal experience create vivid images. Vividness promotes memorability and stronger emotional reactions while your recipient reads your message. Secondly, your personal experiences and those of your colleagues possess novelty. Such novel evidence is more persuasive than evidence the recipient already knows. Best of all, your experience may strike a chord with Harri, whose experiences may have been similar.

In short, effective communicators realize that message recipients are not influenced solely by appeals to logic. Appeals to emotions and values are the components that create intensity in how we evaluate information. In this case, the employees' desire to keep STP has a strong emotional component. While a purely logical analysis of STP with other methods of training might suggest that STP ought to be eliminated, an important emotional issue for the employees is the value of STP in promoting cohesiveness within the company. The intensity of your emotions will convey to Harri and the Board that eradicating STP will result in an intangible but very real loss of emotional bonds between the employees and the company. Actual words such as quotations from various employees and satisfied customers who benefited from the knowledge employees gain through STP can be utterly compelling in corroborating the widespread influence of STP within and outside the company.

As a writer, you should consider language features that appeal to the emotions. While a detailed discussion of such expressions is beyond the scope of this article, persuasion textbooks like Larson (2001) or Bettinghaus and Cody (1994) have good sections on the role of language variables in persuasion. Since emotional appeals are more attention-grabbing, they end up being very memorable. Knowing this psychological fact means that writers should assess whether he/she has intentionally incorporated any language elements that can create attention and memorability.

Firstly, by using what are known as *god* or *devil* terms, we can select words that create a more intense reaction. As suggested by the labels, *god* terms have ultimate positive connotations while *devil* terms have irrevocably negative associations for individuals or groups of people. While each person's set of terms is slightly different, it isn't difficult to figure out from your analysis of Harri's motivations that "cost reduction" and "technological innovations" are god terms for him. If you can be seen to be helping Harri achieve his objectives (which you have referred to in his terms), you are likely to be more convincing.

It is ironic that while most of us will tend to focus our energies on developing a painstakingly crafted logical argument to convince the rational side of the recipients like Harri or the Board of Directors, persuasion research reminds us not to ignore the powerful appeal of emotions. Emotional messages grab and hold attention. Vivid images stay in our memory as do the warmth of shared values, the fear of possible risk or the intensity of a shared vision. Therefore, while we may not be able to so easily quantify a message that works well emotionally, its effect is easy to detect and relatively easy to create if we pay attention to choosing words and expressions that communicate emotionally.

The Message: And the verdict is?

We end with a final nod to how to end a persuasive message. Should you summarize your viewpoint in an explicit conclusion? Such a decision depends on the involvement and motivation of the reader, according to persuasion research.

Naturally we can assume that STP is a high involvement issue for Harri and the Board once profit, enhancements to technology and other business objectives interconnect. Some research has shown that once an audience is reasonably well-informed and involved, presenting a logical argument that shows two sides of the issue is best ended by leaving the audience to draw their own conclusion.

Nevertheless, when an argument is long, complex, or addressed to a mixed audience who may have neither the interest nor the ability to draw the conclusion you intend, explicit conclusions work best. If in doubt, opt for the explicit conclusion.

5. Communicate to Persuade

This short tutorial has worked through six scenarios to help you gauge your ability to use language to influence change in attitude or action as the desired outcomes of persuasion. As you have seen, basic persuasion research enables us to use information about how real people actually respond in persuasion encounters to plan useful strategies. As readers, we find that many different heuristics help us to decide if we are convinced by what we read, so the selection of the six items above is based on those text features that satisfy the need to convert persuasive aims into workable language strategies. As you work through more cases like *Teknosport* and read further in the persuasion literature, you will develop greater confidence and skill as someone who can achieve business influence.

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