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Influencing Your Audience

6 Tactics to Make Your Messages More Persuasive

By Ken O'Quinn

Author of: *Perfect Phrases for Business Letters*
and Founder of WritingWithClarity.com



www.writingwithclarity.com
ken@writingwithclarity.com

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Success in business, particularly in management, depends on your ability to get results with the help of other people. That often requires that you overcome resistance, sway the skeptics, or motivate the apathetic. Perhaps you are asking senior management to accept your idea over someone else's, or maybe you are trying to persuade employees to accept a controversial policy change. Persuasion is about shaping an audience's attitudes and behaviors.

Most people do not learn much about persuasion growing up. Those who are on the debate team in high school learn the art of rhetoric, which is how to structure an argument, but no high school course explores the behavioral psychology behind what makes people act or why they change their mind. Most colleges do not offer persuasion courses, and they are rare in MBA curriculums.

Consequently, if you ask most people to write a persuasive message, beyond using *please* and *thank you*, they struggle. So here are six tips to help you be a more persuasive communicator:

1. Be perceived as credible.

Before you even try to persuade someone, you can increase your chances of success by creating an atmosphere where persuasion can occur.

One way is to strengthen your image. Aristotle told us that for a person to be a persuasive communicator, the audience needs to view him or her as credible. Credibility is the audience's determination of how believable you are, and here are two ways that people judge credibility:

Expertise – Learn as much as you possibly can about your field because people are persuaded to do things for people they perceive as experts. Expand your knowledge by doing research, by joining committees, by taking on new assignments, and by participating in projects that expand your horizons.

Be trustworthy – This means be honest, be fair, be a good listener, and don't be afraid to acknowledge your own weaknesses, something people do not do often enough.

Consider the major league baseball umpire who caused a pitcher to lose a perfect game because the umpire called a runner safe at first base when, the video showed, the runner was out. He acknowledged his error to reporters after the game, publicly apologized to the pitcher, and received a standing ovation at the start of the next night's game.

2. Know your audience.

Just as a sports coach does not use the same defense for all opponents, so it is that a communicator cannot present the same type of message to all audiences.

In a persuasive communication, it is essential to consider the audience's beliefs, attitudes, and values because you need to tailor your message to their frame of reference. You can't build the message entirely around what you think is important and what you want the audience to hear, because it's not about you. If the message is contrary to the audience's experiences, attitudes and values, you will not connect with people.

A politician who wants to give a public speech advocating lowering the drinking age to 18 should consider whether the audience will include parents with teenage children. If so, the speaker can still advocate a lower drinking age, but he needs to adjust his message. To soften the audience's resistance, he could include a provision in his bill that would prohibit open containers in a car.

3. Overcome resistance with an effective opening.

When an audience is supportive or neutral, you can tell people directly what your position is; there is no need to delay it and ease into it. But when people are skeptical or opposed to your request or your idea, you need a different approach.

Let's say you want your team to attend a writing workshop and they are as excited as riding in an elevator. You could simply tell them it is mandatory, but they might be more agreeable if you try a more subtle approach, such as this:

Nurses and lawyers and accountants all have to be recertified, and we all agree that's important because they need to keep their skills sharp. Yet, when it comes to writing, people assume that what they learned 20 years ago is enough to get them through their careers.

Because the audience is resistant, you need to move people toward a new way of thinking about your proposal. So you withhold your position and open with something the audience already accepts as true. As they sit there nodding in agreement, you present your idea, which now seems more acceptable to them.

4. Position your best information first if you have a strong case.

People read messages in one of two ways, depending on whether they are what psychologists call a motivated audience or an unmotivated group.

Motivated people, probably the most common audience, are attentive from the beginning. The information might directly affect them, they might just be interested in the topic, or they might need to approve or reject your idea. So they read it closely, think carefully about the position you present, analyze it, and form an opinion around that initial information. They will pay less attention to subsequent details, so if you have a strong argument, it is best to present it early.

An unmotivated audience, often employees who are apathetic, is only casually interested in the topic and will not read closely at the beginning.

Contrary to what many people have heard, the last thing you heard or read is not necessarily what you are most likely to remember. Experiments have found that only under certain circumstances, depending on several variables, do people remember the last thing presented.

5. Use concrete language

The purpose of a persuasive message is to motivate an audience to act or to accept your point of view, and to do that, you must use language that moves people. This means avoiding corporate buzzwords, those fashionable words that people use because everyone else does. Here are three important reasons to do so:

Buzzwords are boring because they are clichés, which means they are stale from overuse.

They drain your message of authenticity and give it an artificial, cut-and-paste sound.

They do not influence an audience because they are vague; they do not convey clear images or ideas.

Use concrete language because it represents real things that people can see, feel, and hear, and therefore, they words resonate with people. What makes great speeches compelling and persuasive is that speakers avoid using *bandwidth*, *robust*, *leverage*, *incentivize* and other mush. Such words are blurry; they leave the audience with only a vague notion of what the reader is referring to.

Martin Luther King said, “I’ve been to the mountain top”; he didn’t say, “I’ve been to a mission-critical platform.”

To persuade people, you need to bring your message within the realm of their life experience so that they relate to it. So use the plain, familiar words of daily conversation, which are rich with imagery and action, and people will grasp your persuasive appeal.

6. Remember that people want to be consistent.

We feel a need to be consistent because our culture values consistent behavior and views inconsistency as an unattractive character trait. We want to demonstrate consistency in two ways: by living up to our commitments, and by acting in ways that are consistent with our beliefs and our self-image.

Managers should ask employees to put their performance goals in writing because the written document represents a commitment. The employee will feel more motivated to achieve her goals, knowing that she made a commitment to do so and also knowing that someone else might see her written commitment and consider her inconsistent if she does not achieve what she said she would.

When our behaviors are not consistent with our attitudes and beliefs, including our feelings about ourselves, we experience what is called cognitive dissonance, which is mental turmoil, internal conflict.

Someone who is a strong advocate for conservation will feel a twinge of guilt (mental disharmony) if, at a business breakfast, he chooses a Styrofoam cup instead of a cup that can be washed and reused.

If someone said they would send you important information two weeks ago and you still don't have it, rather than simply asking them again to send it, use the consistency principle. Make a point of mentioning they said that they would send the information and that you look forward to reading it. That will be a reminder to them that they made a commitment and have not followed through.

About Author Ken O'Quinn

Ken O'Quinn is a writing coach who conducts corporate workshops, one of which is *Influencing Your Audience: Crafting Messages with an Impact*. His website is WritingWithClarity.com.