

*The Public Relations Strategist* — Current Issue

## The Art of Persuasion: Winning Support for Your Messages

By **Ken O'Quinn** - April 9, 2014

If you want to persuade an audience to accept your ideas, then you can try a number of creative ways to make your proposal more appealing. But there may be a better approach: focusing on why the audience is resistant.

Understanding resistance is important because that is what stands between you and motivating readers or listeners to comply with your request, change their behavior or accept your ideas.

If you know what's behind their reluctance, then you can approach them with one of two strategies: One is the conventional approach. To counter an audience's skepticism or outright opposition, most people try to make their offer or idea more attractive.

But psychologist Eric Knowles says there is another strategy that people overlook. Instead of improving the favorability of your offer, try lowering the audience's resistance.

Here are a few ideas that you can use to try to mitigate the audience's hesitation:

### Ask for less.

People often ask for too much in a persuasive appeal, and it is quickly rejected. Reducing the scope of the initial request makes it less burdensome, less complicated and less daunting for the reader or listener, so you are more likely to get a favorable response.

When considering this tactic, be realistic about what you can accomplish. If your audience will be opposed, or at least wary, then perhaps all you can realistically expect to accomplish is getting people to think about your idea. Or, if you are trying to persuade senior management to approve an expensive program, then asking if you can first run it as a pilot program calls for less of a commitment.

You can always ask for more later, which in social psychology is called the "foot in the door" technique. By asking for less initially, you increase the likelihood that the audience will say yes to your first request, and you also improve the chance that they will say yes when you return to ask for more later (because of the principle of consistency).

### Acknowledge the resistance.



If the audience is already resistant, then be candid about it and address it up front. Say, "I realize you might be reluctant to..." or "I understand your concerns about..."

By treating their opinion with respect, you are validating their feelings and opinions, and the empathy helps create an emotional connection.

### Change the comparison.

People evaluate options with a comparison point in mind, and you often can persuade them to accept an offer depending on what they are comparing it with.

For example, a group was having a difficult time selling cookies for 75 cents, so it wrote, "Reduced from \$1 to 75 cents" on its sign and it sold many more. This is the reason sale prices are so successful in retail stores. People focus more on the comparison than on the actual cost.

Similarly, let's say you would like an employee to volunteer two hours a week for the United Way. If you ask the person to contribute two hours, she might decline, because compared to not doing any volunteering and having the two hours to herself, your request is inconvenient.

But if you first ask her to volunteer six hours a week, then the comparison point, or anchor, has now changed. Compared to six hours, two hours seems much more manageable.

### Change the frame of reference.

People evaluate information differently depending on which element they are focusing on. You can rearrange the elements of your proposal to emphasize the positive attributes.

When people eating hamburgers were told that the meat was 75 percent lean, they gave it a higher grade than a second group (eating the same meat) did, which was told that the meat contained 25 percent fat.

The University of Kansas told psychology majors that they were required to participate in four hours of research experiments each week. If they missed an hour that they had signed up for, then they were penalized one hour, and they had to complete five hours of research. This created resentment, so the psychology department reframed the requirement. It told students they had to complete five hours of research, but if they completed four without missing an appointment, then it would waive the fifth hour. The same requirement in a different framework elicited far more positive reactions from students.

### Remove the audience's reluctance.

L.L. Bean, outdoor clothing and sporting goods dealer, built a global reputation on its satisfaction-guaranteed customer service. Among other things, customers can return products even without a sales receipt. This guarantee provides an assurance to the customer who might be hesitating to buy but decides to do it, thinking, "I can always return it."

Just as changing the frame of reference makes a person look differently at your proposal, providing some sort of guarantee or assurance also expands the person's perception of your offer.

If you are trying to get an employee to take on an assignment, then tell the person you will find someone else if the task becomes too time-consuming. If a person says he can't attend your event because he has a deadline, and you say you can arrange for him to have an extension, then that might be the assurance he needs to remove his ambivalence.

Listen carefully to why people are resisting. It is often because they are worried about the ramifications, and the more you can do to eliminate the outcome they are concerned about, the more likely you are to persuade them.

## Influencing your audience

If you prefer the conventional strategy and want to make the message more inviting, then consider these tactics.

### Strengthen the message.

Include substantive information, such as hard facts, statistics (not too many) and descriptive details. Quote experts in your company or industry, particularly people the audience thinks are credible.

### Use concrete language.

Use words that appeal to the senses, words that people can see, hear and feel. This makes your message real and brings it within the realm of the reader's experience.

No one ever says, "Remember JFK's famous speech when he said, 'Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do to enhance optimal cross-functional leveraging.'" Great speakers use words that connect with people. Buzzwords and other corporate babble do not resonate with employees and customers.

### Demonstrate your credibility.

People often decide how to respond to a persuasive appeal based not on the content of the message but on whether they view the communicator as credible. And two factors people use to judge credibility are expertise and trustworthiness. Communicate your expertise in your message. This can include citing well-known experts in the field. When you refer to credible sources, your message becomes more persuasive.

### Use the principle of social consensus.

This principle of human behavior says that when people are undecided about what action to take in a given situation, they will often look at what others are doing and will take their cue from that. This is the human tendency to "join the crowd."

If you are in an airport waiting area, approaching departure time, and everyone gets up and forms a line, then so will you. If everyone else is doing it, then we assume it must be the right thing, or the practical thing, to do. When you were in high school and trying to figure out what to wear to the party Friday night, what did you often do? You called a friend and asked what he or she was wearing.

If you are trying to gain approval for a project and you know that a manager or executive whom your audience admires already supports it, then mention that in your message. People tend to be influenced by the opinions of people they view as credible.



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