

Why Study Persuasion?

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One of the authors was enjoying a day at the beach with his family. As he sat in a folding chair, lost in a good book, he could hear the cries of seagulls overhead and the pounding of the surf. Nothing was bothering him. He was oblivious to the world around him. Or so he thought. As he reflected more on the situation, however, he became aware that he was being bombarded by persuasive messages on all sides. A boom box was playing a few yards away. During commercial breaks, various ads tried to convince him to subscribe to a wireless phone service, switch auto insurance companies, and try a new bacon cheeseburger. A nearby sign warned that no alcohol, glass objects, or smoking were permitted on the beach. A plastic bag in which a nearby family's children had brought their beach toys advertised Wal-Mart on its side. The family picnic cooler proudly displayed its manufacturer, Igloo, as well.

And that was only the beginning. A plane flew overhead, trailing a banner that advertised a collect calling service. The lifeguard's tower displayed a Hurley logo. The lifeguard's truck, a specially equipped Toyota, announced that it was the "official emergency vehicle" of "Surf City USA," a moniker that is trademarked by the city of Huntington Beach, California. Oh, the indignity of being rescued by an unofficial vehicle!

There were oral influence attempts too. His son tried to lure him into the water by saying, "Come on, it's not that cold." But he knew better. His son *always* said that, no matter how cold the water was. "Would you mind keeping an eye on our things?" the family next to the author's asked. I guess our family looks trustworthy, the author thought. His wife asked him, "Do you want to walk down to the pier? They have frozen bananas." She knew he would be unable to resist the temptation.

And those were only the overt persuasive messages. A host of more subtle messages also competed for the author's attention. A few yards away, a woman was applying sun block to her neck and shoulders. The author decided he'd better do the same. Had she nonverbally influenced him to do likewise? Nearby a young couple was soaking up the sun. Both were wearing hats with the Nike "swoosh" logo. Were they "advertising" that brand? A young man with a boogie board ran by, headed for the water. His head was shaved, his face was heavily pierced, and he sported a goodly number of tattoos. Did his appearance advocate a particular set of values or tastes? Was he a billboard for an "alternative" lifestyle? Every male head on the beach turned in unison as a trio of bikini-clad women walked by. Were the males "persuaded" to turn their heads or was this simply an involuntary reflex? Two tan, muscular males were tossing a Frisbee back and forth. Both had six-pack abs. The author made a mental note to do more sit-ups. There seemed to be as many persuasive messages, or potentially persuasive messages, as there were shells on the beach.

The preceding examples raise two important issues. First, persuasion is pervasive. We are surrounded by influence attempts, both explicit and implicit, no matter where we are. Second, it is difficult to say with any certainty what is and is not "persuasion." Where should we draw the line between persuasion and other forms of communication? We address the first of these issues in this chapter. Here we examine the pervasive nature of persuasion and offer a rationale for learning more about its workings. In the next chapter, we tackle the issue of what constitutes *persuasion* and related terms such as *social influence* and *compliance gaining*.

AIMS AND GOALS

This is a book about persuasion. Its aims are academic and practical. On the academic side, we examine how and why persuasion functions the way it does. In so doing, we identify some of the most recent theories and findings by persuasion researchers. On the practical side, we illustrate these theories and findings with a host of real-life examples. We also offer useful advice on how to become a more effective persuader and how to resist influence attempts, especially unethical influence attempts, by others.

If learning how to persuade others and avoid being persuaded seems a bit manipulative, remember, we don't live in a society populated with unicorns and rainbows. The real world is brimming with persuaders. You can avoid learning about persuasion, perhaps, but you can't avoid persuasion itself.

Besides, we can't tell you everything there is to know about persuasion. Nobody knows all there is to know about this subject. One of the points we stress throughout this book is that people aren't that easy to persuade. Human beings are complex. They aren't that malleable. They can be stubborn, unpredictable, and intractable, despite the best efforts of persuaders.

Persuasion is still as much an "art" as it is a "science." Human nature is too complicated, and our understanding of persuasion too limited, to predict in advance which influence attempts will succeed and which will fail. Think how often you flip the channel when a commercial costing millions of dollars to produce and air appears on television. As one advertising executive put it, "half the money I spend on advertising is wasted...but I don't know which half" (cited in Berger, 2011, p. 1). Think how many candidates for public office have spent fortunes campaigning, only to lose their elections. Or think how difficult it is for the federal government to convince people to stop smoking, practice safe sex, or buckle up.

The science of persuasion is still in its infancy. Despite P. T. Barnum's axiom that "there's a sucker born every minute," people are uncannily perceptive at times. It is tempting to believe that if one only knew the right button to push, one could persuade anybody. More often than not, though, there are multiple buttons to push, in the right combination, and the sequence is constantly changing. Even so, persuasion is not entirely a matter of luck. Much is known about persuasion. Persuasion has been scientifically studied since the 1940s.¹ Written texts on persuasion date back to ancient Greece.² A number of strategies and techniques have been identified and their effectiveness or ineffectiveness documented. Persuaders are a long way from achieving an Orwellian nightmare of thought control, but a good deal is known about how to capture people's hearts and minds. Before proceeding further, we want to address a common negative stereotype about persuasion.

PERSUASION IS NOT A DIRTY WORD

The study of persuasion has gotten some bad publicity over the years. Everyone seems to agree that the subject is fascinating, but some are reluctant to embrace a field of study that conjures up images of manipulation, deceit, or brainwashing. There is, after all, a sinister side to persuasion. Adolph Hitler, Charles Manson, Jim Jones, David Koresh, Marshall Applewhite, and Osama bin Laden, were all accomplished persuaders—much to the detriment of their followers.³ We, however, do not think of persuasion as the ugly stepsister in the family of human communication. Rather, we find the study of persuasion to be enormously intriguing. Persuasion is the backbone of many of our communicative endeavors. We can't resist the urge to learn more about how and why it works. Part of our fascination stems from the fact that persuasion is, on occasion, used for unsavory ends. It is therefore all the more important that researchers learn as much as they can about the strategies and tactics of unethical persuaders.

PERSUASION IS OUR FRIEND

Persuasion isn't merely a tool used by con artists, chiselers, charlatans, cheats, connivers, and cult leaders. Nobel Peace Prize recipients and Pulitzer Prize-winning journalists are also persuaders. In fact, most "professional" persuaders are engaged in socially acceptable, if not downright respectable, careers. They include advertising executives, campaign managers, celebrity endorsers, clergy, congresspersons, diplomats, infomercial spokespersons, lawyers, lobbyists, mediators, media pundits, motivational speakers, political cartoonists, press secretaries, public relations experts, radio talk show hosts, recruiters, salespersons, senators, social activists, and syndicated columnists, to name just a few.

Let's focus on the positive side of persuasion for a moment. Persuasion helps forge peace agreements between nations. Persuasion helps open up closed societies. Persuasion is crucial to the fundraising efforts of charities and philanthropic organizations. Persuasion convinces motorists to buckle up when driving or refrain from driving when they've had a few too many. Persuasion is used to convince a substance-abusing family member to seek professional help. Persuasion is how the coach of an underdog team inspires the players to give it their all. Persuasion is a tool used by parents to urge children not to accept rides from strangers or to allow anyone to touch them inappropriately. In short, persuasion is the cornerstone of a number of positive, prosocial endeavors. *Very little of the good that we see in the world could be accomplished without persuasion.*

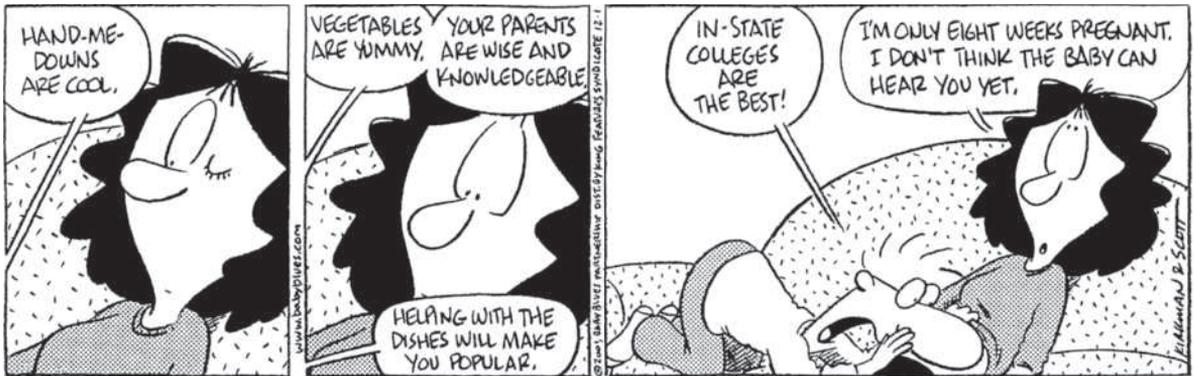
Persuasion, then, is a powerful and often prosocial force. Having highlighted the positive side of persuasion, we address the question of *why* the study of persuasion is so valuable. The next section, therefore, offers a justification for the study of social influence.

THE PERVASIVENESS OF PERSUASION: YOU CAN RUN BUT YOU CAN'T HIDE

We've already mentioned one of the primary reasons for learning about this subject: Persuasion is a central feature of every sphere of human communication. We can't avoid it. We can't make it go away. Like Elvis impersonators in Las Vegas, persuasion is here to stay. Various estimates suggest that the average person is exposed to anywhere from 300 to 3,000 messages per day.⁴ Persuasion is part and parcel of the "people professions" and is ever present in our daily interactions with friends, family, and coworkers. There are more ways to persuade than ever before. You can give a *TED talk* to promote your big idea, engage in *hashtag activism*, advocating a cause by tweeting, or promote change through a website such as www.dosomething.org.

Word of Mouth: What's The Buzz?

Nowadays, it is hard to avoid "buzz." You may even be doing some of the buzzing yourself. According to some estimates, the average American comments on specific products and services 60 times per week (Moore, 2010). So ubiquitous is word of mouth (WOM) that it generates 3.3 billion messages per day



Persuasion is everywhere—even in the womb!

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(Berger & Schwartz, 2011). So why all the buzz about this strategy? Consumers have grown cynical. They no longer trust traditional advertising. They place more trust in friends than in Madison Avenue. As a result, a message that is spread via social networks can be highly effective. Like tossing a rock into a pond, the ripples of influence spread among social circles.

Because buzz marketing relies on friendships to spread the word, it is essential that it be perceived as genuine (Salzman, Matathia, & O'Reilly, 2003). WOM succeeds when it seems authentic rather than manufactured, spontaneous rather than choreographed, and peer driven rather than corporate-sponsored. WOM enjoys several advantages over traditional advertising and marketing techniques. It operates largely through interpersonal channels (face to face, cellphone, email, IM, texting), lending it an air of authenticity. It is inexpensive compared to traditional media. And it is self-perpetuating. Moreover, buzz is more effective than mainstream media at reaching younger audiences.

Social Media: Rise of the Machines

Perhaps nowhere is the omnipresence of social influence more apparent than in new media. Some people seem to spend their every waking moment texting, tweeting, blogging, or posting their views on all matter of subjects large and small. New media aren't just entertaining diversions, they are important mediums for influence. When we friend someone on Facebook or follow someone on Twitter, it is a result of influence. Roughly one in five microblogs, for example, mentions a specific brand (Jansen, Zhang, Sobel, & Chowdury, 2009).

Social media is so important that companies now specialize in *sentiment tracking*, a process of monitoring and measuring social media to gauge the public's mood in nearly real time. Software can track how a person, brand, or issue is trending based not only on the number of tweets generated but also on how favorable, neutral, or negative those tweets are (Benady, 2012; Leonhardt, 2011). The software recognizes words related to feelings, emotions, and opinions and uses them to take the public's pulse on an issue.

In addition to its marketing potential, Twitter has transformed the political landscape, 140 characters at a time. Social media even played a role in the Arab Spring movement. As Savir (2012) noted, “the revolutions in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Yemen would not have taken place without young people communicating and speaking their minds on Facebook and other social media” (p. 24). Indeed, a Tunisian blogger, Lina Ben Mhenni, was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize (Cambie, 2012).

Tipping Points

Key concepts and principles associated with buzz marketing were laid out by Malcolm Gladwell in his bestseller, *The Tipping Point* (2000). Gladwell likens WOM to a virus through which a message is spread until the whole society is “infected.” Based on what he calls “*the law of the few*,” a small number of influential people can generate a groundswell of support for an idea, brand, or phenomenon. Once a message gains a certain amount of momentum, it reaches a tipping point and becomes “contagious.” In order to reach the tipping point, however, a number of things have to happen.

Über Influencers First, the right kinds of people must be involved. Gladwell identifies three types of people who are essential to the process. *Mavens* possess specialized expertise. They are in the know. They may be celebrity chefs, fashionistas, fitness gurus, tech geeks, or wine snobs. Mavens needn’t be rich or famous, but they must be ahead of the curve. They are the early adopters, or what some call alpha consumers, the ones who hear about ideas and try out gadgets first. “One American in ten,” Keller and Barry (2003) maintain, “tells the other nine how to vote, where to eat, and what to buy” (p. 1).

In addition to mavens, Gladwell states that *connectors* are also essential. Based on the viral metaphor, they are carriers. They have large social networks. When connectors learn from mavens what the “next big thing” is, they spread the word. Since social circles tend to be overlapping, forwarding messages spreads them increasingly outward from their epicenter.

The last type Gladwell identifies is *salespeople*. They receive the message from a connector and then talk it up within their own circle of friends. Salespeople tell their friends, “You must see this movie,” “You’ve got to try this restaurant,” or “You gotta read this book.”

Orchestrating the Next Big Thing In addition to having the right kinds of people, some additional conditions must be satisfied for an idea to go viral. *Context* is critical. The idea must come along at the right time and place. Social networking sites, for example, wouldn’t have been possible before there was widespread access to the Internet. An idea also must possess *stickiness*, which means that it is inherently attractive. Without some sort of natural appeal, people won’t gravitate toward the idea or pass it along (Heath & Heath, 2008). The yellow Livestrong bracelets associated with the Lance Armstrong Foundation had stickiness. They offered a simple, convenient way for people to display their support for the fight against cancer. *Scalability* is another requirement: It must be easy to ramp up production of the idea, product, or message to meet demand. *Effortless transfer* is yet another ingredient in the recipe for an effective viral campaign. A viral campaign has to leverage free

media. Ideas that can be spread by forwarding an email, including an attachment, or embedding a link are easy to disseminate. The more time, effort, or money it takes to spread the word, the less likely the idea will go viral.

An example of a successful viral video was Volkswagen's "Darth Vader kid" commercial, which received more than 50 million hits on YouTube. In the video, a kid, dressed in a Darth Vader costume, believes he has summoned "the Force" to start a Volkswagen Passat's engine. In fact, the kid's father started the car via keyless ignition. The kid's startled reaction is adorable. There are no guarantees, however. For every success story like Volkswagen's spot, there is a litany of failures. Viral marketing holds considerable potential, but it is a hit-or-miss strategy, with far more misses than hits.

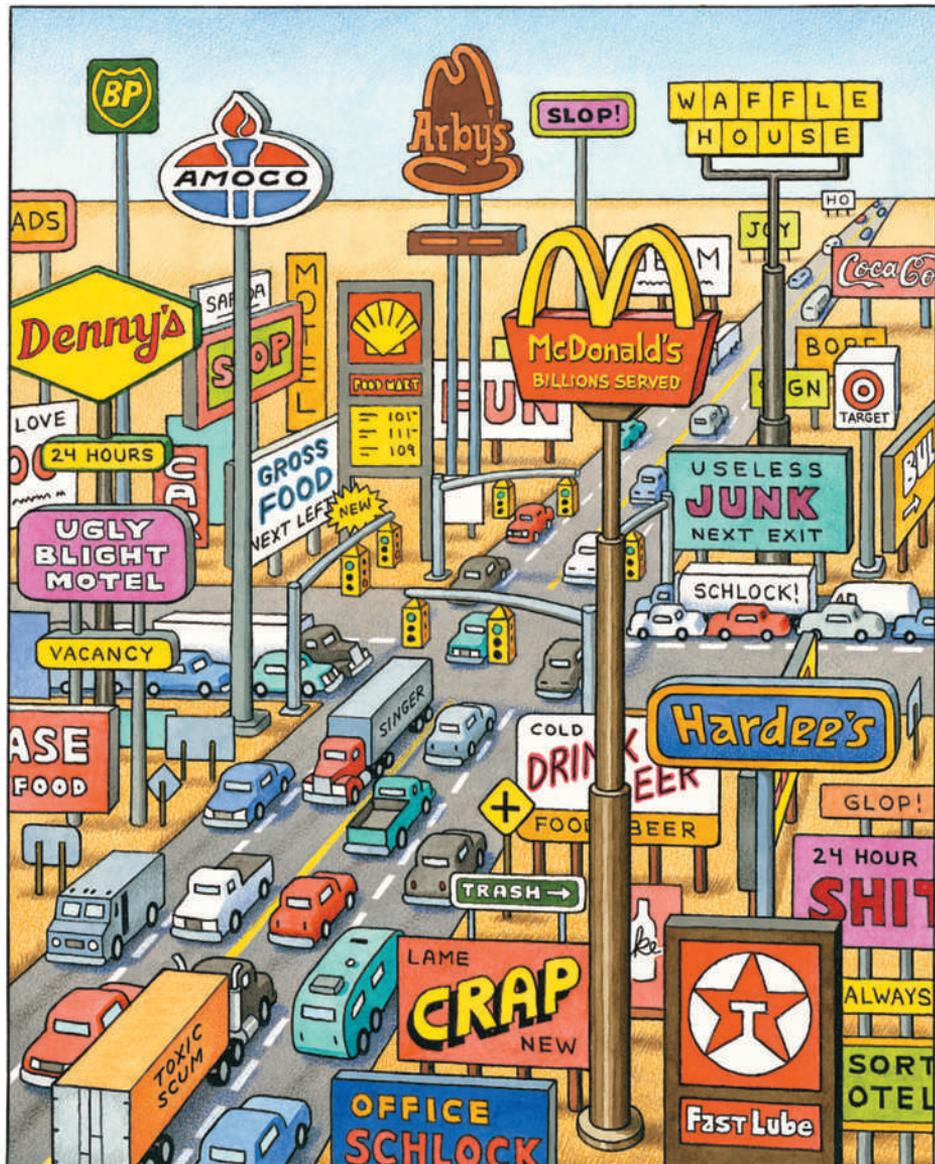
Infectious or Inexplicable? Despite the popularity of viral persuasion, the phenomenon itself isn't that predictable or easy to manufacture. Evidence for the effectiveness of tipping points is largely anecdotal. Many messages go viral, but few are planned, deliberate efforts to persuade. Orchestrating a viral campaign can be difficult. There is no guarantee an idea will gain traction.

The Word of Mouth Marketing Association (WOMM) offers advice for conducting viral campaigns. The very concept of viral marketing, however, is something of an oxymoron. A viral campaign is planned to appear unplanned. It is contrived to seem genuine. As consumers grow wise to the strategy, it will become less effective. There are also ethical questions about using friends as shells. The FTC now requires that any online endorsement in which the endorser is compensated must be disclosed (Sprague & Wells, 2010). Not only is traditional persuasion, such as advertising and marketing, becoming less obvious, persuasion also plays an important role in a variety of not-so-obvious contexts as well. We examine three such contexts in the following sections: gamification, the sciences, and the arts.

Gamification: Farmville as a Cash Cow

Parents have known for decades that one way to get infants to eat their vegetables is by turning mealtime into a game. "Here comes the airplane," the parent says with each spoonful of strained peas. A modernized version of this approach, known as *gamification*, is being used to stimulate consumer interest and involvement (McGonigal, 2011). Gamification applies videogame methods to other contexts to increase consumer engagement. People like to play games. They enjoy the competition. Why else would they spend hours on end playing Angry Birds, Farmville, or Words With Friends? Games are entertaining, challenging, and rewarding. Transforming a mundane task into a game can make it more fun and exciting.

Games also can be used as a form of influence. For example, to encourage people to take the stairs rather than the escalator, a project sponsored by Volkswagen involved the redesign of a staircase to look like a piano keyboard. With each step a person took, a corresponding note sounded. As a result, 66 percent more people took the stairs than previously (www.thefuntheory.com). As another example, Nike+ gamified the activity of running thanks to a shoe sensor that allows runners to post information about their running regimens, including distance, time, and calories burned. Runners are able to socialize and compete with each other using



Persuasive messages must struggle to cut through the background of media clutter.
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downloadable apps (Are you game? 2011). Through points, badges, leaderboards, and other incentives, gamification keeps people coming back for more. This approach has been used to enhance education, improve workplace productivity, increase voter turnout, and promote awareness and participation in social causes.

Gamification is not without its critics, however. Ian Bogost (2011), a professor and expert in videogames as cultural artifacts, cautioned that “‘exploitationware’ is a more accurate name for gamification’s true purpose” (para. 12). Critics charge

that earning badges and points trivializes activities such as learning, working, exercising, or participating in social causes.

Persuasion in the Sciences

You may not think of them this way, but scientists are persuaders (Glassner, 2011). The ongoing debate about climate change illustrates the persuasive challenge facing climatologists. Despite widespread agreement among evolutionary biologists that evolution is a fact rather than a theory, there is a continuing social controversy over the teaching of creationism alongside evolution in public school curriculums. Even in fields such as chemistry, mathematics, or physics—the so-called hard sciences—persuasion plays a major role.⁵ Scientists often have to convince others that their research possesses scientific merit and social value. They also have to argue for the superiority of their theories over rival theories. In this respect, Thomas Kuhn (1970) argues that all scientists employ “techniques of persuasion in their efforts to establish the superiority of their own paradigms over those of their rivals” (p. 151). Similarly, Mitroff (1974) comments that “the notion of the purely objective, uncommitted scientist [is] naïve. ...The best scientist...not only has points of view but also defends them with gusto” (p. 120). Scientists must do more than conduct experiments and report their results. They also must persuade other scientists, funding agencies, and the public at large of the merits of their work.

Persuasion in the Arts

Another not-so-obvious context for persuasion is the arts. Not all art is created “for art’s sake.” Art serves more than an aesthetic or decorative function. Artists have strong opinions and they lend expression to their opinions in and through their work. Consider film as an art form, for example. Movies such as *Dead Poets Society*, *Life Is Beautiful*, and *Schindler’s List* demonstrate the power of the camera to increase awareness, change attitudes, alter beliefs, and shape opinions. Other art forms have the capability to persuade as well. Playwrights, painters, muralists, sculptors, photographers, and dancers give voice to their political and social views through their art.

Think about painting for a moment. Many of the famous works hanging in museums were created out of a sense of social conscience. Using images rather than words, artists comment on social conditions, criticize society, and attempt to transform the social order. We examine this issue in more detail in Chapter 14, but for now let’s consider one particular work of art, Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica*. Through this painting, Picasso offered a moral indictment of war and man’s inhumanity to man. The painting features people and animals, the victims of the indiscriminant bombing of a Basque town during the Spanish Civil War, in various states of agony, torment, and grief. As Von Blum (1976) notes, “the purpose of the painting is frankly propagandistic. The artist’s intent was to point out the inhuman character of Franco’s fascist rebellion” (p. 92). Picasso wasn’t trying to paint a “pretty” picture. He was making a moral statement. The painting has been dubbed by one art historian “the highest achievement in modernist political painting” (Clark, 1997, p. 39). Not only Picasso, but also many other artists express persuasive points of view in and through their art.

Other Not-So-Obvious Contexts for Persuasion

Persuasion operates in a variety of other contexts, some of which are not so obvious. We highlight a few here as illustrations. Social scientists have studied bumper stickers as a form of political expression and as an unobtrusive means of measuring attitudes (Endersby & Towle, 1996; Sechrest & Belew, 1983). Scholars have examined the effects of intercessory prayer (offered for the benefit of another person) on recovery from illness (Frank & Frank, 1991; Hodge, 2007). Studies have examined the military's use of social influence (Cialdini, 2011; King, 2010). Other researchers have focused on 12-step programs, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, and other support groups as forms of self-help and group influence (Kassel & Wagner, 1993). One scholar has written about compliance-gaining tactics found in dramatic plays, such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (Kipnis, 2001). One of the authors investigated various styles and strategies of panhandling to see which ones proved most effective (Robinson, Seiter, & Acharya, 1992).

Weird Persuasion

Sometimes persuasion is downright weird. A case in point is the town of Dish, Texas, formerly known as Clark, Texas. Its citizens agreed to rename their town as part of an endorsement deal with Dish Network. In return, Dish Network agreed to provide all 125 residents free satellite TV service for 10 years. The main opponent of the idea, not surprisingly, was one Mr. Clark, after whom the town was originally named.

Why would Dish Network and the town's citizens agree to such a deal? In a word, buzz. The strangeness of the transaction generated free publicity. The mayor of the town said the new name would attract more customers. One wonders where a small town should draw the line. Could there be a Viagra, Virginia, or a Depends, Delaware, in the not-too-distant future?

Yet another example of weird persuasion occurred in Mansfield, Nottinghamshire, U.K. The citizens wanted to stop rowdy teens from loitering at an underpass at night. Their solution was to install street lights with a bright pink hue. Why pink, you ask? Pink light highlights acne. Teens with blemishes didn't want to be seen with bright, glowing acne. The plan worked: The teens moved on (Spotty Teens, 2009).

Scholars sometimes investigate quirky aspects of persuasion, too. Did you know that participants in a study who consumed caffeine were more easily persuaded than participants who had no caffeine (Martin, Hamilton, McKimmie, Terry, & Martin, 2007)? Now you do. As long as the participants were motivated to pay attention to the message, caffeine consumption increased agreement. Other researchers found that mixed-handed people were more persuadable and more gullible than purely left- or right-handed people (Christman, Henning, Geers, Propper, & Niebauer, 2008). And Briñol & Petty (2003) discovered that asking people to nod their heads up and down (as if in agreement) made them more agreeable than shaking their heads back and forth (as if in disagreement). What is the point of such research, you ask? Such studies illustrate both the complexities and subtle nuances of persuasion.

Persuasion, then, can be found in obvious and not-so-obvious places. Before concluding this section, we examine one additional context in which persuasion occurs: the interpersonal arena.

Persuasion in Interpersonal Settings

The extent of influence exerted in the interpersonal arena should not be underestimated. Although we may think of Madison Avenue as all-powerful, face-to-face influence is far more successful. Despite all the money spent on traditional advertising and the increasing amounts being spent on new media, most influence attempts still take place in face-to-face settings. Ninety percent of word of mouth recommendations, for example, take place offline (Moore, 2011). On a daily basis we are bombarded with persuasive requests in the interpersonal arena. Your brother wants you to hurry up and get out of the bathroom. A homeless person asks if you can spare some change. Your parents try to talk you out of getting a tongue stud. Or worse yet, your significant other uses the “F” word to redefine your relationship: that’s right; she or he just wants to be “friends.” Aaahhh! Naturally, we persuade back as well, targeting others with our own entreaties, pleadings, and requests for favors.

Why is interpersonal influence so much more effective? Because it seems more genuine and less conspicuous. Consider the following scenario:

The bait: Your friend calls up and says, “Hey, what are you doing Friday night?”

The nibble: Anticipating an invitation to go somewhere, you reply, “Nothing much, why?”

You’re hooked and reeled in: “Well, I wonder if you could help me move into my new apartment then?”

At least when you watch a television commercial you *know* the sponsor is after something from the outset. In interpersonal encounters, others’ motives may be less transparent. Most communication scholars agree that if you have a choice of mediums for persuasion, you should choose the interpersonal arena. Our advice: Next time you want to turn in a paper late, talk to your professor in person!

From our discussion thus far, it should be apparent that persuasion functions as a pervasive force in virtually every facet of human communication. Kenneth Burke (1945, 1950, 1966), among others, has written that humans are, by their very nature, symbol-using beings. One vital aspect of human symbolicity involves the tendency to persuade others. We are symbol users, and one of the principal functions of symbol usage is persuasion.

The recognition that social influence is an essential, pervasive feature of human symbolic action provides the strongest possible justification for the study of persuasion. Persuasion is one of the major underlying impulses for human communication. By way of analogy, one can’t understand how an automobile works without taking a look under the hood. Similarly, one can’t understand how human communication functions without examining one of its primary motives—persuasion.

FOUR BENEFITS OF STUDYING PERSUASION

Given that persuasion is an inevitable fact of life, we offer four primary benefits of learning about persuasion. We refer to these as the instrumental function, the knowledge and awareness function, the defensive function, and the debunking function. We examine each of these in turn.

The Instrumental Function: Be All That You Can Be

One good reason for learning about persuasion is so you can become a more effective persuader yourself. We refer to this as the *instrumental function* of persuasion, because persuasion serves as an instrument, or a means to an end. We view the ability to persuade others as an important aspect of communication competence. *Communication competence* involves acting in ways that are perceived as effective and appropriate (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). Competent communicators possess the skills needed to achieve their objectives in fitting ways for the particular situation.

A competent persuader needs to know how to analyze an audience in order to adapt the message to the audience's frame of reference. She or he needs to be able to identify which strategies are appropriate and which will enjoy the greatest likelihood of success. A competent persuader also must know how to organize and arrange a persuasive message for maximum benefit. These are only some of the abilities required for successful persuasion.

But achieving the desired outcome is only one facet of communication competence. How one goes about persuading also matters. A competent persuader needs to be viewed as persuading in acceptable, appropriate ways. This means a persuader must be aware of social and cultural norms governing the persuasive situation. For example, a parent who publicly berates his or her child during a soccer match may be seen by other parents as engaging in boorish behavior.

We are confident that by learning more about persuasion you will become a more effective and appropriate persuader. Of course, not every influence attempt will succeed. By applying the principles and processes presented in this text, and by adhering to the ethical guidelines we offer, you should be able to improve your competence as a persuader.

The Knowledge and Awareness Function: Inquiring Minds Want to Know

Another good reason for learning about persuasion is because it will enhance your knowledge and awareness of a variety of persuasive processes. Knowledge is power, as the saying goes. There is value in learning more about how persuasion operates. You may not plan on going into advertising for a living, but simply knowing how branding operates is worthwhile in and of itself. You may not plan on joining a cult (who does?), but learning more about what makes persons susceptible to cult conversion is worthwhile nonetheless. Simply from the standpoint of an observer, learning about these topics can be fascinating.

An additional benefit of learning about how persuasion functions concerns overcoming *habitual persuasion*. Many people rely on habitual forms of persuasion, regardless of whether they are effective. They get comfortable with a few strategies and tactics that they use over and over again. A good deal of our communication behavior is “mindless,” as opposed to mindful, meaning we don't pay much attention to how we communicate (Langer, 1978, 1989a, 1989b). Sometimes persuasion operates this way. Just as runners, swimmers, and other athletes need to learn to adjust their breathing in response to different situations, persuaders—to maximize their effectiveness—need to learn to adapt their methods to different audiences and situations. Persuasion isn't a “one-size-fits-all” form of communication.

The Defensive Function: Duck and Cover

A third reason for learning about how persuasion operates is vital in our view: The study of persuasion serves a *defensive function*. By studying how and why influence attempts succeed or fail, you can become a more discerning consumer of persuasive messages, unlike the hapless fellow depicted in the accompanying cartoon. If you know how persuasion works, you are less likely to be taken in. It is worth noting that people tend to *underestimate* the influence of advertising on themselves and *overestimate* its effects on others, a phenomenon known as the *third-person effect* (Davidson, 1983; Jensen & Collins, 2008). Thus, you may be more defenseless than you realize.

Throughout this text, we expose a number of persuasive tactics used in retail sales, advertising, and marketing campaigns. For example, we have found in our classes that after students are given a behind-the-scenes look at how car salespeople are taught to sell, several students usually acknowledge, “Oh yeah, they did that to me.” Admittedly, a huckster could also take advantage of the advice we offer in this book. We think it is far more likely, however, that the typical student reader will use our advice and suggestions as weapons *against* unethical influence attempts. Box 1.1, for example, offers advice on how to recognize various propaganda ploys. In later chapters of this book, we warn you about common ploys used by all manner of persuaders, from cult leaders to panhandlers to funeral home directors.



“That’s it, Henry—you’ve dialed your last mattress!”

BOX 1.1 | Persuasion versus Propaganda and Indoctrination

What are propaganda and indoctrination and how do they differ from persuasion? To a large extent, it is a matter of perspective. People tend to label their *own* messages as persuasion and the *other guy's* as propaganda. The same applies to indoctrination: We tend to think that our government educates its citizens, but foreign governments, especially those we dislike, indoctrinate their citizens. Understood in this way, *propaganda* and *indoctrination* are largely pejorative terms used to describe persuasive messages or positions with which people disagree. Gun control advocates claim the NRA uses propaganda to thwart legislation that would place restrictions on gun sales. Opponents of school prayer think that requiring students to recite a prayer in class constitutes a form of religious indoctrination. When accused of propagandizing, the common defense is to state that one was only engaged in an education or information campaign. Thus, whether a given attempt at influence, such as the D.A.R.E. campaign, is persuasion, propaganda, or indoctrination is largely in the eye of the beholder.

Definitions of propaganda are many and varied, but we happen to think Pratkanis and Aronson's (1991) definition does a good job of capturing the essence of the term:

Propaganda was originally defined as the dissemination of biased ideas and opinions, often through the use of lies and deception . . . The word *propaganda* has since evolved to mean mass "suggestion" or influence through the manipulation of symbols and the psychology of the individual. Propaganda is the communication of a point of view with the ultimate goal of having the recipient come to "voluntarily" accept the position as if it were his or her own. (p. 9)

Different scholars have offered different views on the nature and characteristics of propaganda (see Ellul, 1973; Jowett & O'Donnell, 1986; Smith, 1989). However, there are some essential characteristics on which most scholars agree. These are as follows:

- Propaganda has a strong ideological bent. Most scholars agree that propaganda does not serve a purely informational function. Propaganda typically embodies a strong bias, such as that of a "left-wing" or "right-wing" agenda. The campaign of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) to promote animal rights would fall into this category. Propagandists aren't trying to be neutral or objective. They are working a specific agenda.
- Propaganda is institutional in nature. Most scholars agree that propaganda is practiced by organized groups, whether they happen to be government agencies, political lobbies, private corporations, religious groups, or social movements. For instance, the Anti-Defamation League is an organization founded to prevent libeling and slandering of Jewish people. Although individuals might use propaganda too (a parent might tell a child, "Santa only brings presents for good girls and boys"), the term usually is associated with institutional efforts to persuade.
- Propaganda involves mass persuasion. Most scholars agree that propaganda targets a mass audience and relies on mass media to persuade. Propaganda is aimed at large numbers of people and, as such, relies on mass communication (TV, radio, posters, billboards, email, mass mailings, etc.) to reach its audience. Thus, gossip that was shared by one office worker with another at the water cooler wouldn't constitute propaganda, but a corporate rumor that was circulated via email would.
- Propaganda tends to rely on ethically suspect methods of influence. Propagandists tend to put results first and ethics second. This characteristic is probably the one that laypersons most closely associate with propaganda and the one that gives it its negative connotation.

What are some of the questionable tactics used by propagandists? The Institute for Propaganda Analysis, which was founded in 1937, identified seven basic propaganda techniques, which still exist today (Miller, 1937). These include the *plain folks appeal* ("I'm one of you"), *testimonials* ("I saw the aliens, sure as I'm standing here"), the *bandwagon effect* (everybody's doing it), *card-stacking* (presenting only one side of the story), *transfer* (positive or negative associations, such as guilt by association), *glittering generalities* (idealistic or loaded language, such as "freedom," "empowering," "family values"), and *name calling* ("racist," "tree hugger," "femi-Nazi"). ▀

The Debunking Function: Puh-Shaw

A fourth reason for studying persuasion is that it serves a *debunking function*. The study of human influence can aid in dispelling various “common sense” assumptions and “homespun” notions about persuasion. Traditional wisdom isn’t always right, and it’s worth knowing when it’s wrong. Some individuals cling tenaciously to folk wisdom about persuasive practices that are known by researchers to be patently false. For example, many people believe that subliminal messages are highly effective and operate in a manner similar to that of post-hypnotic suggestion. This belief is pure poppycock, as we point out in Chapter 15.

Of considerable importance, then, are empirical findings that are *counterintuitive* in nature—that is, they go against the grain of common sense. By learning about research findings on persuasion, the reader can learn to ferret out the true from the false, the fact from the fiction.

We hope you’ll agree, based on the foregoing discussion, that there are quite a few good reasons for studying persuasion. We hope we’ve persuaded you that the study of persuasion can be a prosocial endeavor. That brings us back to an earlier point, however: Not all persuaders are scrupulous. At this juncture, then, it seems appropriate that we address two common criticisms related to the study of persuasion.

TWO CRITICISMS OF PERSUASION

Does Learning about Persuasion Foster Manipulation?

We’ve already touched on one of the common criticisms of studying persuasion; the notion that it fosters a manipulative approach to communication. We address ethical concerns surrounding the study and practice of persuasion more specifically in Chapter 16. For the time being, however, a few general arguments can be offered in response to this concern. First, our principal focus in this text is on the *means* of persuasion (e.g., how persuasion functions). We view the means of persuasion not so much as moral or immoral, but rather as amoral, or ethically neutral. In this respect, persuasion can be likened to a tool, such as a hammer. Like any other tool, persuasion can be put to good or bad use. If this sounds like a cop-out, read what Aristotle had to say on this same point in his *Rhetoric*:

If it is urged that an abuse of the rhetorical faculty can work great mischief, the same charge can be brought against all good things (save virtue itself), and especially against the most useful things such as strength, health, wealth, and military skill. Rightly employed, they work the greatest blessings; and wrongly employed, they work the greatest harm. (1355b)

Related to this idea is the fact that tools can be used in good or bad ways, depending on their user. We believe that first and foremost, a *persuader’s motives* determine whether a given influence attempt is good or bad, right or wrong, ethical or unethical. We maintain that the moral quality of a persuasive act is derived primarily from the ends a persuader seeks, and only secondarily from the means the persuader employs. It isn’t so much *what* strategies and tactics a persuader uses as *why* he or she uses them.

To illustrate, suppose you asked us whether the use of “fear appeals” is ethically justified. We would have to say, it depends. If a fear appeal were being used to warn sexually active teens of the risks of HIV infection from unprotected sex, we would tend to say the appeal was justified. If a fear appeal were being used by a terrorist who threatened to kill a hostage every hour until his demands were met, we would say the appeal was unjustified. In each case, the motives of the persuader would “color” the use of the fear appeal. Consistent with our tool analogy, fear appeals, like other persuasive strategies, can be used for good or bad ends.

A second response to this criticism was highlighted earlier. The study of persuasion performs a *defensive function* insofar as it educates people to become more discriminating consumers of persuasive messages. For instance, we believe our “Tips on Buying a New or Used Car” (see Box 1.2) are useful to any potential

BOX 1.2 | Tips on Buying a New or Used Car

Given the current state of the economy and the economic fix in which car dealers find themselves, buying a car nowadays is easier than before. Car dealers are eager to sell cars. Nevertheless, car salespersons, especially *used* car salespersons, have a bad reputation. We’ve met some honest, upstanding sellers. We’ve also met some shady operators. Because a car is a major purchase, one would be well advised to err on the side of caution when negotiating with a car salesperson. *Caveat emptor*, as the saying goes: Let the buyer beware.

1. Be wary. Remember, buying a car is a ritual in which the car dealer has the upper hand. This is the prototype for high-pressure sales. They are professionals. They sell cars every day. You are an amateur. Who do you think has more experience with persuasion in this setting?
2. Do your homework *before* you go visit a car dealer. Read up on the makes and models in which you’re interested. Find out about performance criteria, standard features, and options before setting foot on a car lot. *Consumer Reports* sells an excellent paperback that compares used cars on reliability, safety, and other criteria based on data from actual owners. Research shows that doing your homework can save you money (Seiter & Seiter, 2005).
3. Keep a poker face. If the salesperson knows you are eager or excited about the car purchase, he or she will smell blood. Once the salesperson knows you are emotionally attached to a particular car, you’ll wind up paying more.
4. Take a calculator with you. Car salespersons like to pretend that the prices of things are entirely up to the calculator (“Hey, let’s see how the numbers shake out”). The implication is that the numbers aren’t negotiable or flexible. Everything is negotiable! Do your own figuring to see if the numbers “shake out” the same way. If not, ask why.
5. Once you are on the car lot, dealers will try to keep you there. They may put you in a cubicle, holding you “hostage” during the negotiations. Their psychological strategy is to wear you down. After hours of haggling, you’ll become mentally drained and more likely to give in. They may ask for the keys to your trade-in, presumably to look it over and determine its value. Once they have your keys, you can’t leave.
6. The car salesperson will want to *avoid* talking about the total price of the car, opting instead to discuss the monthly payment you can afford. You, however, should focus on four things: (a) the total purchase price, (b) the finance period, (c) the interest rate, and (d) the monthly payment. Don’t discuss the monthly payment unless you are clear on the finance period involved (a 3-year loan, 4-year loan, 5-year loan, etc.). If you admit you can afford \$300 per month, the salesperson may simply switch to a longer finance period—say, 4 years, instead of 3, thereby adding thousands of dollars to the total purchase price.

BOX 1.2 | Continued

7. During the negotiations, the salesperson may leave the room a number of times to talk with the “sales manager.” This is all choreographed. The salesperson can’t agree to anything without checking with this mysterious figure, so the person with whom you are negotiating really can’t commit to anything. You, however, will be asked to commit to a lot of things. Don’t!
8. The salesperson will act like he or she is your best friend, even though you just met. The salesperson will look for ways to identify with you or ingratiate himself or herself to you to establish camaraderie (“You like fly fishing? That makes two of us.” “Whaddya-know, my granddaughter is named ‘Fifi’ too!”). During the negotiations, the salesperson will pretend he or she is on your side and is willing to go out on a limb for you (“Well, my sales manager may kick my butt for even taking him this offer, but hey, I like you!”). Remember these two are working as a team, *against you*. Don’t be confused for a moment about where the salesperson’s loyalties reside.
9. The car salesperson will do all kinds of things to get you to make a commitment to buy (“What would it take to get you to buy this car? Just tell me, whudda-I-godda-do to get you in this car?”). Often the salesperson will ask you to write down any amount you’re offering on a slip of paper or an offer sheet, even though it isn’t legally binding (it does increase your psychological commitment, however). The car dealer *wants* you to sit in the car, take it for a test spin, smell the upholstery, because then you will become psychologically committed to owning the car.
10. If you get close to a deal, or alternatively, if a deal seems to be coming apart, don’t be surprised if another salesperson comes in to take over the negotiations. Often a “closer” is sent in (sort of like a relief pitcher in baseball) to complete the sale.
11. Beware of “loss leaders” (advertised specials at absurdly low prices). These are come-ons designed to get you onto the lot. Once there, however, you’ll be subjected to the “old switcheroo.” You’ll find there is/was only one car at that price. You will probably be told, “Sorry, it’s already sold... but I can make you a honey of a deal on...”
12. The sale isn’t over simply because you’ve agreed on a price! You still have to deal with the dreaded “finance person.” You’ll be given the impression that you’re simply seeing the finance person to sign documents and process paperwork. Don’t let down your guard. The finance person will try to add on thousands of dollars in the form of extended warranties, antitheft systems, and protective coatings.
13. The interest rate is just as important as the price of the car. Shop around for a car loan from a bank or credit union *before* you shop for a car. The rates may be lower and you can find out exactly how much you qualify for in advance.
14. Shop around for prices on options such as stereos before you go to a car dealer. People often bargain well on the purchase price, then give up everything they’ve gained by failing to bargain on the price of extras. The price of everything is negotiable!
15. Don’t let the salesperson know in advance that you have a trade-in. Any bargaining gains you make on the purchase price of the new car will just be deducted from the trade-in value of your used car. Sell the used car on your own if at all possible. If that’s not possible, you can always mention your trade-in after you’ve negotiated the price of the new car.
16. Don’t get a lemon. Buying a used car can be particularly risky. One of the authors bought a used sports car on eBay. How did he know from a mere picture and description whether the car was in good shape? He ran a CARFAX history on the car, easily available online (see www.carfax.com), which revealed that the car had had only one previous owner; had never been stolen, totaled, or repossessed; had correct odometer readings; and had passed a smog check each year when the vehicle registration was renewed. Since the car was coming from another state, the author went one step further and hired an independent mechanic to perform a “prepurchase inspection” on the car, at a cost of about \$150. We strongly suggest you do the same for any used car. After all, how much can the average consumer tell about a car from looking under the hood and kicking the tires? 

car buyer who wants to avoid being manipulated at a car lot. By increasing your awareness of the ploys of would-be persuaders, this text performs a watchdog function. You can use the information contained herein to arm yourself against the tactics of unscrupulous persuaders.

A third response that bears mentioning is that in denouncing the study of persuasion, antimanipulation types are also attempting to persuade. The message that persuasion is manipulative or exploitative is itself a persuasive appeal that advocates a position regarding the “proper” study of communication. When one group claims to know best how human communication should be studied, they are, in fact, standing on the persuasion soapbox themselves.

Are Persuasion Findings Too Inconsistent or Confusing?

An additional complaint is that the study of persuasion has led to findings that are overly qualified, or contradictory in nature. Empirical investigations of persuasion, it is argued, have not yielded clear and consistent generalizations. There is no “ $E = MC^2$,” no “second law of thermodynamics,” no universal when it comes to persuasion.

First, the complaint that persuasion isn’t worth studying because the findings are often inconclusive or contradictory makes little sense. Quite the opposite: We believe that persuasion warrants study precisely because it *is* so elusive. Underlying this criticism is the expectation that reality is, or should be, simple and uncomplicated. Like it or not, understanding reality is hard work. As we’ve already noted, human beings are complex creatures who rarely respond to messages for one and only one reason. Actually, we find this to be a redeeming feature of humanity. We rejoice in the fact that we aren’t an altogether gullible, predictable, or controllable species.

A second response to this criticism is simply that persuasion research *has* revealed a number of significant, relevant generalizations. You’ll find many such generalizations throughout this book. Newer techniques of statistical analysis, such as *meta-analysis*,⁶ have made it possible to reconcile some of the previous inconsistencies in the literature. In this text, we identify a number of noteworthy, albeit qualified, generalizations that are based on the most recent meta-analyses available.

You’ll notice in this book that we’ve drawn on the people in the trenches themselves to learn how persuasion works in particular contexts and settings. We’ve talked to used car salespersons, funeral home operators, retail clothing clerks, advertising firms, former cult members, door-to-door salespersons, and telemarketers to find out—from the horse’s mouth, so to speak—how persuasion operates.

ETHICAL CONCERNS ABOUT THE USE OF PERSUASION

We would be remiss if we concluded this chapter without emphasizing the importance of ethics in the persuasion process. We wish to underscore the point that the use of persuasion is fraught with ethical concerns. We raise a number of such concerns in Box 1.3 for you to ponder. Our position is that in learning how to become a more effective persuader, you should strive to be an ethical persuader as well. In the final chapter, we address a number of ethical questions related to various strategies and techniques of persuasion discussed throughout the text. We wait until the final chapter to fully examine ethical concerns for two reasons: First,

BOX 1.3 | Ethical or Unethical Persuasion? You Decide

Instructions: For each of the following scenarios, indicate how ethical or unethical you perceive the persuader or the persuasive strategy to be, *based on a five-point scale* (with 1 being “highly ethical” and 5 being “highly unethical”).

1. A student pretends to cry in a professor’s office in an attempt to coax the professor into giving her a makeup exam. Is this ethical persuasion?
2. A persuader advances an argument he doesn’t believe in but that he thinks will be convincing to his listeners. The argument isn’t untrue or invalid; it just happens to be one with which the persuader himself does not agree. Is this ethical persuasion?
3. A car salesperson emphasizes that the model of car a customer is considering has “more horsepower and better mileage than the competition.” The salesperson fails to mention that the car has worse reliability and a worse safety record than the competition. Is this ethical persuasion?
4. A skilled attorney successfully defends a client she knows to be guilty. Is this ethical persuasion?
5. A minister tells his congregation that a vote for a particular candidate is “a vote for the Devil incarnate” and that the scriptures demand that the faithful cast their ballots for another candidate. Is this ethical persuasion?
6. A persuader sincerely believes in the arguments she is presenting, but the facts and information she cites are incorrect and outdated. Is this ethical persuasion?
7. Parents use a fear appeal to convince their child to clean her room. “Santa doesn’t bring presents to children with dirty rooms,” they warn. Is this ethical persuasion?
8. A children’s cereal states on the box, “High in the vitamins kids need!” but doesn’t mention that the cereal is high in sugar, too. Is this ethical persuasion?
9. A newlywed husband is upset that his wife wants to go to a dance club with some of her single friends for drinks. “If you go,” he warns, “I’m going to a strip club with some of my friends.” Is this ethical persuasion?
10. A political campaign runs a series of negative attack ads against an opponent, not because the campaign manager prefers to but because voter surveys show that negative ads will work, whereas ads that take the political “high road” won’t. Is this ethical persuasion? ▲

until you’ve learned more about persuasion, you may not fully appreciate all of the ethical issues that are involved. Second, after you’ve studied the full scope of persuasion as we present it in this text, you’ll be in a much better position to place these ethical questions in perspective.

SUMMARY

We hope that we’ve convinced you of the ubiquity of persuasion in human interaction. The capacity to persuade is one of the defining features of humankind. This fact provides the strongest possible reason for studying persuasion. Given that learning about persuasion serves an instrumental function, a knowledge and awareness function, a defensive function, and a debunking function, we believe there is ample justification for studying this topic. Finally, rejoinders to two current criticisms of the study of persuasion were offered. Hopefully, a persuasive case has been made for learning about persuasion.

One other thing: Did we mention that learning about persuasion can also be fun?

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NOTES

1. The scientific study of persuasion dates back to the 1940s and 1950s, when Carl Hovland founded the Yale Attitude Research Program as part of the war effort. The government wanted to know how to counter enemy propaganda that could affect the morale of troops and how susceptible POWs were to brainwashing.
2. Aristotle’s work *Rhetoric* is one such text that has survived the test of time. Written in the fourth century B.C., Aristotle’s work has had a lasting influence on our understanding of persuasion. Many of his insights and observations are considered valid even today.
3. Note that with the exception of Hitler, these charismatic leaders enjoyed a limited following. The rest of us weren’t taken in by their claims, suggesting that people, in general, aren’t that gullible after all.
4. Rosseli, Skelly, and Mackie (1995) state, “even by conservative estimates, the average person is exposed to 300–400 persuasive messages a day from the mass media alone” (p. 163). Kurtz (1997) claims that the average TV viewer watches more than 150 commercials a day, including promos for upcoming shows, and more than 1,000 in a typical week (cited in Berger, 2011, p. 7). Dupont (1999) states that we live “in a world where we are potentially exposed to 3,000 advertising messages per day” (p. 14). Jones (2004) pegs the number of advertising messages at 300 to 1,500 every day, but indicates that some estimates are as high as 3,000 per day—a number Jones labels fanciful (p. 12). Without saying who says so, Berger (2011) reports that “some estimate that we are exposed to 15,000 commercial messages each day” (p. 101).
We are suspicious of such estimates, however, because they may simply represent “unknowable” statistics. At the very least, estimates of the number of persuasive messages to which the average person is exposed involve extrapolations, and the criteria upon which the extrapolations are based aren’t always provided. What’s more, the estimates often contradict one another. By way of illustration, Berger (2011) maintains that “advertisers spend around \$800 per person in the United States on advertising” (p. 101), whereas Dupont (1999) claims, “In the U.S., close to \$400 for every man, woman, and child are invested in advertising each year” (p. 8). Which, if either, estimate is correct?
5. We don’t have sufficient space to devote to this topic here, but suffice it to say that the traditional notion of scientific realism is under siege from the antirealism camp (see Kourany, 1998). The antirealists argue that science is neither purely objective nor impartial but heavily value laden (see also Laudan, 1984; Longino, 1990).
6. *Meta-analysis* refers to a statistical technique that allows a researcher to combine the results of many separate investigations and examine them as if they were one big super study. A meta-analysis is capable of revealing trends across a number of studies and resolving apparent inconsistencies among studies.