

*“We have the right arguments, but nobody seems to pay attention.”  
“How can we get our message across to people who don’t want to listen?”  
“Why do people believe the bad information put out there by the other side?”*

Psychologists have been studying persuasion and influence for decades, uncovering some fundamentals about persuasion and documenting why an argument that focuses on facts, logic, or other “content” is often ineffective in generating attitude or behavior change in a target audience. It has been well established that an emphasis on more *peripheral* elements, which generally appeal to the emotions associated with a particular message, is far more effective.<sup>1</sup> Observers of modern political discourse have pointed out that conservatives have made far more effective use of this principle than the intellectual left wing, by speaking more often to the audience’s hearts, not their minds.<sup>2</sup>

## Who cares about content?

For many of us, logic dictates that coherent, strong arguments are the obvious route to persuasion. This approach is extremely effective, and its effects tend to be very long-lasting, *among that small portion of your audience that is highly involved, highly motivated, and/or highly informed*. But as we know, the challenge to most successful advocacy is finding ways to reach and persuade the (usually much larger) group of people who *don’t* fall into those categories.

If your audience is less interested in your argument for social change than your co-workers and friends, then it is more effective to focus your appeal on the emotions, or the underlying values and principles associated with your message, rather than an intellectually-focused, fact-based message.

### *The Underlying Science: Inertia, Outgroups, and Negative Emotions*

Under most circumstances, most people try to avoid change and to conform to their social surroundings.<sup>3</sup> This results in *inertia*. When advocates interested in social change (the opposite of inertia) come on the scene, they represent a minority opinion – and people lump them into what behavioral scientists refer to as *outgroups* relative to the majority *ingroup*. The outgroup representative might be overtly labeled – carpet baggers, outside agitators, provocateurs – or the designation might be much more subtle, and may not even be consciously recognized. Nevertheless, ingroup members typically initially dislike and are prejudiced against the ideas espoused by those perceived to be members of outgroups. This means that an outgroup messenger will not be very convincing, no matter how strong or well-crafted her or his message.<sup>4</sup>

Another important finding is related to the distinction between emotions/feelings and cognitions/thoughts. For most of us, once a strong emotion (prejudice, dislike, fear) is aroused by an outgroup member (an advocate of change) *even if we aren’t consciously aware of it*, it tends to take precedence over cognitions, facts, and logic.<sup>5</sup> A strong negative emotion can easily eclipse a sound cognitive argument. Worse, an intellectually complex argument risks being dismissed out of hand.

Framing the message so that it is emotionally appealing is also important. Messages that work best will *reinforce, rather than challenge*, the underlying values and beliefs of the target audience. The [“daisy girl” ad](#) run by the Johnson campaign in 1964 remains a classic example of this principle. The ads showed an attractive child innocently counting the petals of a flower (an image that evoked shared values of peace and security) contrasted against a countdown to a nuclear explosion (the presumptive outcome if voters were to make the wrong choice at the polls!).

## Some science-based suggestions for persuasive advocacy messages:

- *Minimize “outgroup” perceptions.* People are more likely to endorse information when it comes from someone who is like them, or who they like.<sup>6</sup> Choosing messengers that the audience will perceive as ingroup members minimizes outgroup prejudices. This strategy explains the ready acceptance by so many Americans of the views personified by “Joe the Plumber” in the 2008 presidential campaign – even after his objective credibility had been seriously called into question by Democrats and the news media. When the messenger is perceived as an *ingroup* member, the positive emotional consequence is that the message is more likely to ‘ring true’, and hence tends to be more convincing.
- *Focus on the positive in the advocated change.* Part of our resistance to change is that people tend to overvalue what they already have, and so they are inclined to perceive any modification to the status quo as a potential loss for themselves. Social scientists call this the “[endowment effect](#)”. Not surprisingly, it means we will want to hold on to what we’ve got, independent of how valuable our situation is in reality, and of how much benefit the alternative would bring to us.<sup>7</sup> Disinformation about health care reform proposals has very effectively exaggerated fears among many Americans that changes to the current system will leave them worse off. The response (“[if you like your health care plan, you can keep it](#)”) has been relatively less effective, coming *after* negative emotions were already aroused.
- *Provide instant gratification.* Positive results in the distant future are much more difficult to relate to, and are hence less appealing.<sup>8</sup> [At The Hunger Site](#), internet visitors are encouraged to click a button on its web site. Upon clicking this button, a message informs them that they have donated the equivalent of “1.1 cups of food to the hungry”. This provides instantly positive feedback, leaving people feeling good about their contribution to abolishing world hunger. Global climate change is another time-bound example, and has been a particularly hard sell because the threat is in what most people perceive to be the distant future. Hence the result of their actions is impossible for them to feel right now. The recent “[Cash for Clunkers](#)” program got around this problem by providing a short-term reward in return for an action providing long-term improvements in fuel efficiency and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions for American cars.
- *Make it relevant.* Arguments that are pertinent to people’s personal lives tend to be more motivating. The United Kingdom has [below-average smoking rates](#), compared to the rest of Europe. British anti-smoking campaigns have made effective use of [provocative messages](#) that focus on their audience’s private lives, e.g. that smoking promotes the accelerated development of facial wrinkling, or slogans in public bathrooms such as “Bad news. Smoking causes impotence. More bad news. These ads are in the ladies [bathrooms] too”. Part of the success of development assistance programs such as World Vision’s “[Sponsor a Child](#)” campaign, or the online micro-lending institution [Kiva](#), lies in establishment of personal communications and connections between donors and the person who receives their charitable donation or loan.
- *Keeping up with the Joneses.* Social pressure to fit in with our peer group is an important motivator. Fund-raising professionals use this principle when they publish the names along with the size of the contributions made by the donors to their cause. Similarly, curbside recycling programs are successful both because they make recycling easy and because one look at the distinctive recycling bins arrayed along the street on pick-up day reinforces the view that recycling is the norm in a given neighborhood. In this way, new habits are created. If the Joneses are doing it, then so can (and should) we.
- *The feel-good factor.* If people are in a good mood before hearing a call for action, they are more likely to respond positively. Social scientists attribute this effect to the buffer that a good mood provides against a competing sense of helplessness that might otherwise result when an advocacy message feels overwhelming.<sup>9</sup> Public service announcements by the [ThisIsReality](#) campaign humorously deriding the concept of “clean” coal took advantage of this principle.

The information presented in this briefing sheet is based on a vast body of scientific research on effective message framing. To find out more about any of the points raised above, or about the underlying psychological science of this knowledge base, please contact us at 202-675-6956. We would also welcome your feedback on applying these principles, and lend our support to your advocacy messaging efforts.

### **About SPSSI**

*The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) is an international group of approximately 3000 psychologists, allied scientists, students, and others who share a common interest in research on the psychological aspects of important social issues. In various ways, the Society seeks to bring theory and practice into focus on human problems of the group, the community, and nations, as well as the increasingly important problems that have no national boundaries. For more information, please contact Jutta Tobias, Ph.D., SPSSI James Marshall Public Policy Fellow, at [jtobias@spssi.org](mailto:jtobias@spssi.org), or (202) 675-6956.*

*Fact sheet created by Jutta Tobias, Ph.D.; September 2009.*

### **References**

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Petty and Cacioppo's (1986) Elaboration Likelihood Model, and Chaiken (1987) Heuristic-Systematic Model are the scientific underpinnings of this research review. Available at Petty, R. E., & Cacioppo, J. T. (1986). *Communication and Persuasion: Central and Peripheral Routes to Attitude Change*. New York: Springer, and at Chaiken, S. (1987). The heuristic model of persuasion. In M. P. Zanna, J. M. Olson, & C. P. Herman (Eds.), *Social Influence: The Ontario Symposium* (Vol. 5, pp. 3-39). Hillsdale: Erlbaum.
- <sup>2</sup> From Drew Westin's (2007) book *The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation*. New York: Perseus.
- <sup>3</sup> This is based on the status quo bias, a cognitive bias responsible for human inertia. More on this can be found at Kahneman, D., Knetsch, J. L. & Thaler, R. H. (1991). Anomalies: The Endowment Effect, Loss Aversion, and Status Quo Bias. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 5(1), 93-206.
- <sup>4</sup> This effect was found repeatedly in the (1990, 1992) experiments of Diane Mackie and her colleagues. For an overview of this research, please refer to Mackie, D. M., Gastardo-Conaco, M. C., & Skelly, J. J. (1992). Knowledge of the advocated position and the processing of in-group and out-group persuasive messages. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 18, 145-151.
- <sup>5</sup> To read more about this phenomenon, see Sherman, D. K., & Kim, H. S. (2002). Affective Perseverance: The Resistance of Affect to Cognitive Invalidation. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 28(2), 224-237.
- <sup>6</sup> More on this can be found in Platow, M. J., Mills, D., & Morrison, D. (2000). The effects of social context, source fairness, and perceived self-source similarity on social influence: A self-categorisation analysis. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 30, 69-81.
- <sup>7</sup> Based on Tversky & Kahneman's (1992) Cumulative Prospect Theory. More details at Tversky, Amos; Daniel Kahneman (1992). "[Advances in prospect theory: Cumulative representation of uncertainty](#)". *Journal of Risk and Uncertainty*, 5, 297-323
- <sup>8</sup> For a more detailed account of why humans are so inclined towards short-term goals, and how to use this phenomenon to benefit society, please refer to Richard H. Thaler & Cass R. Sunstein's (2008) book *Nudge* (Yale University Press).
- <sup>9</sup> From Raghunathan, R., & Trope, Y. (2002). Walking the tightrope between feeling good and being accurate: Mood as a resource in processing persuasive messages. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 83, 510-525.