

The power of persuasion

The art of persuading others to accept your views and ideas is far from simple. Jonathan Atkins suggests a range of tactics that will result in a satisfactory outcome for all.



By Jonathan Atkins

Think about the last time you tried to persuade someone to accept your view. It might have been a formal business meeting or a debate over which restaurant to go to on Friday night. Replay the encounter in your head and consider the following questions:

- Did either of you get angry at any stage?
- Did you interrupt when you disagreed with the other person?
- Did you do most of the talking?
- Were you surprised when the other person's motivation eventually became clear?
- Were you disconcerted by the other person raising unexpected issues?
- Did you find yourself agreeing to things you were unhappy about but could not think quickly to rebut?
- Did the discussion leave either of you feeling lost?
- Did the eventual solution fail to meet your original aim?

If you answered 'no' to all these questions, well done! You have a natural aptitude for persuasion and you probably don't need to

read the rest of this article. But I expect that most of us can think of at least one situation when some of those questions would have been answered with a resounding 'yes'. If so, then there is scope for you to develop your powers of persuasion.

Persuasion is a powerful tool. Many people are sceptical of change and need to be convinced of a new idea. More often than not, it is not simply what you are selling but how you are selling it. This is especially true in marketing where, rather than selling something tangible where the benefits are clearly visible, most marketers are dealers in ideas and concepts. Thus, the gentle art of persuasion is often the deciding factor between success and failure.

The knack of persuading others to embrace your ideas has been an essential part of society for millennia. Over 2,000 years ago, Aristotle mused upon the mechanisms behind effective persuasion. For him, persuasion was an art that involves moving a person (and their attitudes) from point A to point B. Any message can be insightful, controversial or entertaining, but if it doesn't move a person from point A to point B, then it is not persuasive. Conceptually, it is that simple.

However in reality, as most readers will be aware, the art of persuading others to accept your views and ideas is far from simple. Firstly, you need to become an amateur psychologist. Secondly, it is important that you use the power of language to convey your message in a way that appeals to your audience. Finally, and crucial to most business situations, it is focusing on a prac-

tical and agreed way forward.

UNDERSTAND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF PERSUASION

Effective persuasion targets the attitudes of your audience rather than their behaviour. Renowned social psychologist Icek Ajzen developed the Theory of Planned Behaviour which illustrates the way in which the process occurs. Working back from behaviour, it is assumed that actions are best predicted by intentions, and that intentions are in turn determined by a person's attitudes. Such attitudes are subject to change through social pressure such as persuasive argument. Hence, the first stage of effective persuasion is not about asking someone to do something; it is about making them want to do it.

WHAT YOU SAY – THE POWER OF LANGUAGE

"For just when ideas fail, a word comes in to save the situation."

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

Using oral persuasion is a key skill which differentiates successful persuaders from those who are not. As psychologist James Borg notes in his book, *Persuasion: the art of influencing people*, if you have an image in your mind that you wish to convey, you will first translate this image into words. The listener will take your words and translate them back into an image. If these images do not coincide, then the message has not been accurately communicated. Any subsequent attempt to persuade others to accept this message will be significantly hampered. Effective use of language is key to effective persuasion.

- **Put yourself in their shoes** – Use the ‘what’s in it for them?’ angle to understand the desired outcome from their point of view. Use this knowledge to sell them the benefits in their own terms.
- **Seek to understand** – Use open questions (How? What? Where? When?) in order to open the debate. Your listeners will be more open to accepting a particular message if they feel they have had an opportunity to contribute their own suggestions and ideas.
- **Avoid compulsive talking** – Take time to listen. Active listening is essential to developing a dialogue and allowing you to build your case organically.
- **Probe and clarify** – Begin with open broad questions and probe for the facts. Narrow the field to specific points and explore the potential outcomes. Finally, don’t forget to clarify your understanding.
- **Be positive and assertive** – Use statements that begin “I need...”, “I think...”, “I suggest...” and “I believe...”. This approach tends to convey a positive and assertive manner that is more likely to be listened to.
- **Be open and honest** – Much miscommunication occurs as a result of adopting a closed communication style. Borg details three common styles of closed dialogue to avoid:
 - *The definitive*: This is a common pitfall that involves masking personal opinion as bare fact (eg. he is the worst persuader I have ever seen). Using words such as “In my opinion...”, “I believe...” or “It appears to me...” will open up the debate and encourage others to buy-into your suggestions.
 - *The exaggerated*: This pitfall involves the use of words for dramatic effect as opposed to accuracy. Avoid the use of words such as always, never, everything, all as they may not accurately convey the situation. Instead, use softeners such as frequently, usually, almost always. Again, this encourages open discussion.
 - *The forcing*: These words tend to be commanding in nature and usually illicit a defensive reaction. Avoid using words such as “You must...”, “He ought to...”, “You should...”. Instead, opt for the less forceful approach of words such as “It would be beneficial if you...”, “You may want to think about...”.

Generally speaking, we want to be persuaded to take a particular course. It appeals to our vanity. We do, however, need a good reason to do so and are looking for someone to convince us. As Borg notes, “you have to use words to communicate; why not use the best?”.

WHAT YOU DO – THE ART OF NEGOTIATION

“Most people give up just when they’re about to achieve success.”

Ross Perot

So you can see that the power of words is crucial in successful persuasion. However, this does not tell the whole story. The tactics you employ to supplement your message are also important. You have empathised with your client’s point of view, you have chosen your words wisely and you have communicated a clear and concise message that sells the benefits in a language they understand. Now all that is left to do is reach an agreement.

Alan Fowler, author of *Negotiating, Persuading and Influencing* and *Negotiation Skills and Strategies*, notes an amalgam of skills that can help you to negotiate an outcome that is beneficial for both sides.

- **Be collaborative**: You and your client are both working towards rectifying the same issue – only from different sides of the fence. Try to establish an attitude of working together to resolve the situation.
- **Take a ‘Time-out’**: Planned or ad-hoc adjournments during negotiations allow those involved to consider new facts or discuss issues outside of the formal meeting environment. They are also effective tools for removing tension from emotionally charged situations.
- **Offer a compromise (if necessary)**: You are likely to want others to be persuaded to your point of view. However, this is not always possible and a compromise is often needed. When offering concessions or a compromise, the key is to ensure that the listener does not feel pushed into an alternative approach. Instead, float some ideas for consideration before agreeing on a particular action (eg. “As a matter of interest, what would your views be if we

did it this way instead?”).

- **Summarise regularly**: Do not wait until the end of the discussion to summarise. Clarify your understanding at regular points and be seen to make notes. Summarising is a useful tool for closing the door on a particular area and avoiding rehashing areas that have been discussed and actions agreed.

All of this should help you to get to the final stage – reaching an agreement. This can sometimes be the trickiest part. It is important that you take the initiative and move the discussion from the realms of the hypothetical to a realistic, practical and, above all, agreed plan of action. Timing is crucial here – push for agreement when a collaborative mood pervades. Also, take your time and don’t rush into the final agreement. It is likely that you will miss vital information or the client will misinterpret the next steps.

As stated at the beginning of this article, marketers trade in ideas and concepts. But you are not alone. It is estimated that the average person is subject to around 1,700 attempts to influence every day. We are continually bombarded with attempts to persuade us to change our attitudes and opinions. So when you are attempting to persuade someone your idea must stand head and shoulders above the rest. By becoming an amateur psychologist, you can begin to understand the world from your audience’s point of view. From this vantage point, you can employ a range of tactics that will result in a satisfactory outcome for all.

Further Reading:

Persuasion: the art of influencing people by James Borg. (Pearson: Harlow)
Negotiating, Persuading and Influencing by Alan Fowler. (CIPD: London)
Negotiation Skills and Strategies by Alan Fowler. (CIPD: London)

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