



Speaking The Language of Influence: 3 Paths To Persuasion

©2009 Joseph Sommerville, Ph.D.

The word “persuasion” has gained a reputation it doesn’t deserve. Many tend to associate it with advertising, propaganda or downright manipulation. On the contrary, it forms the very foundation of an ethical sales process. It’s one of the most useful tools available for agents to help prospects understand the benefits of their products.

You’ll be much more effective with sales if you’ll take the time to learn the three paths to persuasion, some strategies about when to use each and some techniques that will make you more effective.

There are only three ways to persuade someone verbally. Regardless of the personality types, how many subliminal messages you try to plant in your conversation or how many other pseudo psycho analytical tools you try to use, they’ll all be based on one of these three paths. The Greek thinker Aristotle discovered them almost 2400 years ago and articulated them in *The Art of Rhetoric*. Human nature hasn’t changed during that time and neither have the principles of how to persuade someone.

The first path is logic. Logic depends on evidence or data plus reasoning. If you want to make the case that a new policy will save money, you’ll need to provide some evidence that it’s been successful in similar situations. Some forms of logical evidence include statistics, examples, case studies, analogies and expert testimony.

To be most effective, don’t assume that facts or statistics will speak for themselves. People can interpret facts in different ways. For example, one person may see a higher deductible policy as a way to save money, while someone else views it as increasing the burden on the policyholder. Also, make sure that whomever you’re talking to has enough context to interpret the facts. A credit score of 720 will make no sense to a prospect unless he realizes that individual credit scores may range from approximately 330—850.

Finally, remember the adage “A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still.” In other words, you can’t beat someone over the head with the stick of logic. Some people are not persuaded by logical argument and you can’t persuade them by browbeating them with how sensible your position is. Logical argument tends to appeal to those who are detail-oriented such as accountants, financial planners, engineers and those in technical fields. Recognize this limitation and be prepared to try something else.

The second path to persuasion is emotion. It's important to recognize that logic and emotion are not opposites. After all, isn't it reasonable to fear the consequences of unhealthy behavior? So what are some of the things people fear within a financial environment? Physical and psychological stress, unexpected or unforeseen problems, loss of a job, loss of the ability to produce income, catastrophic health costs and the ability to provide for long-term care are at the top.

The opposite of fear is confidence. The more you can do to replace fear with confidence in the future, the more successful you'll be in persuading someone. Show them how your suggestions will solve their problems and anxieties. Emotional appeals must also be used ethically. You shouldn't try to make people fear threats that don't exist and you should only use fear when you can offer a solution to take it away. Narratives and factual examples are excellent vehicles for emotional appeals.

The third path to persuasion is credibility. Being credible means both being recognized for your expertise and being liked. The two are complimentary. An expert who isn't liked has little chance of making the sale and the well-liked person who has little knowledge will also be unsuccessful. Your expertise will come as a result of your education, training and experience. Prospects and clients expect you to have it. The likeability factor is what will differentiate you.

People like you when they realize you share similar interests, goals and objectives. In other words, they see you're on the same team as them. People also like you when they recognize that you have common dislikes or enemies. The enemy doesn't have to be a person. It might be the bureaucracy, a policy or even a regulation. The point is, that when you can demonstrate similarity, you become more likeable. Help prospects understand that you are an advocate for them, not your organization.

Which of these three paths is the best? It all depends. It depends on the situation, your objectives and whom you're trying to persuade. You can sometimes use a combination or even all three. The most important thing to remember is to focus on the other person. What you find persuasive personally won't always be the case with someone else. Since you're trying to persuade that person, you'll need to orient your communication outward. Focus less on delivering your message and more on adapting your message to your prospects.

You might even ask someone what she would find persuasive or what it would take for her to accept your proposal. Ask what facts or evidence it would take to make her change her mind. That clarifies her thinking, gives you criteria and lays out your groundwork for persuasion.



Joe Sommerville shows professional services firms how to increase visibility, enhance credibility and close more business. Download the first chapter of RainMaking Presentations: How to Grow Your Business by Leveraging Your Expertise at www.RainMakingPresentations.com.