

ELABORATION LIKELIHOOD MODEL

Introduction

Some people are gullible. They will accept anything at face value and they will trust others at the drop of a hat. Some people are argumentative. They have an opinion and they will have others take notice of it and believe it come hell or high water. Some people are stubborn. These people will have nothing to do with something they don't believe or agree with. They form their own opinions based on facts that they know to be true and aren't easily swayed otherwise. And some people are unconvincing. They may have something great to say, something really meaningful and useful. But they are unable to convey their message in a way that is credible to others. Then there are the people in the middle. Those with the happy balance of trust and skepticism. They may be ready to hear a message and take it in as their own, but if it is a worthless message or one ill conceived, then they cast it aside in search of new and meaningful information.

The fact that these different types of people exist is the foundation for the existence of the concept of persuasion. Without the green and gullible there would be no one to be persuaded. Without the argumentative and trustworthy ones there would be no one to persuade. But the very existence of certain types of people with certain personalities does not account for the existence of persuasion. There must be something in the message itself that lends itself to adoption. There must be something that people want to hear and believe and pass on as a viable concept. What is it about a message that makes people believe it and allow it to change their attitude about a subject?

In 1980, Richard E. Petty and John T. Cacioppo created the Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion to explain, in detail, how a persuasive message worked to change the attitude of the receiver. They proposed that a message was transmitted and received through one of two routes of persuasion: the central route and the peripheral route.

The central route holds that a person is more likely to be persuaded if he is able to elaborate on a message extensively. That is, if he is motivated to think about the message, is able to think about it, and if the message is a strong one, he will be persuaded in accordance with the message.

The peripheral route states that if a person is unable to elaborate on a message extensively, then she may still be persuaded by factors that have nothing do with the actual content of the message itself. That is that she would be drawn to the message by factors that she is already familiar with and has positive attitudes about and would associate those attitudes with the message. She would then be persuaded toward the message, albeit weakly and temporarily.

CENTRAL ROUTE

Persuasive communication

For a message to be effective it must be persuasive. It attempts to steer one's thinking in a direction that will likely benefit the communicator and/or the receiver. Determining whether the message is indeed persuasive is what this model is all about. If it is a neutral message, it has failed to be persuasive and the receiver can take it or leave it for what it is worth (a waste of the receiver's time). So, assuming that the message is in some way, at least a little bit persuasive, the receiver becomes involved in the next step. For our purposes, a persuasive message should be considered to be an advertisement.

Motivation to process

In order for the receiver to have motivation to process the message it must have some relevance to her. It should pertain to something that she already knows about. At least some familiarity with the subject matter of a message will encourage the receiver to process it. People have a lot to do in a day. They don't have a chance or the desire to think about every little thing that pops up. This is known as low involvement. When a person has little or no tie to a product or message, they have little involvement with it and thus little or no desire to hear much about it.

On the other hand is high involvement. An expert in woodcarving will want to know more about techniques and processes that he can use to refine his craft. A person suffering from asthma will want to know about new breakthroughs in the treatments that will help her breath a little easier. In shopping for a car, a consumer will want to find out about all the features of several different models in order to make an informed and confident decision before spending such a sum of money. When a person has a high degree of personal experience with information conveyed in the persuasive communication, he or she is more likely to pay attention and get deeper into the message.

Ability to process

Now the receiver has been motivated to process but does he have the ability to do so? There may be a multitude of distractions: the kids screaming for dinner, the neighbor is at the door for another cup of sugar, the receiver is thirsty and wants a drink. Other advertisements and outlets of information are also distractions. Competition among persuasive messages is fierce and the receiver's time is precious. He may simply not have the opportunity to process the message at that particular time.

The information being conveyed may be too complex to comprehend. An asthma sufferer will surely want to know about the new product but if the ad contains a lot of technical and medical jargon, the patient is likely to be turned off because she simply cannot understand the diction. She will not *elaborate* on the message.

If the receiver can understand the message and there are no distractions, he or she can then go to the next stage in the model.

Nature of arguments in the message

What is the message trying to say? If it is a strong message—that is, if it is a well-constructed and convincing message—the receiver is more likely to receive it favorably. Persuasion may occur even if the message content is in contrast to the receiver's initial attitude. If it is in keeping with the receiver's previous opinions, there is likely to be lasting, positive persuasion. The receiver will have been pulled even more in the direction that he or she was already leaning, thus reinforcing that particular attitude for the future. At this point it is likely that behavior can be predicted as a result of persuasion (i.e., the consumer will purchase the asthma medication because she was persuaded based on the strength and relevance of the message). Successful persuasion has occurred!

If the receiver has become involved with the message this far into the central path but the message does not contain a cogent argument or if it contains false information there is likely to be a boomerang effect. This means that the receiver will reject the message and form negative thoughts and feelings about the message. This is especially true when the receiver is an expert or has a lot of previous knowledge about the subject of the message. She may disagree with the ideas expressed in a well-formed argument and simply reject the message. Or she may see the inadequacies of the message and dismiss it as unreliable information, failing to be persuaded.

PERIPHERAL ROUTE

If a message fails to be channeled through the central route, it may find a path to the receiver via the peripheral route. This happens when the receiver is not *motivated* to think about the message, if he is *unable* to process it, or if the argument is *weak*. A message using the peripheral route attempts to persuade by focusing on issues or themes that are not directly related to the subject matter of the message. That is, the message will attempt to grab attention by making the receiver think about something that she is already familiar with and has positive thoughts about, such as sex, money, or a celebrity. An example is the use of well-known sports figure to sell car batteries. There is no distinguishable tie between the sports figure's reputation as, say, a basketball player and a battery, but a consumer may be persuaded to buy the battery simply because he is a fan of this particular basketball player. In this example the sports figure is a *peripheral cue*.

Robert Cialdini has identified six types of peripheral cues: reciprocity, consistency, social proof, liking, authority, and scarcity.

1. **Reciprocity** is the idea that the receiver is somehow obligated to agree with the message because of some past experience or information.
2. **Consistency** means relying on thoughts held in the past. ("I felt like this before and I feel like this now")
3. **Social proof** is akin to peer pressure. The actions and words of others are likely to influence a receiver of a new message.
4. **Liking** simply means that the speaker is likeable. They may be physically attractive, charismatic, or charming.
5. **Authority** is the sense that the speaker has some power over the receiver, be it an expertise in the subject matter or possibly an overbearing attitude.
6. **Scarcity** is the idea that the message will only be around for a short time and that the receiver should snatch it up before it disappears.

Each of these peripheral cues has little or nothing to do with the actual content of the message. So if the message fails to take the central route at any step in the process (i.e., if the receiver is not motivated, does not have the ability, or if the argument is weak) then the next question is whether there is a peripheral cue present in the message. If there is no cue present, the original attitude will be retained. The attempt at persuasion will fail. If there is a cue, it may produce a positive, but temporary attitude change.

Although the attitude change may be temporary, it could be enough to encourage action. The consumer would then have some more experience with the object of the message. Then, later, when the message is repeated, it may have a better chance of surviving through the central route and change attitudes permanently.

For example: a student needs a new backpack. A Jansport ad happens to come on TV with kids looking cool and having fun with their new packs. The ad touts a few benefits but for the most part the ad is full of appealing visuals. The student is then peripherally motivated to buy a Jansport backpack. The student discovers that the pack is quite a nice and useful one and comes to respect the brand in general. The next time the ad comes on TV the student will have had some practical experience with the brand and will be more motivated to listen to the message and reinforce the positive opinions of Jansport backpacks. Even the very repetition of the message will serve to reinforce the opinions of

the student.

CONCLUSION

Tips for the would be persuader

These two routes to persuasion seem to exist as separate entities but Petty and Cacioppo note that they should be considered as poles on a “cognitive processing continuum that shows the degree of mental effort a person exerts when evaluating a message.” There are innumerable factors that may account for the elaboration—or lack thereof—of a message. As such, the steps in the two routes may overlap as they combine with the environmental factors that the receiver deals with.

However, the two routes are distinct enough that they give a general direction for the communicator to follow in attempting to pass on his message. The central route is the stronger of the two routes. If a message is to persuade using this route, it should be well grounded in facts and attributes of the subject itself. These elements are more trustworthy in the eyes of the receiver and will be the basis for a convincing argument. As such, a message channeled through this route will result in lasting persuasion. There is a danger in attempting to employ the central route. If the subject’s attributes are meaningful but the argument is weak, a boomerang effect will occur, resulting in negative opinions of the subject and message. A boomerang effect will likely occur if the subject’s attributes are weak, even if the argument is strong. In such a case, the communicator should use the peripheral route to persuade the receiver.

When peripheral cues are present, a positive attitude change can occur. This change is likely to be ephemeral, however. For it to become a more lasting change the message should be repeated over a period of time. If there is no peripheral cue, the receiver’s initial attitude (probably a negative one) will be reinforced or altered in the negative direction. The communicator’s choice of routes is one to be made carefully, given the message content and the environment in which the message will be received.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model of persuasion is a relatively new theory, having been developed within the last 20 years. Its theories have stood the test of time thus far, though well challenged. In an ever-changing climate, the Petty and Cacioppo’s model may see further updating or replacement in the near future. Nevertheless, successful persuasion will continue to rely on those special people with those special personality traits.

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