

Persuasive Communication in Business

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ABSTRACT

When we communicate, we usually want something to happen. We want results. And, when we're conscious of results, we're seeking effective communication. To put it another way, the effectiveness of communication can be measured by the responses it gets. It's not measured by how well we wrote or how eloquently we spoke, although those can help us get the responses we want. Good writing and speaking help us get a response because they help get the message across.

So, writing, designing, speaking, and all those other creative activities matter. But, in the end, responses are what count, and effectiveness means getting the responses we want.

That's true for all types of communication, and not just marketing campaigns. Managers who send messages to employees, for example, want employees to respond in a particular way. Maybe they want the employees to do something differently, or maybe they want to reinforce existing behaviors

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1. INTRODUCTION

Almost all of us need to convince others of something, and need to do it often, so let's explore three simple, easy-to-use ideas for increasing our persuasiveness.

First, because persuasive communication focuses on the other person, we need to have that other person firmly in our sights when we write or speak. In other words, communication will be most convincing when we build the message around the other person, rather than ourselves.

So, if you want to persuade me to do something, your communication should focus on me and my response. And to get a response from me, you'll have to address the issues in my terms, not your terms.

In sales, this idea is quite well developed. Copywriters and others know their chances of getting the sale go up dramatically when they communicate benefits. That is, they point out how the reader or listener will come out ahead by buying or using their products.

In non-sales fields, that idea isn't nearly as well appreciated. Consider internal memos, composed and circulated by millions of well-meaning managers and supervisors. Many of them focus on the needs of the manager or the organization, and not on the reader, the person who needs to be persuaded by the writer of the memo.

Second, use persuasive words. Once we've focused on the recipient of our communication, and consciously set out to address her issues, then we move on to the actual wordsmithing, writing our document or speech.

In your writing, you'll find it helps to have a list of persuasive words you can weave into your material. To find a list of them, go to any search

engine and type in the phrase 'persuasive communication' with or without the quotation marks.

Third, watch out for, and eliminate barriers to persuasion.

It's certainly hard enough to sell when you're a legitimate business with legitimate products. So, think how hard it must be to sell when you're pushing questionable products to people who don't want your messages, let alone your products.

Now, we're all apt to make mistakes from time to time, but if you want to persuade someone to do something, please don't forget to use your spellchecker. And, proofread a hard copy of your document. Then run the spellchecker again.

When we make mistakes, and especially mistakes in the subject line of email messages, we distract our readers, and that reduces our powers of persuasion.

There you have three techniques for increasing your persuasiveness: focusing on the people receiving your message; using persuasive words, especially 'you'; and eliminating barriers to persuasive communication, like spelling mistakes. Any one of these techniques will help you be more persuasive. Using all three will do wonders for your powers.

When you next set out to send an important message, pause long enough to ask yourself if persuasion is your goal -- either directly or indirectly. If you do want to persuade, then ask yourself if you've focused your message on one or more of these techniques, which provide a starting point for persuasive communication.

2. PHRASES THAT GIVE YOU POWER

1. I need your help.

When approaching a service agent or receptionist, this opening line appeal to someone's instinctive helpful nature. You're likely to get a better response (and better service!) if you use this line.

2. You don't know me, but...

Be honest. Don't pretend to be someone's best friend. Especially on the phone.

3. I don't know anybody here.

Especially at an event where you don't know anyone, use this line to disarm others' preoccupation.

4. I don't know what that means.

It shows that you're listening. You're not too proud to admit you don't know everything. You'd like to learn more. This approachable, humble phrase also demonstrates interest in the other person.

5. I'm new here/this is my first time.

Again, this appeals to someone's helpful nature. Give them a chance to introduce you to others. Surrender yourself and they'll usually help you out.

6. Hang on for ten seconds.

Especially on the phone, this tells someone that you really will "be right back." With the limited time each person has to talk to you on the phone, sentences like this speed it up. They will usually count, too, just to see if you really come back in 10 seconds. Remember, specificity = credibility.

7. Let me give you an example.

Keeps someone engaged, helps he or she follow you and the conversation. Be sure to offer an example as support for your point.

8. Welcome in.

In all situations – at a table, in a room – use these two words to show approachability and hospitality. It's amazing how much friendlier "Welcome in!" is than "Hello!"

9. Drop me a line.

This covers all mediums of communication and therefore leaves it open for someone to reach you however they prefer. It's also appropriate phrasing for our times: casual, cool and informal.

10. You're my hero.

When someone goes out of their way to help you, this beats "Thanks!" any day.

11. Here's what I learned.

People don't care what you know, only care what you learned. Tell them.

12. It's my pleasure.

This beats "Your Welcome" any day. Don't believe me? Go to the Ritz. They love this phrase.

13. I'm not saying no TO YOU, I'm saying no FOR ME.

Help them understand why you say no without making them feel rejected.

14. I'm not comfortable with that.

This is a good enough reason to object to anything because comfort is everything. And people won't inquire WHY it's not comfortable, they'll respect your choice. You don't have to defend it.

15. I disagree.

These two words say it honestly and directly. Pause for two seconds, get their attention and then explain your point.

16. I don't know, but I can find out.

It's OK not to know everything. But it's also OK to tell someone that their question is important enough that you will go out of your way to find the answer for them.

17. So, to answer your question.

After a long-winded answer, use this to keep your conversation partner on point.

18. Good answer.

My friend Jeff does this and I love it. It reassures and affirms me. Almost like "my answer" was good simply because it came from me.

19. You got it.

I once had a waitress in a hotel lobby that said this for everything. I don't know why, but it made me feel great. I use it all the time. There's just something about it.

20. Right away.

People don't have to wait. They get it now. Few service professionals use this, but it's amazing.

21. You better believe it.

A favorite of Cosmo Kramer, this shows confidence in your points and beliefs.

22. That's just the way I do business.

This phrase helps you keep it real and assures that others respect your choices.

23. I never thought of it that way.

Most people are too proud and too close-minded to show openness to new ideas. This phrase compliments someone and shows lack of judgment. What's more, it offers your willingness to hear someone out.

Guidelines regarding the communication with difficult people

The first step is to keep calm, watch your body language and avoid arguing at all cost.

Provide a "soft cushion" and acknowledge the other person's objection. Use a verbal cushion such as "I appreciate your concern about the delays in the project."

Follow that statement immediately with "Would you share with me the effect those delays have had on you."

Now paraphrase and ask questions for better understanding. Paraphrasing means you repeat what someone has said in your own words. "If I understand you correctly, you're thinking that..."

Use "Glad-Sorry-Sure." Here's a quick way to apologize and reassure the person. "I'm glad you've given us some feedback on your concerns. I'm sorry that you had that experience with us. I'm sure we can find a better solution for you."

Or try the 3 F's (feel, felt, found). Use the 3 F's: "I can see that you feel anxious about the new computer system. I felt (or others felt) that way when I started learning it as well. However, I've found that after a bit of practice, it really isn't that hard to grasp."

Now you are ready to provide your explanation if invited to do so.

Focus on what you are able to do, not what you can't do. "I can provide you with about 60 percent of the information by Friday. Will that help?"

Avoid using the word "but" and instead replace it with "and."

Is it better to keep quiet or ask questions?!

Many people avoid asking questions. They believe that questions imply weakness, ignorance, or submission. As a result they don't ask for information that they need. This costs money and leads to mistakes.

Actually, asking questions is powerful. When you ask questions, you choose the topic and guide the conversation. Questions also help you obtain the things that you want. The key is to ask high value, positive questions that move people's thinking toward the ideas that serve your agenda. Here's how.

1) Plan Questions

Prepare for every situation by asking yourself, "What do I need to learn about this?" Then plan questions to gather that information.

Strategy:

Determine how the company conducts its business.

Determine how people in the company deal with failures.

When appropriate, write out a list of your questions. This helps you revise and refine the questions so that they serve your needs.

2) Think Questions

Most people respond to statements, situations, and questions by making direct replies. Unfortunately, responding before you have all the information can lead to problems. Instead, respond with questions.

Strategy:

Find out what the person wants before you volunteer.

Learn what you did right so you can do it again.

Direct the conversation toward solutions.

3) Use Questions

Savvy leaders ask questions to help other people make decisions. They do this by asking positive, guiding questions that help others discover solutions, find possibilities, and consider options.

Strategy:

Encourage visionary thinking and goal setting. Encourage considering other ways that a product or service could be used. Encourage strategic planning that can lead to more effective selling.

Your goal is to help the other person find answers and solutions by asking good questions.

Get the people in your organization influenced by YOU!

You can force people to go along... for a time. But true leadership involves not only the ability to direct people, but the ability to have them embrace your direction.

So how do you get people to willingly, even enthusiastically, accept your ideas? The key is to present a picture that resonates with their emotions and their desires for the future. To do this, you need to recognize that persuasion isn't a one-shot deal, it's a multi-step process. The more attention you pay to each step, the more likely you are to reach your desired outcome.

Build Your Foundation

Before you can effectively persuade, you need a foundation of trust. While credibility doesn't guarantee you'll convince anyone, without it, you're doomed from the start.

First, you must have expertise credibility. You either have the qualifications that inspire people

to have faith in your judgment, or you need to bring in experts to support you.

Second, you need relationship credibility. People need to trust your motivations and feel confident that you'll keep your word. The more exposure they have to you and the more you show interest in their concerns, the more likely you are to build trust. With a small organization, you can accomplish this through one-on-one contact. To influence a bigger group, you'll need to rely on forums and other large-scale approaches.

Canvass

People won't accept you as an authority on where they need to go, unless they believe you're an authority on where they currently are. As you build trust with people, you'll find it much easier to get a candid understanding of their perspectives.

Canvassing is a series of interactions that gives you a clear picture of people's current views and an understanding of their goals and aspirations. There are a number of approaches you can use depending on the size of your organization. Keep in mind that, regardless how you canvas, the process should give you an opportunity to gain valuable information and build credibility at the same time.

A classic example of successful canvassing on a massive scale was "ValuesJam," the 3 day forum conducted over IBM's corporate intranet in July 2003. Through this forum, CEO Sam Palmisano pieced together a picture of how IBM employees at all levels felt about the current values and future direction of the company. This approach not only provided Palmisano with information, but strengthened his credibility in the process. Both were critical factors in his ability to effectively influence IBM's global workforce.

Fly a Trial Balloon

Once you have a good idea of people's perspectives, it's time to fly a trial balloon. Open up dialog in small groups. Test your ideas with

opinion leaders - key people from the group you want to persuade.

Discuss and debate your planned direction. Ask for their feedback and ideas. It's important to give opinion leaders an opportunity to buy-in to your ideas, and to contribute suggestions. By building trust with opinion leaders, you'll be able to ride the coattails of their credibility, you will be considered the core of communication and you will get the best persuasive results in the community you are acting.

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