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Use of persuasive communication in the commodification of thought

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A B S T R A C T

Persuasive communication is a socio-behavioral act which comes to play when we wish to get our needs accomplished by influencing others. The act of persuasion is divided between the stimulus of the persuader and the response of the receiver. The paper focuses on how the persuaders formulate the stimuli of emotion and reason to evoke the action-oriented response of the receivers. They can effect an attitudinal change by offering a stimulus based on the emotional/rational needs of the receivers. Emotions and reason need not be two different zones of stimulus. They can be interconnected to offer a convincing stimulus. The persuaders can offer a stimulus to the emotions with help of reasoning exercise. Empathy ties the persuader and the receiver in a bond to enhance the emotional understanding about each other and make the persuasive task an objective one. The tenets of language and linguistics are analyzed for their different roles in persuasion. They are substantiated with relevant examples wherever necessary.

Introduction

The behavior of human beings and the subsequent action depend on mutual sharing and counseling. In the mutual process, we attempt to influence each other to accomplish our respective needs. Communication is a primary means which plays an important role to persuade others and fructify our requirements. The essence of persuasive communication lies between

two complex issues of stimulus and response which demand an in-depth study. The response—agreement or argument, acceptance or rejection—to the stimulus depends on how the receivers perceive senders' message.

Persuasion is an influencing exercise which is realized by effecting an attitudinal

change among the people. Towards this end, the persuaders process the persuasive message by navigating it through the receivers' attitude, reason, emotion, and make them realize its significance and utility in their lives. The horizons of persuasive task are determined by the stimulus of the persuaders and the subsequent response of the receivers. The twin behavioral components occupy equal space in the scheme of persuasion to make it a comprehensive exercise. The task can be accomplished when the receivers respond to the persuaders with concerted positive attitude and actions. The stimulus-response act calls for the interpersonal exchange of views based on their attitudes and objectives.

Attitudinal change

Persuasive act cannot be conducted on agreement terms of the two parties on all occasions. When the stimulus and response move in a conflicting way, the persuaders attempt to understand the attitudinal and belief needs of the receivers through mind mapping exercise. The stimulus-response dynamics can be better understood from the perspective of the "Cognitive Response Approach" of Graham Davey (2011) which "... refers to the mental process of perception, memory and information processing by which the individual acquires knowledge, solves problems and makes plans for the future" (p.553). It emphasizes on the response of the receivers based on their input and how they analyze and use it to serve their self-interest. The positive response will emerge out of positive perspective that is stored in their memory. Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) as quoted by Davey (2011) trace the roots of "attitude" as to how they evaluate the message and formulate their response to it. According to them: "Some of the implicit evaluation

associated with a response constitutes an attitude which may have been formed as the result of prior conditioning" (p.29). The speculation of the receivers about the message contents is a challenge to the persuaders to bring it in concurrence with their persuasive objective. The need to change the attitude arises when they encounter the receivers on negative terms. To this effect, first, they have to engage the speculation of the receivers and help them generate explicit realization about the message. Then, they should channelize the explicit realization to bring an attitudinal change and persuade them to formulate a positive opinion about the message. A positive opinion can generate positive evaluative data about the relevance of the message in their lives. The explicit realization and positive opinion will be easily amenable to the logical and emotional needs of the receivers.

Stimulus-response mechanism

The positive opinion helps the receivers to listen to the persuaders intently. Subsequent to their silent listening, the persuaders should understand the evaluation patterns of receivers and evolve a stimulus required to appeal to them. Forgas et.al (2011) suggest some "evaluation forms" of the receivers vis-à-vis the message content. According to them, the receivers formulate their response based on the 'data' stored in their 'memory' to "local evaluation" and "global evaluation". The stimulus to the local evaluation is in a limited context where the "short-term concerns" of the receivers are taken care of. It "could provide a relatively flexible guide for action by incorporating information that is unique to a specific situation" (p.42). It is important for the persuaders to analyze the evaluation needs of the receivers and provide them right stimulus. In case of

‘local evaluation’, the stimulus should be based on the “current context, including the presumed attitudes of another person who just happens to be in the present situation, as well as other (social and non-social) aspects of the context itself, short-term concerns, and unique details of a particular instantiation of the attitude object” (p.42). The persuaders can cater to the ‘local evaluation’ needs by mapping the minds of the receivers. The mind mapping exercise will guide them to overhaul the pre-existing presumptions of the receivers and help them evolve an objective opinion about the message. The local evaluation insists on providing a stimulus in its limited purview to suit the inbuilt evaluation needs of the receivers, but it does not aim to tone down the persuasive zeal required to achieve the persuasive targets. “Local evaluations of an attitude object tend to shift in response to incidental details of the current social context. This approach therefore makes predictions about susceptibility to incidental social influence that lie beyond the scope of even a broadly interpreted compatibility principle” (p.50). The response to the brief, familiar and indigenous stimulus will be quicker than to the broad spectrum of stimulus. Local evaluation provides a ladder to scale the higher heights of persuasion gradually. For a relatively big persuasive task, the authors propose “global evaluation” where the persuaders’ stimulus is “a relatively stable summary guide for engaging with an attitude object by taking into account general information from multiple contexts. It would therefore be shaped by what is consistently relevant for action toward an attitude object across different situations, including broad principles and values, long-term goals, normative societal standards, the views and values of important relationship partners or groups, and central and enduring features of the attitude object”

(p.42). The stimulus to ‘global evaluation’ needs aims at supplementing the message with multi-faceted information across attitudes, “relationship partners” in addition to the “enduring features of the attitude object”. In any context, the persuaders have to determine the evaluative needs of the receivers that differ from one context to another. They need to have knowledge of all components of the stimulus to supplement the message on the need and context basis. In the “multiple context” where information seemed to be less logical, the persuaders may cater to the local evaluation needs to make it more productive. The persuaders have to estimate the evaluative needs of the context and decide upon the corresponding stimulus. The result of persuasion depends on the persuader-receiver relationship, how the latter processes the stimulus and correspondingly responds to it.

Stimulus of reason

The persuaders generate an appeal depending on the context, emotion and reason of the receivers. They are the functional tools of stimulus-response mechanism. Persuasion is not a mere momentary communicative exercise to appeal to emotions or reason and let it go without seeking the action of the receiver. It is a comprehensive attempt to reason out the content meaning of the message, demonstrate its relevance to the receivers and make the receivers see the message through the persuaders’ view. It is a steady monitoring exercise to understand their mood swings, adopt corrective measures, sustain their attitudinal change and achieve the persuasive objective. The objective connotation of the content message is important for the persuasion act. It must be fore grounded on the facts to stand the test of correctness, rationality and credibility.

The facts of the message appeal to the reason of the receivers. Immanuel Kant (2004) diagnoses “reason” as only “imagination” unless it stands the test of “truth” (p.459). According to him, “...the sphere of pure reason is that of necessary truth and a priori cognition, the principle of connection in it requires universality and necessity, and consequently perfect certainty – otherwise we should have no guide to truth at all”. He guards the persuaders not to fall a victim to own “opinion” as a rightful “judgment” unless it is “brought into connection with truth” lest one’s judgment becomes a “play of the imagination” which has “no place in the sphere of pure reason” (p.459). Kant was responding to the honest persuasive act with the touchstone approach on objective justification terms. ‘Priori cognition’ is a hypothetic and theoretical perception where the receivers are persuaded on subjective justifications by spinning the words, thoughts and contexts. The world has witnessed enough jinxes when subjective reasoning was used to overpower the ground reality. Terrorism on one hand and the counter-terrorism wars on the other are the results of lack of subjective reasoning in persuasive acts. While, the objective stimulus of honest reason builds up credibility, the subjective approach and justification erodes it.

The reasoning exercise should be objective to bring out the facts. The fact-based reasoning removes the frills of assumptions and accelerates the thought process to draw the receivers close to conclusion. The persuaders need to address the frills of presumptions, prejudices and misconceptions about the persuasive message. The reasoning exercise of the persuader stimulates the receiver to judge the message contents. Enquiry, clarification, argument, counterargument,

and justification find their way through the reasoning-judgment exercise. As truth needs to prevail in the end of it, the clarification questions and justification details should be objective and reason-centered. Kant feels that, “It is not sufficient to circumscribe the procedure (of judgment) and the dialect of reason; we must also endeavor to discover the sources of this dialectic, that we may have it in our power to give a rational explanation of this illusion, as a phenomenon of the human mind” (p.336). He insists on the objective and accommodative approach of the persuader to steer the argument by being pragmatic to the ‘dialectic’ and offer ‘a rational explanation’. A rational approach cannot be confined to being a unilateral communicative act where the dialectic of the receiver is not heeded to. It should disengage the prejudices of the receivers and generate a positive opinion in contrast to the pre-existing and hard-wired perspective. The objective and well-reasoned out facts can generate positive understanding about the message and effect a functional paradigm shift among the receivers.

Stimulus of emotions

An emotional appeal to the sensitivities of the people has the propensity to arouse the feelings which can seek the cognitive willingness and action oriented response of the receivers. Primarily, the persuaders should identify the emotional needs of the receivers and accordingly determine the form of stimulus. “We are persuaded by reason, but we are moved by emotions. Several studies conclude that up to 90 percent of decisions we make are based on emotion. We use logic to justify our actions to ourselves and to others. Take note that emotion will always win over logic and imagination will always win over reality”

(Mortensen 2004,P.184). Readon (2004) quotes Whatley who advocates emotional appeal despite its encumbrances. Emotions can win over “resistance and resentment” and prompt the receivers to “taking action” (p.92). Though emotional appeal has winning power ‘over logic’, it faces the encumbrances of elusiveness/argumentation. It might not, on its own, concretize the hypothetic opinion and withstand the suspicions of the receivers unless it is rationalized. When it sounds to be ambiguous, it should be coupled with reason to answer the questions and effect an attitudinal change. If the change were to be still in the hypothetic state, the receivers demand clarifications and explanations to finally make a decision out of it. Then, emotional appeal has to concretize it with reason and help the attitudinal change become a decision and thereby an act to perform.

The appeals to reason and emotion are regarded as two different stimuli apart. But, no stimulus can exist independently all the time. But, the interconnectivity between reason and emotion is inevitable for persuasive communication. Bailey et al (2002) juxtapose rational and emotional appeal and prefer to go by the former one for being less “problematic”. In their analysis of stimuli of reason and emotion, they say: “If a person believes the faculty psychology hypothesis, it follows that the only people worth trying to persuade are those who are rational or who share our own emotional sensibility. It is only on the basis of a common set of values or standards that persuasion is possible” (p.246). The authors’ preference to “rationality” as the plausible option negates emotions/feelings which, on the other hand, govern our behaviors in many cases. The unfounded fear of rarity/inability to have “common set of values” among the

receivers “who share our own emotional sensibility” is to defeat the very essence of persuasion, which demands the crisis management skills of the persuaders to address the conflict between reason and emotion. It demands their diligent efforts to understand the persuasive needs of the receivers to offer a stimulus based on the resolution of conflict management between reason and emotion.

Emotion-reason interconnectivity

The persuaders face a tough challenge when they had to alter the receivers’ feelings and belief which form the core of their ingrained emotions. We witness a conflict between reason and belief in the religion matters where people disallow reason to overpower their belief. Most of the persuaders feel let down on the counts of modifying the beliefs of the receivers. The opinion of the psychologists and communication theorists is divided on the stimulus which aims to modify the belief. Macpherson (1920) underlines that “persuasion, aiming deliberately at the modification of belief and conduct recedes” persuasion further (p.212). But, a modification attempt is an indispensable component of persuasive exercise required to affect an attitudinal change. It can be accomplished by interconnecting emotion and reason.

The interconnectivity process embarks upon the dynamics of persuaders’ credibility and the credentials of the message. It wields double-edged influence on the receivers to modify their belief and makes them think in a pragmatic way. The interconnected emotion and reason can realize the persuasive objective better when they are associated with the persuaders’ appropriate lingual and linguistic forms, modest tone with the resonance of honesty

and a semblance of intimacy in their body language. If it were unrealizable, then Winston Churchill's persuasive attempt to modify the "belief and conduct" of his parliamentarians to seek their approval to war plans would not have been possible. He connected emotions: "Upon this battle depends the survival of Christian civilization. Upon it depends our own British life, and the long continuity of our institutions and our Empire", with reason: "Victory at all costs—victory in spite of terror—victory, however long and hard the road may be, for without victory there is no survival" to arouse their positive response.

The persuasive objective to seek action oriented response of the receivers can bear fruit when the modified belief gets translated into action. Pace and Faules (1983) support this analysis as: "Individuals may have communication objectives other than influence. In fact, effective (persuasive) communication may be defined as sending a message that the receiver interprets consistently with what the communicator intended, without distortion. Moreover, a (persuader) is usually interested in more than just producing attitude change. A (persuader) wants action" (p.183). Persuasion is not a mere internal exercise to influence the minds, but a comprehensive task to modify the beliefs and seek the action oriented response of the receivers.

For this purpose, the persuaders should be empathic to understand the concerns of the receivers and draw them close to their objective. Empathy is a cementing force in the triangular relationship of the persuaders, receivers and the content meaning of the message to facilitate the consistent interpretation of emotions 'without distortion'.

Emotion-empathy connotation

The empathy connotation lays emphasis on persuaders and receivers to make them equal stakeholders of the persuasive act. It interconnects the persuaders and the receivers with mutual empathic concerns to understand each other's emotional needs. According to Lakhani et. al. (2005), "Emotion builds empathy like nothing else. The more emotional you can make their decision, the more you can get them to relate to you and your idea, the faster they will become empathetic. By layering on experiences that others have had that are similar to their own and showing how their problems were solved, the people you are persuading become even more empathetic"(p.136). Empathy knits the persuader and the receiver in a relationship which provides space for mutual understanding. It directs the receiver to understand the explanation offered by the persuader and come to a conclusion about the message. In turn, it helps the persuader to offer honest justification about the message contents. Empathic emotional understanding of beliefs and feelings on mutual terms leads persuasion to the positive result. The persuaders need to be objective and tireless pioneering communicators to help receivers decide accordingly. With the empathy partnership, the persuaders should move further to facilitate the receivers in deciding about the message.

Persuaders cannot stand independent of receivers' mental exercise to decide about the message. Their relevance to the decision making process is determined by the empathic concerns they show for the receivers. They should be empathic to see through the internal dynamics of receivers' persuasive needs to chisel out the unfavorable arguments with the help of

logic and justification. Deductive reasoning chisels out irrational data and offers précised details about the message. In case of clarifying the issues of the receivers, they should demonstrate empathic concerns and offer objective explanation worth justification. The understanding, thus emerged, could be drawn closer to persuasion by foregrounding it in their traditional belief. According to Shaughnessy et.al (2004), “We may compel assent by logic but not convince if the logical way of persuasion is an alien perspective” (p.41). The persuaders should be extensively empathic to provide appropriate stimulus to the inbuilt emotional needs of the receivers. The empathic emotional understanding can alter the hard-wired beliefs of the receivers to generate action-oriented response. The point of mention is that persuasion cannot be accomplished with any singular tool of emotion or reason. The best art of persuasion lies in not negating any perspective of the receiver but to treat it with emotion, reason, empathy and justification, as the case may be, and accomplish the persuasive task.

Language mechanism in persuasion

In persuasive communication, language is the chief handler of the message, situation and the people. It accelerates the thought process to evoke emotional understanding of the persuasive message and creates space for stimulus and response. Our perspectives determine the choice of words and the structures we use in our communication. According to Schwarz (2004), we process our thoughts with the help of language and generate information to use it in the decision making process. Language is the conjoining link between the internal thought mechanism and external expression of information. In the thought mechanism,

language and the linguistic forms play multi-functional roles. According to Larson (2002), a language performs three dimensional tasks in the persuasion process—the semantic task with its meaning, the functional task i.e. “the job that words can do, such as meaning” and the thematic task which generates “the feel” (p.156). The persuaders choose the words with appropriate semantic appeal to describe the message and offer a stimulus to the receivers. The meanings of the words connect the persuaders with the receivers over which the persuasive exercise takes off. In the direction of functional task, the words are processed through emotion, reason, empathy, etc. to generate the response of the receivers. The words with various appeals generate an impression (a thematic feel) to become a response.

The receivers’ response could be external/internal or both. In the product sales, when the receivers (buyers) respond positively to the persuaders’ (sellers) stimulus by acting upon the message (purchasing the product), language is said to have performed its functional duty by evoking the functional response of the receivers (to buy the product). Before they bought the product, the language is supposed to have reasoned out its merits/demerits and formulated a subsequent rational/emotional feel before it culminated in a response to buy the product. The action of purchasing the product is the response to the persuaders’ lingual and linguistic connotations that hold appeal to the sensitivities/sensibilities or both.

The purpose, intention, people and the contexts determine the tools of language and the choice of words. The persuaders attempt to capture the attention of the receivers chiefly through the description of

the message. In order to make explanation more appealing, they choose the words, which might or might not fall in the rightful purview of the description. But, it is no denying a fact that persuaders' credibility is associated with their honest communication. The choice of words and rhetoric should be in honest agreement with the spirit of the message. If the semantics of the words sounds dubious, it erodes their credibility. They should desist from spinning the semantics to give an untrue impression about the message and sustain their credibility.

Various tools of figurative language enhance the communicative value of persuasion. Comparisons, contrasts, imagery etc. evoke extra interest of the receivers and may eventually draw them close to accepting the contents of the message. On certain occasions, we deliberately camouflage our words, not necessarily to make them ambiguous, but to facilitate the receivers to draw inferences of their choices. Sometimes the persuaders employ the tool of ambiguity in their explanations. Larson (2002) justifies the use of it as "They (persuaders) try to be unclear, vague, and general to allow for the broadest possible degree of common ground, identification, and co-creation of meaning" (p158). It is employed with a strategic purpose to provide a free play to their minds and make them infer differently. The strategic belief is that from their different inferences, the persuaders might find one which would be close to their persuasive objective.

But it should be admitted that there are unpredictable dangers associated with ambiguity as it is a speculative exercise which might go against the persuasive theme. The persuaders might not have direct control over their divergent inferences every time. In such cases, they

should avoid it and resort to communication with clear connotation. Obama's presidential election campaign slogan "Yes we can" had many ambiguous connotations. They provided different shades of meanings to it—ability to bring in a change to make economy more vibrant, a change for the better future (in the aftermath of reverses suffered in Iraq and Afghanistan wars) as well as a change in the White House to install a Black Man as the president. The phrase had successfully catered to the needs of "functional", "semantic" and 'thematic' dimensions of language by arousing the majority of receivers' emotions and generating a cross-section of meaning. Lingual and linguistic connotations got majority of the people vote for the Democrats to effect a change of seat in the White House.

Semantically, the phrasal words "Yes we can" were a reference to the historical and psychological classification of meaning which provided a sense to think of a black man for the White House. The words became greatly 'functional' when the audience realized that they can bring the change which he was advocating. Thematically, the words aroused the feelings of the people when they were repeating his words in chorus along with him. But it should be borne in the minds that the thematic and semantic approach of language cannot be the main result bearer of persuasive communication.

Communication can bear desired results when the persuaders associate it with relevant cues from the existing socio-political-economic contexts. Words should be used through thematic and semantic perspective to help the receivers formulate a positive response to their message. The persuaders must not attempt to create a dream world and a 'make-believe-situation'

with mere communication rhetoric as it would erode their credibility.

Conclusion

The success rate of persuasive communication depends on various factors like the persuaders, their credibility, their tone and tenor. Also, the content message speaks for itself. The persuaders have to establish the relevance of the message to the receivers with its content words. Its relevance and utility will prompt the receivers to come forth with their action-oriented response. The tools of emotion, reason, empathy, etc. should be used in response to the stimulus needs of the receivers. Their interconnectivity depends on the contexts and the receivers. The persuader-receiver relationship can be established with mutual empathic concern between them. Persuaders should desist from spinning communication for short-term gains as it erodes their credibility. They should allow the facts to speak for themselves, to that extent, their job is to provide a communicative vehicle to the facts to reach the receivers' minds.

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