

The Process of Persuasion

Brief: When trying to sort incoming persuasive information, audience members evaluate whether it lands in their zone of acceptance, their zone of non-commitment or indifference, or their zone of rejection.

Learning Objective: Understand the process of persuasion.

Key Terms:

- Anchor point: An initial attitude used to evaluate new information.
- Social Judgment Theory: A theory of persuasion that suggests that when people are presented with an idea or any kind of persuasive proposal, their natural reaction is to immediately seek a way to sort the information subconsciously and react to it.

Persuasive Speech Purpose

The general purpose for every persuasive speech is to convince your audience to change a belief, change a behavior, or some combination of the two. A specific purpose statement for a persuasive speech that combines belief and behavior about smoking cigarettes might be, “After listening to my speech my audience will believe that nicotine is a dangerous drug and will either quit—or never start smoking.”

The Process of Persuasion

The Social Judgment Theory of persuasion suggests that when people are presented with an idea or any kind of persuasive proposal, their natural reaction is to immediately seek a way to sort the information subconsciously and react to it. We evaluate the information and compare it with the attitude we already have, which is referred to as the initial attitude or anchor point.

When trying to sort incoming persuasive information, audience members evaluate whether it lands in their zone of acceptance, their zone of non-commitment or indifference, or their zone of rejection. A person's anchor point is considered to be the center of their zone of acceptance, the position that is most acceptable to them.

The size of these zone varies from individual to individual and from topic to topic. When a topic is closely connected to how we define and perceive ourselves, or deals with anything we care passionately about, our zone of acceptance of a new idea is likely to be much smaller and our zone of rejection much larger.

When trying to persuade an audience, it is vital to first understand their average anchor point. Get a sense of what you think most of your audience members believe and start there. Offer

your persuasive argument to move them from their current anchor point towards accepting and incorporating your position. If you push too far, too fast, you'll likely throw them off of their anchor point into their rejection zone, where you will inevitably lose the argument.

From Concept to Action

Recall a time when you were unexpectedly convinced to change a belief or behavior. Were you convinced to try a product? Break a bad habit? Adopt a different political view? Or try a new activity? What did you change? How were you convinced to move from your anchor point and incorporate this new belief or behavior into your zone of acceptance? As you conduct your analysis, consider how you can apply your own experience to develop stronger persuasive speeches.

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