John Benjamins Publishing Company

Persuasive messages: The process of influence

William Benoit and Pamela Benoit
Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008
ISBN 978 1 4051 5820 6 (hardcover), 978 1 4051 5821 3
(paperback)

Reviewed by Jos Hornikx
Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands

We encounter persuasive messages everywhere at every moment of the day: in the newspaper in the morning, on television during lunch, at a business meeting in the afternoon, or around the dinner table with our families. Not only are we targets of other people's attempts to persuade us, we also try to persuade other people. Being familiar with persuasion, however, does not make us experts in the art of persuasion already. There is much to learn about the process of influence, about the messages that are most likely to be effective, and about the factors that we should pay attention to. *Persuasive messages: The process of influence* introduces its readers to these matters. The authors of this textbook, William and Pamela Benoit, call it "a guide to successful persuasion" (xii). The authors want to offer their readers practical advice on designing persuasive messages. They have succeeded in their mission, in particular because their advice is firmly grounded in classic and current theories, and in empirical research findings.

Persuasive messages is divided into four parts: attitudes and persuasion (part I; four chapters), preparing persuasive communication (part II; five chapters), theories of persuasion (part III; three chapters), and critical consumers of persuasive messages (part IV; two chapters). In Chapter 1, persuasion is defined as "a process in which a source (persuader) uses a message to achieve a goal by creating, changing, or reinforcing

the attitudes of others (the audience)" (p. 7). As persuasion tries to change people's cognitions – that is, their beliefs, values, and attitudes – Benoit and Benoit present a cognitive approach to persuasion in Chapter 2 by reviewing a number of cognitive response models. The most influential model of this kind is the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). The authors concisely describe the key ideas of the ELM, among which the premise that people's ability and motivation affect how thoughtfully they process a persuasive message. The advice given to persuaders using the ELM is to think about the target audience's ability and motivation, because this will affect their reactions to the persuasive message.

When receivers of a persuasive message process a message relatively peripherally as a result of low motivation and/or low ability, their thoughts about the message may be influenced by the credibility of the source that conveys the message. Chapter 3 discusses important dimensions of credibility (expertise and trustworthiness), explains the roles of source credibility in the ELM, distinguishes between intrinsic credibility (created by the message) and extrinsic credibility (established prior to the message), and advises persuaders to enhance the source's prior reputation or – if such reputation is absent – to have the source demonstrate his or her knowledge in the persuasive message. Part I of the book ends with Chapter 4, in which ethical issues are addressed. As persuaders can change audience's attitudes, it is important to think about whether the persuader's behavior is acceptable or not. Ethical perspectives offer different frameworks to assess the rightness or wrongness of the persuader's behavior. The authors carefully discuss six of such perspectives, including the human nature perspective (e.g., Did the persuader insure that the audience could make a rational choice?), and the legal perspective (e.g., What is the relevant law in this instance?). Audiences, too, have ethical responsibilities such as to be mindful

about persuasive messages that try to convince them, and to allow speakers to be heard.

Part II of *Persuasive messages* contains the most practical chapters for persuaders. In Chapter 5, the Benoits explain the importance of audience analysis. Persuasive messages that have been successful for one audience can fail with another audience. Therefore, it is essential to know as much as possible about the target audience. It is not sufficient to know the audience's size, homogeneity or history with the persuader. Persuaders should also gather information about the audience's knowledge about, interest in, and attitude towards the topic of the persuasive message. This information should guide persuaders in their choices about the persuasive message: the organization (Chapter 6), the supporting material (Chapter 7), and the style (Chapter 8). In these three chapters, the authors give an overview of options available to persuaders. When it comes to structuring the message (Chapter 6), persuaders can, for instance, use the introduction-body-conclusion plan (with different possibilities) or the attention-interest-desire-action (AIDA) plan. When the framework has been chosen, persuaders should think about the materials that could best support their claims. If the target audience is unlikely to accept claims used in the persuasive message, evidence should be used, such as specific examples, statistics, or expert testimony (Chapter 7). One other piece of advice the authors give is to use factors of interest that gain the audience's attention, such as novelty, proximity, and familiarity. Chapter 8 deals in particular with stylistic goals (clarity, intensity, rhythm, and humor), and the devices that can accomplish these goals. Clarity can be enhanced, for instance, with concrete words and the active voice, whereas messages are likely to be more intense when narratives, vivid descriptions, and hyperboles are used. The personal preference of the persuader, the purpose of the message, and the audience characteristics affect which stylistic choices will lead to the most effective persuasive outcome.

In Chapter 9, William and Pamela Benoit provide a further analysis of the audience built around two questions: How to recognize different audiences? How to persuade them? Four different kinds of audiences are presented. Hostile audiences are relatively difficult to persuade because they are antagonistic towards the speaker and/or the topic. With such an audience, the authors advise, amongst others, to emphasize common ground, and to call for a fair hearing. Apathetic audiences are indifferent because of a lack of common ground or relevance. Persuaders should try to show how audience members are affected, and to invite them to participate. A motivated audience is the easiest for persuaders, but it can have high expectations. Most commonly, persuaders will encounter multiple audiences, composed of hostile, apathetic, and motivated members. Depending on the size of the subgroups, persuaders can focus on a part of the audience, balance attention among the different groups, or provide unequal attention to the groups.

Part III presents theories of persuasion that have been fruitful for communication studies. Chapter 10 discusses and evaluates three consistency theories (balance theory, congruity theory, and cognitive dissonance theory). Persuaders have to disagree with their audience to some extent in order to persuade. This disagreement creates inconsistency, which motives the audience to change their beliefs or attitudes. However, there should not be too much inconsistency, as is explained in Chapter 11. The audience member's current attitude is his or her anchor point that may differ extremely or not from the attitude expressed in the persuasive message. Social judgment and involvement theory explain how messages relate to people's existing attitude. The authors present the Theory of Reasoned Action in Chapter 12, and use concrete examples to demonstrate what kind of options follow from this theory to persuade audiences, depending on the current norms, beliefs, attitudes of that audience.

The perspective of the final two Chapters of *Persuasive messages* is not so much on persuaders, but on the audiences. Part IV explains how consumers of persuasive messages can learn to critically assess advertisements (Chapter 13), and political campaign discourse (Chapter 14). With regard to presidential campaigns, the authors advise their readers to listen to both (groups of) candidates, and to reflect on what matters most to them personally (e.g., policy or candidates' character) in order to make an informed choice.

William and Pamela Benoit have written a very good textbook full of practical advice without superficial to-do lists or oversimplified conclusions. Very often, they base their conclusions on meta-analytical results, and not on just a few randomly selected examples of empirical studies. The book is full of well-chosen examples taken from speeches and texts the authors heard or read. Readers will appreciate the glossaries at the end of each chapter, the boxes with key information (e.g., examples of scale items), the direct questions that motivate them to imagine specific situations, and the final section of each chapter that summarizes the chapter, and gives practical advice. The authors are to be praised for their use of cross-referencing between the different chapters, although the position of Chapter 3 on source credibility is not logical, and Chapters 5 and 9 on the audience could have been grouped together. One of the key messages that echoes throughout this book is that advice for successful persuasion starts with an analysis of the audience. The use of specific organizational plans, source testimony or humor may be effective strategies, but they have to be appropriate for the target audience. *Persuasive messages* will prove to be an excellent introduction to the study of persuasion that may guide its readers to successful persuasive attempts.