

Media Literacy: Tools of Persuasion

Basic persuasion techniques

Association	The Rule of Association is a powerful tool in the hands of Media to influence and persuade their audience. It links a product, service, or idea with something already liked or desired by the target audience, such as entertainment, beauty, social acceptance or intimacy, success, wealth, etc. The media message doesn't make explicit claims that you'll get these things; the association is implied. If an audience likes a picture, a logo, a musical segment or the protagonist of an advertisement, the positive emotion created by those things is associated with what is being advertised; i.e people will tend to like the product/service/idea as well.
Bandwagon	The bandwagon effect is the term used to describe the tendency for people to adopt certain behaviors, styles, or attitudes simply because others are doing it. This effect is exploited by media that present lots of people using a product or endorsing an idea, implying that "everyone is doing it" (or else, "all successful/important/ cool people are doing it").
Beautiful people	A very common persuasion tool that uses good-looking people to attract our attention. It is based on the unspoken promise that "we'll look like the models, if we use the product".
Bribery	This technique tries to persuade us to buy a product by promising to give us something else, like a discount, a rebate, a coupon, or a "free gift." Sales, special offers, contests, and sweepstakes are all forms of bribery. Unfortunately, we don't really get something for free -- part of the sales price covers the cost of the bribe.
Celebrities	This technique is a subcategory of the "Social Proof/Testimonials" technique, and the opposite of Simple People. We tend to pay attention to famous people. Media and especially advertisements often use celebrities to grab the attention of the audience. By appearing in an ad, celebrities implicitly send a positive message about a product or idea; sometimes the endorsement is explicit. Many people know that companies pay celebrities a lot of money to appear in their ads, but this type of testimonial still seems to be effective.
Experts	This technique is a subcategory of the "Social Proof/Testimonials" technique. We rely on experts to advise us about things that we don't know ourselves. Scientists, doctors, professors and other professionals often appear in ads and advocacy messages, lending their credibility to the product, service, or idea being sold. Sometimes, "plain folks" can also be experts, as when a mother endorses a brand of baby powder or a construction worker endorses a treatment for sore muscles.
Explicit claims.	Something is "explicit" if it is directly, fully, and/or clearly expressed or demonstrated. For example, some ads state the price of a product, the main ingredients, where it was made, or the number of items in the package – these are explicit claims. So are specific, measurable promises about quality, effectiveness, or reliability, like "Works in only five minutes!" Explicit claims can be proven true or false through close examination or testing, and if they're false, the advertiser can get in trouble. It can be

	surprising to learn how few ads make explicit claims. Most of them try to persuade us in ways that cannot be proved or disproved.
Fear.	This is the opposite of the Association technique. It uses something disliked or feared by the intended audience (like bad breath, failure, high taxes or terrorism) to promote a "solution." Ads use fear to sell us products that claim to prevent or fix the problem. Politicians and advocacy groups stoke our fears to get elected or to gain support.
Humor	Many ads use humor because it grabs our attention and it's a powerful persuasion technique. When we laugh, we feel good. Advertisers make us laugh and then show us their product or logo because they're trying to connect that good feeling to their product. They hope that when we see their product in a store, we'll subtly re-experience that good feeling and select their product. Advocacy messages (and news) rarely use humor because it can undermine their credibility; an exception is political satire.
Intensity.	The language of ads is full of intensifiers, including superlatives (greatest, best, most, fastest, lowest prices), comparatives (more, better than, improved, increased, fewer calories), hyperbole (amazing, incredible, forever), exaggeration, and many other ways to hype the product.
Maybe.	Unproven, exaggerated or outrageous claims are commonly preceded by "weasel words" such as may, might, can, could, some, many, often, virtually, as many as, or up to. Watch for these words if an offer seems too good to be true. Commonly, the Intensity and Maybe techniques are used together, making the whole thing meaningless.
Simple People	(A type of Testimonial – the opposite of Celebrities.) This technique works because we may believe a "regular person" more than an intellectual or a highly-paid celebrity. It's often used to sell everyday products like laundry detergent because we can more easily see ourselves using the product, too. The Plain folks technique strengthens the down-home, "authentic" image of products like pickup trucks and politicians. Unfortunately, most of the "plain folks" in ads are actually paid actors carefully selected because they look like "regular people"
Repetition	Advertisers use repetition in two ways: Within an ad or advocacy message, words, sounds or images may be repeated to reinforce the main point. And the message itself (a TV commercial, a billboard, a website banner ad) may be displayed many times. Even unpleasant ads and political slogans work if they are repeated enough to pound their message into our minds.
Social Proof	The concept of social proof says that we're likely to accept and follow the behavior of others. Social proof can be enhanced by posting endorsements of some product/service or even idea/movement, so that users get influenced to purchase the product/adopt a certain viewpoint. For this reason, media messages often show people testifying about the value or quality of a product, or endorsing an idea. We tend to believe them because they appear to be a neutral third party, with whom we can identify (they are

	<p>citizens/potential consumers like us). This technique works best when it seems like the person “testifying” is doing so because they genuinely like the product or agree with the idea. Some testimonials may be less effective when we recognize that the person is getting paid to endorse the product.</p>
Targeting positive emotion	<p>This persuasion tool is a subcategory of the “Association” technique and uses sentimental images (especially of families, kids and animals) to stimulate feelings of pleasure, comfort, and delight. It may also include the use of soothing music, pleasant voices, and evocative words like “cute”, “fuzzy” or “cuddly.” It works well with some audiences, but not with others, who may find it too cheesy.</p>