I Could Get a Look at a T-bone Steak by Sticking My Head Up a Bull's A** But I Would Rather Take the Butcher's Word For It: An Applied Approach to Persuasive Communication

Corey J. Liberman
Marymount Manhattan College, cliberman@mmm.edu

I Could Get a Look at a T-bone Steak by Sticking My Head Up a Bull's A** But I Would Rather Take the Butcher's Word For It: An Applied Approach to Persuasive Communication
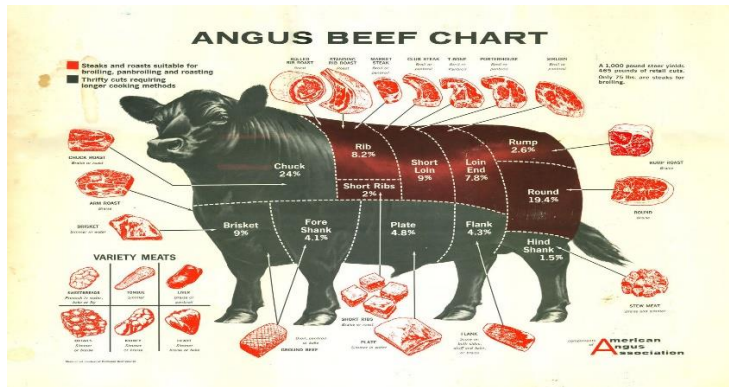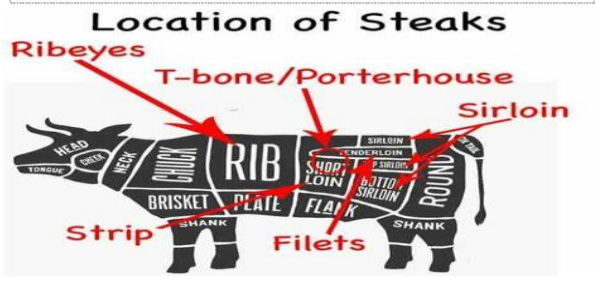
Abstract

This teaching activity tasks students working in groups to determine how to structure messages to increase the likelihood that those targeted with these messages would find themselves in a new cohort. Persuasion is all about the creation, solidification, and alteration of attitudes and are, according to research, the most statistically significant predictors of behavior: people are more likely to engage in behaviors if they have positively-valenced attitudes toward them. According to Harvard Health (2022), 8% of the world's population does not eat meat, while the remaining 92% find themselves in other cohorts (e.g., eat meat monthly, eat meat weekly, eat meat daily). The outcome here would be students creating messages that would persuade people to eat more meat at all cohort levels.

Rationale

The practice of persuasion is certainly nothing new. We do it every day. We attempt to alter the beliefs (what people think to be true/not true), values (what people think to be good/bad), attitudes (what people like/dislike), and behaviors (what people do/don't do) all the time. The Beliefs + Values = Attitudes → Behavior model is the basis for persuasion. But how does this happen from both the source and target perspectives? Decades upon decades of research argues that persuaders, in their attempt to use strategic message design strategies, attempt to do three things while engaged in the purposeful process of persuasion. First…they attempt to create attitudes. Not all individuals have already-existing attitudes about attitude objects. After all, how can one hold an attitude about something for which they have no preexisting information? We cannot hold an attitude about *ChatGPT* if we have never heard of it (even if we have heard about the AI world in which it is enveloped). We cannot hold an attitude about the efficacy of *SPIKEVAX*, the newest vaccination against *COVID-19*, if we had never heard of the virus, nor the vaccination against it (while it might seem impossible or improbable that the latter could not be the case, the former, due to its novelty, could certainly be true). So sometimes persuaders are in the position of creating attitudes from the ground up. But there are two other things that sources of persuasion are attempting to do: change attitudes and solidify attitudes. Social actors might be in communicative situations where they are attempting to persuade targets to change their attitudes about binge drinking or organ donation or reading the daily news or behaving better amidst family members or going to therapy and the list goes on. And persuaders might be attempting to strengthen the already-existing attitudes of targets: communicating and strategically persuading others to eat more vegetables and watch more political debates and visit more art museums and attend less to technologies. If, as the research indicates, the most important and predictive variable linked to behavior is attitude, and communication scholarship argues that it is message design strategy that affects attitude which produces behavior, persuasion should be rather simple. Right? Well…students learn on the very first day of the semester in *COMM 314: Persuasion* that this is anything but the case.

Rules

After distributing the syllabus and discussing the goals for the semester, I share with my students the interesting statistics, provided by *Harvard Health* (2023), that approximately 8% of the world's population does not eat meat. And, for the other 92%, there are some people who eat meat weekly, monthly, and occasionally (although *Harvard Health* does not report these exact statistical indices). We dialogue, as a class, about the potential risks (e.g., cholesterol, saturated fat) and rewards (e.g., flavor, tenderness, amount of iron and protein) linked to eating steak and, following this, I share some photos with them, illustrating that persuasion is not only verbal, but is also a visual process and practice:

The students then spend the next hour, in small groups of four, determining persuasive strategies to create, change, and solidify attitudes that will link to the behavior of eating a T-bone steak. The group ideas will be shared in the next class and we, as a group, will begin to link persuasion theories and models to the ideas which manifested during this opening day class session activity. The name for the activity indicates that the butcher is the persuasive agent attempting to shape, in some way, the values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of the target, and that, like all persuasive situations, we are, from time to time, the butcher. The salesperson if you will. But we are also the patron. And the more that we know about the relationship between these two variables, the better equipped and prepared we will be to learn, understand, and apply persuasion strategies.

Summary

As instructors, we know that students want to see the relationship between theory and application. How will I be able to use this after the class ends? By employing this teaching philosophy on the first day of the semester, students are excited for the rest of the semester. They are doing something fun (or at least I hope). They are doing something that requires group work which, these days, is hugely important. They are doing something that requires intellectual energy and

research. And instructors can have students present their ideas to the class in groups. Students can do a formal write-up of their conclusions in the form of a persuasive pitch. Instructors can have group members switch groups and dialogue about different approaches to having created, changed, and solidified the attitudes of others. There exist a multitude of assessment strategies and this just depends on the idiosyncrasies of the instructor in question. I have found this to be a wonderful pedagogical excise at the very start of the semester.

<u>Additional Readings</u>

Albarracin, D., & Shavitt, S. (2018). Attitudes and attitude change. *Annual Review of Psychology, 69,* 299-327. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-122216-011911.

Braddock, K., & Dillard, J. P. (2016). Meta-analytic evidence for the persuasive effect of narratives on beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behaviors. *Communication Monographs, 83(4),* 446-467. https://doi.org/10.1080/03637751.2015.1128555.

Burgoon, M., & Miller, G. R. (2019). An expectancy interpretation of language and persuasion. In H. Giles and R. St. Clair's (Eds), *Recent advances in language, communication, and social psychology (pp. 199-229).* New York, NY: Routledge.