

# 3 Ways to Make Your Communication More Persuasive

By Robert F. Abbott

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Is all communication persuasive, aimed at convincing others to act or think as we wish? Sometimes it seem like it is. At the least, we can say that much of what we communicate has a persuasion component in it.

Consider this article, which takes an editorial rather than an overtly persuasive approach. Yet, the underlying premise is that strategic communication works more effectively than communication without a conscious purpose. So, I'm trying to persuade you that one approach (the strategic) to communication works better than another.

There's no immediate benefit, given the editorial context. But, in the long run, no one will read my articles unless they share my belief in the usefulness of the strategic approach. And, if no one reads my articles, I might have to find another line of work.

Consider, too, the three most intriguing words in the English language: "I love you." At the same time, these words can be both self-sacrificing and self-serving. In the self-serving sense, we use the words because we want something from the person to whom we've uttered them.

Given that almost all of us need to convince others of something, and need to do it often, let's explore three simple, easy-to-use ideas for increasing our persuasiveness.

First, because persuasive communication focuses on the other person, we need to have that other person firmly in our sights when we write or speak. In other words, communication will be most convincing when we build the message around the other person, rather than ourselves.

So, if you want to persuade me to do something, your communication should focus on me and my response. And to get a response from me, you'll have to address the issues in my terms, not your terms.

In sales, this idea is quite well developed. Copywriters and others know their chances of getting the sale go up dramatically when they communicate benefits. That is, they point out how the reader or listener will come out ahead by buying or using their products. "Buy this shampoo and you'll be more attractive," for example.

In non-sales fields, that idea isn't nearly as well appreciated. Consider internal memos, composed and circulated by millions of well-meaning managers and supervisors. Many of them focus on the needs of the manager or the organization, and not on the reader, the person who needs to be persuaded by the writer of the memo.

Would internal memos work more effectively if their writers focused on the reader instead of themselves? Would people making in-house presentations get better responses by building their pitches on the needs or aspirations of the audience? I think so. The experience in sales has shown, overwhelmingly, that benefits outsell features (features being the characteristics of the product or service being sold).

Second, use persuasive words. Once we've focused on the recipient of our communication, and consciously set out to address her issues, then we move on to the actual wordsmithing, writing our document or speech.

In your writing, you'll find it helps to have a list of persuasive words you can weave into your material. To find a list of them, go to any search engine and type in the phrase 'persuasive communication' with or without the quotation marks.

I'm not sure how well any of these lists have been tested across a broad range of recipients and situations; however, some have been well tested in advertising contexts, and I suspect those are the ones you'll find doing online searches.

In those lists tested by advertisers, you'll almost certainly find the word, 'you'. It's a classic for advertisers. Most consider it the single most powerful word in their vocabularies, bettering even words like the classic words referring to the idea of getting something without paying and to having intimate relations.

I'd like to suggest that you use 'you' too, but for another reason. That's because using the word 'you' helps us to focus on the recipient, as we discussed earlier. After all, the writer who tries to get 'you' into every paragraph doesn't have much choice but to be focused on the recipients, rather than herself or himself.

Try it for yourself. Make an attempt in all your writing, whether you're writing a speech or document, to get 'you' into every paragraph, and see what it does to make your words more persuasive.

Third, watch out for, and eliminate barriers to persuasion. Every day I get more than a hundred of pieces of unsolicited email, the kind we've all grown to know and dislike. While I go through and delete 99% of these messages without even seeing the contents, I can't help but wonder how many of these would-be entrepreneurs chose the wrong business.

It's certainly hard enough to sell when you're a legitimate business with legitimate products. So, think how hard it must be to sell when you're pushing questionable products to people who don't want your messages, let alone your products.

And, to cap it off, take note of how many spammers mangle the language in their subject lines (the only part of their messages I see). Spelling mistakes, misplaced or missing punctuation marks, and case confusion are just a few of their writing sins.

Now, we're all apt to make mistakes from time to time, but if you want to persuade someone to do something, please don't forget to use your spellchecker. And, proofread a hard copy of your document. Then run the spellchecker again.

When we make mistakes, and especially mistakes in the subject line of email messages, we distract our readers, and that reduces our powers of persuasion.

One more suggestion about barriers. Review the chapter called "Misused Words and Expressions" in Strunk & White's Elements of Style. Or use a similar source; many guides to good usage can be found both online and off. Little things mean a lot when we're trying to persuade. Don't let them bring you down.

There you have three techniques for increasing your persuasiveness: focusing on the people receiving your message; using persuasive words, especially 'you'; and eliminating barriers to persuasive communication, like spelling mistakes. Any one of these techniques will help you be more persuasive. Using all three will do wonders for your powers.

When you next set out to send an important message, pause long enough to ask yourself if persuasion is your goal -- either directly or indirectly. If you do want to persuade, then ask yourself if you've focused your message on one or more of these techniques, which provide a starting point for persuasive communication.

Robert F. Abbott, the author of A Manager's Guide to Newsletters: Communicating for Results, writes and publishes a free online newsletter with communication ideas for leaders and managers <http://www.abbottletter.com> .

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