



graphics by daishan sompura

POWER OF PERSUASION

Stephen Kozicki, co-author of *Persuading for Results*, delineates the way to win more business through diligent persuasion and by taking the focus off content.

myth
BUSTED

MORE
CONTENT
WILL
WIN
THE
BUSINESS

‘The difference between what we do and what we are capable of doing would suffice to solve most of the world’s problems’—Mahatma Gandhi

When wanting to influence someone else and win business, the myth that needs busting is: more content is more persuasive. Imagine you are confronting a board of directors, a key customer, or a key supplier you want to persuade to take a different view of the world. Instead of adding more content, take a deep breath and focus on what action you want them to take after your meeting or presentation.

Surprisingly, everyone is different yet we can be persuaded in predictable ways. How? Well, there is a one-word answer: process. This process must be based on understanding the psychology of persuasion.

Now, let me share a case study and then some practical ideas around busting that myth. These ideas and more are contained in the book *Persuading for Results* I have co-authored with Gary Peacock [Head of Innovation and Research at Gordian Business]. Recently, we saw the content myth while working with a major client who was under threat from a key competitor. Their competitor dropped their price by 30% on one of their critical product lines, and a group of senior managers wanted to match the price. Almost a case of fire, ready, then aim!

My client was under pressure to produce more results: higher sales and higher margins. They were expected to deliver better results in less time.

My client was preparing to make a final presentation to win a \$9bn mandate for funds under management. The team was assembled to deliver this final one-day presentation: 45 people and about 500 slides were ready to go.

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They knew their major competitor had already dropped their price by 30% and the pressure was on. I walked into the room and the mood was somber. This team had not won a major deal in two years and were desperate to win this business, but the competitor was a worthy adversary.

Interestingly, when we talk about persuasion and winning deals, the more important the deal the bigger the slide deck. We worked on their message and after the fourth dress rehearsal, we convinced the leadership team to only have fifteen presenters and reduce the slide deck for the day to 113 slides. They made a persuasive final presentation around their value proposition and why the competitors’ price reduction would hurt their account’s business. With this, they won the business with their major account and kept their price steady.

Here, a group of technical gurus wanted to impress with content and not results. Often the smarter you are, the more likely you are to believe the myth: more content is more persuasive.

So a process is needed to break the content trap and focus on winning more business to produce better results. This process means following a set of steps to prepare to persuade faster. Ideally, we would follow this full process every time. But we know managers are busy, so let me give you a quick tip for persuasion. Reach for these three questions when you need to persuade and you will avoid some common problems.

- Ask: Who?
- Ask: What?
- Ask: What are the consequences for doing nothing?

So, let us look at some of the how-to processes that we use, to bust the myth around excessive content because decision-makers want results, not death by PowerPoint.

begin by asking who

What is the name of the person/s you are trying to persuade? Do not stop there. Write down what they like and dislike. Write down their interests: what do they care about? What have they said or written?

A common mistake is just thinking about what you want—I need Amit to fund this project. To persuade in predictable ways, you must understand what the

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person you are persuading cares about. For example, if Amit wants to avoid risks and wants proven ideas, or Amit wants to take risks and wants fresh ideas, then to persuade we should try to connect with his interests. Too often, we know what we want and do not know what they care about.

next, ask what

What specifically do we want the person/s to do? Avoid talking about changing attitudes, ask what do you want them to start doing or stop doing? Limiting this to behaviors—what you can see—will sharpen the persuasion.

In business, when we coach teams pitching for business, we always ask: what do you want them to do? Someone always jokes—give us the order. This is unlikely because before getting the order, there are several steps. So, we ask the team for a list of possible next steps to move towards them, towards getting the order. Typically, this takes the team fifteen minutes because they have not considered some next steps they could ask for.

These next steps could be a financial meeting to discuss financing options, or a technical meeting to discuss technical queries. All the options involve the client committing more of their resources to the next step. Getting the client to commit more resources to the next step moves them one step closer to giving the order to you.

By tailoring our persuasion to these next steps, it is a smaller and easier decision for the client to move forward, and the persuasion becomes more predictable (so, we are more likely to persuade them). Too often we do not know specifically what we want the person to do or to stop doing.

As Lewis Carroll said, “If you don’t know where you are going, any road will get you there.”

finally, ask: what are the consequences of doing nothing?

Simply, if there are no consequences for doing nothing, then guess what will happen: nothing.

When we say ‘nothing,’ that could be saying ‘no’ to your persuasion, or more likely just not responding.

Not responding: “Leave it with me”

“I will get back to you”

“I need more time to think about it”

To be clear, no consequences for doing nothing equals they will do nothing. Too many business people omit this question. So how can you change the consequences? Look at your answers to question one. What are their unique likes and dislikes, what are their interests? How could you change the consequences—to make them more effective for this person?

Finally, the key was to understand the audience and what they wanted to achieve. Here we had a competitor using price as their tool of choice and not value. In contrast, we presented less content and more value—value that connected with the audience, and value that showed the account how they could achieve results and fast.

final tip: on your audience

These may seem like simple things, but we are surprised how often they are missed. So learn the good lessons from this case study. Every audience asks at least two questions:

- Why should I be persuaded by ‘this’ person? Answer this by having someone show your authority: expertise and experience.
- Who else is doing what you want me to do? Answer this in your persuasion by showing social proof: name other organisations. Better still, have someone from these organizations in the room.

Break the content myth; instead of adding more content, take a deep breath and focus on what action you want them to take after your meeting or presentation. This will win you more business in any competitive environment. ■