

The Language of Persuasion

Media makers – particularly advertisers -- use a number of identifiable techniques to inform and persuade media consumers. We can use our understanding of these techniques as specific tools for decoding media messages.

1. **Symbols** can be words, designs, places, ideas, music, etc., symbolizing tradition, nationalism, power, religion, sex, family or any concept with emotional content. In media, people and things often symbolize some larger concept.
2. **Hyperbole** is exaggeration or “hype”. (For example, “The greatest automobile advance of the century!”) Ads often use “glittering generalities” -- impressivesounding language that is nonetheless vague and meaningless. This technique seeks to impress the target and make him/her more susceptible to the sales pitch.
3. **Fear**. Media often try to make us afraid that if we don’t do or buy something, something bad could happen to us, our families and friends, or our country.
4. **Scapegoating** is a powerful technique that blames many problems on one person, group, race, religion, etc.
5. **Humor** is a powerful tool of persuasion. If you can make people laugh, you can persuade them.
6. **The Big Lie**. Most people want to believe what they see. Lies work -- on cereal boxes, in ads and on television news. According to Adolf Hitler, one of the 20th century’s most dangerous propagandists, people are more suspicious of a small lie than a big one.
7. **Testimonials** use famous people or respected institutions to sell a person, idea or product. They need have nothing in common.
8. **Repetition** drives the message home many times. Even unpleasant ads work if they are repeated enough to pound their message into our skulls.
9. **Führerprinzip** (a term coined by Nazi propaganda chief Josef Goebbels) means “leadership principle,” or charisma. Be firm, bold, and strong; have dramatic confidence; and frequently, combine this appeal with the “plain folks” technique. It’s amazingly effective.
10. **Name calling** or *ad hominem* is frequently used in media. It can be direct or delicately indirect. Audiences love it. Our violent, aggressive, sexualized media teaches us from an early age to love to hear dirt. (Just tune in to daytime talk radio or TV!)

11. **Flattery** is based on the idea that if you make people feel good, they are more likely to buy your product. We like people who like us, and we tend to believe people we like. (We're sure that someone as brilliant as yourself will easily understand this technique!)

12. **Bribery** seems to give us something desirable: "Buy one, get one free." This technique plays on people's acquisitiveness and greed. Unfortunately, there is no free lunch.

13. **Diversion** seems to tackle a problem or issue, but then throws in an emotional *non sequitur* or distraction.

14. **Straw man** builds up an illogical (or deliberately damaged) idea and presents it as something that one's opponent supports or represents. Knocking down the straw man reduces the opponent and builds up the attacker.

15. **Denial** is used to escape responsibility for saying something unpopular. It can be either direct or indirect. A politician who says, "I won't bring up my opponent's problems with the IRS," has just brought up the issue.

16. **Card-stacking** provides a false context, telling only part of the story, to give a misleading impression. Read the critics' quotations in any movie ad; only the compliments are included.

17. **Bandwagon** insists that "everyone is doing it." It plays upon feelings of loneliness and isolation. In the United States, with our incredible addiction to sports, this technique is often accompanied by the concept of being on "the winning team."

18. **Plain folks.** Many advertisers and politicians promote themselves or their products as being of humble origins, common, one of the gals/guys. Unfortunately, this technique reinforces anti-intellectualism, implying that to be "common" is unquestionably good.

19. **Nostalgia.** People tend to forget the bad parts of the past, and remember the good. A nostalgic setting usually gives a product a better image.

20. **Warm & fuzzy.** Using sentimental images (especially families, kids and animals) to sell products.

21. **Beautiful people.** Using good-looking models in ads to suggest we'll look like the models if we buy the product. (How many times have you seen this one used?)

22. **Simple solutions.** Avoid complexities, unless you're talking to intellectuals. Attach many problems to one simple solution.

23. **Scientific evidence** uses the paraphernalia of science (charts, graphs, etc.) to "prove" something that's often bogus.

24. **Maybe.** Exaggerated or outrageous claims are commonly preceded by "maybe", "might", or "could." You could win a million dollars!

25. **Group dynamics** replaces the weakness of the individual with the strength of the group. Live audiences, rallies, pep rallies...

26. **Rhetorical questions** get the target to say "yes" to preliminary questions, in order to build agreement and trust before the sales pitch.

27. **Timing** can be as simple as planning your sell for when your target is tired. In sophisticated propaganda, timing is the organization of multiple techniques in a pattern or "strategy" which increases the emotional impact of the sell.