Most business communication textbooks limit their treatments of persuasion to the classical rhetorical model, motive-goal theories, and psychological organizational structures. Suggesting the need to integrate contemporary persuasion theory into the business communication literature, the author synthesizes a wide range of persuasion theories and relevant research using four theoretical approaches: learning theory, consistency theory, perceptual theory, and functional theory. Where appropriate, the author suggests practical implications of these theories to business communication.

The Theoretical Bases of Persuasion: A Critical Introduction
Annette N. Shelby
Georgetown University

The traditional textbook presentation of persuasion to business communication students focuses primarily on prescriptive techniques and formats for writing and speaking. Textbook writers who have tried to integrate findings of persuasion theory into their presentation have faced two major problems. The first problem is that the various theories of persuasion which are to be found largely in the social science literature have not been unified into a coherent framework. As the following discussion will suggest, even the most sophisticated of the new approaches do not integrate the diverse empirical findings on the process of human influence.

The second problem has been that business communicators have found little in contemporary persuasion theory that is useful and practical since contemporary research in persuasion has resulted largely in hypotheses about the hows and whys of persuasion (assessment) rather than in what persuaders should do to be effective (intervention). From a pedagogical perspective, these assessment theories do not provide useful conclusions and implications.

Despite problems with integration and practicality, researchers in the business communication field cannot afford to ignore developments in persuasion research; rather, they should identify relevant findings and take the initiative in developing an integrated theoretical framework that supports their principles and techniques. As a first step in that process, this paper will identify and briefly describe the theories of persuasion commonly included or implicit in contemporary business communication texts as a base point for updating the persuasion theory useful for business communicators. Next, the paper will provide a review of alternative theoretical models from persuasion research that are relevant to business communication.

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PERSUASION THEORIES CURRENTLY USED IN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION TEXTS

A review of business communication textbooks indicates that a modicum of attention is paid to a very few of the available persuasion theories, and the theories that are included are likely to be translated as prescriptive formularies. Despite some examples to the contrary, most business communication text writers generally use one or a combination of the following approaches: a classical rhetorical model; a motive-goal paradigm; or a psychological structure, which prescribes kinds of content to be included and order of presentation for a persuasive message. Both the motive-goal approach and psychological structure are derived from the social psychology literature.

CLASSICAL RHETORICAL MODEL

Following Aristotle’s emphasis on “discovering in a given case what are the available means of persuasion,” texts often draw on the classical rhetorical canons relating to invention (message content), disposition (selection and arrangement of materials), style, and presentation. The classical approach is particularly apparent in the emphasis business communication texts place on stylistic guidelines such as “the seven Cs” (completeness, conciseness, consideration, concreteness, clarity, courtesy, and correctness). Prescriptions that link style and content, including the “you attitude” and success consciousness, are also presented as central to the process of influence or persuasion. Similarly, the order or arrangement of material is treated as a function of the audience’s probable response, while format becomes important as a persuasive “means.”

Despite its comprehensive approach to persuasion, the classical paradigm becomes skewed when presented simply as a formulary without emphasizing the given case. Every case is different; the audience, the situation, the goal, the message sender, and the channel all combine to drive persuasive choices. The unique interrelationships of these variables determine which messages will be effective and which will not.

MOTIVE-GOAL APPROACH

A second general approach found in business communication texts is the motive-goal model of persuasion. In some texts, the motive-goal model supplements the classical system of invention; in others, it supersedes it. Commonly described as a reader-benefit prescriptive (benefits being closely associated, if not synonymous, with motives), the motive-goal approach challenges the persuader to “discover” or “invent” those arguments that can be expected to motivate a given audience. The theory is based on the
assumption that arguments that will move one audience to accept the message and give the desired response will not necessarily have motivational force for all audiences.

Though attempts to understand the bases of human motivation have resulted in various concepts and listings of emotions, needs, and motives, Abraham Maslow's delineation of a hierarchy of needs has been the most influential motivational paradigm in contemporary business communication. Maslow's work, which sets out an ascending structure of five types of needs (physiological, safety, security/belonging, esteem/status, and self-actualization), suggests that the needs associated with the lower levels of this structure must be fulfilled before an individual will focus on fulfilling the higher-level needs. One very attractive feature of Maslow's analysis has been its potential for practical application; it assists persuaders in defining and focusing on those needs that will be potentially motivating for a given receiver. Maslow's theory also appeals to business communication writers because it is the basis for and agrees with other accepted theories of organizational behavior.

Psychological Structure

Whereas motive-goal theory provides an alternative to classical systems of invention, a variety of formularies, which follow structures derived from established (if unidentified) psychological theory, have replaced classical principles of disposition in most textbooks. These formularies stipulate a framework for specifying content constraints and order of presentation for persuasion messages. The widely used AIDA approach (attention, interest, desire, action) or some version thereof appears in most texts as a general persuasive strategy or as a sales letter formula. Other typical persuasive models found in business communication texts include Monroe's motivated sequence (attention, need, satisfaction, visualization, and action) and the "four Ps" (Promise, Picture, Prove, and Push). Where writers have devised their own formulas, they have usually renamed and/or compressed steps in the traditional AIDA paradigm and attempted to specify more clearly the descriptive and proof (both emotional and logical) requirements of a persuasive message.

Psychological theories underlie and support these various formularies, whether or not the theories are explicitly stated. For example, two theories particularly relevant to the AIDA approach are: (1) messages likely to meet with resistance are more effectively presented through an inductive case that leads the reader to the major point, rather than one that presents the point initially, and (2) a message sender cannot be persuasive unless the receiver's attention is gained and maintained. These notions are usually either implied or presented simply as proverbial advice without explanation of the existing empirical or theoretical basis.
CONTEMPORARY PERSUASION THEORY

Since World War II, when systematic empirical investigation of persuasion began, social psychologists and communication theorists have offered alternatives to and extensions of the classical rhetorical model, the motive-goal approach, and psychological structure. Some of this work builds on a common foundation; other approaches proceed from conflicting assumptions about human behavior and make no attempt to relate to existing persuasion paradigms. Some of the new approaches are supported by empirical studies; other hypotheses are more intuitive. From a macro-perspective, persuasion theorists have explored the goals of persuasion, the process of persuasion, and the centrality of attitude. At the micro-level, they have derived a number of persuasion theories to explain behavioral influence.

Goals of persuasion received renewed attention during the early 1980s, when communication theorist Gerald R. Miller challenged the prevailing assumption that the sole goal of persuasion is behavioral change of a resistant message receiver. Miller expanded the parameters of persuasive goals to distinguish three behavior outcomes: response-change, response-reinforcing, and response-shaping. Whereas response-change is based on conflict, response-reinforcing calls for strengthening "currently held convictions" and making them "more resistant to change." Similarly, response-shaping (also referred to as conditioning or attitude formation) seeks to create or develop a behavior where no conviction is currently held and no resistance to the learning process is expected. For Miller, response-shaping goes beyond simple task learning and is "usually directly linked with more abstract attitudes and values that are prized by society or some significant segment of it."10

The process of persuasion is a second macro-issue on which contemporary communication theorists have focused. Whereas much early persuasion theory is based on a simple stimulus-response (S-R) influence model, which assumes a relatively passive message receiver who is acted upon by means of a message, that model was largely abandoned in the 1960s after the publication of David Berlo's Process of Communication.11 Communication theorists then embraced a transactional model that posits an active, often dominant, message receiver who manipulates rather than is manipulated by the message. That model, the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) model, emphasizes the organism that mediates between the stimulus and response. As Mary John Smith observes, that model was a major shift in both theory and research because it "assumes that persuasive effects are the joint product of symbolic interaction between two or more persons, and that each party shares a perception of choice and a sense of control over the persuasive encounter" (emphasis added).12
The centrality of attitude is the third major issue that has dominated contemporary persuasion research. Since Carl Hovland’s original work on attitude change in the 1940s, the recognition of attitude as a central force in determining behavior has been a motivating force and central theme for research. Studies have focused on attitude change, formation, and reinforcement, and on defining and measuring attitudes. Attitudes have received particular attention as mediating or intervening variables in the S-O-R influence model.

Though no universally accepted definition of attitude exists, one way to view the construct is as a predisposition or readiness to respond in predetermined ways to given stimuli. Thus, “attitudes are motivational, or drive producing.” Though attitudes are presumed to have a direct relationship to behavior, the nature of that relationship is open to dispute. Research findings outline three different positions: attitudes produce behavior; behavior leads to attitude formation; and a reciprocal relationship exists, with each influencing the other. Another attitude characteristic that has influenced the development of persuasion theory and research is the presence of measurable affective and cognitive attitude dimensions, a finding that is particularly important for the empirical researcher.

Whereas theorists and researchers have given primacy to the role of attitudes in the persuasion equation, business communication writers have focused on the ends or goals of persuasion and, thus, on the nature of persuasive effects. Long before Miller suggested that “being persuaded” may involve more than behavioral change, business communication writers were emphasizing the importance of eliciting new behavioral responses from message receivers, as well as reinforcing existing ones. Thus, in the area of goals at least, the practice in business communication preceded the theory in social psychology. Many business communication writers have also begun to relate the notion of persuasion as a process to prescriptions about what message senders should do. However, despite admonitions about analyzing audience attitudes, most business communication texts do not systematically incorporate attitude research into their discussions. The following discussion of contemporary theoretical approaches may provide some direction about how to achieve a useful integration.

Much of the more recent theoretical work in persuasion has been largely inaccessible to scholars outside the fields in which it was developed for at least three reasons. First is an assumption that readers share a comprehensive knowledge base of previous research findings in the field. Second is the pervasive emphasis on research methodology and quantitative reporting of findings. Third is the plethora of field-specific jargon that defies translation and, at times, understanding. In this paper, I attempt to bring contemporary persuasion theory to the attention of business communication scholars by providing necessary context, focusing on verbal description, and stripping away as much jargon as possible.
In distinguishing and describing theoretical trends, I borrow a classification scheme from social psychologists Richard E. Petty, Thomas M. Ostrom, and Timothy C. Brock, who identify four theoretical approaches or systematic clusterings of persuasion theories. Though the approaches sometimes overlap—in the issues they address as well as the research methodology they use—their focus differs considerably. The typology is as follows: the learning approach, the consistency approach, the perceptual approach, and the functional approach. Of these four approaches, the first is the oldest, the most researched, and in many ways the most easily applied. Moreover, the other three “clusters” rely heavily on its premises and research base. The current trend in consistency theory, which generated an extensive body of empirical research, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, is toward less sweeping generalizations than early theorists suggested and toward more limited and specialized applications of consistency principles. Perceptual and functional explanations of persuasive behavior are continuing to gain widespread interest within the research community.

The Learning Approach to Persuasion Theory

Since both persuasive effects and the attitudes that mediate them are learned responses, persuasion theorists have turned to learning theory for explanations of behavioral influence and for practical prescriptions about ways to persuade others more effectively. Fundamentally, learning theory attempts to explain or predict the relationship between a stimulus and a response. The stimulus may be the message source, the message itself, or the context within which the communication occurs. The response is the persuasive effect, what the message receiver thinks, feels, or does as the result of the stimulus.

Learning theorists have identified and investigated specific persuasion variables both independently and in combination. They have also devised a number of theoretical persuasion models, including information processing, cognitive response, and social exchange paradigms. Their findings not only shed light on the relationship between stimulus and response, but they also provide a research foundation relevant to the consistency, perceptual, and functional approaches.

Most persuasion theory that is based on learning theory follows B. F. Skinner’s differentiation of two types of learning paradigms, which he labeled Type S and Type R. Type S, classical Pavlovian conditioning, pairs a conditioned stimulus with a neutral one with the aim of eliciting the same response toward both stimuli. Type R, operant or instrumental learning, rewards or reinforces appropriate responses with the aim of making them uncritical and habitual. Under specified conditions, incentives, rewards, reinforcements, and punishments have been determined useful for learning new responses.
Those persuasion theorists whose work derives from and builds on learning theory have devised persuasion models, which they have tested empirically. The most commonly used model, information processing, focuses on the source or sender's message. Another approach, the "cognitive response model," emphasizes the receiver's response and/or self-generated messages. In general, both models rely on the connection or association between stimulus and response. As Petty, et al., observed,

In general, learning theorists propose that it is learning to associate positive or negative attributes with the attitude object that is crucial in achieving persuasion. This approach includes learning message facts and arguments, as well as acquiring effective emotional responses through conditioning.

Information processing models based on learning theory have resulted in experimental investigations of persuasive stimuli and their effects. In the 1950s and 1960s, Carl Hovland and his colleagues at Yale University's Attitude Change and Communication Research Program developed a sequential model of learning responses, which they considered essential for persuasion. The responses they specified were attention to the message, comprehension of the message, and acceptance of the message. Focusing on stimulus variables that would influence "learning" these responses, they investigated message source, content, medium, and receiver characteristics. Their findings have formed the basis for much of the theory-based prescription found in traditional business communication texts, including psychological structure models such as AIDA.

Hovland's model has been extended by contemporary social psychologist William J. McGuire. Whereas the Yale group had concentrated on the acceptance step and emphasized stimulus variables, McGuire sought a more comprehensive model that would take account of the receiver's personality and other traits. Initially, he identified five steps (attention, comprehension, yielding, retention, and action), which he later reduced to two: acceptance (which combined attention and comprehension from the more complete model) and yielding.

Working from the two-stage/model, McGuire hypothesized that (1) personality variables that relate positively to one stage will likely relate negatively to the other; and (2) the communication situation will determine the relative importance of each stage. In his first hypothesis, McGuire is suggesting that personality traits that will make a receiver more apt to listen to (accept) a message will make the same receiver less likely to act on that message (yield). Conversely, those traits that would make receivers likely to resist accepting a message will make them more susceptible to yielding to it. The second hypothesis suggests that situational characteristics will also influence the relative importance of acceptance and yielding in a given case. For example, if a message is extremely complex, the persuader may need to
pay great attention to the acceptance stage; if the message is simple, the acceptance stage may require less attention.

Whereas McGuire and the Yale group focused on the source-generated message, Anthony Greenwald, in developing his "cognitive response model," hypothesized that receiver responses and self-generated messages are ultimately more important in persuasion. Petty, et al., who extended Greenwald's model, summarized its tenets as follows:

... when people receive persuasive communications, they will attempt to relate the new information to their existing knowledge about the topic. In doing this, the person may consider much cognitive material that is not in the communication itself. These additional self-generated cognitions may agree with the proposals of the source, disagree, or be entirely irrelevant to the communication.

By emphasizing the receiver's active participation in the persuasion process, Greenwald laid the theoretical groundwork for a number of receiver-based approaches to persuasion. One of the more relevant for business communication is McGuire's "innoculation theory," which posits that message receivers "innoculated" with weak counter-arguments against a position they already hold will generate their own supporting argument, which will allow them to resist subsequent, more forceful attacks on their initial position. That perspective has significant implications for strategic administrative or managerial communication in which series or follow-up messages are common.

In contrast to information processing, which stresses the source-generated message, and the cognitive response model, which emphasizes messages the receiver generates, social exchange theory focuses on the interaction that occurs between the source and receiver in a persuasive situation. According to social exchange theory, persuasion occurs when a message sender and receiver both agree to give up something (costs) in order to gain something from the other (rewards). The practical implications of the theory for the persuader are obvious. As Erwin P Bettinghaus notes, message senders should analyze the immediate and long-term costs versus the benefits of behavioral change, both to the message sender and receiver. Further, the message should specify the reasons for acceptance. Finally, it should minimize the costs involved or justify them in terms of the expected benefits.

One persuasive message strategy that derives from social exchange theory is the "door-in-the-face" technique. In that strategy, concessions are the "goods" to be exchanged. The strategy operates as follows. A persuader makes an initial request that is certain to be denied (though not so large as to evoke hostility). The rejection is then followed by a smaller request, which constitutes a concession on the sender's part. The message receiver is thus obligated to make a similar concession, which is to accept the second request.

Empirical tests of information processing models, cognitive response models, and social exchange models have provided both the theorist and the practitioner with greater understanding of how persuasion works. Research
findings have also given communicators clearer direction about methods and strategies that may be used to persuade others. The following findings, which relate to (1) the message source, (2) the message, (3) the message channel, and (4) the message receiver, are particularly relevant for business communication scholars and practitioners.

The message source has long been recognized as being an important factor in persuasion. Researchers have attempted to define those characteristics that make a message sender more or less persuasive. Though researchers have developed numerous listings of perceived source (or component) characteristics of credibility, two characteristics that most would agree influence source credibility are expertness and trustworthiness. In addition to these credibility characteristics, researchers have also demonstrated that the attractiveness (physical attractiveness and similarity between sender and receiver) and power of the source also influence persuasion. The problem for persuaders becomes how to increase receiver perception of these message sender variables.

Perception of the message source is critical to persuasion because it affects how receivers will “process” and thus respond to messages. The ramifications for business communication can be described within the context of McGuire’s two-stage mediation model. As an example, at the acceptance stage of the persuasion process, an uncommitted receiver will likely examine information from a low credibility source more carefully than that from a high credibility source.

The message has also been investigated as an important persuasive element. Despite a growing consensus that receiver-generated messages may have a greater impact on persuasive outcomes than source-generated messages, business communication deals primarily, if not exclusively, with the latter. Therefore, the research reported here as particularly relevant to business communication deals with source-based messages. One caveat, however, is that most of these findings are based on immediate or short-range effects.

Message appeals have received considerable empirical attention. Findings show that both motive appeals and reward appeals seem to be extremely receiver-specific (i.e., to be effective, the message sender must choose an appeal that has a high degree of relevance for the particular receiver). Emotional appeals, on the other hand, tend to be more generalized, though Bettinghaus cautions,

When the audience is informed about the topic to be discussed, when they already have a well-formed frame of reference, the effect of an emotional appeal may be expected to be less than when the topic is a new one, and the audience is reacting with no structured base of prior information.
Further, Bettinghaus summarizes specific ways message senders may arouse receiver emotions through persuasive communication:

1. The use of highly affective language to describe particular situations.
2. The association of proposed ideas with other either popular or unpopular ideas.
3. The association of ideas with visual or other non-verbal elements that might arouse emotions.
4. The display of non-verbal emotional cues by the communicator.27

Numerous studies have investigated fear appeals and threats as they related to persuasion. The extent to which fear appeals are effective seems to depend on: the strength of the appeal; the timing of the desired persuasive effect; the specific receiver characteristics; and the presence of other motivators. It has been demonstrated that when using fear appeals, persuaders should heed Aristotle's "Golden Mean": in most situations, appeals should be moderate. Moreover, because fear appeals lose force over time, they are appropriate only when an immediate response is desired. Studies also show that personality variables of receivers influence their response to fear appeals. For example, the anxious can be expected to respond most favorably to lower-strength fear appeals, the less anxious to higher-strength ones. Another important finding is that fear appeals are not likely to be effective in isolation, but must be accompanied by other supporting appeals. Finally, as Smith has noted, two additional factors must be present for fear appeals to cause attitude or behavioral change: the receiver must be convinced that the "recommended preventative measures are highly effective" and be provided with "specific instructions about how to take the recommended action."28

Research findings about message repetition, one-sided vs. two-sided arguments, and the importance of evidence in persuasion also have practical implications for the persuader.29 Message repetition appears useful to persuasion—to a point. Studies on message repetition suggest a “two-stage process, involving an initial increase, then a decrease in attitude change with more frequent exposure.” The optimum number of repetitions is most often determined by the interrelationship of variables in the particular persuasive situation.

Experimental results suggest two important factors that should determine the persuader’s choice of presenting one or both sides of an argument: pre-existing commitment (both the position of the commitment and the level) and the immediacy of the desired persuasive effect. In general, studies show that one-sided messages are more persuasive for reinforcing existing attitudes and behaviors, while two-sided messages have greater effect when changes in attitude or behavior are desired. In short, receivers who agree with the presented position need only hear that position; those initially opposed to the message will be more convinced by hearing both sides. The clear exception
is when long-term persuasive effects are sought; then, a two-sided message is likely more effective in both cases.

The amount and kinds of evidence that should be included in persuasive messages are a function of the timing of the desired behavior, the credibility of the source, the presentation of the evidence, and the knowledge level of the receiver. Use of evidence appears particularly critical to achieve long-term persuasive effects. While emotional appeals or source characteristics may have a stronger immediate impact, evidential content of the message tends to have greater staying power. In the short-term, use of evidence becomes increasingly important when the message source has low credibility. Similarly, evidence is most persuasive when it is delivered well. Finally, as James M. McCroskey and his colleagues discovered, new information or evidence is more persuasive than that which is familiar to the receiver.  

Research on the message channel or medium has contributed two findings that are of particular relevance for business communication. First, simple messages are generally more effective when presented orally or visually; complex messages are usually best transmitted through written channels. Second, message distraction or channel “noise” can be useful in the short-term; distraction makes messages less likely to be refuted or countered by diminishing comprehension. In the long-term, however, channel distraction is considered counter-productive to persuasion.

The message receiver has also been the subject of substantive empirical investigation. From the large body of research in this area, Smith has identified three variables relevant to persuasion: personality traits, involvement with the communication issue, and initial attitudes about the message topic. To increase the probability of persuasion occurring, it is important that business communicators analyze their audience to: (1) identify personality variables operative in a given audience (such as intelligence, self-esteem, authoritarianism), (2) assess the probable effect of these variables on message acceptance and receiver reaction, and (3) develop message strategies to reinforce positive self-generated messages and minimize or refute negative ones. Similarly, research has shown that receivers who feel strongly (either positively or negatively) about a sender’s message will require appropriate message strategies to reinforce or change their pre-existing attitudes and opinions. Finally, as earlier discussion suggested, discrepancy will affect persuasibility.

Of the four theoretical approaches to contemporary persuasion theory noted by Petty and his colleagues, learning theory has been the most fruitful in providing prescriptive advice to persuaders. In addition to specific findings relevant to message source, the message itself, the medium or channel, and the receiver, the theory supplies a number of other generalizations that are applicable to persuading others. Kenneth E. Andersen has provided a useful summary of those propositions.
1. Learning must be motivated. (a) Excessive motivation can retard learning. (b) Individuals differ in motivation to learn.
2. Learning involves the habituation of response.
3. Individuals differ in terms of ability to respond.
4. Simpler elements are more easily learned; elements that involve less effort are more easily learned and retained.
5. Curves of forgetting are very marked at first, gradual at later stages.
6. Learning demands reward; items that receive positive reinforcement will be retained; those that receive negative reinforcement will be extinguished.
7. Meaningful items are learned more easily than are meaningless items.
8. Frequency of reward, specificity of reward, and immediacy of reward will affect learning.
10. Learning tends to generalize from a specific situation to situations perceived as related; the degree of perceived relationship affects the degree of generalization.
11. Learning involves problems in the transfer of learning; material acquired in one situation may not transfer to another.

Consistency Theory Approach to Persuasion

Whereas learning theory attempts to explain the relationship between a stimulus and response, consistency theory, a second major theoretical approach to persuasion, focuses on the relationship between the stimulus and the receiver's frames of reference. The underlying hypothesis is that whether the receiver already agrees or disagrees with a message or its source will be an important factor in persuasion since dissonance or lack of consistency is a potential motivator for attitude change. A large body of empirical research gave rise to and substantiated the assumptions underlying consistency theory. Since these generalizations do not hold true for all communication behavior, some scholars insist that they have limited applicability.

The most popular of the various consistency formulations are Heider's balance theory, Festinger's dissonance theory, and Osgood and Tannenbaum's congruity theory. As Anderson has observed, a basic assumption common to these approaches is

... that thoughts, new cognitions as well as the totality held in the mind from the past, tend to organize themselves in meaningful ways. As long as a new cognition does not disturb the current balance, no change is predicted unless it is one of further strengthening and reinforcement. However, if the new cognition is discrepant—does not fit—in some way with the reality previously held, a pressure for adjustment exists.

Fritz Heider's balance theory hypothesized that attitude change occurs in situations in which there is a perceived inconsistency in cognitions (i.e., what
is “known,” both through awareness and judgment). Heider focused on the perceived like/dislike relationships between the source, receiver, and object or event (message). In his model, achieving a “balanced” and therefore desirable state among these relationships is possible in three situations. First, balance can occur if both sender and receiver have a negative attitude toward the message and a positive attitude toward each other. Second, balance is obtained if both the source and the receiver have positive attitudes toward the message and toward each other. Finally, balance results when the source and receiver each have a different attitude toward the message and, at the same time, dislike each other.

Since balanced situations generate no tension for change, they are not particularly useful for persuasion. Rather, persuaders may need to create cognitive imbalance, or at least a perception of it, to achieve the desired persuasive ends. Then they need to link their messages to a resolution of the imbalance. Imbalance occurs under two conditions: when the source and receiver like each other but disagree about the message; and when the source and receiver dislike each other but agree on the message.

Leon Festinger’s cognitive dissonance theory reaffirms the human need to maintain consistency. While Heider had concentrated on the like/dislike relationships among source, receiver, and message, Festinger focused on the consonance or dissonance of new ideas with the individual’s existing cognitive system and how the relationship of new ideas to the existing system affects receiver choices. Festinger also considered the magnitude of cognitive dissonance to be important in persuasion. That magnitude can be influenced by a number of diverse factors, including the relative number of consonant and dissonant cognitions, the importance of these cognitions to the individual, and the amount of cognitive overlap. Though consistency theory suggests that individuals will take action to restore balance (particularly in cases of high dissonance), that action may not always be consistent with the action desired by the persuader. Message receivers may change their initial cognitions, but they may also choose to increase the attractiveness of their own position, decrease the attractiveness of the suggested one, or create cognitive overlap to reduce the perception of dissonance between the two.

Though individuals may hold discrepant cognitions (e.g., want public services, dislike taxes), sometimes perception of the inconsistency does not occur until the dissonant cognitions are linked or connected; only then is there motivation for attitude change. According to the congruency theory, originally formulated by Charles E. Osgood and P. E. Tannenbaum, this explicit linking creates pressure for attitudinal congruence and cognitive consistency. That pressure may be expected to result in attitude change. Osgood and his colleagues hypothesized that the more extreme or polarized positions would change least. It should be noted, however, that in situations
of noncongruence, change on both the source and object dimension is to be expected. Thus, the high credibility source should expect to lose some degree of credibility when gaining acceptance of a discrepant message. In any event, persuaders who have high credibility for message receivers (particularly expertness and trustworthiness) are likely to have some positive influence on the object dimension. Further, since source credibility is a function of the receiver's perception, message senders likely have considerable control over the variable.

The Perceptual Approach to Persuasion

A third major approach to persuasion, the perceptual approach, is an attitude-change model that focuses on factors that affect how receivers perceive messages. The model helps explain how individual differences affect attitude change and, thus, persuasive effects. Early investigations of perception, conducted primarily by learning theorists, revealed that perceptual selectivity and the individual's frames of reference affect the likelihood and extent of attitude change in response to a message. More recent studies, which have focused on the structure of attitudes and frames of reference as they affect judgment and attitude change, have elevated perceptual theory to a preeminent position in the persuasion literature.

Muzafer Sherif and Carl Hovland's social judgment theory has been a particularly influential structural approach. Sherif hypothesized that a receiver judges a message on the basis of individual "attitudinal referent structures," which are attitude clusters that relate to a given message and thus influence how a receiver will likely respond to the message. Attitude referents have a structure, which consists of a latitude of acceptance (the range of acceptable positions), a latitude of rejection (the range of unacceptable positions), and a latitude of noncommitment (the range of positions about which the receiver is indifferent). According to social judgment theory, whether attitude change occurs and how great that change will likely be is a direct function of the "latitude" within which a message falls. A message falling within a receiver's latitude of rejection, for example, will fail to be persuasive no matter how much credibility the message source has, no matter how "good" the message itself is, and no matter how correct the choice about channel or medium. In fact, the message may be seen as more discrepant than it actually is, which may lead to a "boomerang" effect with the negative attitude being actually strengthened. A message falling within a receiver's latitude of acceptance, on the other hand, will likely be effective even if the message is weak, the source questionable, and the channel inappropriate. Latitudes of noncommitment offer the greatest challenge for persuaders, since the potential for influence is so great.
A critical problem for persuaders is determining the "latitude" within which the receiver's probable response to a given message falls. One cue is the level of ego-involvement; that is, how much a receiver cares about a given message. As Sherif and his colleague note, "susceptibility to change decreases with increased ego involvement in [one's] own stand." Individuals who feel strongly about an issue (high level of ego-involvement) are less likely to change their attitudes (thus, they fall into the latitude of rejection) than those who have no strong opinions about the issue (they fall into the latitude of noncommitment). Ego-involvement does not seem to have any strong bearing on the latitude of acceptance, however.

Attribution theory provides another means of assessing probable audience response to a message. Developed originally from the work of Fritz Heider and expanded by Kelley and by Jones and Davis, the hypothesis is that individuals observe the behavior of others, assess whether that behavior is intentional or outside the individual's locus of control, and try to explain the behavior by ascribing or attributing it to some dispositional (personal) or situational (social or environmental) cause or reason. Thus, attribution theory attempts to explain human behavior by focusing on both personal factors or motivations and on impersonal or contextual ones. Specific attributions persuaders make about the behavior of their receivers (whether Joe eats too much because he is hungry, a personal attribution; or whether he eats too much because his wrestling coach demands he gain weight, a situational attribution) will influence the communication strategies persuaders choose to try to influence the behavior.

The reason one person assigns to another's behavior may or may not be correct, of course. Research findings have demonstrated, for example, that people commonly ascribe behavior to personal factors when the behavior violates accepted norms, occurs consistently, appears in a wide variety of situations, and is present in the absence of strong situational constraints. Not only may such attributions fail to recognize that both personal and situational factors, including the interaction between them, influence behavior, but identifying single causes for complex behavior tends to oversimplify and, therefore, distort the real reason people act as they do. Thus, attribution may inhibit as well as facilitate the process of influence.

Message senders must also take into account the self-attributions their receivers make. According to Bem, when individuals' "internal cues are weak, ambiguous, or uninterpretable," they will use external signals to assign reasons for their own behaviors. These cues may include the behavior of others as well as their own behavior. Several practical implications are obvious. First, to influence receiver self-attributions, message senders need to provide satisfactory reasons for the desired behavior, which a message receiver may "observe." Another strategy is to gain commitment from a receiver, which he or she will use as a reference point for future behavior.
Numerous research studies have confirmed that individuals tend to repeat behavior they have already exhibited or carry through on behavior they have agreed to. The classic "foot-in-the-door" technique extends those notions by hypothesizing that message receivers who grant a moderate request (try a new soap) will likely grant a larger request (buy the new soap) if no strong external inducements are offered. In short, self-attribution is an alternative to the compliance, power-based approaches to behavioral change.

Perceptual approaches to persuasion emphasize that message receivers do not necessarily respond to the message cues they receive, but to what they perceive as the meaning of the message. In interpreting message, receivers use their prior frames of reference (attitude structures), the groups to which they belong or aspire, the behavior of others, the situational context, and even their own behavior as bases on which to form judgments. Social judgment theory argues that some messages are readily agreed to because they are "judged" acceptable; others are rejected as unacceptable; still others fall within the latitude of noncommitment, which means they are fertile ground for persuasion. Attribution theory explains how individuals justify their behavior through reasons or causes found in the external environment. To be persuasive, message senders must influence that environment, including the message receiver's own behavior.

Functional Theory Approach to Persuasion

The fourth general approach to persuasion, functional theory, begins with the premise that the desired persuasive effect (what the receiver is asked to believe or do) must be relevant to that receiver's needs. The focus, however, is not on determining what those needs are, but rather on understanding the nature of those needs and identifying means of activating them. Traditional functional theory (most particularly expectancy-value theory) stresses that people hold the attitudes they do because "those attitudes facilitate the attainment of valued consequences." Thus, people develop positive attitudes toward those things they believe will help them meet their needs; negative attitudes toward those things that will not. As McGuire argues, understanding the "why" behind an attitude helps the persuader to accomplish the necessary attitude or behavioral change. The persuader has three strategic options in effecting that change: show that "the present attitude no longer leads to the satisfaction sought; that "another attitude will meet the individual's needs more effectively"; or that "the individual should reconsider the attitude's value in light of new information." The functional approach was first formulated by Daniel Katz, who suggested that attitudes serve at least one of the following four functions: (1) an instrumental or utilitarian function (they can bring satisfaction through
maximizing external rewards or minimizing punishments); (2) a value-expressive function (they can enhance self-image by reinforcing an individual’s value to others); (3) a knowledge function (they can help a person interpret and make sense of experience through providing “schemata” or classification systems to sort competing stimuli); and/or (4) an ego-defensive function (they can protect self-image).

Though Katz’s formulation “has been generally neglected and therefore its success has been limited,” the functional theoretical approach to persuasion is experiencing quite a revival in the 1980s under such labels as “compliance-gaining” theory and “rules” theory. Like Katz’s model, the newer constructs provide alternatives to the traditional emphasis on source or message variables to explain the process of social influence and to predict persuasive outcomes. Neofunctionalism differs radically from Katz’s approach, however, in that its focus is behavior, not attitudes. Further, the persuasive effects with which compliance-gaining is concerned are immediate, not long-term, and they are limited to behavioral change or initiating new behavior, thus excluding reinforcement of existing behaviors as a relevant persuasive effect.

Compliance-gaining, one of the “new” approaches, rests on the assumption that persuasion is often indirectly coercive, that power is a legitimate and necessary part of persuasion. As Simons put it, “Persuasion, broadly defined, is not so much an alternative to the power of constraints and inducements as it is an instrument of that power, an accompaniment to that power, or a consequence of that power.”

Wheeless, Barraclough, and Stewart consider compliance-gaining to be “the implementation of power.” They argue:

Power is a potential and compliance is the realization or activation of that potential. . . . The securing of adherence, conformity, cooperation, or obedience—compliance—is not only the manifestation of exercised power, it is the very reason for the existence of power. . . . [T]he gaining of compliance does not happen in the absence of power.

Power, however, is that which one person gives to another or agrees to for a time; it is not something the individual inherently has. The perception that a message source has power, therefore, is the critical factor in influence.

The compliance-gaining approach suggests that the message sender’s power, which is “implemented” through verbal messages that provide a “reason or inducement,” serves as the motivator for securing a desired behavior from the receiver that would not otherwise have occurred. Therefore, a number of persuasion theorists and researchers have grounded their work in the early literature that identifies sources, bases, or kinds of power that motivate others. Four models, developed in the early 1960s, have been particularly influential. The first and most widely cited is French and Raven’s five bases of power: reward power, coercive power, legitimate power, referent power, and expert power, all of which depend on the message
receiver's perception of his or her relationship with the message sender. Five years after the original formulation, Raven added a sixth category, informational power. The French and Raven model identifies power options, but it does not give persuaders direction about the kinds of power to use in a given situation.

A second model, developed by Etzioni, included three general types of power: coercive, remunerative, and normative (which he separated into pure and social). Etzioni's model is prescriptive, and therefore useful to persuaders, in that it suggests that certain strategies are more effective for particular kinds of message receivers than for others: the coercive strategy is particularly useful with negative (alienative) receivers; the remunerative approach works best with neutral (calculative) receivers; and the normative or value-oriented strategy is likely most successful with positive (moral) receivers.

The third model described here, Kelman's processes of social influence, includes compliance (when one person responds favorably to another as a means of gaining a favorable reaction from the other); identification (when a desired behavior occurs because it is perceived to result in a satisfying relationship to another individual or group); and internationalization (when the accepted behavior is congruent with the individual's value system). As with the French and Raven model, the Kelman approach provides the persuader a basis for developing alternative message strategies. It does not, however, give direction about when and how to use those strategies.

A fourth model, Parsons' modes of compliance (persuasion, inducement, activation of commitments, and deterrence) focuses on the kind of sanctions employed (positive or negative) and whether the persuader's wish is to influence the receiver's intentions (It's right; It's wrong) or to control the situation (It's advantageous; It's disadvantageous). Though the Parson's model provides the persuader a number of message strategy options, it does not relate these strategies to the receiver and his or her probable response.

A number of persuasion theorists and researchers have attempted to find commonalities among the various lists of power bases or sources and to relate these to strategies through which power can be activated by a persuader. Marwell and Schmitt, for example, examined the power literature and came up with sixteen compliance-gaining techniques (promise, threat, positive and negative expertise, aversive stimuli, liking, altruism, positive and negative esteem, pregiving, moral appeal, positive and negative self-feeling, positive and negative altercasting (projecting onto the receiver certain characteristics or situations), and debt). They reduced these techniques to five strategies persuaders may use in influencing others: rewarding activity, punishing activity, expertise, activation of impersonal commitments, and activation of personal commitments. Similarly, Schenck-Hamlin, et al. and Wiseman and Schenck-Hamlin classified thirteen compliance-gaining techniques into
three strategies: those dependent on sanction; those that rely on explanation; and those that have some normative basis. 59

Wheeless, Barraclough, and Stewart proposed three categories, under which they classified compliance-gaining techniques derived from a wide range of field research. They explained their approach as follows:

Tactics operate through the verbal mechanisms of 1) previewing expectancies and/or consequences, 2) invoking relationships and/or identification, 3) summoning values and/or obligations . . . . These general mechanisms provide (implicitly or explicitly) the structure of reasons/inducements within specific compliance-gaining tactics through which an agent [message sender] implements power bases. The more specific types of power (for example, coercive, social, internalization . . . ) are the reasons/inducements inherent within compliance-gaining tactics that an agent [message sender] uses to call his or her power to the target’s [receiver’s] attention (emphasis added). 60

Though its rationale is considerably more sophisticated than those that preceded it, the Wheeless, Barraclough, and Stewart model is quite similar in form to Kelman’s earlier three-step process of social influence. As such, it reinforces power as a broad-based, yet central construct in compliance-gaining and relates power to specific message strategies. Further, the paradigm links message strategies to receiver needs through relating the three categories of the model to Maslow’s needs hierarchy. The prescriptive implications follow. Those message receivers whose basic physiological or safety needs are unmet will most likely be persuaded by expectancies/consequences strategies; those for whom belonging is a primary motivator are particularly receptive to identification/relationship strategies; and those who are at the esteem or self-actualization needs levels will more likely comply with appeals directed toward values or obligations. 61

How and to what extent the various power based strategies work in persuasion depend in large measure on the receiver. One particularly important variable is where message receivers perceive control of their lives to be; that is, where the ultimate responsibility for the consequences for their behavior rests. Those who view reinforcement of their behavior as primarily coming from and dependent on an outside source (others, fate, luck) are termed externals. Those who believe that they are responsible for their own rewards and punishments are called internals. Both externals and internals respond to persuasive messages, but they respond differently. For example, internals cope with threats more easily than externals; therefore, they are not as likely as externals to be moved by fear appeals. 62 The Wheeless, Barraclough, and Stewart model accounts for such receiver differences and recommends persuasive strategies to accommodate them. According to that model, persuaders seeking compliance from externals should use expectancies/consequences (rewards/punishments) and relationship/identification strategies. Those seeking compliance from internals should probably rely on message appeals based on values or obligations.
Rules theory, which complements compliance-gaining models, is a second "new" functional approach to persuasion. Whereas the compliance-gaining literature is preoccupied with power and its role in influencing others, the rules approach is concerned with the factors that govern choice. According to Shimanoff, a rule is "a followable prescription that indicates what behavior is obligated, preferred, or prohibited in certain contexts." Therefore, rules govern both the message sender's choices about persuasive strategies to use as well as the receiver's response to those strategies.

Reardon has developed one of the more comprehensive rules approaches to persuasion. Her "regulative rule model" consists of four components: antecedent conditions that influence the choice, behavioral options the communicator has, the behavioral force each option has (is the behavior obligatory, prohibited, preferred, permissible, or irrelevant to getting one's needs met?), and the desired consequents, which are the communicator's goals. Based on their perception of those four components as they operate in a given situation, communicators choose behavior (persuasive appeals or a response to them) that they believe to be appropriate, consistent, and effective. Reardon explained her "tripartite perspective," which builds on the Katz and Kelman models, as follows:

[I]nappropriate will be used to refer to violations of what the persuader considers widely shared among members of the society, organization, group, or dyad. Inconsistency refers to the persuader's perception that some behavioral choice violates what he or she perceives to be the self-concept rules of the persuadee. Ineffectiveness refers to a poor choice of behavior given persuadee-desired consequents.

To the extent that the sender and receiver share the same rules and apply them similarly in a given situation, the communicative act will likely be successful.

Smith agrees that persuasive behavior is governed by anticipated consequences based on past experience. Her focus, however, is on the underlying beliefs relating to those consequences, which she calls "behavioral contingency rules," and on the contexts surrounding them. According to Smith, there are five such rules that a given context may trigger. These rules may be classified either as self-evaluative or adaptive. The self-evaluative rules, which link persuasive behavior to "self-established" standards, are either self-identity rules (reflecting self-concept) or image maintenance rules (concerned with the impression one makes on another). The adaptive rules, which tie persuasive behavior to "extrinsic goal achievement," include environmental contingency rules (with emphasis on physical well-being, both of self and important others), interpersonal relationship rules (that focus on satisfying personal relationships), and social normative rules (that relate appropriate societal and cultural norms to the persuasive behavior).

Smith's five-part motivational structure extends Katz's earlier functional analysis not only by adding to and recasting the classification system, but also
by emphasizing the nature of the contexts within which compliance is sought. Since it is hypothesized that contexts "activate" the rules that influence persuasive choice, Smith is concerned with the kinds of contexts operative in social influence situations. She identifies two kinds, potential and actual, with "actual contexts . . . [being] created by and thus are functions of choice-making behavior . . . in potential contexts." Further, Smith describes three variables, which she has begun to test empirically, that influence what a given context is. The first variable is the relationship between the communicators, specifically their intimacy, their resistance to each other, the power relationships between them, and the consequences (both short- and long-term) of their relationship. The second variable, the communicators' persuasive intentions, includes perceived personal benefits to be gained, the rights communicators have to make or refuse a request, and the short-term/long-term persuasive objectives that are involved. The communicators' situational orientations, the third context variable, has four dimensions: level of ego-involvement, number of relevant situational beliefs operative, whether the situation is perceived to be favorable or unfavorable, and the communicators' apprehension about the situation.

In summary, one of functional theory's major contributions to practical persuasion, and thus to business communication, is its linkage of the persuader's goal to the message receiver's needs. Further, it emphasizes that both sender and receiver have goals and needs that must be met if persuasion is to occur. Whereas Katz focused on the functions attitudes serve, extensions of the functional theoretical approach have emphasized persuasive behavior. In the compliance-gaining approach, power provides the motivational impetus that links the persuader's goal to the receiver's needs. In the rules perspective, context "activates" a set of motivating rules that govern choice, and thus, behavior. Finally, as extensions of the theory indicate, functional theory provides message senders a clearer understanding of the kinds of "power" available to them as persuaders, a variety of message strategies they may use to "implement" this power and gain compliance from others, and an explanation of the choices people make in situations involving social influence.

**CONCLUSION**

Contemporary persuasion theory has much to offer business communicators. This paper has provided a first step toward making that theory available to the discipline by synthesizing four major conceptual approaches and suggesting their implications for business communication. The next step must be to integrate these findings with traditional persuasion models—including the classical rhetorical paradigm, the motive-goal approach, and psychological structure. Useful pedagogically, these
approaches to persuasion should be updated to reflect contemporary theory
and research.

NOTES

2. William C. Himstreet and Wayne M. Baty, Business Communication Principles
tend to mirror textbook approaches. See, for example, Kitty O. Locker, “Theoretical
(Summer 1982), pp. 51-65.
3. Aristotle, Rhetoric, trans. by Lane Cooper (New York: Oxford University Press,
1976); Herta A. Murphy and Herbert Hildebrandt, Effective Business Communications,
5. Abraham H. Maslow, Motivation and Personality (New York: Harper and Row,
1954). Though the Maslow model is widely used, empirical studies that have tested
the model do not substantiate implications of the theory.
6. See, for example, Frederick H. Herzberg’s analysis of satisfiers and motivators in
Frederick H. Herzberg, Bernard Mauser, and Barbara B. Synderman, The Motivation
7. See Malra Treece, Communication for Business and the Professions, 2nd ed.
(Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc.), p. 236.
8. Alan H. Monroe, Principles and Types of Speech, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Scott,
E. Roloff and Gerald R. Miller (eds.), New Directions in Theory and Research
Winton, 1960).
12. Mary John Smith, Persuasion and Human Action: A Review and Critique of
Wilbur Schramm, “The Nature of Communication Between Humans,” in Wilbur
Schramm and Donald F. Roberts (eds.) The Process and Effects of Mass
M. Murchison (ed.), Handbook of Social Psychology (Worcester, MA: Clark
University Press, 1935); L. W. Doob, “The Behavior of Attitudes,” Psychological
Review 54 (1947), pp. 135-56; S. Oskamp, Attitudes and Opinions (Englewood Cliffs,
14. See Robert A. Wicklund and Jack W. Brehm, Perspectives on Cognitive
Dissonance (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1976); William J. McGuire,
“The Concept of Attitudes and Their Relations to Behaviors,” in H. Wallace Sinaiko
and L. A. Broedling (eds.), Perspectives on Attitude Assessment: Surveys and Their
Alternatives (Champaign, IL: Pendleton, 1976); Herbert C. Kelman, “Attitudes Are
Alive and Well and Gainfully Employed in the Sphere of Action,” American


17. Greenwald's model may be viewed as an extension of, or as an alternative to, the information processing approaches. Smith, for example, places Greenwald squarely in the information processing tradition. Petty, et al., on the other hand, treat Greenwald's cognitive response approach as a fifth approach that is complementary to the four primary theoretical approaches (learning, perceptual, functional, and consistency), arguing that

In large part, the cognitive response approach can be viewed as an attempt to bring the four traditional approaches together by examining the thoughts elicited when a person anticipates, receives, or reflects on a communication.

(from Petty, Ostrom, and Brock, "Historical Foundations," op. cit., p. 14.)


29. For relevant research studies in these three areas, see Smith, Persuasion and Human Action, op. cit., p. 229.


41. It should be noted, however, that ego involvement can distort the judgment process, with receivers minimizing or maximizing the discrepancy between their positions and those advocated.


44. See Kelly, note 43.


53. Ibid., p. 113.


61. Ibid., pp. 134-5.

62. Ibid.


64. Reardon, Persuasion, Theory and Context, op. cit., pp. 35-36.

65. Ibid., pp. 88-89.


67. Ibid., p. 491.

68. Ibid.

69. Ibid., p. 507.