Chapter 5

Build It, But Will They Come? Persuasion, Creativity, and Newsworthiness

Think left and think right and think low and think high. Oh, the thinks you can think up if only you try!

—Dr. Seuss

This chapter discusses the importance of originality and creativity in developing effective persuasive messages. It also addresses **newsworthiness** and creative angles for pitches.

Learning Objectives

The information presented in this chapter will enable you to:

1. Describe Petty and Cacioppo's Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) of persuasion.
2. Use Grunig's **situational theory** to identify active and passive **audiences**.
3. Develop the "Big Idea" that will set your program apart.
4. Establish persuasive strategies that appeal to various target public.
5. Develop an "angle" for your program that will interest targeted media outlets.

Most public relations textbooks, including this one, emphasize systematic processes and logical structures. There's good reason for that. If a public relations plan is not thoroughly researched, well-analyzed, and coherent, decision makers will not take it seriously. Logic and accuracy are only the foundation of a strong plan. A public relations plan also must be creative, fresh, and of interest to your target public, if you want it to succeed.

Persuasion in Public Relations

An underlying goal of most communication is persuasion at some level. Every day, we influence others to act, consider, believe, or attend to something in some way. For example, announcing that dinner will be served at 6 p.m. is not merely an informative message; it also persuades the receiver to behave in a certain way—to be in the table at 6 p.m. Similarly, all public relations messages have persuasive elements. We must influence a target public to first notice the message, then absorb its contents, and finally, to appropriately act on it. Clearly, with today's glut of persuasive messages on billboards, radio, television, the Internet, e-mail, social media, apparel, printed materials, and point of purchase displays—we must work thoughtfully and strategically to make our messages stand out and "be heard."

Consider, for example, that you are responsible for organizing an upscale, black-tie fundraising dinner, and silent auction at a local hotel. Planning the event is only half the job. Just because

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you "build it" doesn't mean "they will come," no matter how wonderful or worthwhile your client thinks the event is. What will entice potential donors to attend? How is *this* nonprofit organization different from the hundreds of other charities one might sponsor? Why would someone attend *this* event over the many others that are held every month? Announcements and media alerts aren't enough. To engage the media and attract attendees, you need a special "hook" that appeals to your **audience**'s unique self-interests. This is one reason why your research-based **audience** analysis is so important. A thorough and accurate understanding of the target public's values, interests, and motivations is essential to developing an effective persuasive **strategy**.

Similarly, secondary target public for public relations often are the media. Your goal is to persuade various media outlets to accept and distribute your messages. This means you must develop a persuasive **strategy** based on a clear, research-based understanding of the motivations and values of each media outlet's readers, viewers, or listeners and craft newsworthy media materials. To develop your **strategy**, it's helpful to have some understanding of persuasion theory and of active and passive **audiences**.

Persuasion Theory

One particularly useful theory of persuasion for public relations is the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), which was developed in 1980 by Petty and Cacioppo (1981). This model proposes that people process persuasive messages through two routes: (1) the *central route* and (2) the *peripheral route*.

The *central route* to persuasion is the most direct route. This route involves logical analysis and evaluation of the persuasive message by the receiver (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). This means the message must carry with it strong evidence and support. Persuasive messages for pharmaceutical products, for example, include evidence of efficacy, often in the form of scientific studies and testimonials.

The *peripheral route* to persuasion is an indirect path. It relies on the message receiver *elaborating* on message content by associating it with things that are positive and familiar (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Celebrity endorsements, for example, are aimed at the peripheral route. When Michael Jordan recommends Hanes underwear, message receivers recognize his stellar NBA record and draw a positive association with the brand without examining or analyzing the message content. As always, understanding your **audience** is essential for determining which route to persuasion you are trying to reach. Thus, it is helpful to consider public as *active* or *passive.*

Grunig's Situational Theory of Publics

Grunig's (1997) **situational theory** of publics is a very helpful way to think about **audiences** and appropriate persuasive strategies to reach them. This theory proposes that target public can be classified in terms of the extent to which they are aware of and ready to act on any given topic. *Active public* are interested in the topic and are likely to seek detailed information on that subject. This means the central route to persuasion is effective for these people. Such tools as brochures, information packets, schematics, diagrams, and other materials that provide comprehensive information and background are appropriate for active public. Passive public may

or may not be aware of the topic and have relatively little interest on it. For these public, which are not likely to seek information, the *peripheral route* is more likely to be effective, and it should be accessed through short, repetitive messages, such as jingles, bumper stickers, and celebrity endorsements. Here, you are planting seeds and raising awareness, rather than providing detailed information for immediate action.

Active **audiences** can become passive and vice versa. Consider, for example, that you represent a refrigerator manufacturer. A newlywed couple is planning to purchase their first refrigerator. This is a major expenditure, and the couple becomes part of an active public. They have a keen interest in the topic, and they are likely to visit stores, talk to friends, read reviews, and visit corporate websites to compare specifications and energy efficiency, check *Consumer Reports*, and seek advice. They will be persuaded to make their final decision based on facts and evidence—in other words, through the central route. Your job, then, is to provide persuasive evidence about your client's brand to these potential customers. However, the couple will not remain an active **audience**. Once they purchase the new fridge, their interest will wane.

Let's jump ahead five years. Our married couple is still happy with their refrigerator, and they have become part of a passive **audience**. They will not look for information on refrigerators. Detailed messages will not reach them, nor will this couple be interested in them. Instead, the peripheral route is more likely to be effective to grab their attention and stimulate positive associations with your client's brand of refrigerator. Eventually, when they need a new refrigerator, the couple will again become part of an active public. Then, those peripheral route tools can help persuade them to look at your client's information.

Identifying and distinguishing between active and passive **audiences** and the routes to persuasion for each is helpful because we can then develop appropriate types of tools to reach our audiences. The big question, of course, is how to develop an overarching creative **strategy** or make something newsworthy.

Persuasive Strategy: Developing the "Big Idea"

As noted in the introduction to this text, strategies tie together all your **tactics** to form a unified, cohesive plan. The strategies you choose must be creative and fresh to be effective. This is not as difficult as it may at first appear, if you consider some underlying factors for creative approaches.

Sandra Moriarty (1997), Professor Emerita of the University of Colorado, described what constitutes "the Big Idea." First, there is an element of risk. We must take a leap of faith beyond the safe, bland strategic statement, and take our strategic concept to a new level that may be untried and unknown. The Greater Houston Convention and Visitors Bureau did just that with its Public Relations Society of America Silver Anvil Award-winning "Where the Chefs Eat: Houston Culinary Tours" campaign (Shilcutt, 2011). In an effort to promote Houston's culinary offerings and boost its reputation, these tours departed from traditional, behind-the-scenes tours of famous chefs' kitchens. Instead, the tour invited participants to visit restaurants where the chefs ate on their days off. This fresh approach resulted in every tour selling out within five minutes, with a waiting list of more than 1,500 people, as well as more than 11 million **media impressions** (Shilcutt, 2011).

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FIGURE 5.1 Sandra Moriarty, Professor Emerita, University of Colorado, described the importance of the "Big Idea" in a PR plan.

Second, as we have already discussed, the **strategy** must be relevant to the target **audience** and appeal to that **audience**'s interests, values, and motivations. South Wales Fire and Rescue won a prestigious Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) Excellence Award in 2011 for its "Project Bernie" campaign, which was designed to overcome an accepted local practice of setting grassfires each spring in the target area of Tonypandy. The **audience** was young males who perceived the annual ritual as fairly "harmless." These youths were reached by forming Youth Advisory Board of teens from a local college. The students developed Bernie the Sheep, a cartoon mascot, along with the tag line "Grass is Green, Fire is Mean." The program was so successful that it was extended to three additional areas in South Wales.

> *Big ideas are designed to solve communication problems. If they are not strategic then they are not Big Ideas, but rather just random thoughts.*
>
> —Professor Sandra Moriarty

Third, "the Big Idea" must have a recognizable emotional, physical, or intellectual impact on the target public. Edelman and Starbucks Coffee Company won a PRSA Silver Anvil with the Starbucks Coffee Company Earth Month campaign, which did just that. Edelman and Starbucks recognized that environment was the number one concern of consumers, and that people trusted

brands with ethical and socially responsible reputations. Starbucks, in an effort to enhance its reputation for being environmentally conscious, engaged its customers during its April 2010 "Earth Month" through a five-milestone **strategy** that included, among other things, offering free coffee to customers with a reusable mug or tumbler, convening a "Second Cup Summit" to work toward a recyclable cup solution, and facilitating speaking engagements at conferences about environmental stewardship. More than 1.2 million consumers participated in the tumbler promotion, and Starbucks saw its reputation as an environmentally responsible organization measurably enhanced.

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FIGURE 5.2 While the concept of a "Big Idea" may seem daunting at first, it really is a matter of allowing yourself to think freely about the client's goals and how they mesh with those of your target publics.

Finally, to be truly "big," "the Big Idea" must be original. One example of originality is the "Expedition 206" campaign from Coca-Cola and Fast Horse, which won a PRSA Silver Anvil Award of Excellence. This unprecedented global campaign aimed to send three young people to nearly 206 countries in a one-year period as part of Coca-Cola's "Open Happiness" campaign (Fast Horse, 2015). The travelers used both social and traditional media from each country

they visited to tell their stories, generating more than 60,000 YouTube viewers and making a personal connection with millions of consumers on an international basis. A word of caution about originality: It may take some research to verify that your idea is unusual and imaginative. Although something may be new to you and your team, it may be old hat to others.

Brainstorming, surfing the Internet, looking at what has been done before for similar projects, and considering new twists can help you develop that "Big Idea." Brainstorming, per se, tends to be less productive than a method known as the ***nominal group technique***, first proposed by Delbecq and Van de Ven (1971). This approach helps facilitate open discussion and encourages equal contributions from all team members. The following steps present a condensed form of this technique:

1. **Develop and state the question.** Everyone needs to agree on this as a starting point for discussion. It may be something like, "How can we help the client attain the goal of improving employee morale?" or "What is the best **strategy** to appeal to this target **audience**?"
2. **Work independently.** Each team member spends some time alone, developing as many ideas as possible that answer the stated question.
3. **Gather ideas.** Record all ideas on a flip chart or white board or some other medium that is visible to all team members. Each person provides one idea at a time, which can be revised with permission from the team.
4. **Discussion.** Avoiding any judgments of value or merit, discuss and clarify each of the ideas. The outcome of this step should be a concise list of ideas for further consideration.
5. **Prioritize ideas.** Limiting the number to no more than five or eight ideas, identify those of top priority by having team members vote. If there are many ideas, it might help to categorize them. For example, categories might be "most cost effective," "best overall **strategy**," or "most appropriate for client's organizational culture." This step also includes clarifying any misunderstandings, and allowing team members to change their minds, if they so choose.
6. **Discuss implications.** Develop the intended and unintended consequences of the chosen ideas, how they can be implemented, and how well they address the client's goals.

Beyond brainstorming, considering some basic principles of **newsworthiness** can help get you there, as well.

Newsworthiness

Novice practitioners often make the mistake of thinking that if they use the proper format and style of a **news release**, the media will run with it. However, a perfectly written but dull release will never see print. A release must be newsworthy, preferably from a variety of perspectives, but especially from the perspective of the media outlet's **audiences**.

Six criteria of **newsworthiness** can help you craft both effective **news releases** and creative strategies for your public relations program. They are:

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1. Prominence
2. Timeliness
3. Proximity
4. Impact
5. Conflict
6. Novelty

Prominence refers to a person, place, or thing that is well known or important. Celebrity status, political power, fame, or notoriety can create prominence. Keep the consumers of each media outlet in mind when determining prominence. For example, the mayor of a small town may be prominent and newsworthy for a local paper, but not for national media. Similarly, celebrity magazines might be interested in Lindsay Lohan's shopping sprees, but political media are not. Consider, too, that prominence, alone, may or may not be enough to make a story newsworthy.

Timeliness means the story is recent or is connected in some way to a current trend. Sometimes, this can be cyclical, so it's helpful to look at trends in the media. For example, each January we can observe media interest in fitness and weight loss methods as people establish resolutions for the New Year. The weight loss and fitness industries have known this for years. As a result, we see them launch new programs and major campaigns during the first couple of months each year.

Proximity is the physical location of the story. The closer a story is geographically to a media outlet's consumers, the more newsworthy it is likely to be. For example, a fundraising golf outing at a local golf course will most likely be of interest only to local papers unless additional newsworthy elements are in place, such as a *prominent* golfer or celebrity. If a significant news event occurs in a faraway place, news media **gatekeepers** often scramble to find a local connection to the story, in an effort to make the news of greater interest to local **audiences**. These stories often rely on speculation and second-hand sources (Riches, 2015) but they still have the desired effect of making a faraway story seem closer to home.

Impact refers to the consequences of the story. Here, you are concerned with how many people the story will affect. The larger the impact, the higher the likelihood will be that the story is viewed as newsworthy. A river overflowing its banks, for example, may only be of interest to a few people, if it does no damage. However, if it threatens homes, the story becomes newsworthy. Major floods that affect large areas and displace many people can become national and even international news—especially when media **gatekeepers** can frame the disaster story using an elected official's pithy quote (Conlon & Valencia, 2015).

Conflict tends to capture people's attention. The old saying that "if it bleeds, it leads" holds true. We tend to think of conflict as wars, protests, and the like. But conflict can be developed linguistically, as well, as it was with the U.S. government's "War on Drugs," which was part of the Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act of 1970. Public relations professionals also utilize manufactured conflicts as competitions and contests to bring an element of excitement and **newsworthiness** to a campaign.

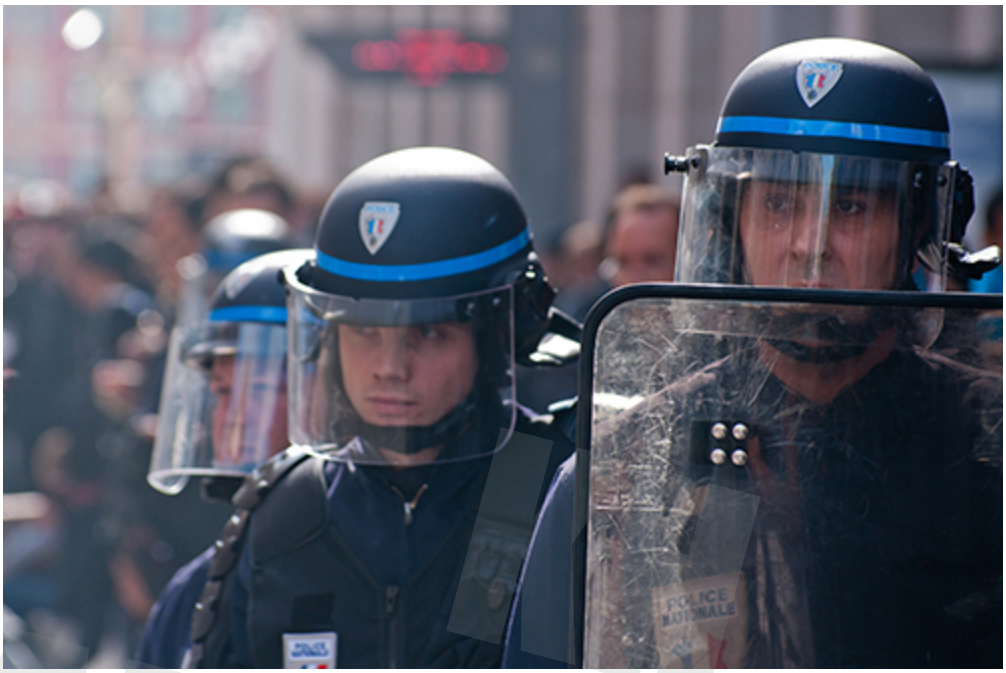

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FIGURE 5.3 Conflict, particularly if it is close to the target public (proximity) or affects many people (impact) is often newsworthy.

Novelty or uniqueness is a key element in **newsworthiness**. This is where your "Big Idea" is important. First, last, biggest, tallest, oldest, youngest—superlatives refer to things that are unique. Try to incorporate events and story ideas into your public relations program that involve unusual elements to increase **newsworthiness**.

While it's important to be expert in developing the story focus and "Big Idea" that will gain interest and notoriety for your communications plan, please approach this work with thoughtfulness and a sound ethical perspective. Too often, stories framed as *urgent news* exhibit a lack of background and context (Tiegreen & Newman, 2008). Dramatic perspectives are hyped, and artificial conflicts are created. This results in what Tannen (1998) has described as "The Argument Culture". This culture is saturated with "the belief that controversy is interesting and the absence of controversy is dull" (Tannen, 1998, p. 30). Ratcheting up the drama or conflict in a "Big Idea" story is not only unethical, but it contributes to a continuance of this conflict-laden media culture—which ultimately breeds public cynicism that can hinder public relations professionals' efforts to do the right thing.

Tying it All Together

Public relations is inherently persuasive. While PR must be systematic and logical, it also must have a creative edge to appeal to target public. Successful public relations efforts often present a "Big Idea" involving a fresh, new approach that is relevant to and has a big impact on target public. Or, alternately, that "Big Idea" could involve something that **audiences** and public already understand—presented in a different and thought-provoking way. A good example of this is the

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recent TobaccoFreeCalifornia campaign that frames cigarette smoking not as damaging to your health—but, rather, as an effort that threatens the health of our planet because "billions of trees are cut down every year to make cigarettes" (No mas butts, 2015).

One way to create an identity for your campaign is to develop a theme for your public relations program. It might center on a tag line or a catchy campaign identification or a unique character, like a mascot. This theme might be an innovative activity or contest or story. Whatever device you use, it must directly (1) appeal to your target public based on careful **audience** analysis, and (2) address your client's goals. The concepts of **newsworthiness** can also help with the development of "the Big Idea," as well as appeal to media.

None of the characteristics of **newsworthiness** stands alone. The more elements of **newsworthiness** you can incorporate into any story, the more newsworthy it is likely to be. At the same time, don't try to overload a story with too many different ideas for the news media **gatekeeper** to consider. If the **gatekeeper** can't quickly identify with the angle your story is taking, the story may be left by the wayside. So, when you're thinking of something *unique*, also consider ways in which you can increase *impact*, localize it for *proximity* to your target public, draw interest of *prominent* people or organizations, and *time* it to current trends or events.

Reflect and Review

1. You are a public affairs specialist for a small liberal arts college, which has just named a new president. You are charged with announcing the appointment to the media. Which media outlets would you target and why?

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2. Your client, a small printing company, is entering its tenth year of business and wants to do "something special" to celebrate a decade of success. The target is the general public in the local area, a highly diverse **audience**. Is this an active or passive public? Justify your answer.

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3. Which of the following tools is best suited to reach an active **audience**? Justify your answer in terms of the **Elaboration Likelihood Model of persuasion (ELM)**.

- Feature Article _____
- Brochure _____
- Door Hanger _____

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- Website _____
- Table Tent _____

4. You work for Wonder Widgets, a huge manufacturing firm with corporate offices in New York. Of the six items below, which would the most likely consider newsworthy by local New York papers? Would any be better targeted to national newspapers? Would you send any to multiple outlets? What would you suggest to be done to improve the **newsworthiness** of each item? Be specific and justify your answer in terms of the criteria for **newsworthiness** outlined in the text.
    a. Wonder's annual employee recognition dinner in two months.
    b. The promotion of Wonder's Vice President of engineering to senior Vice President of research and development.
    c. The death of East Livingston, NJ resident F. Fieldstone, one of Wonder's longtime employees.
    d. Wonder's quarterly earnings statement.
    e. The Laguna Beach, Calif. wedding of Wonder's President and CEO.
    f. The latest information on Wonder's newest and innovative widget.

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