

The Art of Persuasion: From Aristotle to Jedi Mind Technique

Gregory Caswell, AEF Executive Director

The role of the communicator, typically when marketing comes into play, is to convince their audience to do something, change a behaviour, or alter their point of view. The same principles apply whether it's to convince someone to begin a recycling program or to plant a tree in their backyard as it is to sell a product. I should warn that upon first seeing these principles, some may interpret them as manipulative; however, they are age-old techniques which are better referred to as "persuasion."

The Ancient Art of Rhetoric

And when I say ancient, I mean it. The rhetorical triangle credited to Aristotle and used by his pals in philosophical debates some 2000 years ago is still widely used today. The three cornerstones are pathos, logos, and ethos.

Pathos: appeals to emotions or feelings

Ever become interested in something because there's a cute animal involved? Are you like me and tear up at holiday commercials that feature families? The marketer in both of these examples has employed pathos. This approach pulls at the heartstrings, evokes nostalgia, or creates an emotional response, and by emotions I mean all of them. I've put this one first because in my opinion, it's the most effective and quickest way to win someone over. (Did you click on this tutorial because it had "Jedi" in the title? Pathos!) It's why we say to start every speech with a joke. Why? Because psychologically our first response is emotional. It's only when we step away and let things sit that we start to see things more logically.

Logos: appeals to logic and reason

Who doesn't love a good infographic? This probably decade-old must-have is a highly effective way to convince your audience because it quickly lays out the facts about what you want them to know. It's also a great example of logos at work.





Logos is often used in technological or scientific marketing where there is a showcase of statistics, features, data, research, evidence, etc. The more facts available the less likely the audience will argue with you. The less opportunity to argue means they agree and huzzah! You've won them over.

Ethos: appeals to credibility and ethics

Ever buy something because your favourite celebrity posted something about it on Instagram? Who doesn't think of George Clooney when they are sipping their Nespresso? Or in a less sales-related example, donated to a charity because of the spokesperson delivering the message?

Ethos offers credibility, reliability, and honesty. It builds trust, or creates instant trustworthiness because of the person or organization behind the message. Think CNN versus Fox News.

Jedi Mind Technique

You know in The Force Awakens when a captive Rey says to the stormtrooper "You will drop your weapon and go." At first he doesn't, because she's not using the force, but then when she does, he repeats "I will drop my weapon and go," and we all cheer. Well, this one is kind of like that. It's also as risky.

Because we live in a highly polarized world where everyone wants to feel like they belong and not be called out, marketers and communicators are employing a similar technique. Essentially, it's telling your audience what they aren't, typically through a comparison with something unattractive or undesirable. Next, you positively reinforce what they are, what they aspire to be, or what you want them to be or do.

A pretty sloppy example, but you get the gist:

"I know you don't want to destroy the planet, like those other people. Those people who want to cut down the rainforest and drown the polar bears.

No, you want a beautiful, green future for your children and your grandchildren's children. You want to be part of the solution.

Why not be the solution and plant a tree? Here's how you plant a tree, and the best place to buy one."



Choosing the best approach

When planning your communication, first consider your audience. Think of their defining demographics. How old are they? What gender are they? Where do they live? Where do they get their information? What matters to them? What subjects should you avoid? Why is your message important to them?

Once you have a clear picture of who you are trying to convince, determine which appeal will work best. Need to make an immediate connection with a limited amount of time. Try pathos. Have some budget for a big name: ethos to the rescue. Got their attention but still need to drive home the “why”? Logos is a good bet. Want to get a large amount of people on your side while also taking a risk? Adopt the powers of the Jedi.

Most importantly, keep track of your results. Did your appeal work? If your audience isn't convinced, which one will you use next?

—

Gregory Caswell is the Executive Director for the Alberta Emerald Foundation. In addition, he is a theatre artist with wide experience in event management.

