

Specific Media Tools for Analysis

by Bob McCannon, Executive Director, New Mexico Media Literacy Project

These are classic techniques of persuasion, used by advertisers, media makers, politicians, and most other individuals, consciously or unconsciously.

Remember, emotional transfer is the basic process at work in persuasion and sales. If you can make your target feel something, especially better, you are on your way to persuading them.

1. **Symbols** are larger than reality, usually emotional, "idea-conveyances;" they can be words, designs, places, ideas, music, etc. They can symbolize tradition, nationalism, power, religion, sex or any emotion or emotional concept. The fundamental principle of persuasion is to rub the emotional content of one thing onto another. Thus, a beautiful woman can be used on TV to promote sexual promiscuity, the killing of police, or the nutritious benefits of Snickers.
2. **Hyperbole** is exaggeration or "hype." **Glittering generalities** is a common subset of hype that utilizes impressive language, vague and meaningless, and leaves the target impressed emotionally and, therefore, more susceptible to the next pitch. For example, "The greatest automobile advance of the century...."
3. **Fear** or **Defensive Nationalism** uses fear, usually of the enemy, although it can be of sickness or any threat. For example, calling political statements "McCarthyism" or "communism" brings up fear of demagogues and dictatorship. Scapegoating is a powerful subset of defensive nationalism that blames all problems upon one person, group, race, religion, etc.
4. **Humor** is a powerful emotion. If people laugh, one can persuade them.
5. **Lie (big)** - Most people want to believe the truth. Lies work, on cereal boxes and, especially, on television "news." According to Hitler, people are more suspicious of a small lie than a large one. "Nutrigrain Cereal has no added sugar." (Read the fine print; In the words of _____, it depends upon your definition of . . .)
6. **Maybe** (a combination of hype and lie) Outrageous claims are fine, if preceded by "maybe, might, or could." Listen carefully to the infomercials
7. **Testimonial** uses famous people or respected institutions or idea to sell a product. It can be a person, idea or product. They need have nothing in common, and no logic need be used, since Americans *have become conditioned to accept this pattern as fact.*
8. **Repetition** drives the message home many times (in different ways or the same, but repeat it). It is (in the words of Goebbels) effective even when the target thinks that it is unpleasant. Remember, Chevy trucks are "like a Rock."
9. **Plain folks** promotes oneself or one's product as being of humble origins, common, one of the guys/girls/people/Americans, etc. This device is very popular with advertisers and politicians. The unfortunate side effect of plain folks is that it reinforces anti-intellectualism (a common TV theme), implying that "common" is necessarily good.
10. **Strength** (also known as *Führerprinzip* or the "leadership principle") that Adolf was so fond of describing. Be firm, bold, strong; have the dramatic, confident image of a leader. Believe it or not, this is frequently combined with plain folks. America has built a myth about the value of rugged indi-

vidualism (Clint Eastwood, Rambo, Arnold Schwartzegger, etc.) that some think leads to much “aleness” and, more importantly, lack of cooperation in our society.

11. **Name calling** is frequent. It can be direct or delicately indirect. Audiences love it. Our violent, aggressive, sexual media teaches us from an early age to love to hear dirt. Just tune in to Geraldo or Jerry Springer. Name calling is frequently combined with hype, truth, lies, etc. Remember, all is fair in love, war, political campaigns and advertising (and suing for libel is next to impossible.)

12. **Flattery** is telling/implying that your targets are something that makes them feel good or, often, *what they want to be*. And, I am sure that you are all intelligent enough to understand this one.

13. **Bribery** gives (or seems to give) something desirable for support or purchase. Everyone wants something for nothing.

14. **Diversion** seems to tackle a problem or issue, but, then, throws in an emotional non-sequitur or distraction. A subdivision is **straw man** which sets up an illogical (or diminished) concept as though it is what your opposition represents or supports and, then, attacks it.

15. **Denial** allows you to avoid being attached to something unpopular. It can be direct or indirect. My favorite example of indirect denial was Gov. Dukakis saying, “Now if you think I would take a page out of George Bush’s Willie Horton book and bring up the example of a furloughed federal prisoner who brutally raped a mother of five children, you’re wrong. I would not do that.”

16. **Card stacking** is selecting facts (usually out-of-context) so that they give a false and/or misleading impression—telling only part of the story. Read the critic’s quotations in any movie ad.

17. **Band wagon** insists that “everyone is doing it,.” It plays upon the universal loneliness of man. In America with our sports addiction, it is often accompanied by the concept of winning. “Join the winning team.”

18. **Simple solutions** reduce complexities, which are to be avoided (except when selling to intellectuals). If possible, attach many problems to one solution.

19. **Scientific evidence** uses the paraphernalia of science (charts, uniforms, vocabulary, etc.) for “proof” that gives a misleading impression.

20. **Group Dynamics** uses group behavior, replacing that “I” weakness with “we” strength. Achieving a powerful “dynamic” in a target usually involves using a sequence of many other devices as well.

21. Ask Rhetorical questions. Get the target “agreeing,” saying “yes;” then give them the sales pitch.

22. **Nostalgia** takes advantage of the fact that people forget the bad aspects of the past. Referring to good memories causes people to think a product is good. Remember, emotions rub off from one idea onto others.

23. **Timing** can be as simple as planning your sell for a time when you know your target will be tired. However, in sophisticated propaganda it is the organization of the above techniques and your factual material in an effective pattern or strategy that makes people do what they would not ordinarily do.

There are many techniques of persuasion. Frequently, students or classes will make up their own techniques of persuasion for techniques that do not easily fit into the above categories.