



ABOUT PERSUASION AND THE PUBLIC GOOD

IN AN OPEN SOCIETY, there is a healthy emphasis on persuading people to do the right thing, as opposed to using coercion. In other words, we try to convince people to act in ways that are smart and right by persuading them to change, rather than threatening them with punishment.

Both persuasion and legal punishment have their place in society. Persuasion is usually less disruptive to a person's life and, depending upon the nature of behavior, is usually more effective in causing permanent change. It just is harder to do well.

Effectively persuading someone to change requires an understanding of both the issue of concern and the nature of the person you are trying to impact. Years ago, alcohol prohibition was an attempt to use criminal law instead of appealing to reason and values. It did profound harm and it didn't work. More people than ever were physically harmed by alcohol and the unintended consequences became a national nightmare.

An example of persuasion being effective relates to tobacco use. While regulations restricting certain tobacco use probably played a role in the substantial reduction in life-threatening use and addiction among Americans, it is commonly accepted that, when the values and attitudes among young people changed, use of tobacco plummeted, as did consequent rates of disease.

Initially, anti-tobacco outreach consisted of officious pronouncements by public officials that use of tobacco was wrong and dangerous. Medical professionals routinely issued technical warnings about the health risks of tobacco use. These messages were powerfully overshadowed by high-impact marketing from the tobacco industry. The tobacco industry repeatedly portrayed tobacco use as part of a beautiful lifestyle, taking place in interesting, sophisticated settings. A boring warning

dictum from the Surgeon General, inserted into these artful tobacco promotion ads, naturally did little to discourage tobacco use, especially among the young.



In the 1980s, our organization helped pioneer forms of outreach similar to the persuasive methods used by professional marketing groups. We used art to define tobacco use as an activity that would make someone unappealing to others. We pointed out that a user's teeth would become stained and yellow, their hair and clothing would stink, they would generally be perceived as unkempt, unattractive and "dirty" (and lonely) by their peers. We understood that youth were focused on personal image, and that tobacco use could honestly be seen as degrading both appearance and image.

Perhaps the best indication of our success in discouraging tobacco use was that the tobacco industry obtained a court order mandating that our offices would have to make a permanent accommodation for their attorneys. We would have to archive and turn over to them every possible document relating to our efforts. We saw the all-encompassing subpoena as a blatant attempt to harass us into discontinuing our persuasive efforts. Their attempt to bury us in the legal process had the opposite effect: we realized we were winning and rededicated ourselves to continue those efforts.

The point is that, as we came to understand

the audience, we could speak to their sentiments, stereotypes, and core values, and find ways to artfully persuade them to change behavior. That approach carried through to development of similar persuasive messages in other areas of concern and risk.

There are typically three levels of communication to which institutions default when trying to persuade.

The most ineffective communication style is focused on the presenter or presenting organization. For instance, the commissioner of a state agency, a police chief, or the head of a medical department officiously declares that certain behavior is simply wrong. The focus is misplaced on the presenter, not the message nor the audience.

The second approach, most often used by agencies or organizations, is to simply focus on an organized presentation of information and facts. The focus is on the message.

The third and by far most effective persuasive communications style is to spend serious time in learning what is important to the audience, then developing messages focusing on the values and sentiments of the audience.

