

Personal Selling

Theory, Research, and Practice

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2

Attitude Change and Personal Selling: Central and Peripheral Routes to Persuasion

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The typical personal selling situation involves a salesperson and a customer. The salesperson's goal is get the customer to agree to purchase some product. The customer's goal is to obtain the best possible product at a reasonable price. Yet salespeople are sometimes unable to close a transaction, and customers sometimes end up with products that they do not really need or want. What are some of the factors that determine whether or not the salesperson and/or customer will be satisfied? Three literatures within social psychology appear most relevant to this question: compliance, bargaining, and attitude change.

Over the last twenty years, social psychologists have documented a wide variety of *compliance* techniques. In one technique, the door-in-face procedure, a salesperson asks a customer to make a very expensive purchase, and when the customer refuses, the salesperson comes back with a more modest request. Thus a student selling door-to-door might ask a customer to help him or her through school by purchasing a \$500 set of encyclopedias. The customer would like to help, but the request is too large, so the customer says no. The student, however, immediately comes back with a more modest request. Would the customer be willing to subscribe to just one magazine? Research shows that more people are likely to agree to the second more modest request after they have refused the initial large request than if no initial large request were made. Research supports the view that this effect occurs because the customer, feeling that the salesperson has made a reasonable compromise, feels subtle pressure to compromise also (see Cialdini et al. 1975). Importantly, in compliance techniques, one person gets another to agree to some request *without changing the person's attitude about the product in question*. So in the example, our hypothetical customer has agreed to subscribe to a magazine, but the customer's attitude about the magazine has not changed as a result of the customer's interaction with the salesperson. Several other compliance techniques have been shown to be effective in getting people to agree to requests without changing their attitudes about the issue or product under consideration (for example, the

foot-in-the-door technique, see Freedman & Fraser 1966; DeLong 1979; the low-ball technique, see Cialdini, Cacioppo, Basset, & Miller 1978; Burger & Petty 1981, and so forth).

A second relevant area of research in social psychology is that on *bargaining and negotiation*. Consider the same magazine salesperson who wants the customer to purchase a magazine subscription. After hearing the price of a one-year subscription, the customer may indicate that the price is too high but that s/he might subscribe for half the price. The salesperson says that the half-price deal is impossible, but that s/he might be able to offer 25 percent off. The customer and salesperson finally close the sale at one-third off the listed price. A large number of social psychological studies have investigated a variety of factors that may determine whether the final selling price is more advantageous to the customer or the salesperson (see review by Miller & Crandall 1980). For example, in one study Cialdini, Bickman, & Cacioppo (1980) found that new-car customers who were able to demonstrate that they were tough bargainers in an initial discussion with a salesperson subsequently obtained a better price in bargaining over a second car than customers who did not bargain over the initial car. It is important to note that in the typical bargaining situation, just as with the compliance techniques noted above, the interaction between salesperson and customer does *not* involve an attempt to change the customer's attitude about the product. All that is at stake is how much the customer will pay for the product or what conditions will be attached to the sale.

A third approach to obtaining agreement, highlighted in this chapter, relies on changing a person's attitude about the product under consideration. In this approach, our hypothetical magazine salesperson might have attempted to get the customer to *like* the magazine more than s/he did initially prior to asking him/her to subscribe to it. This approach assumes that the more favorable the customer's attitude toward the magazine, the more likely s/he is to subscribe to it. Our primary goal in this chapter is to present a general framework for thinking about attitude change: We call it the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). The ELM specifies two distinct routes to attitude change—central and peripheral—that have different antecedents and consequences. We will review some empirical evidence for the model and address the relevance of the model for personal selling situations. We believe that the ELM may provide some insight into how salespeople influence the attitudes of customers. We hope that this understanding will help produce better consumer decisions.

Central and Peripheral Routes to Persuasion

It is not uncommon for textbooks on the psychology of attitude change to describe ten to twenty unique theories of persuasion. These various

theories, all with periods of ascendancy and decline, have competed over the years for the attention of researchers and practitioners. In a recent review, we suggested that—even though the different theories of persuasion have unique terminology, postulates, underlying motives, and particular effects, that they specialize in explaining—the different theories can be thought of as emphasizing one of two relatively distinct routes to attitude change (Petty & Cacioppo 1981). First, the *central route* views attitude change as resulting from a person's diligent consideration of information that is central to what that person feels are the true merits of the product. The theoretical approaches that fall under this route have emphasized factors such as (1) a person's attempt to cognitively justify dissonant behavior (for example, Cummings & Venkatesan 1976; Festinger 1957); (2) a person's attempt to comprehend, learn, and retain product-relevant information (for example, Hovland, Janis, & Kelley 1953; McGuire 1976); (3) a person's attempt to scrutinize a message and evaluate whether the arguments are cogent or specious (for example, Cacioppo & Petty 1981; McGuire 1974; Petty, Ostrom, & Brock 1981); and (4) a person's attempt to combine and integrate product-relevant information and beliefs into an overall evaluative reaction (for example, Anderson 1981; Azjen & Fishbein 1980). Attitude changes induced by the central route are postulated to be relatively enduring and predictive of subsequent behavior (Cialdini, Petty, & Cacioppo 1981; Petty & Cacioppo 1980).

In contrast to this focus on the extensive cognitive activity that is central to an evaluation of the personal worth of a product, a second group of theoretical approaches to persuasion has developed that emphasizes a more *peripheral route* to attitude change. Attitude changes that occur through the peripheral route do not occur because an individual has personally and carefully considered the pros and cons of the product. Rather, they result because the product is associated with positive or negative cues or because the person makes a simple inference about the merits of the product based on various simple cues in the persuasion context. For example, rather than diligently considering the product-relevant arguments presented, a person may favor a product simply because s/he heard about it during a pleasant lunch, because the person telling him/her about it is believed to be an expert, or because there appear to be many arguments in favor of it. Similarly, a person may decide against a product simply because the salesperson is unattractive or too dissimilar. These cues (for example, good food, many arguments, attractive sources) may shape attitudes or allow a person to decide what attitudinal position to adopt without the need for engaging in any extensive thought about the actual product-relevant arguments presented. The approaches that fall under the peripheral route to persuasion have emphasized factors such as (1) whether or not a simple attitudinal inference can be made based on observing one's own behavior (for example,

Bern 1972; Scott 1978); (2) whether or not the position advocated in a message falls within one's predetermined latitude of acceptance or rejection (for example, Sherif, Sherif, & Nebergall 1965; Newman & Dolich 1979); (3) whether or not some immediate personal benefit is associated with expressing a particular attitude (for example, Schlenker 1978, 1980); and (4) whether or not a product is associated with basic but product-irrelevant cues such as food and pain (for example, Janis, Kaye, & Kirschner 1965; Sternthal & Craig 1974) or is associated with secondary cues such as pleasant pictures and attractive endorsers (for example, Kelman 1961; Mowen 1980). Attitude changes induced through the peripheral route are postulated to be relatively temporary and unpredictable of subsequent behavior.¹

Unfortunately, none of the unique theories of persuasion has yet provided a comprehensive view of attitude change. A general framework for understanding persuasion must consider that attitudes toward issues and products sometimes are formed and changed in a thoughtful manner after a careful consideration of issue or product-relevant arguments (central route) but attitudes sometimes are formed and changed as a result of relatively simple cues in the persuasion situation (peripheral route). Also, variables that enhance and reduce the likelihood that extensive cognitive activity will accompany attitude change should be specified as well as the consequences of thoughtful and nonthoughtful persuasion. Since a salesperson can presumably induce attitude change toward a product by either the central or the peripheral route, it is important to understand the influential variables and the differential consequences of the two routes to persuasion. Before proceeding to a discussion of the implications of our ELM for personal selling situations, we need to outline the model in some detail.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion

Figure 2-1 presents an abbreviated diagram of the ELM specifying the two routes to persuasion (see Petty & Cacioppo, in press, for further details). The basic tenet of the ELM is that different methods of inducing attitude change should work best depending on whether the elaboration likelihood of the communication situation (i.e., the probability of message or issue-relevant thought occurring) is high or low. When the elaboration likelihood is high, the central route to persuasion should be particularly effective, but when the elaboration likelihood is low, the peripheral route will likely be better. Two classes of variables affect whether or not the elaboration likelihood will be high or low. First, people will not be *motivated* to think about every message that they receive. Since it is estimated that people may receive over 1500 persuasive messages a day from national advertisers alone (Will 1982), far too much effort would be required to carefully scrutinize

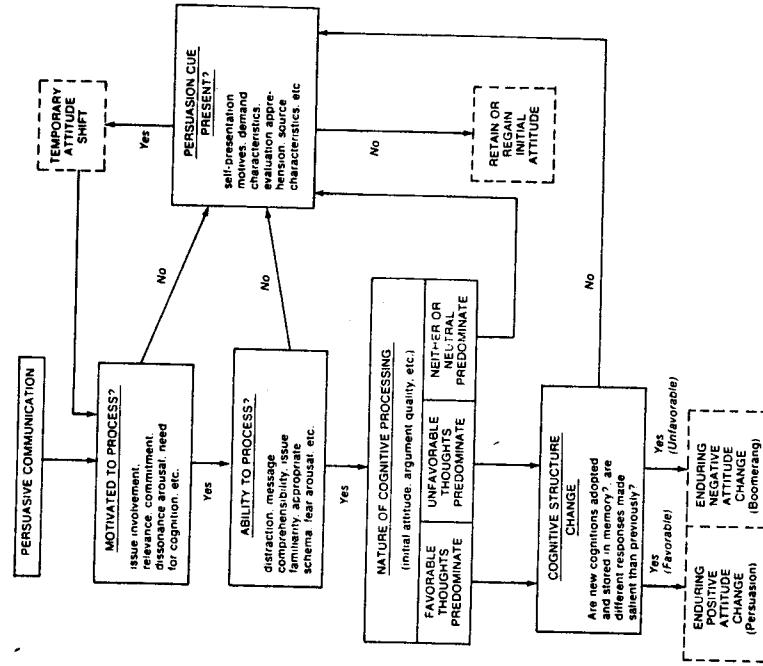


Figure 2-1. The Elaboration Likelihood Model of Attitude Change

every argument. Furthermore, even if people were willing to think about every message they received, it is unlikely that they would have the *ability* to do so.

One assumption of the ELM is that when people have both the motivation and ability to think about the arguments in a message or the arguments that a salesperson might present, they attempt to determine the personal implications of the arguments. This may involve relating the persuasive

arguments to prior personal experiences or information previously stored in memory. For example, if a salesperson encourages a customer to buy a television with automatic fine tuning for the best reception, this argument might elicit a favorable thought from one customer (for example, I sure can use better reception than I get now) but an unfavorable thought from another (for example, my present television doesn't have automatic fine tuning and my reception is fine). A second assumption is that the more favorable the thoughts a message elicits, the greater the likelihood of positive attitude change, but the more unfavorable the thoughts a message elicits, the greater the likelihood of resistance or boomerang (see Cacioppo & Petty 1981; Wright 1980, for documentation). In short, the ELM holds that one way a variable can affect attitude change is by affecting the number and nature of issue or product-relevant thoughts that a message elicits. As noted earlier, however, attitudes may also be changed without thinking about the issue or product-relevant arguments if a salient positive or negative cue is present in the persuasion situation. In sum, according to the ELM, a variable can affect attitudes by affecting the motivation or ability to think about and evaluate the available issue or product-relevant arguments (central route) or by serving as a positive or negative cue (peripheral route).

Consequences of the Route to Persuasion

It is important to know *how* a variable affects persuasion because current research supports the view that attitudes changed by the central route tend to be more enduring and more predictive of behavior than those changed by the peripheral route (Chaiken 1980; Cialdini et al. 1976; Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann 1983). When an attitude change is based on an extensive foundation of self-generated favorable thoughts and beliefs about an issue or product, the attitude change is likely to persist because the issue or product-relevant beliefs are likely to remain salient (see Slamecka & Graf 1978). Furthermore, even if a few of the favorable cognitions elicited at the time of message exposure are forgotten, others are likely to remain. On the other hand, attitude changes that result from one prominent cue (for example, an attractive source) would appear to be much more vulnerable to forgetting. These changes are likely to endure only if the person has been exposed to the persuasive message in the same persuasion context many times, thereby rendering the cue relatively permanent. Even then, however, such attitude changes would appear to be highly susceptible to counterpropaganda because the person has so little on which to base a positive or negative opinion. Thus the new attitude would be difficult to defend if challenged severely. The fact that attitudes induced via the central route have a more

extensive informational basis than those induced via the peripheral route may render people more confident in acting on these attitudes, and the fact that central attitudes are more salient in memory than peripheral attitudes may make people more able to act on them (cf. Fazio & Zanna 1981).

Testing Central versus Peripheral Routes

Because of the different consequences of the two routes to persuasion, it is important to know how a variable affects persuasion. When an attitude change is produced, it is unclear how long it will last or how predictive it will be of subsequent behavior. So how can it be determined whether a variable works by the central or the peripheral route? In the typical basic or applied study on attitude change, one cannot tell. For example, trial attorneys have long suspected that the use of a dramatic rhetorical question in a closing argument could enhance persuasion over the use of simple declarative statements. Research has supported the view that when argument summary statements are presented in declarative sentences (for example, the car gets good gas mileage), they are typically less persuasive than when the argument summary statements are phrased as rhetorical questions (for example, the car gets good gas mileage, doesn't it?; see Zillmann 1972). But *why*?

Zillmann (1972) suggested that for most naturally occurring messages, rhetorical questions are used only with especially strong arguments. Because of this, he proposed that over time the use of rhetorical questions eventually comes to signal the presence of good arguments. Therefore people might agree more with rhetorical messages because they make the inference that the arguments are good. Note that Zillmann's theory does not require people to actually think about the merits of the arguments. It only requires them to notice the presence of the rhetorical questions, which serve as a peripheral cue as to the validity of the advocacy. Others have argued that the use of rhetorical questions makes the speaker appear more polite, and people prefer to agree with polite others (see Bates 1976). Again, rhetorical questions serve as a peripheral cue.

In contrast to these theories, we have proposed that when people are unmotivated to think about a message, the use of rhetorical questions motivates increased thinking about the arguments provided. Thus when the salesperson says, "This car gets good gas mileage, doesn't it," the customer is more likely to think about whether or not the car really does get good gas mileage than when the salesperson just asserts that the gas mileage is good. Thus if the person knows that the car really does get good gas mileage, the message using rhetorical questions should be more likely to elicit a favorable thought than the message using declarative sentences, thereby enhancing the persuasive impact of the message. However, if the person

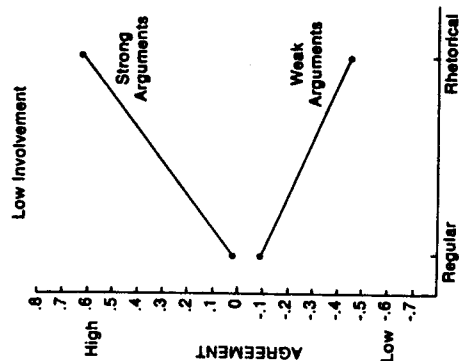
knows that the car really doesn't get good gas mileage, the message using rhetorical questions should be more likely to elicit a counterargument than the message using declarative sentences, thereby reducing the persuasiveness of the message. Our reasoning suggests how to conduct a crucial test of the central versus peripheral explanations of the effectiveness of rhetorical questions: Compare the effectiveness of both strong and weak arguments summarized in both declarative form and as rhetorical questions. If they serve as a positive peripheral cue, rhetorical questions should enhance the persuasive impact of both strong and weak messages. If the central theory is correct, however, then rhetorical questions should improve agreement only for messages with strong arguments. If the arguments are weak and rhetorical questions strengthen thinking about them, agreement should be reduced.²

To compare the two approaches to rhetorical questions, we exposed college undergraduates to a message very low in personal relevance. The message contained relatively strong arguments (that is, they elicited primarily favorable thoughts when undergraduates were asked to think about them in a pilot test) or relatively weak ones (that is, they elicited primarily unfavorable thoughts when undergraduates were asked to think about them). Each of the major arguments in the regular version of the message ended with a summary sentence. In the rhetorical version, six of the eight argument summarizing statements were transformed to rhetorical questions. Afterward, students indicated their extent of agreement with the comprehensive exam idea (see Petty, Cacioppo, & Heesacker 1981).

Figure 2-2 presents the results. Our pattern of data clearly suggests that rhetorical questions do not serve simply as acceptance cues. When strong arguments were presented, the use of rhetorical questions enhanced persuasion, but when the arguments were weak, rhetorical questions reduced persuasion. If we had only included strong arguments in our messages, both peripheral and central explanations could have accounted for the results. Thus one indication that a variable affects attitudes by affecting the motivation and/or ability to think about the message arguments is that the variable affects the acceptance of strong and weak arguments differently. The more a variable improves the motivation and/or ability to scrutinize message arguments, the more people should realize the positive implications of cogent arguments and the negative implications of weak ones and the more their attitudes should be affected by these argument differences. If a variable affects attitudes simply by serving as an acceptance or rejection cue, then the quality of the arguments should be relatively unimportant.

Variables Affecting Motivation and Ability to Think

Perhaps the most important motivational variable affecting a person's willingness to think about a persuasive message is the personal relevance of the



Source: Petty, Cacioppo, and Heesacker, 1981.

Figure 2-2. Rhetorical Questions and Message Processing

message. As a message becomes more personally involving or there are more personal implications of the advocated position, it becomes more important and adaptive to form a reasoned and veridical opinion. Thus as a message increases in personal relevance, the quality of the arguments in the message becomes a more important determinant of attitude change, and the number and nature of a person's message-relevant thoughts become a more important predictor of the amount of message agreement (Petty & Cacioppo 1979a, 1979b). In addition, we have found that in general people are more motivated to think about messages or anticipated messages that take disagreeable rather than agreeable positions (Cacioppo & Petty 1979a, 1979b). Counterattitudinal messages indicate that one's attitude may be incorrect; therefore these messages may warrant more careful consideration than proattitudinal messages that do not challenge one's viewpoint.

Just as some messages may typically evoke more thought than others, we have also found that some people are typically more motivated to think about messages and are more likely to extract meaning from them (for example, Cacioppo & Petty in press, b; Heesacker, Petty, & Cacioppo in press). In particular, in a series of studies on the need for cognition, we have

found that some people tend to find tasks requiring extensive cognitive activity to be fun, whereas others prefer to avoid them (Cacioppo & Petty 1982). As might be expected based on our ELM, the quality of the arguments contained in a message is a more important determinant of attitudes for people high than low in their need for cognition (Cacioppo, Petty, & Morris 1983).

Of course, many variables can affect a person's motivation to think about a message. Finally, we note that the more people responsible for evaluating a message, the less motivated any individual is to exert effort in order to evaluate the message (Petty, Cacioppo, & Harkins 1983). Thus the impact of some messages delivered to groups may be diffused. For example, if a husband and wife are listening to a salesperson explain the benefits of home insulation, it is likely that their attitudes would be less affected by the quality of the arguments the salesperson provides than if either were listening alone and felt solely responsible for evaluating the message (see Petty, Harkins, & Williams 1980).

As figure 2-1 indicates, having the motivation to think about a persuasive message is not sufficient to ensure that the central route will be followed. A person must also have the ability to think about the issue-relevant information presented. Some people will naturally have a greater ability to think about certain kinds of information because of their superior intelligence (Eagly & Warren 1976) or because of their greater experience with or knowledge about an issue (Cacioppo & Petty 1980b; Wood 1982). In addition, a large number of situational variables have been shown to affect a person's ability to think about a message. For example, to the extent that a message is accompanied by distracting stimuli, the ability to think about it is decreased, and people thus are less able to differentiate strong from weak arguments (Petty, Wells, & Brock 1976). On the other hand, as a message is repeated a moderate number of times, people have a greater opportunity to think about the arguments and show greater differentiation of cogent from specious arguments (Cacioppo & Petty 1980a; in press, -4). How a message is presented may also affect a person's ability to engage in issue-relevant thought. When a person reads a message about a product (as opposed to hearing it on a radio, television, or face-to-face) it is possible to stop the message presentation to think about it. An oral message, however, may be presented too quickly to permit careful scrutiny (Chaiken & Eagly 1976). As a persuasive message becomes more complex and difficult to understand, the more advantageous it becomes to screen out distractions, to repeat the major message arguments, and to perhaps provide the customer with a written summary of the major points made.³

Inducing persuasion by presenting a customer with cogent product-relevant arguments is an effective sales strategy when the elaboration likelihood of the persuasion situation is relatively high. A salesperson can

estimate the elaboration likelihood by carefully considering the variables discussed above. Does the product have important personal implications for the customer? If not, prior to presenting the arguments for a product, can the salesperson point out some personal implications that the customer might not have considered? Can the salesperson ask the customer questions during the presentation to induce more thinking about the arguments presented? How much knowledge does the customer have about the product? Will the customer be able to evaluate the facts and figures that are part of the sales presentation? According to the ELM, when the elaboration likelihood is high, attitudes will be determined mostly by the quality of the product-relevant arguments available; but when the elaboration likelihood is low, peripheral cues in the persuasion situation will be more important determinants of attitudes. What variables serve as peripheral cues, and what is the evidence for their operation?

Peripheral Cues

As noted earlier, a customer might decide in favor of a product simply because of the salesperson's likeability or because some other simple positive cue was present. According to the ELM, peripheral cues should be especially important determinants of attitudes when people are either relatively unmotivated or relatively unable to think about the issue or product-relevant information presented. In order to provide an appropriate test of the two routes to persuasion, it is necessary to construct two kinds of persuasion contexts: one in which the elaboration likelihood is high and one in which the elaboration likelihood is low. In the experiments described next, we specifically attempted to validate the prediction that there were two relatively distinct routes to persuasion. We held the ability of our subjects to think about the message at a relatively high and constant level across experimental conditions (for example, the messages and issues employed were easy to understand, no extraneous distractions were present, etc.), but we experimentally varied their motivation to think about the message by varying the extent to which the message had personal consequences for the message recipient. Following the procedure of Apsler & Sears (1968), subjects in the high and low relevance conditions were exposed to the same experimental stimuli. But subjects in the high relevance conditions were led to believe that the issue or product under consideration would likely have direct personal consequences for them, whereas subjects in the low relevance conditions were led to believe that the issue or product had few personal implications. Given that all subjects have the same ability to think about the arguments presented, subjects in the high relevance conditions should be more likely to follow the central route to persuasion whereas subjects in the low relevance conditions should be more likely to follow the peripheral route.

In addition to varying the personal relevance of the message in each of our experiments, we manipulated the quality of the arguments contained in the message, and a peripheral cue that would permit assessment of the message without the need for issue- or product-relevant thinking. As explained above, a manipulation of message quality allows us to assess the extent to which subjects are carefully scrutinizing the message arguments. The greater the scrutiny, the more they should realize the strengths of cogent arguments and the flaws in specious ones. Furthermore, if subjects are basing their attitudes on a careful assessment of the validity of the arguments presented, the peripheral cue manipulations should have little effect on their attitudes. On the other hand, if subjects are not thinking carefully, then their post-message attitudes should not differ greatly as a function of the strength of the arguments in the message but should vary because of the peripheral cue presented.

Source Cues. In our initial test of the two routes to persuasion (Petty, Cacioppo, & Goldman 1981) we had university undergraduates listen to a message advocating that seniors be required to pass a comprehensive exam in their declared major as a requirement for graduation. In the high-involvement conditions, the speaker advocated that the policy be instituted at the students' own university next year, thereby affecting all of the students personally. In the low-involvement conditions, the speaker advocated that the policy begin in ten years, thereby affecting no current students. Half of the students heard eight cogent arguments in favor of the recommendation and half heard eight weak arguments. Finally, for half of the students, the source of the message was described as a Professor of Education at Princeton University (expert source), and for the other half the source was described as a junior at a local high school (non-expert source). The expertise of the message source provides a peripheral cue that permits an assessment of the advocacy without any need to think about the issue-relevant arguments.

The results of this study are graphed in the left panel of figure 2-3. When the students thought that the exam proposal had little personal relevance, their post-communication attitudes were influenced only by the expertise of the message source (peripheral cue); the actual quality of the arguments had no effect. On the other hand, when the students thought that the exam proposal had direct personal consequences, their attitudes were affected only by the quality of the issue-relevant arguments presented; the source expertise manipulation had no effect.

To test the utility of the ELM in a situation wherein product rather than issue attitudes were involved, we conducted a study in which university undergraduates were asked to examine a booklet containing twelve magazine advertisements (Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann 1983). One of the ads in the booklet was for a fictitious new product, "Edge disposable razors." Before beginning to look through the ad booklet, the students were

Attitude Change and Personal Selling

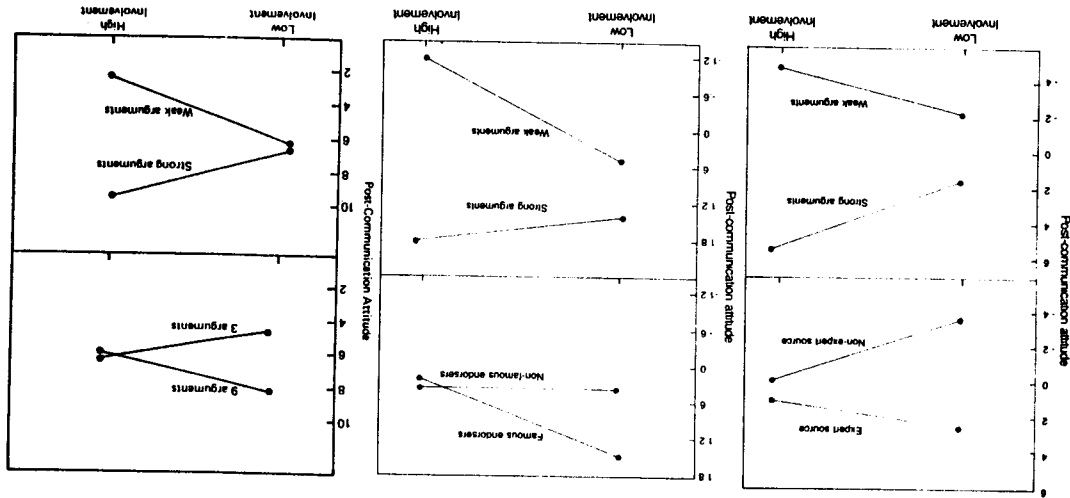


Figure 2-3. Results of Source-Cue Study
Sources: Petty, Cacioppo, and Goldman, 1981; Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann, 1983; Petty and Cacioppo, 1984.
Note: The top half of each panel shows that peripheral cues are effective under low involvement; bottom halves show that arguments are processed under high involvement.

informed that at the end of the study they would be asked to select a modest gift. Students in the high-involvement group were told that they would be able to select from a variety of disposable razor products, rendering our bogus razor ad highly relevant. Subjects in the low-involvement group were told that they would be able to select from a variety of toothpaste products (one ad for toothpaste was included in the ad booklet). For these subjects, the razor ad was relatively irrelevant.

Four different versions of the ad were constructed. Two featured photographs of two well known and liked sports celebrities, and two featured middle-aged citizens described as Californians. The product endorser served as the manipulation of a peripheral cue. In addition, two of the ads featured very persuasive arguments for the product (for example, "handle is tapered and ribbed to prevent slipping"), and two featured weak arguments (for example, "designed with the bathroom in mind"; see example ads in figure 2-4).

After exposure to the ad booklet containing one of the four Edge ads, subjects rated their attitudes toward the products. The attitudes toward Edge razors are presented in the middle panel of figure 2-3. When subjects anticipated making an imminent decision about the product class (high involvement), the quality of the product-relevant information provided in the ad had a stronger impact on attitudes than when no decision was imminent (low involvement). On the other hand, under low involvement, the nature of the product endorsers (famous or not) had a significant effect on attitudes toward the product, but the endorsers had no effect on product attitudes under high involvement. In addition to the attitude measures, students were asked to rate the likelihood of purchasing Edge razors the next time they needed a product of this nature. Attitudes toward Edge razors proved to be a better predictor of behavioral (purchase) intentions under high ($r = .59$) than under low-involvement conditions ($r = .36$). Thus as expected by the ELM, attitudes changed by the central route were more predictive of behavior than those changed through the peripheral route.

The accumulated persuasion literature in social psychology is generally consistent with the ELM view that attributes of the source of a persuasive message are particularly likely to serve as simple acceptance or rejection cues when people are relatively unmotivated or unable to think about the message arguments presented. When motivation and thinking ability are high, source factors become relatively unimportant in their role as cues. Thus source factors are more likely to serve as cues when the personal consequences of a message are low rather than high (see also Chaiken 1980; Rhine & Severance 1970). In addition, source factors have been shown to gain importance as the ability to process a message decreases. Thus, source factors have been shown to have a greater impact on persuasion when distraction is high rather than low (Kiesler & Mathog, 1968) and when a

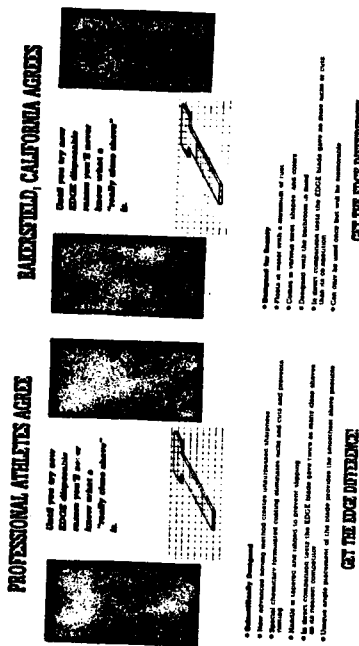


Figure 2-4. Mock Magazine Ads for Razors

message is externally paced (such as when presented orally) than when self-paced (such as when presented in print; Chaiken & Eagly 1983; Worchel et al. 1975).

Message and Other Cues. Although in the experiments just described, the peripheral cues resided in the message source, cues may also reside in the persuasive message or the persuasion context. To document this, we briefly describe a study designed to show that the mere number of arguments contained in a message can serve as a peripheral cue and affect attitudes when people are unmotivated to think about the issue. In this study, we once again exposed college students to a message advocating that seniors be required to pass a comprehensive exam in their major. We once again manipulated the personal relevance of the proposal and the quality of the arguments in support of the exam, but this time we included a peripheral cue within the message. Specifically, half of the students received a message containing only three arguments and half received a message containing nine (see Petty & Cacioppo 1984). If a person is not thinking about the arguments in a message, then it may be reasonable to infer that the more arguments in favor of the proposal, the better it must be. The results of our study are graphed in the right panel of figure 2-3. As expected by the ELM, when the issue had high relevance, subjects' attitudes were affected only by the quality of the arguments in the message; the mere number of arguments

presented had no effect. However, when the issue was of low relevance, attitudes were affected by the mere number of arguments presented but not by their quality.

In sum, in our experiments on the different routes to persuasion, we found that under very high-relevance conditions, people exerted the cognitive effort required to evaluate the issue-relevant arguments presented, and their attitudes were a function of this information processing activity (central route). Under very low-relevance conditions, however, attitudes were determined by salient peripheral cues such as how expert or likable the source was or how many arguments the message contained, and the actual quality of the arguments in the message had relatively little impact. Importantly, although our research has focused on how the motivational variable of personal relevance affected whether attitude changes resulted from issue-relevant thinking or peripheral cues, other motivational variables (for example, the number of people evaluating the message) and ability variables (for example, the extent of prior knowledge about the issue) can also be important in determining the route to persuasion.

Implications of the ELM for Personal Selling

Since a great deal of personal-selling research has focused on particular characteristics of salespersons and how these attributes affect product attitudes and sales, this is where we will begin our discussion.

First, it is clear that a wide variety of attributes of salespeople have been studied, including the salesperson's expertise, physical attractiveness, similarity to the customer, and others (see Reingen & Woodside, 1981, for further discussion). It is noteworthy that some studies have found attributes of salespeople to exert a significant impact on attitudes and sales, but others have failed to detect any impact. In addition, many different theories have been proposed to account for the diversity of findings obtained. The diversity of findings and the multitude of theories available to account for significant and non-significant results has led to considerable disagreement in the literature as to how important salesperson attributes such as perceived expertise, similarity, and attractiveness really are. Some investigators have concluded that these variables do exert an important influence on sales (for example, Reingen, Ronkainen, & Gresham 1981) whereas others have concluded that salesperson attributes more often are not important (for example, Wilson & Ghingold 1981).

Consider the impact of a salesperson's perceived expertise on his/her ability to close a sale. In one study, Obermiller & Sawyer (1981) varied the perceived expertise of a salesperson who attempted to convince college students to sign up for a new tennis course in which personalized instruction

would be offered for \$30. The expert salesperson was described as a former tennis instructor whereas the non-expert was described as a novice. In addition, the expert salesperson used more tennis jargon than did the non-expert. Each was trained to deliver the same 1500-word sales message. After the talk, the students were asked whether or not they wanted to sign up for the course. Overall, 30 percent of the students signed up for the course; this figure did not differ for the expert and the non-expert salesperson.

On the other hand, Woodside & Davenport (1974) conducted a study in which the manipulated expertise of the salesperson did affect sales. In their study, a salesclerk attempted to induce the purchase of a cassette-tape-head cleaner kit. In addition to manipulating the amount of knowledge the clerk displayed about the cleaner kit (expertise), they also manipulated how similar the clerk's stated taste in music was to the customer's (similarity). In this study, both increased expertise and increased similarity induced greater sales.

Why did these two studies achieve different results? One possibly important difference between the two studies concerns the customer's motivation and/or ability to evaluate and scrutinize the product-relevant information provided. Most college students are interested in sports and are quite familiar with tennis and the benefits of exercise. Thus it is likely that in the Obermiller & Sawyer study, most of the potential customers had the requisite motivation and ability to evaluate the arguments presented by the salesperson. It was not necessary for them to rely on the salesperson's presumed level of expertise in order to evaluate the tennis course offer. On the other hand, most owners of tape recorders probably know very little about their maintenance and the real utility of a tape-head cleaner kit. If so, then most potential customers for this product would be relatively unable to evaluate the true merits of the arguments presented and would therefore be more likely to base a decision on the salesclerk's apparent expertise or on how much they liked the salesclerk. We suggest that in the first study, customers followed the central route to persuasion because the elaboration likelihood was relatively high, but in the second study, customers followed the peripheral route to persuasion because the elaboration likelihood was relatively low. Similar analysis of the likely extent of message elaboration in previous research on source factors in personal selling might be useful in accounting for the conflicting pattern of data obtained in these studies.

Source Factors as Motivators of Thought

We suspect that in many of the personal selling situations typical of actual buyer-seller exchanges, the elaboration likelihood is neither as high nor as low as we deliberately created in our laboratory tests of central and

peripheral routes to persuasion. For example, in our initial study (Petty, Cacioppo, & Goldman 1981) we varied the personal relevance of a message to create different elaboration likelihood conditions. In the high-relevance conditions, our subjects were told that the proposal they were to evaluate had important and relatively immediate personal consequences for them (for example, if they didn't pass the comprehensive exam that was to be instituted next year, they would be unable to graduate). Low-involvement subjects were led to believe that the proposal would have absolutely no personal consequences for them. These manipulations were designed to induce relatively pure forms of the central and peripheral routes to persuasion. As already noted, under conditions of very high involvement, attitudes were affected only by the relevant arguments, and not by source expertise; conversely, with low involvement, attitudes were affected only by source expertise, not by the quality of the arguments.

What would happen if the level of personal relevance was less clear? For example, what if we told students that the university was considering the institution of senior comprehensive exams, but it was not clear when or if they would be instituted. This situation more closely parallels typical day-to-day persuasion situations. Before the President of the United States begins a nationwide television address on arms control or before a salesperson begins a presentation on tax sheltered annuities, most potential voters or customers are not sure how personally relevant or important the information will be. So how much effort should they put into processing what the speaker has to say? We have proposed that when people are only moderately interested in the topic of the message or are uncertain as to its relevance, source factors may influence the extent of thought about the message (Petty & Cacioppo 1981). Consistent with this expectation, in our own research we have found that when a message is counterattitudinal and involvement is moderately high, people scrutinize the arguments of expert sources more than sources who are inexpert (Heesacker, Petty, & Cacioppo, in press). Also, people scrutinize arguments presented by attractive sources more than those of unattractive sources (Puckett, Petty, Cacioppo, & Fisher 1983). Counterattitudinal messages are potentially threatening because they indicate that one's attitude may be incorrect and one's behavior may be maladaptive. This threat should be especially strong when the counterattitudinal message is presented by an expert or by an attractive source who is believed to be more intelligent, witty, and interesting than an unattractive source (Berscheid & Walster 1974). When the counterattitudinal information is presented by an inexpert or unattractive source, it can be dismissed more easily as untrue without thought. Thus when the message is counterattitudinal it may make more sense for people to devote more effort in order to process what an expert or attractive source rather than an inexpert or unattractive source has to say. On the other hand, when the message is pro-

attitudinal, it may be more threatening to find that a favored position is supported by an inexpert or an unattractive source. Under these circumstances, people may choose to think more about what the normally less desirable source says (cf. Sternthal, Dholakia, & Leavitt 1978).

In sum, when the personal relevance of a message is very apparent, it doesn't matter *who* says it, but it is very important for the person to attempt to evaluate the true merits of the proposal. When the personal relevance is clearly low, however, it doesn't matter *what* is said and it may be sufficient to express an opinion simply based on the characteristics of the message source. When the relevance of the message is less clear but the topic is potentially important, people appear to use the source of the message as an indication of whether or not the message is worth thinking about. When the message contains cogent arguments, enhanced thought leads to increased agreement, but when the message contains weak arguments, increased thought leads to decreased agreement. Thus in some situations, characteristics of the source (salesperson) may determine how much effort people put into processing a message (see figure 2-5).

Some Final Implications and Conclusions

We can conclude that when the elaboration likelihood of a persuasion situation is very low, source factors will tend to serve as positive or negative peripheral cues. When the elaboration likelihood is at some intermediate level, source factors may be used to determine whether an issue is worth thinking about. When the elaboration likelihood is very high, source factors will tend to be relatively unimportant as simple acceptance or rejection cues or as motivators of thought; under high involvement, argument processing is prepotent. It is important to note that sometimes source factors may serve as persuasive arguments. For example, if a salesperson is selling cosmetics and claims to use the product that is being sold, the attractiveness of the salesperson can serve as a cogent product-relevant indication of the effectiveness of the product. In this case, the attractiveness of the salesperson is not peripheral, but central to the true merits of the product, and the attractiveness of the salesperson would be expected to have an impact on attitudes even when the elaboration likelihood was high (Petty & Cacioppo 1980). In most instances, however, salesperson characteristics are likely to be peripheral to the true merits of the product and therefore are likely to affect product attitudes primarily when the elaboration likelihood is low.

We noted earlier that attitudes changed through the central route tended to be more enduring and more predictive of behavior than those changed by the peripheral route. What are the implications of this for personal selling? When people are exposed to an advertisement in the mass media, the goal of

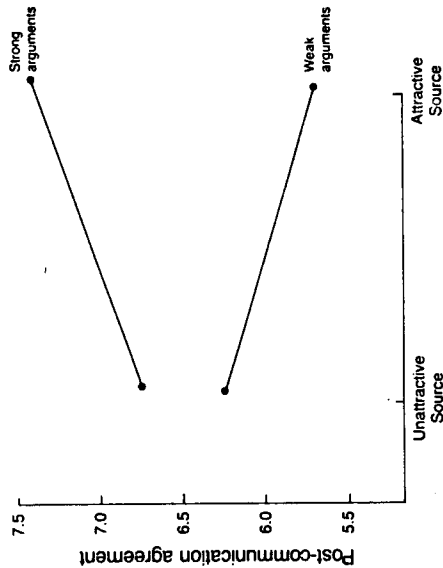
because the person has carefully considered and rejected the arguments presented, the dislike for the product will be temporary and irrelevant to future product purchases. It is interesting to note that although a salesperson's courtencousness may be peripheral to evaluating the true merits of a product, it is central to evaluating the merits of a retail establishment. Therefore, although the negative attitude toward a particular product induced by a rude salesperson may decay quite rapidly—since this information about the salesclerk is unlikely to be integrated with other information about the product—the information about the rude salesclerk is likely to be integrated with other information that the person has about a particular store and create a more permanent negative change in attitude toward that establishment. The lesson is that a feature that produces a peripheral change in one attitude may induce a more central change in another.

Notes

1. It is important to note that the various theoretical approaches to attitude change and the variables whose effects they try to explain may not fall clearly under one or the other route in all circumstances. For example, the theoretical process of self-perception (Bem 1972) might lead to attitude change via a simple inference under most circumstances but to extended issue-relevant thinking in others (Liebhart 1979). Additionally, we note that the distinction that we have made between the central and the peripheral routes to persuasion has much in common with the recent psychological distinctions between deep versus shallow processing (Craik & Lockhart 1972), mindful versus scripted or mindless processing (Langer 1978), systematic versus heuristic processing (Chaiken 1980), and earlier formulations on different kinds of persuasion (e.g., Kelman 1961; Kelman & Eagly 1965). For more details on similarities and differences among the approaches, see Petty & Cacioppo (in press).

2. Our expectation that the use of rhetorical questions should enhance thinking for relatively unmotivated people applies only if the message recipients are also able to elaborate the arguments. If not, rhetorical questions might serve as peripheral cues.

3. Our discussion has so far assumed that variables affecting motivation and/or ability to process a message do so relatively objectively. This is not necessarily so; for example, some variables appear to bias the nature of information-processing activity, thereby motivating or enabling people to be more favorable or more unfavorable than they otherwise would be (Cacioppo, Petty, & Sidera 1982; Petty & Cacioppo 1979a; Wells & Petty



Source: Puckett, Petty, Cacioppo, and Fisher, 1983.

Figure 2-5. The Impact of an Attractive Source on a Moderately Involving Counterattitudinal Message

the ad is to entice the person to purchase the product at some time in the future. Thus the central route to persuasion has important advantages over the peripheral route because if an attitude is to influence subsequent behavior, it must be relatively enduring. In personal selling situations, however, the purchase behavior is requested immediately, not at some vague point in the future. In this situation, even attitudes formed via the peripheral route may be salient enough to influence behavior. In fact, the peripheral cue that created the positive attitude is often physically present at the time of the purchase decision. Thus the personal selling situation may be one persuasion context in which the peripheral route to attitude change has considerable utility. Importantly, however, if a person has a favorable attitude about a product due to the operation of a peripheral cue rather than because the person has carefully considered the true merits of the product, the attitude is relatively unlikely to persist and influence subsequent product purchases. One important implication of this is that if a person comes to dislike a product because the salesperson is rude and unattractive, and not

1980). A discussion of these processes is beyond the scope of this chapter; interested readers should consult Petty and Cacioppo (1983; in press) for reviews.

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