

# 2

## Persuasion Theories

### Introduction

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Given the industry's roots in propaganda, persuasion can be a tricky word in public relations. As you will learn in Chapter 6, which explains the evolution and different models of Public Relations, some scholars eschew persuasion or categorize it as a tool used by lower level public relations practitioners while others believe it to be the cornerstone of an effective campaign. At the same time, we live in a world with limited time, attention spans, and resources, and persuasion is often used in public relations to focus the attention of decision-makers to agree to consider or prioritize a certain issue. For example, Capitol Hill staffers often juggle numerous legislative subjects—many of equal merit—and part of an advocate's job is to convince congressional advisors that a specific proposal is worth a congressional hearing, debate, or supporting with a vote (a Herculean task these days given the limited amount of time lawmakers appropriate for their legislative agenda). Similarly, editors must filter several story pitches and decide which ideas receive prominent coverage and which are ignored all together. Media relations professionals must make a case that their story is newsworthy and relevant to the publication's readers. Therefore, persuasion continues to play a critical role in the day-to-day life of a public relations professional; as such, it's imperative that public relations professionals have a grasp on the theories that explain the conditions leading to persuasion and factors that influence resistance.

The academic literature on persuasion is vast, and the theories covered are rooted in several academic disciplines such as sociology and psychology. Furthermore, from a communication studies perspective, scholars approach persuasion from different viewpoints including rhetorical analysis and media effects. Therefore, the goal of this chapter is not to cover every twist and turn of persuasion but rather to coalesce the theories into those most applicable to the public relations practitioner. Furthermore, although this text centers on theory and not practice, it is important to note that effective persuasion depends on a public relations professional understanding her audience—a point that is often repeated in each section. As a result, effective application of these theories also hinges on careful public relations research, a point that readers should keep in mind as they progress through the chapter.

The chapter begins with an overview of the historical roots of persuasion, a rhetorical approach that began in antiquity and is still used today. Then, since the goal of persuasion is change, the chapter covers select theories that explain how attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors are formed and influenced. Finally, the chapter covers select theories that pertain to how practitioners can use persuasion to influence audiences with an emphasis on crisis communication.

## Historical Roots of Persuasion

### Aristotle and Burke

Although the word rhetoric has several negative connotations, when used in an academic setting, the term simply refers to the study and practice of how language—written, verbal, and pictorial—influences persuasion. While numerous historical figures have shaped modern rhetorical studies, two that public relations professionals should know are Aristotle and Kenneth Burke.

### Aristotelian Rhetoric

Aristotle's *On Rhetoric*, written more than two thousand years ago, is considered to be the foundation of rhetorical studies, and Aristotelian rhetoric is interwoven in many academic disciplines including philosophy, law, and communication studies. Under this approach, persuasion is direct and accomplished through strategic message development. A key aspect for public relations professionals is Aristotle's arguments that speakers should incorporate all available means of persuasion, which to him were ethos, logos, and pathos.

The first appeal identified by Aristotle is ethos, which refers to the speaker's credibility and trustworthiness. For modern day message creators, ethos can be derived from several sources such as credentials, experience, authority, reputation, and delivery skills. Often, a key decision shaped by a practitioner is who is the best person to deliver a message. For example, consider the creation of a campaign to stop distracted driving among new drivers. Who will teenagers most listen to as a credible source? A police officer? A mom? Peers?

(Theory explains the need for a credible source; audience research provides insight into the type of source needed.)

Pathos refers to the speaker's ability to connect with an audience through emotion. The type of music, lighting, sound, camera shots, and graphics incorporated into the



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Ethos, logos, and pathos are the building blocks of a modern, persuasive speech.

distracted driving Public Service Announcement mentioned above create a specific feel designed to make the viewer feel the importance of the issue. Finally, logos refers to using reason to create a sound and easy-to-follow message supported with evidence that an audience will find credible. For example, will your teen audience be moved more by statistics of individuals killed by distracted driving or the financial and social consequences of losing a license and going to jail?

## Burke's Persuasion Through Identification

Admittedly, jumping from Aristotle's work to Burke's (1953) *Rhetoric of Motives* is a sweeping and giant historical leap. However, Burke's philosophy of persuasion occurring through identification, often unconsciously, is the foundation of many public relations strategies. Burke, a literary theorist and critic, argued that persuasion is only possible after a communicator establishes common ground through the use of language or symbols. According to Burke, sources of identification include material, idealistic, and formal. Material refers to ownership of similar goods or products. For example, political candidates often arrive to rallies and events dressed in a similar manner to their prospective voters; a candidate showing up in a three-piece suit at a construction work site is jarring and results in greater perceived divisions. Identification refers to the shared attitudes, beliefs, and values. In the same political example, a candidate might identify with the construction workers by saying, "We both believe in greater safety protections for workers." Finally, formal pertains to shared membership in a particular group or organization. A candidate participating in a primary debate may identify with her audience by arguing that she better represents the ideals of her party than her opponent. More specifically for the public relations student, Cheney (1983) offers three rhetorical strategies organizations employ that are drawn from Burke's philosophy: establishing common ground, identification through antithesis, and the assumed or transcendent "we."

## ARISTOTLE, BURKE, AND LANDRIEU: WINNING AUDIENCE ACCEPTANCE ON CONFEDERATE STATUE REMOVAL

Public relations professionals, especially those working in advocacy, often find themselves charged with shaping public opinion through news coverage of a particular issue, a job that often requires persuading an audience to "see" an old issue in a new light. Frequently, persuasion is attempted through a public address, congressional testimony, a news conference or, increasingly,

online videos and social media posts. Typically, a team of communications professionals works on remarks, which are ultimately delivered by an organization's leader.

In the Spring of 2017, four statues, which were Confederate monuments, were removed from the city of New Orleans at the direction of then Mayor Mitch Landrieu, a controversial action resulting in

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fervent support as well as calls for a New Orleans boycott and death threats against the mayor. On May 19, 2017, as the Robert E. Lee statue was being transferred elsewhere, Mayor Landrieu gave an address at the city's historic Gallier Hall to explain the reasoning behind the decision. Like many significant historical speeches, the address extended beyond an explanation for the removal in an attempt to shape public opinions about race.

The speech, also praised for its eloquence, includes several examples of ethos, logos, pathos, and identification. Landrieu, who is white, invokes ethos by explaining that despite his New Orleans upbringing and his family's long-time involvement in civil rights advocacy, he did not realize the impact these statues had on people of color for many years until his friend Wynton Marsalis, a famous black jazz musician, asked him to consider the number of people who left New Orleans because of the city's attitudes on race. Landrieu also includes remarks about the importance of confronting history from former Republican President George Bush and Democratic President Barack Obama, a credibility enhancing technique accomplished by suggesting support for the decision is not limited to one political party.

Landrieu cites numerous examples of pathos most notably asking the audience to put themselves in the place of an African American mother or father explaining why their little girl must walk past statues of individuals who fought for slavery.

Specifically, Landrieu says: "Can you look into that young girl's eyes and convince her that Robert E. Lee is there to encourage her? Do you think she will feel inspired and hopeful by that story?" Landrieu's examples of logos include comparing erection of the statues to terrorism and refuting arguments about their historical significance by arguing that the city lacks monuments to other notable events such as lynching, slave blocks, or the city's designation as America's largest slave market.

Identification techniques are woven throughout the speech starting with Landrieu's acknowledgment of the city's multicultural roots, which include Native American, African, Irish, Italian, and Cuban. Use of "we," "our," and "let's" can be found throughout the address such as "the soul of our beloved city is deeply rooted in history," and "we will continue to pay a price with discord, division and yes, with violence."

The cultural debate over keeping confederate statues continues as supporters attempt to mold the issue as a reminder of heritage just as detractors frame these statues as symbols of slavery and repression. There is, however, agreement that Landrieu's speech was a significant contribution toward shaping attitudes toward confederate statue removal. His speech was hailed as "one for the ages" by the *Times-Picayune* and as "one of the most stirring and important speeches of the Trump era" by *The New York Times*.

The first technique is similar to idealistic identification; organizational messages identify with audiences by stressing commonalities. For example, an advertisement for a credit union might stress shared values but also point out that the branch is locally owned with employees who live in the same community they serve. Identification through antithesis involves establishing a common enemy, often abstract, recognized by both the audience and organization. The credit union mentioned might promote their services over the "big faceless banks" who prey on customers with enormous fees and poor customer service. Finally, the "assumed we" is identification through incorporation and repetition of "we" and related forms, a technique so common that audiences often overlook the fact that they have not actually consented to being a part of the group mentioned. For example, the credit union's website might have a headline that screams "We all agree that the time of the big bank is over!"

## Formation of Attitudes, Beliefs, and Behaviors

Rhetorical theories are clearly at work in many public relations tactics; yet, think about all of the persuasive messages that you may initially find compelling but ultimately ignore. Additionally, a “rookie mistake” often made by public relations students is claiming that their campaign is designed to raise awareness about a specific issue. While raising awareness is often a first step, CEOs and clients are not interested in paying for increased audience knowledge: They want a behavior change! In order to fully appreciate persuasion theories applied to a public relations context, practitioners need to also understand how attitude formation influences behavior. These concepts can help predict which messages are likely to hit their mark and which will likely fall flat. The following section begins with an overview of attitude, beliefs, and values. Then, the section includes theories that predict how attitudes, beliefs, and values interact with other variables to influence behavior. Finally, the section includes theories that predict the strength and direction of attitude change.

### Rokeach's Theory of Beliefs, Values, and Attitudes

The words attitude, values, and beliefs are often thrown around interchangeably. However, for the practitioner, it's important to fully understand each term and how each influences behavior. A starting point is the work of social psychologist Milton Rokeach (1968) who argued that an individual's organization of attitudes around a specific topic can predict behavior; these constellations of attitudes are built from an individual's belief and value system. Rokeach (1968) identified **beliefs** as “any simple proposition, conscious or unconscious, inferred from what a person says or does” (p. 113) and identified three types: descriptive, evaluative, and prescriptive. Descriptive beliefs are often verifiable such as in the following statement: Individuals spend significant time on social media websites. Evaluative beliefs assign judgment—for example, “Spending significant time on social media websites is bad.” Prescriptive beliefs outline what should be done about a given situation as illustrated in this belief: “Technology companies should help their customers avoid social media addiction.” Not all beliefs are created equally and, according to Rokeach, **values** are those beliefs which are central to an individual's sense of self and difficult to change. For example, a lifelong Republican might occasionally consider voting for a Democrat if she believes that person is the best candidate for the job; however, a few votes for the other party is unlikely to cause her to abandon her long-term party affiliation.



Rokeach's Theory of Belief, Values, and Attitudes reminds PR professionals that attitudes predispose individuals toward behavior. What specific attitude do you think this protester is trying to change with his sign?

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Rokeach explained that **attitudes** toward an issue, person, or object are formed from this system of beliefs and values, and these resulting attitudes predispose individuals toward behavior. For example, an individual's attitudes toward immigration, health care, or reproductive rights drawn from his belief and value system are likely to sway his vote toward—or away from—a particular candidate.

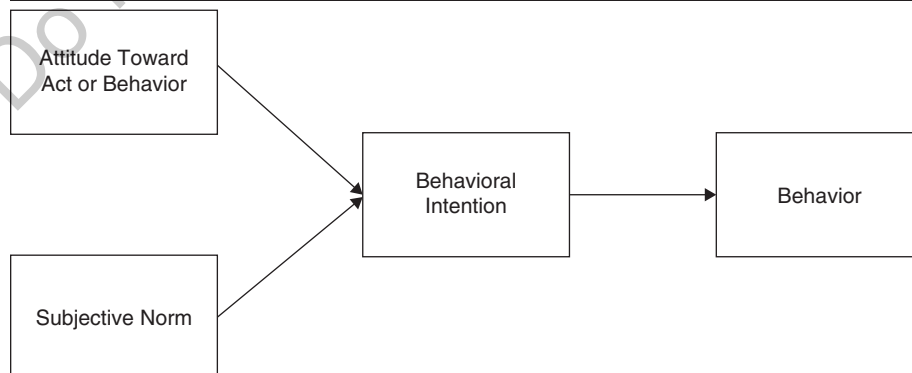
## Theory of Reasoned Action/Theory of Planned Behavior

While attitudes are part of the behavior predicting formulas, other scholars argue that attitudes alone are not enough to anticipate actions. According to the theories of Reasoned Action and Planned Behavior, individuals carefully consider other factors such as social norms and ability to complete a specific action in addition to attitudes before performing a specific behavior. The TRA, Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), explains that actions are influenced by behavioral intentions, which is the amount of effort an individual is willing to take toward a specific action.

These intentions are composed of personal attitudes mixed with subjective norms (see Figure 2.1), such as perceptions of what peers will think of the action combined with desires to act in ways that fit in with a group. The Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) adds a new factor, Perceived Behavioral Control, to the TRA (see Figure 2.2). Perceived Behavioral Control refers to the individual's perceptions that he has the skills, resources, ability, and knowledge to perform a certain action.

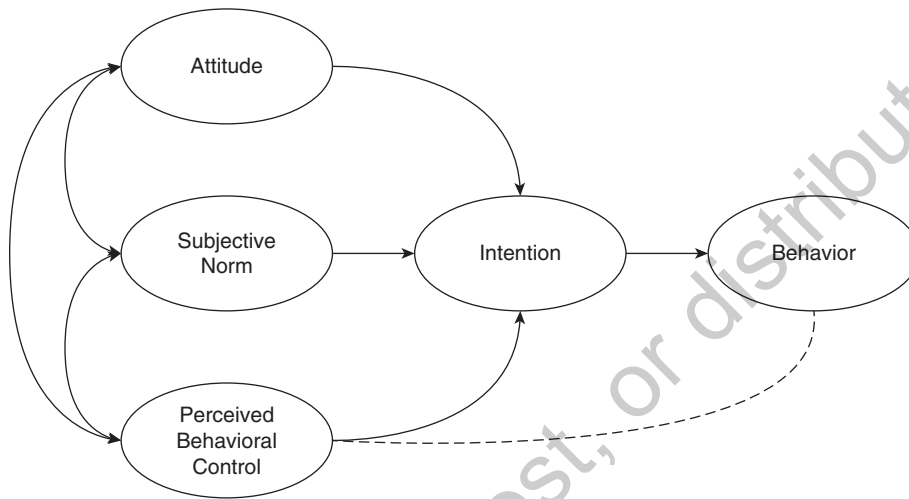
Scholars have applied these theories to public relations related topics such as an individual's likelihood to follow brands on Twitter (Chu, Chen, & Sung, 2016), the influence of media campaigns on children's physical activity (Paek, Oh, & Hove, 2012), and the impact of corporate social responsibility initiative on attitudes toward an organization (Werder, 2008). For public relations professionals, these two theories highlight the influence of social norms and perceived ability on an individual's intention to take a specific action. In other words, campaigns designed to only reshape attitudes may not be enough to deliver the intended behavior change;

**FIGURE 2.1** ● The Theory of Reasoned Action Argues That Actions are Influenced by Our Attitudes and Our Perceptions of the Judgments of Others.



audiences may need an additional communication push which convinces them they are able to make the change and that they'll fit in with their peers when they do.

**FIGURE 2.2** ● The Theory of Planned Behavior Reminds PR Professionals That Individuals Also Need to Have the Ability to Perform a Certain Behavior for Persuasion to Occur.



## DUDE, IT'S RUDE! THEORY OF PLANNED BEHAVIOR AND PHILADELPHIA AREA'S MASS TRANSIT SYSTEM

As noted above, often public relations efforts to shape attitudes are not enough to compel behavior change. Anyone who has ever had to share a subway ride with another individual blasting his music while sitting under a “quiet, please” sign or has had to stand during a bus ride because another passenger has taken two seats for herself can appreciate the Dude, It’s Rude campaign launched by the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA). SEPTA officials launched the campaign in 2014 and updated it in 2015 with even more direct, edgier material in order to increase etiquette on its rails and buses to improve the experience for all passengers. The materials are designed to shape social norms and perceived behavioral controls. The

signs are stark with minimal words and scream etiquette instructions from a social norm point of view. For example, signs read “Dude, It’s Rude . . . Take a Stand and Offer Your Seat” and “Dude, It’s Rude . . . Don’t Block the Doors” and “Dude, It’s Rude . . . Step Aside and Let Them Off First.” Not only do these messages send a strong message about how passengers should behave but they are coupled with simple instructions about how to perform specific actions to comply with the etiquette. In other words, listing the instruction of “Offer your seat” is more compelling than the more abstract “Be polite.” The Dude It’s Rude campaign replaced a previous and softer communications approach SEPTA had taken to improve rider experience.

Source: Passenger Etiquette: Dude It’s Rude Campaign. (n.d.) SEPTA. Retrieved from <http://www.septa.org/cs/etiquette/>



Advertisements frequently seek to create cognitive dissonance in audiences. For example, this woman probably feels conflicted by the promise of a good deal which competes with her attitudes of saving money.

## Cognitive Dissonance

Anyone who has felt the persuasive tug to buy a product that an advertiser promised to meet our perceptions of ourselves as smart, eco-friendly, attractive, fit, or popular has experienced cognitive dissonance. According to Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957), mental tension occurs when individuals are faced with conflicting beliefs, receive new information that challenges existing beliefs, or act in ways that are inconsistent with what they believe.

Furthermore, individuals are driven to reduce the discomfort caused by this tension through altering beliefs, actions, or perceptions of actions. For example, a student who cares deeply about her grades is talked into attending a late-night party the night before her public relations midterm exam. Unfortunately, a lack of rest and study time resulted in that student receiving a low grade on the test, a grade that may even jeopardize her final grade. The student's belief—that grades are important—conflicts with her actions, staying out too late the night before a test. According to cognitive dissonance theory, that student will be driven to reduce the mental tension created by the differences in her beliefs and actions. Since she cannot change her action—her test performance—she may alter her beliefs. First, she may attempt to alter future behavior such as swearing that she will never stay out the night before a big test. Or, she may weaken her perception of her action by telling herself that part of college is living in the moment.

The amount of discomfort experienced depends on the importance of the issue to the individual and the degree of difference between the belief and action. For example, an individual who cares passionately about animal rescue will be more likely to experience dissonance after viewing a news segment about a local shelter facing budget cuts than his friend who has never owned a pet. As a result, that individual is more likely to reduce the mental discomfort that occurs between an important belief about the urgency of caring for animals in need and acting as someone who holds that belief by making a financial donation to the local shelter. Similarly, the animal rescue supporter will experience less dissonance if he makes a small donation than making no donation at all.

Originally a social psychology theory, numerous studies have been conducted applying cognitive dissonance to fields such as education, health, and political communication. For public relations professionals, cognitive dissonance theory illustrates that awareness about an issue does not necessarily lead to action and that sometimes, the professional's job is to increase cognitive dissonance through messaging. For example, researchers Taylor, Lamm, and Lundy (2017) examined the water conservations behaviors of individuals with different views on climate change and identified a demographic of younger, well-educated, and predominantly liberal individuals who believed that climate change was real and caused by humans. However, despite their



beliefs, they were not taking simple and personal actions to conserve and protect the water supply such as reducing the length of showers, turning off the faucet while brushing teeth, and not watering the lawn when rain was in the immediate forecast. The study recommended that communicators increase the dissonance for this group by creating messages that explained how these actions were inconsistent with their strong environmental beliefs and placing these messages on mediums preferred by this demographic such as the Internet.

On the other hand, cognitive dissonance can also demonstrate that actions can alter beliefs. For example, the “Spread the Word to End the Word” campaign is a strategic communication plan supported by Special Olympics, Best Buddies, and more than 200 companies from around the world that asks individuals for a specific action: to pledge not to use the word “retarded.” Although the term was once used as a medical diagnosis, the word has become a derogatory and hurtful term to describe an individual with an intellectual disability or to insult someone (“Spread the Word,” n.d.). Given the acceptance and frequent use of the word, it is likely that individuals with strong beliefs about tolerance and acceptance may have used the word before understanding the consequences of its meaning. Therefore, cognitive dissonance explains that taking the action of pledging will ultimately shift the belief from the word as permissible to unacceptable. Furthermore, the theory illustrates how an individual who has taken the action of the pledge will find future uses of the word jarring and could take further action to educate his peers or coworkers about the harmful impacts of the r-word.

## Elaboration Likelihood Model

Unlike the theories of Reasoned Action and Planned Behavior, the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM; Petty & Cacioppo, 1981) argues that not all attitude changes are the result of careful consideration. The ELM provides a framework for not only understanding how attitudes may be altered but also the magnitude of these changes.

While we would like to believe that we carefully consider all messages we encounter, the reality is that human beings do not have the time or mental capacity to contemplate every billboard, tweet, newscast, flyer, and even conversation. Instead, we make decisions about topics that receive our full attention and those that receive a “sounds good” or immediate “no way” response. ELM proposes that individuals have two routes to persuasion: the central, which involves deliberate processing of a message, and peripheral, which involves outside cues such as perceptions of source credibility and attractiveness as well as surface level appeals such as color, design, entertainment, or alignment with an aspirational identity goal.

Elaboration refers to the amount of cognitive effort an individual is willing to take to process a persuasive message. Factors that influence high elaboration are personal relevance, personal responsibility, and an individual’s need for cognition, a term that refers to how much an individual enjoys a challenging or complicated mental task.

When elaboration is high, individuals use the central route of message processing. They are motivated to first pay attention to the message and then carefully consider the argument’s merits, compare these arguments to previous experiences, develop a position about the evidence of the piece, and finally develop an attitude based on the results of the assessment. When elaboration is low, individuals are more likely to rely



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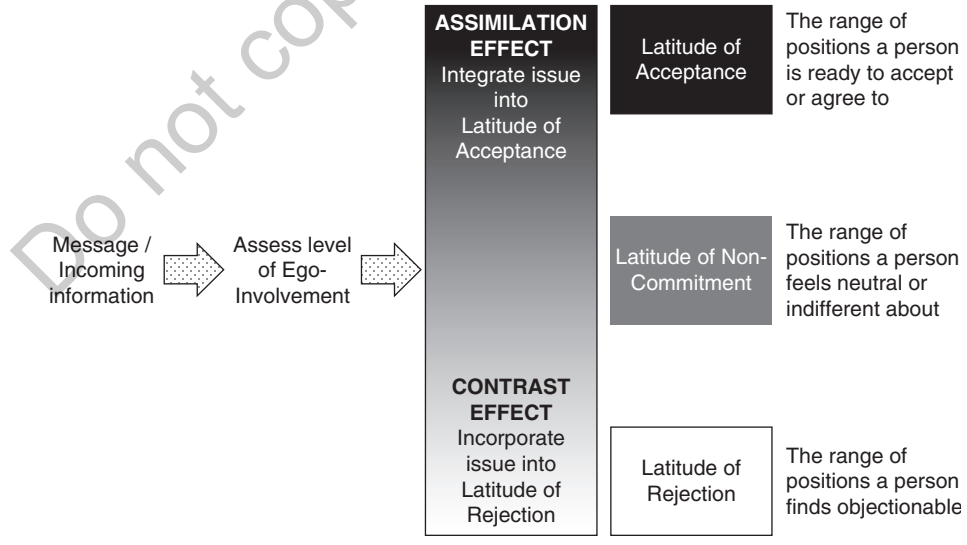
The advertisements in New York City's Time Square are a great place to find peripheral cues. How many do you see in this picture?

on peripheral cues to guide their decision-making. It's important to note that ELM only refers to the type of response an individual makes toward a persuasive message; high and low elaboration do not mean that the individual eventually agrees with the communicator's point of view. ELM can help explain why often public relations professionals must first increase audience awareness about an using using peripheral cues. However, once that awareness is reached, the model also illustrates why it cannot be taken for granted.

### Social Judgment Theory

Social Judgment Theory (SJT) (see Figure 2.3) posits that the likelihood, strength, and direction of persuasion depends on the comparisons individuals make between new messages and previously held attitudes (Sherif, 1936; Sherif & Hovland, 1961; C. W. Sherif, M. Sherif, & Nebergall, 1965). According to SJT, individuals have both an anchor point, the individual's previously held attitude, as well as a range of positions surrounding

**FIGURE 2.3 ● Social Judgment Theory Argues That the Strength and Likelihood of Persuasion Depends on the Comparison an Individual Makes Between New Messages and Existing Attitudes.**



Source: Adapted from 12manage.com

that anchor for any given issue. The latitude of acceptance refers to the range of ideas that the individual would find suitable.

The latitude of rejection refers to the ideas that the individual would find unacceptable, and the range of noncommittal refers to the ideas for which the individual has no strong feelings.

For example, consider advertisements for cigarettes and the public service announcements designed to get smokers to quit. An advertisement for cigarettes with the message of “you deserve a break” or “freedom of choice” would likely fall into the latitude of acceptance of a committed, pack-a-day smoker. Messages urging the smoker to stop immediately risk being ignored as these ideas fall into the latitude of rejection. Messages that ask the smoker to quit for just a day or just a few hours are more likely to fall into the range of noncommittal and therefore may be more acceptable to the audience.

Predicting persuasion according to SJT also relies on several other factors: assimilation, contrast, and ego involvement. Assimilation is a mistake in perception where an individual perceives a message to be closer than it is to their anchor point; therefore, persuasion cannot occur. For example, if an individual already believes that smoking should be banned at outdoor public spaces on campus, similar messages such as smoking should be banned during university events reinforce this previously held belief. The problem is that the communicator missed an opportunity to persuade that individual to action such as signing a petition or taking part in a meeting with university officials. On the other hand, contrast occurs when a message is so far from the individual's anchor point that it is easily dismissed. For example, an 18-year-old smoker with a youthful perception of invulnerability may laugh off persuasive appeals that smoking will lead to an early death but may respond to messages suggesting that smoking leads to bad breath and smelly clothes, making him less attractive. The last variable is ego involvement. The more immersed an individual is in a particular topic, the lower the chances of attitude change. For example, a student who only smokes a few cigarettes on Friday and Saturday nights with friends and abstains at all other times is more likely to be persuaded to quit than someone who has smoked regularly for the past five years.

For the public relations professional, SJT plays a key role in selecting effective messages provided, of course, that the practitioner has done careful research to understand the starting point of his audience. For example, Joy Rumble and her colleagues (2017) analyzed 14 different messages related to genetically modified food to investigate which messages resonated more with men and women living in Florida. Her team found gender differences in message interpretation with men more accepting of statements that GM foods can be modified to increase nutrients and women more accepting of statements that GM foods are tampering with nature. On the other hand, the statement “GM foods have little risk to the person consuming them” fell into the



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Social Judgment Theory reminds PR professionals to carefully select their message based on their audience. What do you think are the most effective antismoking messages for your peers and do these messages differ for other groups like older adults?

latitude of rejection for both men and women. Many of the statements tested such as “GM foods do more good than harm” and “GM foods allow people to live longer, better lives” fell more into the latitude of noncommittal. In other words, according to this study, an advocacy group seeking approval of Florida residents for GM foods would have a better chance persuading this group with messages about the benefits of these foods than messages refuting the risks.

## Persuasion Theories That Drive Influence

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The previous section detailed how public relations practitioners can shape, shift, or change existing audience attitudes. However, what happens when your audience does not really have a preestablished idea, is unfamiliar with your issue, or is placed in a situation where they will draw conclusions about your organization without having all of the facts? These next few theories illustrate how practitioners can influence an audience to adopt the organization’s viewpoint.

### Narrative Paradigm

There is an old joke in the public relations field which is “never let the facts get in the way of a good story.” While effective public relations professionals are also ethical practitioners, there is truth rooted in that statement about the power of compelling narratives, and there are also risks. In fact, many scholars attribute the “success” of fake news to two themes discussed in this chapter: the power of a compelling story and a willingness to accept content that is consistent with an individual’s belief system even if that content is untrue. Public relations professionals should recognize the persuasive power of a story and realize when to step in to combat a tale that is untrue or unfair.

Narrative paradigm, developed by Walter Fisher (1984), argues that human beings are more likely to be persuaded by a compelling story than a logical argument. According to the theory, communication occurs through storytelling, an approach which is in contrast to the rational paradigm which advocates that individuals are persuaded by reason, logic, and careful analysis. However, Fisher (1984) points out that the narrative paradigm is not absent of logic; rather, the framework is a combination of argumentative and persuasive themes with literary and aesthetic themes. The narrative paradigm has five assumptions. The first is that human beings are natural storytellers; we are drawn to stories as both a teller and a listener. Second, human beings make decisions based on their perspective of “good reasons” for doing so. In other words, the story must have reasons the audience will find meaningful in order for the listeners to adopt the viewpoint put forth in the story. Third, these “good reasons” are influenced by culture, history, biography, and character, which means that stories are likely to impact individuals differently. Fourth, not all stories are created equal. In order to be effective, a story must have narrative rationality which is a combination of narrative probability and narrative fidelity. Narrative probability requires that the story’s formal elements are coherent and without immediate contradiction. In other words, the audience must be able to follow the author’s tale and suspend disbelief. Narrative fidelity refers to the story’s ability to resonate with its listeners based on

the audience's experience and perceptions of truth, beliefs, and values. Finally, stories shape perceptions of reality, and, as a result, individuals construct these perceptions by selecting some stories over others.

Storytelling is a common theme found in public relations tactics from advertisements with testimonials to speeches that open with an anecdote that illustrates the main points of the remarks. Furthermore, most communicators can intuitively grasp the persuasive power of stories. However, public relations professionals must also pay attention to the stories told culturally about certain people, topics, issues, or events especially if those "good stories are getting in the way of facts."

For example, Shari Hoppin (2016) used the narrative paradigm to illustrate how personal stories told about suspicions of a link between vaccinations and autism kept the idea alive for some audiences even after doctors and scientists debunked the theory with logical explanations and facts. Hopkins explained how a story about an autism diagnosis received close to vaccination contains both coherence, since parents have heard similar stories, and fidelity since ultimately parents want to do what's best for their children. For some audiences, the data and logic of the scientific studies just cannot compete with the emotional pull of parents trying to protect their children, according to Hopkins. In other words, stories about unvaccinated children dying from the measles may result in more behavior change (vaccination) than the scientifically proven facts.

## WANT MILLENNIALS TO ATTEND YOUR SCHOOL? MAKE A VIDEO WITH A QUIRKY SQUIRREL

As noted above, storytelling is a common technique in public relations tactics, and narrative paradigm illustrates how these stories persuade audiences. However, some stories are more compelling than others. For example, Michael Burns (2015) used the narrative paradigm to identify factors that could influence students to select one college over another. During the study, participants acting as prospective college students took part in a focus group after reading or watching recruitment materials featuring personal stories from college students explaining why they made the decisions to attend Oswego State University, Hendrix College, Ohio University, and Kent State University. Five themes emerged from the focus groups. First, stories helped give prospective students a sense of closure about their choice. While the narratives alone were not enough for these students to choose a college, the stories acted as a final push or tipping point

for the decision. Second, the focus group students found stories about daily experiences and expectations useful in making decisions. Knowing what to expect helped these students feel better about their choices. Third, the students preferred videos to written blogs stating that the videos tugged at their emotions and held their interest longer whereas blogs were "boring." Fourth, students found information that balanced academic information with social information valuable. Finally, students reported that stories featuring unusual or quirky information were memorable and captivating. For example, Burns mentioned that all of his focus groups contained a lengthy discussion on the black squirrels, the unofficial university and town mascots, included as part of the Kent State recruitment videos. Burns's research provides interesting insights for public relations practitioners; while stories are persuasive, content and medium matter!

## Framing Theory/Framing Effects

Framing is a word that public relations students will hear frequently, both on the job and within the classroom. When heard in a professional setting, the term typically refers to choices made about a message's construction such as the positioning of a particular argument. When a communication professional creates a strategy such as a speech, tweet, public service video, news release or event, he has choices about material to emphasize or include and the type of devices he can use to engage his audience such as storytelling, symbols, music, word choice or other production elements. The culmination of these choices create salience, a sense of "what's important" and "how to respond" for an intended audience. (For example, Situational Crisis Communication Theory, detailed later in this chapter, advises crisis communicators to adopt language strategies to frame a crisis to fit a crisis responsibility cluster.)

When discussed in an academic setting, the term refers to how these choices establish a specific type of frame as well as an evaluation about its effects. From an academic point of view, framing theories explain how the construction of messages creates meaning for an audience and how this meaning ultimately influences audience processing and responses. In other words, influence is gained not by what is being said, but by how it is being said (Scheufele & Iyengar, 2017). Understanding the impact of framing from an academic point of view helps public relations professionals create messages that resonate with audiences and provides ammunition to challenge an editor about unfair treatment of an organizational viewpoint, product, or action. Academic literature on framing is vast and frequently contradictory. The following provides highlights of framing for public relations professionals, specifically historical roots, definition, and types, and then concludes with two case studies to explain frames at work.

### Academic Roots

Understanding the basics of framing's academic roots helps practitioners grasp the different ways framing is used in communication studies and why some applications of the theory are controversial (Cacciatore, Scheufele & Iyengar, 2015). Framing theories can be traced back to several academic disciplines including sociology, psychology, and linguistics. Sociologist Erving Goffman (1974) argued that individuals interpret reality by filtering new information through a set of mental structures that are influenced by culture and experience. These mental structures or frameworks create meanings for individuals. Separately, psychologists Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman (1981) demonstrated that individuals respond differently to equal alternatives depending on how each is phrased: Their research demonstrated that an individual's aptitude for risk changed when equal alternatives were presented in terms of "lives lost" or "lives gained." Linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1981) contend that language, particularly metaphors, shapes meanings and guides responses. For example, the often-repeated adage that "time is money" explains the value of each and provides subconscious directions about how individuals should approach both time and money (Lakoff & Johnson, 1981). These three academic traditions set up differences in communication research between scholars who conduct rhetorical analysis to identify the meanings created by frames and scholars interested in the effects these frames have on decision-making and attitude change.

## Definition and Types

Academic discussion surrounding media framing involves the decisions journalists make about story coverage and how those choices influence audience understanding and attitude change. Gamson and Modigliani (1987) defined media frames as a central theme that connects the events of a story. Arguing that facts themselves have no meaning if not connected or organized in some way, Gamson (1989) points out that these media frames can be intentional or accidental. For example, suppose you were writing an article for your university's newspaper about a student who won a prestigious scholarship for postgraduate study. During your interview with the student, you discover he was hospitalized during his freshman year of high school fighting pediatric cancer, an interesting fact but not one necessarily related to the scholarship. Which aspects of this story would you lead with? Do you start your story about an individual overcoming a significant illness to achieve academic success? Or, do you start by focusing on the student's unrelenting drive, dedication, and focus? Although they may seem like subtle differences, these choices result in different stories which shape a reader's understanding.

A definition of framing with widespread acceptance comes from Robert Entman (1993) and refers to the concept of salience, which means choosing to make certain aspects or elements of a story more accessible than others for the audience. "Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). These frames define problems, diagnose causes, provide moral judgments, and suggest solutions (Entman, 1993). For example, Entman (1991) reviewed news coverage from *Time*, *Newsweek*, *CBS Evening News*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post* about two commercial airline tragedies: KAL 007, a Korean passenger airline shot down by Soviet military jets in 1983 after the plane had flown into Soviet airspace, and Iran Air 655, which was shot down over the Persian Gulf by the U.S.S. *Vincennes* in 1988. Although the incidents were similar—military aircraft destroying passenger jets—frames used to describe the tragedies differed. Frames associated with the Soviet-caused KAL 007 incident focused on themes of murder and outrage while frames used to cover the U.S.-caused Iran Air 655 incident centered on the event as a tragic accident and pushed responsibility to passenger carriers to avoid combat zones (Entman, 1991).

In addition, the impact of the frame used is also contingent on the internal schema of the individual; media frames are more impactful when they align with an individual's world view (Entman, 1993). For example, Jim Kuypers, a frame analysis pioneer, identified frames present in George W. Bush's speeches in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 designed to both help U.S. audiences process an event never seen before on American soil and lay the groundwork for justification of a U.S. military response. For example, Kuypers (2006) references Bush's September 20th 2001 speech to Congress where he taps into American values by aligning the 9/11 attacks to other historical events with clear and brutal villains such as World War II and Pearl Harbor. Using frames of good versus evil, tyranny versus freedom, and

civilized versus barbaric, Bush established a master frame known as “The War on Terror” (Kuypers, 2006).

Scholars have also identified many types of media frames; public relations professionals should note emphasis, equivalency, episodic, and thematic frames. Emphasis frames, which stem from the sociology perspective, deal with how meaning is constructed by what story elements are included, stressed, diminished or excluded whereas equivalence frames, drawing from the psychological perspective, pertain to the different ways the same information is presented (Scheufele & Iyengar, 2017).

Shanto Iyengar (1991) identified two type of media frames which influence audience responses: episodic and thematic. An episodic frame is similar to a close-up; the story centers on an individual, a single event, ideas on how to fix the individual, and identifies individual responsibilities for the problem at hand. In contrast, Iyengar defines thematic framing as a wide shot; stories center on issues and include background information, trends over time, and how to fix the conditions leading to these situations, and identify an institution’s or society’s responsibility for solving the problem.

## GETTING THE WRONG SOLUTION WITH EPISODIC FRAMING: A WARNING FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS

The way the news media cover a particular topic can impact how an audience will respond and predict what audiences and decision-makers will find acceptable. In 2003, an essay about eight Princeton-educated friends who left high-powered jobs to become stay-at-home moms gained national attention and reignited the debate about roles for women in the workforce. The article, titled “The Opt-Out Revolution,” written by Lisa Belkin emphasized the decision to leave paid employment as a personal choice; the piece omitted any short or long-term financial consequences of taking time off from a career and neglected to point out that the majority of working mothers were dependent on their salary, making a choice to leave employment available to a minority of well-off families. In fact, a larger group of lower-income moms left the workplace at this time because they couldn’t afford childcare, a story not covered nearly as closely as the well-off moms opting out of career success for diapers and playdates (Warner, 2013).

Nevertheless, the opt-out story, which aligned with certain cultural norms of motherhood, “had legs” (to use a journalistic term) and persisted with



!Stock.com/cofotoisme

Does this image reflect a women’s choice in leaving the workplace for her children or an employer’s unwillingness to provide quality childcare for its employees? While opinions will vary, the answer is that the choice of episodic or thematic framing has real world consequences.

coverage in *Time* magazine and on *60 Minutes*. (Here again is the power of the combination of a compelling story targeted toward an entrenched belief system of “mothers should stay home” held by many.)

As noted earlier in the chapter, episodic framing tends to put the blame on individuals, and the



opt-out narrative, which describes leaving the workforce to raise children as a choice, fits this prediction. Framing the decision to leave paid employment as a personal choice downplays employer responsibilities to provide flexibility to both fathers and mothers or equal pay for women or moms feeling like the demands of parenting forced them out of the workforce. These themes and others such as the high cost of quality child-care and society's role in the solution would be incorporated as part of a thematic frame and would result in a very different story!

Ten years later, many of the women in the original opt-out piece were interviewed again. Only the women who were the most well-off, connected, or academically credentialed found jobs after returning to the workforce, though those jobs paid less than what they made originally. Many of the women struggled financially and personally as a result of their opt-out choice. Others offered more nuanced themes looking back at their decisions to

leave the workplace a decade ago. Some valued their time at home but noted that the ending was not what they expected. Although the viewpoints of women interviewed for the story vary, what is clear is that episodic framing tells a different story than thematic framing.

Making choices about employment and child-care is difficult for all families, and this case study is not intended to put forth a specific opinion on parenting! However, the case study stressed that the opt-out story is a warning for public relations professionals: Pay careful attention to how news media frames your issue and do not be afraid to challenge an editor about unfair coverage (although, we recommend you make this complaint diplomatically and supported with research). As E.J. Graff (2007) wrote about the opt-out coverage in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, "if journalism repeatedly frames the wrong problem, then the folks who make public policy may very well deliver the wrong solution."

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## Attribution Theory and Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Crisis communication is a visible aspect of the public relations industry, and influencing public opinion in the wake of a disaster requires an understanding of two theories that can persuade an audience's willingness to trust an organization under fire. Attribution and Situational Crisis Communication Theories (SCCT) can help practitioners predict how an audience will respond emotionally to certain situations and what types of messages will be more persuasive based on those anticipated feelings. Attribution theory, first developed by psychologist Fritz Heider (1958), argues that human beings seek explanations for the behaviors of themselves and others. For attribution to occur, an individual must observe another's behavior, perceive the behavior to be intentional, and assign the behavior to internal or external causes. Bernard Weiner (1985), who was interested in motivation and achievement, theorized that emotions and ultimately future behavior can be predicted by how individuals interpret the causes of success and failure and that these interpretations are influenced by the dimensions of locus, stability, and controllability. Locus of control refers to the perception that performance is guided by internal factors such

as ability or external factors such as luck. External attributions assign the behavior to the situation, other people, or factors such as luck. Stability refers to how likely individuals perceive that the behavior will change over time, and controllability refers to the individual's belief about how much influence they can exert over the situation.

At first, these explanations might seem like common sense or another version of different psychological theories, and Attribution Theory has received criticism for being overly simplistic. In response, Weiner (1985) argued that Attribution Theory can be applied to a wide range of situations and that an individual's expectations are tied to previous attributions—an idea of particular significance to public relations professionals. Moreover, Weiner (1985) demonstrated links between emotions and dimensions noting that the emotions of anger and pity are linked to the dimension of controllability. Individuals feel anger and respond negatively when actions are considered to be under the individuals' control and feel sympathy and respond positively when those actions are perceived to be outside of the individual's control (Weiner, 2006). For example, consider a student who watches his friend continually play games on his phone during class. When the game-playing student asks to receive notes from his friend, the friend is angry and refuses telling the student that he should make better decisions about how he uses his class time. On the other hand, a student who knows his friend is sick with the flu is more likely to take notes and pick up handouts from class perceiving that the illness is outside of his friend's control.

For public relations professionals, Attribution Theory illustrates that audience perceptions of "who is to blame?"—a question guaranteed to arise during a crisis communication scenario—influences future behaviors of stakeholder groups. Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2007) builds from Attribution Theory and identifies a framework for understanding a crisis scenario's threat to an organization's reputation by examining initial assignments of blame and then factoring in a company's crisis history as well as prior relational reputation. Furthermore, the theory identifies categories of crisis responses based on the mixture of these variables.

First, not all crisis situations are created equal and deserve equal responses. SCCT identifies three initial crisis responsibility clusters: victim, accidental, and intentional. The victim cluster includes scenarios clearly outside of the organization's control such as a natural disaster or product tampering by an outside agent. Since the organization is literally viewed as a victim, audiences will respond more with sympathy than anger. The accidental cluster concerns incidents for which the company may be technically responsible but acted without harmful or malicious intent. For example, despite a company's reputation for rigorous online security, hackers exploit a previously unknown security loophole on a company's website and access privacy information from millions of customers. Audiences may attribute some level of responsibility to the accidental cluster—certainly more than the victim cluster—but the preventable cluster receives the most significant amount of blame from audiences. As it sounds, the preventable cluster deals with those scenarios where the organization acted maliciously or with neglect. For example,

hackers gain privacy information from customers, and it was later revealed that the company skimmed on security funding or knew about these security risks and did little to counteract them.

SCCT also identifies two factors that can intensify a crisis and bump perceptions from victim to accidental or accidental to preventable: crisis history and prior relational reputation. Crisis history refers to the amount and type of crisis scenarios a company has experienced in the past. For example, in March 2018, United Airlines made national headlines several times for the death of a family's dog, a dog flown to Japan instead of Kanas City and failing to board a dog on its family's flight. Moreover, United Airlines has significantly more pet deaths than any other carrier, according to the U.S. Department of Transportation (*Air Travel*, 2017). SCCT illustrates how a pet incident—even if it were truly accidental—on an airline without this extensive history will most likely be received differently and more positively than a future pet incident on United Airlines.

Another factor that can magnify an audience's perception of blame is prior relational reputation, which can be explained as previous perceptions and interactions with the company unrelated to the crisis. For example, many who have visited a Disney World theme park can testify to the quality of entertainment as well as the unique and attentive customer service provided by its staff, and The Walt Disney Company typically ranks highly on surveys of reputation (*The Harris Poll*, 2018). As such, audiences may lay less blame at the feet of Disney during a crisis than toward companies such as Comcast, AIG, United Airlines, Wells Fargo and the Weinstein Companies, who all have fair to poor reputational scores (*The Harris Poll*, 2018).

After a crisis communicator assesses the initial assessment of blame and remembers to factor in the impact of crisis history and prior relational reputation, the second step is to select a response strategy. SCCT offers three: denial, diminish, and rebuild. Denial strategies seek to create or reinforce the perceptions that the incident falls in the victim cluster, which carries less audience blame. Examples of these types of messages include refuting charges or blaming others for the incident. Diminish strategies attempt to shape perceptions that the incident falls into the accidental cluster, which lessens the amount of blame assigned. Examples of these types of messages include shaping perceptions that the crisis is not as bad as audiences perceive or outside of the company's control. For example, an electric company might announce that the unexpected April blizzard did knock out power for 15% of customers, but that they were able to keep 85% of customers connected. Finally, rebuild strategies are for those scenarios defined as preventable clusters and include apologies, compensation, and accessing audiences for forgiveness. One aspect of these strategies that cannot be stressed enough is the importance of the accuracy and truthfulness of these messages. Oftentimes, perceptions of the type of cluster will be inaccurate. For example, a company leader is accused by a disgruntled employee of something she did not do. As long as the company is accurate, framing the incident as a victim cluster is not only ethical but effective. However, covering up lies or misdeeds can easily take a company to the preventable cluster requiring extensive and costly rebuilding strategies.

## SCCT AND CRISIS RESPONSE: SAYING SORRY IS NOT ONLY HARD BUT IS LINKED TO RESPONSIBILITY CLUSTERS

Saying sorry is hard enough, but for crisis communicators, effective apologies must also reflect the crisis's initial responsibility cluster, according to Situational Crisis Communication Theory. Consider these recent examples of crisis responses.

In April 2018, renowned NBC anchor Tom Brokaw was accused of sexual harassment that took place during the 1990s. In November 2017, NBC had fired the popular, highly paid and seemingly untouchable Matt Lauer in the wake of sexual harassment allegations brought by NBC employees. SCCT illustrates that the Brokaw initial responsibility cluster is likely to be intensified given NBC's crisis evidenced by the Lauer firing and subsequent news reports of the hostile workplace climate at NBC. While this case study does not judge the question of Brokaw's guilt or innocence, it does seek to provide examples of victim and accidental cluster framing about the accusations as identified by SCCT theory.

First, in an e-mail Brokaw sent to his colleagues, which was later published by *The Los Angeles Times* and *The Washington Post*, Brokaw describes his new life "as an accused predator" and refers to being "ambushed and perp walked" and "taken to the guillotine and stripped of any honor and achievement I had earned in more than a half century of journalism and citizenship." These first statements challenge the charges, suggest that someone else is to blame, and, as a result, establish a victim frame.

As the e-mail continues, Brokaw also includes framing that suggests an accidental cluster. He writes "She often sought me out for more informal meetings including the one she describes in her New York hotel room. I should not have gone, but I emphatically did not verbally and physically attack her." The inclusion of "should not have" admits to a smaller level of involvement while maintaining the theme that responsibility rests with other parties. As of this writing, it is too early to tell what the final outcome of these allegations holds for

Brokaw. However, SCCT predicts that audience acceptance of these victim and accidental frames will translate into more sympathy and less blame for Brokaw, which bodes well for his reputational protection.

On the other hand, several other companies have been recognized for their willingness and effectiveness at fessing up to mistakes, especially during those situations which SCCT recognizes as a preventable cluster. For example, in February 2018, a chicken shortage forced Kentucky Fried Chicken to temporarily close most of its UK stores, a move which resulted in a flood of criticism on social media and caused some angry UK customers to even contact the police. At first, the company's social media response tried to frame the incident as more of an accidental cluster. KFC tweeted an apology with a reference to the old joke that the "chicken didn't cross the road to their restaurants" and then went on to explain that the shortage was caused by a new supplier, a move that fell flat with customers.

However, the company then adopted a rebuilding strategy by paying for a full-page advertisement in *The Sun* and *Metro*. The text begins with the words "we're sorry" bolded and in larger font than the rest of the message. Following the simple apology, the remainder of the message thanks customers for their patience and employees and franchise partners for their "tireless work." The company notes its rebuilding efforts by explaining that progress is being made and fresh chicken is being delivered every day. Notably, the advertisement does not point the finger at any other entity, unlike the first response. Finally, and most memorable, the advertisement's image conveys that the company understands the deep frustration felt by its customers in a humorous and lasting manner; the KFC logo on its bucket was replaced with FCK. (And yes, you read that correctly.) The move was lauded by public relations, advertising professionals, and customers, which reinforces SCCT theory's prediction that audiences, and not

organizations, decide initial responsibility clusters and that preventable clusters need rebuilding strategies such as accepting responsibility, apologizing, and outlining future plans to do better.

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## Conclusion

Although scholars disagree about the role of persuasion in public relations, the reality is that persuasion is widely used—both ethically and unethically—in many public relations campaigns. Therefore, it's imperative that public relations students understand the theories that predict and explain when, how, and under what conditions persuasion is likely to occur. For the public relations practitioners, those theories include those on rhetoric, attitudes, and shaping public opinion.

## Review Questions

1. The chapter's introduction explains how public relations scholars have not always embraced the idea of persuasion. In your opinion, when should practitioners use persuasion techniques? When should they not?
2. Google the full text of the Landrieu Statue Removal speech. Find examples of ethos, logos, pathos, and identification not already mentioned in the case study.
3. Think about a time you were persuaded to action through ELM's peripheral route of persuasion. What cues influenced your decision? Would you make the same behavior choice today?
4. Find an example of the same story covered by publications with differing viewpoints such as FOX News and CNN. How does each publication frame the story? How do those choices influence your understanding of the issues covered?
5. Social Judgment Theory explains that individuals have a range of attitudes about a given topic that they will find acceptable or at least not objectionable. Think about a current event for which you hold a strong opinion. Which messages fall into your latitude of noncommittal? Which fall into your latitude of rejection?
6. Find an example of a celebrity or organization making a public apology. (No matter the year, you are likely to find one!) How are they framing their responsibility cluster? What types of messages are they using?