

CRAFTING A PERSUASIVE MESSAGE: BELIEF IS JUST THE BEGINNING

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TO CHANGE PEOPLE'S MINDS AND ACTIONS, YOU NEED MORE THAN FACTS (AND IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT "EMOTION")



Traditionally, companies have focused on RTBs (reasons to believe) as an essential factor in their marketing: those clear, simple explanations for why a customer should believe you and the promised benefits of your product or service. RTBs can include everything from product features to endorsements, supporting facts, results, and your company's reputation, with the ultimate goal of getting consumers to change their behavior in your favor.

Believability is a necessary element of persuasion, but is it sufficient to do the persuading?

What if there was something else in your messaging that could have a stronger impact on changing consumer behavior?

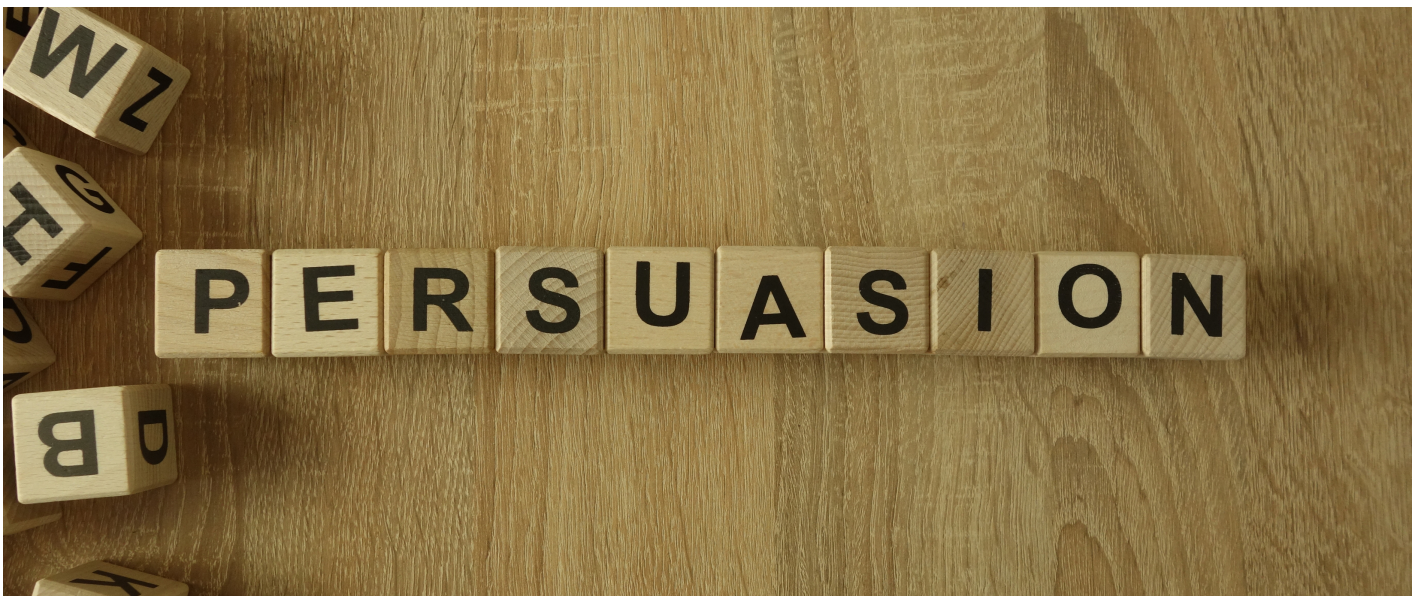
Based on our analysis of over 40,000 survey responses evaluating a diverse range of messaging narratives across topics and industries, we found that what matters most for writing a persuasive message is the message's ability to instill **confidence**. This is **not** about confidence in the messenger or the communicator—but rather confidence in the message through **language, down to the word, of your message**.

NOT BELIEVABILITY, NOT IMPORTANCE, NOT EVEN CONVINCINGNESS.

At maslansky + partners, our proprietary, online message testing platform—**Persuasive Strength™**—allows us to measure your message’s persuasion power through an academically validated scale grounded in behavioral science.

We’ve generated data on persuasiveness from tens of thousands of participants, across hundreds of projects, and dozens of industries. From this data, we have developed **robust benchmarks** against which we can evaluate the overall effectiveness of messaging narratives. The original academic research adapted for Persuasive Strength™ treated each item in the measurement scale as equal in its contribution to persuasion. But was that actually the case? By applying artificial intelligence and machine learning algorithms, we set out to identify what matters most, and most importantly—why.

Our research-on-research shows that while believability, convincingness, importance, general agreement, and positive thought all play a role, they are not the most important variables in driving outcomes. Instead, the most persuasive messages are those that have the greatest impact on **confidence** and **reasoning strength**.



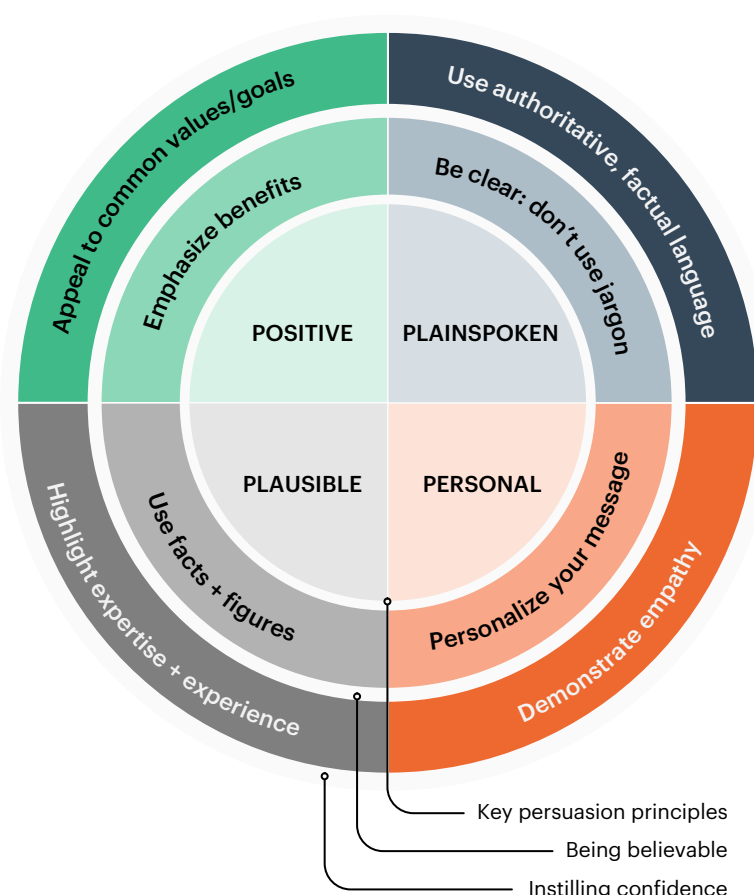
What this all means: The more confidence people derive from your message, the more likely they are to act. And explicitly measuring this level of confidence should be part of any message-testing approach.

THE LANGUAGE OF BEING BELIEVABLE VS. INSTILLING CONFIDENCE

Confidence, as we are defining it, is the certainty a consumer (or other stakeholder) feels about the key idea or “thought” a brand or company is trying to communicate. It is the process of earning the benefit of the doubt and creating an alignment of interests between the communicator and the listener.

But how does one instill confidence?

To define the key attributes of instilling confidence, we conducted a further analysis of the words, phrases, messages, and narrative approaches that scored highest and lowest on this metric.



What we learned is instilling confidence shares many of the traits of building trust—a process we have studied for nearly 20 years. Like trust, instilling confidence is about doing much more than simply presenting the strongest facts or arguments. Instead, instilling confidence, like trust, is grounded in four key principles of communication:

BE POSITIVE

Make your message easy to like

BE PLAINSPOKEN

Make your message easy to understand

BE PERSONAL

Make your message easy to relate to

BE PLAUSIBLE

Make your message easy to believe

When applied together in a message narrative, scores for instilling confidence increase significantly. When one or more elements are missing, scores on this metric—and overall persuasiveness—fall.

BE POSITIVE

This is about making your message easy to like. And there are several tactics behind doing this—for example, emphasizing benefits, using empowering language, using future-oriented language, and almost always, avoiding negative framing.

The key to bridging the gap from being believable to building confidence for this principle is **appealing to shared values or common goals**. However, in doing so, we need to understand where the line is between being positive and overly optimistic. If you cross this line, you come off as manipulative or insincere and ultimately diminish confidence.

EXAMPLE:

From

The need for an HPV vaccine...



To
THE POWER TO PROTECT YOUR CHILD

The Gardasil vaccine can protect against HPV-related cancers—but vaccine skepticism was particularly on the rise at the time, and parents were reluctant to give it to their children. Focusing on the need of preventing this sexually-transmitted virus (even with positive framing and no scare tactics) still wasn't working. But appealing to a common goal and telling parents they have the power to protect their child empowered parents, making them feel more comfortable and confident, which means more children and teens are getting vaccinated for HPV.

BE PLAINSPOKEN

Comprehension is always key in effective communication and our data shows making your message easy to understand is also a believability driver. However, to instill confidence, we found that the use of **authoritative and factual language drives impact**. And, equally important, doing so without the use of jargon or corporate speak.

EXAMPLE:

From

We help manage longevity risk...



To
WE ENSURE YOU DON'T OUTLIVE YOUR MONEY.

Our work in the financial services space has unearthed foundational, consistent lexicon rooted in the consumer mindset and their underlying values to make financial products and their benefits more easily understood, transparent, and intuitive. Some language that consumers are exposed to more often in their daily lives, like market risk, aren't as necessary to spell out. And using industry jargon does us no favors. Our annuities lexicon work tells us that it is more important for consumers to discuss 'not having enough money to last' and 'accessing invested money when you need it' with a financial professional over 'longevity risk' and 'liquidity risk.' The more plainspoken, results-oriented language is authoritative in tone, keeps the customer in control, and makes investing for retirement feel more immediately relevant and motivating.

BE PERSONAL

The key to being personal is connecting to **what's in it for the audience**. So what? Often statistics or proof points do not speak for themselves. Make sure to connect the dots. **Use active voice to increase believability**. Show that you actually understand why something matters to your audience to instill confidence.

EXAMPLE:

From
Over 10,000 taxi cabs...



To
YOUR AVERAGE WAIT TIME IS UNDER 4 MINUTES

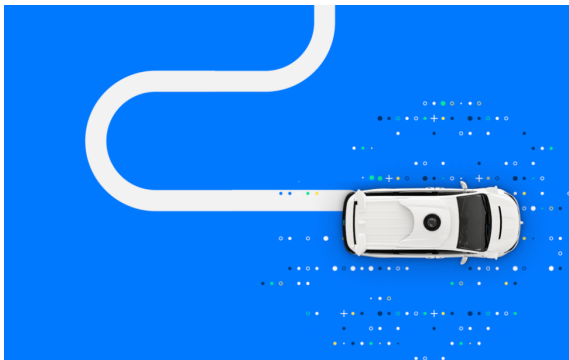
Some business challenges are actually language challenges that can be fixed by being more personal and relevant. After a hurricane had flooded a major city, it was struggling to get tourists back. One huge barrier was transportation concerns. The city spent a lot of money to promote a message touting the number of cabs operating, but it wasn't working because people didn't get what that meant. Changing the message to make it more personal—that your average wait time for a cab is under four minutes—was relevant, tangible, and way more effective. The number of visitors and the amount of money they spent in the city nearly doubled from the previous year.

BE PLAUSIBLE

This principle is all about making your message easy to agree with. Sure, facts and figures get you believability and can also hit the other “Ps” at the same time, **but anchoring to expert opinions and/or highlighting experience is what gets you confidence**.

EXAMPLE:

From
SAFER DRIVER



To
THE WORLD'S MOST EXPERIENCED DRIVER

There were many gaps between Waymo's initial positioning as a self-driving vehicle and how consumers felt about their personal driving experience. No matter how many "safety facts" were presented to consumers, it just wasn't working. Turns out people actually enjoy driving and didn't want to hear about negative stats they thought didn't apply to them. In addition, they only heard about driverless cars when something bad happened and they weren't sure how they felt about giving up control and trusting the technology. But there was also one universal truth when it comes to driving: experience is everything. Reframing Waymo's positioning as a "safer driver" to being "the world's most experienced driver" changed everything. This plausibility tactic helped unlock a way to boost Waymo from being seen as a laggard to a leader of the driverless car revolution.

While we see companies sporadically apply these principles of instilling confidence, it is often not in a conscious or strategic way. This can be a missed opportunity to strengthen the persuasive power of your message. Every word is an opportunity to dial up confidence in your target audience. **Make-sure-each-and-every-word-counts**.