



How Communicator and Audience Power Shape Persuasion

Powerful people aren't always the best choice for persuading others. Less powerful audiences require warmth and connection.

In October 1997, a Swedish journalist with motoring magazine *Teknikens Värld*, took the Mercedes A-Class out for a spin on an obstacle course. During the “moose test”, an evasive maneuver where the car is purposefully put through an aggressive slalom to test its handling in the event of a sudden obstacle (i.e. a moose), the car flipped over and crashed. The case caused a media uproar calling for a response from Mercedes, then a **clear market leader** in the luxury segment with **record revenues** and sales of 715,000 units, ahead of rivals BMW and Audi with 675,000 and 560,000 cars shipped respectively in 1997.

In a statement, the company declared, “we’re assuming that the incident in Sweden was caused by extreme driving conditions – conditions that pushed the envelope too far.” This didn’t go down too well, given the driver was injured and many consumers were worried about their safety. Perhaps spurred on by Mercedes’ offensive strategy, other auto journalists subsequently tested the car. In two other tests, the car flipped over again. Mercedes put forward further excuses, even blaming the tyres, which were made by Goodyear. The firm eventually started corrective action, saying it would change the tyres and introduce a skid-prevention system as standard. This didn’t sit with its initial denials and sparked further press scrutiny.

Mercedes’ response has become a classic case of unbalanced communication focusing on competence at the expense of warmth, despite consumers’ probable distress and need for reassurance. Could this imbalance stem from Mercedes’ powerful position in the market? More generally, to what extent do feelings of power shift what people communicate and what audiences value? My forthcoming article, **Dynamics of Communicator and Audience Power: The Persuasiveness of Competence versus Warmth**, co-authored with Derek Rucker of Northwestern University and Adam Galinsky of Columbia, sheds light on these questions by unpacking the effect of power on persuasion.

Shifting Communicator and Audience Power

On the face of it, feelings of power boost persuasiveness: powerful CEOs such as Steve Jobs and Richard Branson, or powerful politicians from Lincoln to Churchill, are all remembered as effective communicators whether it be selling products or mobilising countries. However, effective persuasion can sometimes come from less powerful voices. For example, when promoting health care messages, relatively powerless children can be more effective than adults and low-income consumers more successful than highly ranked officials.

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So which is it, are the powerful or powerless more persuasive? Well, it turns both can be persuasive but it depends who they're talking to. First, having power increases the extent to which a communicator focuses on competence when delivering a persuasive message but a lack of power increases the extent to which a communicator focuses on warmth. The audience's sense of power also plays a role. When an audience feels powerful, the crowd cares more about competence, but when it lacks power, it cares more about warmth.

We ran a series of experiments in which participants were randomly assigned to roles of communicators or audience members and the communicators had to deliver either a written or oral message. They had to persuade their audiences on a variety of things, from trying new gym facilities to promoting a university or a new restaurant.

We varied communicators' sense of power by asking them to recall a time when they had or lacked power or assigning them to momentary roles of director or employee. The audiences didn't know the power of the communicator and vice-versa so we could view in isolation how the sense of power affected how messages were delivered and received. Across experiments, communicators who felt powerful were more persuasive towards high-power audiences and those feeling powerless were more convincing to low-power audiences.

Focus on competent vs warm content

What accounts for this effect? Power provokes a kind of "psychological attunement" by shaping the psychological orientation of both communicators and audience members. Those with a feeling of high power lean towards emphasising skills and competence, which high-power audiences are persuaded by. On the other hand, low-power orientates communicators towards connecting to others, which fits with low-power audiences that value messages emphasising warmth and connection.

In one experiment, 160 participants were assigned roles of boss or employee to compose an advertising message for a restaurant by selecting the most persuasive arguments from a list. High-power communicators picked a greater number of competence arguments such as "the chef has built a reputation based on his skills and competence." Whereas the low-power communicators picked a greater number of warm arguments, such as "the chef's friendly reputation makes this restaurant very inviting". And, at the receiving end, powerful audiences preferred the messages that had emphasised competence, but powerless audiences preferred those emphasising warmth.

For executives, these findings illustrate the kind of settings and messages that might help or hinder their success at persuasion. In contexts as varied as sales negotiations, advertising or even word-of-mouth campaigns, arguments should be tailored to persuade different audiences. For instance, if a manager of a fund-raising agency is attempting to solicit donations from wealthy and high-power individuals, he or she should emphasise the competence and performance of their organisation in order to solicit more money. On the other hand, high-power individuals, such as heads of state, or CEOs, may not be the best choice for persuading low-power mass audiences. A low-power communicator might be more effective or at the very least, a high-power communicator should aim to convey greater warmth in his or her messages.

As for Mercedes, the company later realised their communication focus about the issue of the A-Class only alienated customers. It eventually radically switched to a conversational tone mixing both competence and warmth. After testing and tweaking the car to pass the moose test, the company surprised customers and media by even joining in with the mockery that had developed about its A-Class model. Advertisements were published under the title of "The A-Class and the elk" and it even provided stuffed elk toys and bumper stickers to customers, which signaled warmth, but crucially, competence. It finally embarked on a one-day advertising blitz in which the company admitted "the fact is, we made a mistake" in 180 German newspapers and the country's biggest television networks. The unusual show of self-depreciation from Mercedes was what its audience needed all along.

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