

# Information and Persuasion: Rivals or Partners?

Katherine McCoy

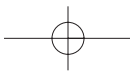
The best thinkers in graphic design have long held that information and persuasion were oppositional modes, representing the competing cultures of graphic design and advertising. But perhaps this long-cherished notion is no longer pertinent, especially for interactive electronic communications. So many other boundaries seem to be blurring these days including work and play, entertainment and information, and education and games; with commerce permeating everything.

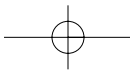
The conventional distinction between information and persuasion has to do with a piece's content, plus the sender's intention. Some content is understood as information and some content is labeled as persuasion, promotion, or even propaganda. In this scheme of things, information is noble. Note that Richard Saul Wurman, trained as an architect, has coined the term "information architecture" to describe the graphic design of his highly successful Access Press travel guides. This inspired the venerable graphic designer Massimo Vignelli to proclaim himself an information architect, too. This vision of communications fits well with the modernist ideal of objective, rational design. Within this paradigm, persuasion is distasteful, associated with the worlds of advertising and marketing—emotional, subjective, manipulative, and superficial.

But might there be an alternative to this tidy dichotomy? Perhaps information and persuasion are not an either/or opposition. More likely, they are modes of communication that overlap and interact.

The information/persuasion relationship involves more than the type of content and the sender's intention. The reader's motivation and the communications context—the situation in which communications happens—are important factors as well.

Consider two examples of what we might generally consider "information design," and how they interact with audience members at various motivation levels. An airport monitor would seem to be a purely informational condition. A traveler hurrying to catch a plane is highly motivated and will make full use of the flight monitor—no need to persuade this audience member. On the other hand, a stop sign also would seem to be highly informational with no promotional character. But when a driver in a hurry encounters a stop sign, the driver may make only a rolling pause in the intersec-





tion. Although the content is informational, this audience member has low motivation and ignores the message.

Even ostensibly informational content—factual, objective, even numerical—conceived with pure “informational” intentions of the sender—the airport or the local government—with no promotional intentions, must persuade many readers to pay attention, and to get involved.

Desire and necessity are part of the communications process here. Both affect the audience’s motivations. Even an audience member that “needs” some information (i.e., for traffic safety) also must possess the “desire” for this information to complete the communications loop. A message only becomes information when someone cares to make use of it.

Persuasion creates desire. A basic definition of persuasion is an attempt to shape or change a user’s behavior or attitude. Persuasion exerts a direct influence on behavior, and promotes a response. Promotional communications encourage behaviors.

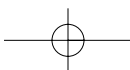
Seduction is a key tool for persuasion. A graphic design can seduce the reader/viewer into a useful encounter with its message. Seduction initiates the entry step in the communications process, promising a reward for the audience’s attention. Once drawn into the communications piece, the quality and relevance of its information takes over, engaging the reader on deeper levels. In these days of media saturation and multi-channeling, there is fierce competition for the reader’s attention, and readers have increasingly short attention spans. Seductive media can persuade a reader to pay attention, to get in bed with the message content and spend some time with it.

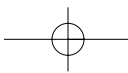
Persuasion and seduction seem especially relevant for the design of interactive electronic communications. Nonlinear messages make it difficult to orient and direct the reader with traditional graphic strategies conceived for linear message sequencing. An Internet site’s readers can choose their own paths, breezing by key content, and may be diverted by links to other sites on the Web.

Seductive communications strategies can direct and prompt the reader/user to follow comprehensible reading paths, and to make appropriate responses in software operation.

Thinking of seduction in this way, the smallest graphic moves—directing the user to the highlighted “OK” button, for instance—use persuasion to reduce effort and to channel the reader to useful paths through complex material and difficult software tools.

Three steps to seduction are outlined in an article by Julie Khaslavsky and Nathan Shedroff titled “Understanding Seductive Experiences.” *Enticement* attracts attention and makes an attractive promise. The *relationship* stage gives small fulfillments (or feedback) and promises more fulfillment. Finally, there is *delivery* on final promises, and the experience ends in a memorable way. The authors





note that effective seduction need not actually reach the third stage—that useful ongoing, long-term relationships can be based on incremental fulfillments. The sexual overtones to this process are both humorous and instructive.

In recent years, the Stanford Persuasive Technology Lab, directed by B. J. Fogg, has been exploring some of these ideas under the name “captology,” the study of persuasive media. Their focus is on software programs and smart products that encourage or change behavior in the fields of health, safety, environment, and personal management. For instance, they have studied the persuasive impacts on teenagers interacting with the “Baby Think It Over” doll in high school programs. This smart doll simulates the responsibilities of caring for a newborn with random crying every two and one-half hours, tracks the teenage “parent’s” behavior, and reports the student’s behavior to the teacher.

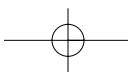
Beyond such practical applications, persuasion and seduction may be essential for all communications design, from traditional print to interactive media, and from micrographic “moves” to large-scale strategies. They can motivate disinterested or distracted audiences to focus on promotional, entertainment, and shopping Websites.

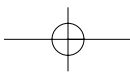
But persuasion/seduction also can increase productivity for motivated users in sites and software involving numerical/factual work and objective content in fields such as medicine and data management—for example, through the use of prompts and cues for the accurate use of spread sheet software. In product design, persuasion/seduction can clarify operation sequences for smart products, and enrich the user’s product experience. Persuasion can assist those constrained by unfamiliarity with the content, or a lack of competence for a software tool or a product’s operation.

Perhaps information/persuasion is not an “either/or” choice, but rather an “and/also” interaction between communication modes. There could be a complex interaction between the sender’s intentions, message content, the audience/user’s motivations, the communications context, and the designer’s strategies.

Rhetoric—the departure from normal language usage for the purposes of persuasion—holds promise for the expression of seductive messages. To identify graphic rhetorical moves for interactive electronic communication’s onscreen text, we can establish the non-rhetorical base of “normal graphic language usage” as the typewriter’s onscreen equivalent—the Wang word processor and VDT—low-resolution display of generic letterforms on a light-gray background. Compared to this, all recent graphical interfaces and screen design strategies are rhetorical devices to persuade the user/reader to use the software correctly.

Seen in this light, almost any piece of communications design uses persuasion. The red color of a stop sign is a persuasive rhetorical tactic to attract the attention of drivers, alerting them to





potential danger, promising safety through the avoidance of a collision, and fulfillment when cross traffic passes smoothly in front of them—the three steps of the seduction process. The Mac's smiley face when booting up promises a positive experience and effective operation, persuading us to wait patiently and happily for fulfillment.

Persuasive rhetoric is as simple as the boldface type highlighting a name when we scan a newsmagazine paragraph. But screen-based electronic media create both the opportunity and imperative for a far deeper application of persuasive rhetoric through interactivity, sound, and motion. These new design dimensions can generate smart persuasive character, attitude, and behaviors to persuade users/readers to make the right moves for effective operation.

Persuasion and seductive rhetoric can be developed as theories to explain and evaluate existing communications phenomena, expose and clarify current design strategies, and codify new design strategies for generalized application in communications design.

