



Power and Influence

Get Your Message Across to a Skeptical Audience

Research-based suggestions for establishing credibility.
by Steve Martin

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Persuading decision makers that your proposals and recommendations are worthy of their time and attention is a tough challenge – even for the most experienced and admired experts. So what should you do if you find yourself having to persuade an audience that doesn't know about – or is even skeptical of – your expertise and experience?

Persuasion researchers know that decision-makers will often place their faith less in what is being said, and more in who is saying it. For good reason—following a trusted authority often reduces feelings of uncertainty. In today's constantly changing business environment, it's increasingly the messenger that carries sway, *not* the message.

Therefore, it's crucial that you convince your audience you have the necessary expertise to make a recommendation – which can present problems if you lack credibility.

You need to be seen as competent and knowledgeable, yet recounting a list of your accomplishments, successes and triumphs, however impressive, will do little to endear you to others. No one likes a braggart. But arranging for someone to do it on your behalf can be a remarkably efficient tactic in overcoming the self-promotion dilemma.

Take, for example, [a set of studies](#) led by Stanford University's Jeffrey Pfeffer, who found that arranging for an intermediary to toot your

horn can be very effective. Participants in one study were asked to play the role of a book publisher dealing with an experienced and successful author and read excerpts from a negotiation for a sizeable book advance. Half read excerpts from the agent, touting the author's accomplishments. The other group read identical comments made by the author himself. The results were clear. Participants rated the author much more favourably on nearly every dimension—especially likeability—when the author's agent sang his praises instead of the author himself. Remarkably, despite the fact that participants were aware that agents have a financial interest in their authors' success and were therefore biased, hardly any took this into account.

In another study with real estate agents, my team and I measured the impact of a receptionist introducing a realtor's credentials before putting through a call from a prospective client. Customers interested in selling a property were truthfully informed of the agent's qualifications and training before the inquiry was routed to them. The impact of this honest and cost-free introduction was impressive. The agency immediately measured a 19.6 percent rise in the number of appointments they booked compared to when no introductions were made. So arranging for others to tout your expertise before you make your case can increase the likelihood of people paying attention and acting on your advice.

Remember that the same is true if your proposal is being delivered in written form. When submitting a proposal or recommendation, avoid making the mistake of squirreling away you and your team's credentials towards the end of an already full document. Instead, make sure that they are prominently positioned up front.

Another approach for winning people over when you lack experience? Play up your potential.

In [research](#) led by persuasion scientist Zakary Tormala, participants were asked to evaluate applicants for a senior manager position in a large corporation whose backgrounds and qualifications differed only in one key aspect: one had gained 2 years of relevant industry experience and scored highly on a leadership *assessment* test and the other had gained little experience but scored highly on a leadership *potential* test. Despite the experience deficit, the candidate who had scored highly on the leadership potential test was rated as more likely to be a successful hire, even though they were objectively much less qualified.

The persuasive pull of potential doesn't just hold true in recruitment contexts. Facebook users shown a series of quotes about a comedian registered much greater interest (measured by click-rates) and liking (measured by fan-rates) when informed of the comedian's promise – *"This guy could become the next big thing"* – rather than his actual achievements – *"Critics say he has become the next big thing."*

If you have an abundance of talent but a lack of on-the-job experience, all is not lost. In addition to introducing your know-how before you make your proposal, also try including a statement that signals the promise of your potential. Doing so might persuade audiences to think about you more positively, which in turn, could tip the balance in your favor – even if you're not an expert on paper.

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