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Informing vs Persuading

by Harold S. Williams

Programs in government and non-profit groups often begin with the premise of education. We speak of the need to "educate" people to many things—including the dangers of smoking and teen pregnancy, the problems of solid waste and the potentials of a drug-free life. At first blush, who could disagree with such a noble intent? But we need to look deeper to see how the high road in concept becomes the low road in result.

When people speak of educating others, the probability is very high that they do not have information gain as the objective. Nor is the goal knowledge or even wisdom. Their intent is not simply to inform, but to persuade. They want to get people to do something that they are not doing now, or to prevent them from doing something they might otherwise do.

The point of this paradigm is to show just how far apart are the purposes of educating to inform and educating to persuade. When the distinction is appreciated, a number of strategic implications for program planners and implementers will follow.

The paradigm shapes up as follows:

Informing	**Persuading**
Focus on data	Focus on data use
Ends with knowledge	Ends with behavior
Objective (facts)	Subjective (meanings)
What people are presumed to need	What people want and will use
Begins with answers	Begins with questions
Extols virtues	Sells benefits

The differences are key. To begin, the informing mind-set sees information as its commodity. Public-sector and non-profit prevention programs churn out facts and figures on every imaginable issue. Many millions of dollars are spent annually on videos, pamphlets, speeches, workshops, and other means repeatedly used to disseminate data.

The assumption is that if people become knowledgeable on a given issue, they will do the right thing. This core tenet is clear but misguided. From diverse social science research studies comes a key finding: information is rarely sufficient to change behavior. Evaluations of prevention programs in many critical social problem areas conclude that unless other steps are taken, the likelihood is low that a

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person hearing the message—whether on drugs, illiteracy, pollution or another topic—will respond with a new behavior. Further, this remains true even if the person gets and retains the information!

The persuading mind-set starts and ends not with data but with the person who must use it if "education" is to succeed. It recognizes that the role of information is no more critical than many other factors—such as recipient values, sense of options, peer pressure, and wants and desires—in determining responsive behavior.

Informing focuses on the objective world of facts and figures. The problem is that people act not on data but on what it means to them. Management consultant Zig Ziglar makes this point by telling a story from European history. Aristotle believed that if two different weights of the same material were dropped from a uniform height, they would fall at different speeds. This belief was taught at the University of Pisa. Years later, Galileo arrived not only to challenge this theory but prove equal drop rates by a demonstration from the Leaning Tower of Pisa. He convinced the students and teachers beyond any doubt. But Aristotle's theory continued to be taught at that university. Galileo had informed them but had not persuaded them.

Informing, like much of current education, is based on a premise that is tidy but self-limiting: the educator knows what the student needs. It is self-evident, according to this view, that people need jobs, self-esteem, literacy, connection to parks and cultural assets, or whatever else we have to offer. In reality, what people want and what they are prepared to use is often very different from what others think they should have. The most fundamental premise in marketing is that what the customer wants to buy is more important than what the vendor wants to sell. This is as true for social and human services as for computer software and cars.

It is not necessary to end up with what a person first desires, but it is essential to start there. The entry point is questions, not answers. Until we learn about the concerns and issues as seen by potential recipients of our "educating," much of what we tell them will prove irrelevant. When the informer focuses on value and virtues of a given course of action, his or her speech can be endless. When he or she focuses on benefits meaningful to the respondent, the words are fewer but far more effective.

While this essay speaks to "educating" beyond schools, a number of people in formal education are coming to this understanding as well. Classrooms filled with lectures and rote memorization are gradually giving way to sessions of active inquiry and implementation by students. For example, while schools believe that many young people need physics, those same young people are much more likely to say that what they want to know about is cars. A few bright physics teachers solve this by recognizing that the study of a car and its parts can include virtually every key principle of physics.

One teacher discovered recipient meaning when faced with the task of getting his students to memorize a passage of the U.S. Constitution. His efforts at both mechanical and humanistic approaches failed. Then, by looking closely at the world of the students, he came to the realization that most of them were perfectly capable of memorizing—if only the context were theirs and not his. He asked the kids to form into groups and to do the passages as a rap song. Almost everyone passed!

Some readers may resist the informing to persuading shift on ethical grounds. Persuading is manipulative compared to the elevated ground of education. My response is that the intent of persuading cloaked as "educating" is the greater worry.

The New Framework for Persuading

The paradigm of persuading needs a framework that may at first glance seem an uneasy fit in the public sector. The framework is called marketing and it is useful for three reasons. The first is its insistence that the clients, patients, students, offenders, and at-risk persons whom public and non-profit groups served be considered as customers. "Customer" is a useful term in connoting the choices that recipients

of social and other public programs actually do have. They may choose or not choose to get the information. They may choose or not choose to retain it. They may choose or not choose to use it. Indeed, program offerers are actually dependent on voluntary acts of potential customers to be achieve their results.

The second advantage of marketing comes from the inclusiveness of definition. Marketing means the design, pricing, promotion, distribution, and sale of ideas, goods, and services to create exchanges that satisfy both offerer and recipient. Marketing starts with the problem of shaping products that will meet customer needs and wants, not as the problem of selling someone something entirely predetermined. Many forms of public-sector "educating" presume that the product is perfect and, indeed, if there are defects, they must lie with the user!

As a third factor, marketing connects product with customer in an exchange process that is rarely successful when viewed as exploitation. Unless the customer also wins, the exchange generally won't happen. And if it does happen, it won't last. Marketing is at heart cooperative, not competitive.

Marketing as the framework for persuading has three successive elements.

1. Informing. People are given sufficient information that they are able to draw a conclusion and become interested in doing so. In the marketing framework, information is more through compelling examples and illustrations than in statistical profiles.

2. Convincing. In this step, customers put together information to form conclusions concerning not only belief but disposition to act on belief. The recipient now has connected information bits into a pattern—a conviction and a disposition.

3. Action Prompting. The disposition to do something is now translated into behavior. Persons convinced they should get a job, fight drugs, lose weight, stop abusing, etc., now act on their conviction. They do something.

An example from my world of fund raising at The Rensselaerville Institute may help put these steps in perspective. To raise over $500,000 annually from a diverse set of donors, we start by informing them. Through newsletters, annual reports and the like, we tell people what The Institute does and stress the results of our work. While information is not enough, it is an essential starting point. We must ensure that a lively and compelling tone will lead people to read it. If they don't, the next steps are probably irrelevant.

Our next step is convincing those people who get informed to support us. For contributions to come, those whom we inform must decide that The Institute's programs: a) deserve their support, and b) are more worthy of support than others to which they might give instead. When this happens, people are disposed to contribute. This step takes follow-up by us. It will not happen solely from our mailing.

But if I relax at my desk waiting for big bucks to come in, I'm sure to be disappointed. The gap between belief and action can be great. Most paths are paved with good intentions. I must now convert conviction to behavior by prompting action. In marketing terms, this step is called "the sale." At least for potential donors of larger amounts, I need to find a way to say to them: "I'm delighted you find us worthy of your support." This last step makes the difference between a gift to us or a gift to someone else...or to no one at all.

A number of strategies are defined by this progression. Here are five which are broadly relevant to public service programs.

1. Knowing when to end a step is as important as knowing when to start it. The timing issue in classroom education is knowing when to begin. Thresholds are deemed important in suggesting "reading readiness" and the like. In persuading, the key is less to know when to conclude.

There is almost no end to the facts and figures we might communicate and help others to retain in the step of informing. From a persuading perspective, however, there is a level of information that is sufficient to enable persons to become convinced. Continuing to inform people once that point is reached is actually counterproductive. Clarity becomes confusion; data becomes overload.

If informing has its useful limits, convincing has its end point—when a conviction is reached. Once a person has reasoned, analyzed, felt or in other ways come to the desired conclusion, he or she is disposed to act. Additional time spent on developing the conviction may well lead to new questions or a reconsideration of decision. Advocates are among those who can linger too long. They are more preoccupied with the principle of understanding rights than the behavior of meeting needs. Others fall in this category because they believe that conviction will invariably lead to behavior if only it is sufficiently strengthened and enforced.

The final step, prompting action, recognizes that there is a peak point at which a person is most likely to act on his or her conviction. Once past, readiness actually declines! Salespersons (including evangelists and fund raisers just as readily as those who sell cars or computers) have made a science of knowing just when the customer is most likely to buy the product. They carefully wait for that moment to close the sale.

Persons who would "educate" people to do something tend to be anchored in the timeless and durable nature of the problems which they, as helpers, face. They fail to understand that the world of those who have (and occasionally cause) problems is not so constant. Interveners frequently fail to understand that, if the endpoint is action rather than accrual, less can certainly be more.

2. Persuading builds on choice. When advertising compares the good or service promoted with other brands, it recognizes that people do have choices and that it is useful to acknowledge and speak to them. We make a mistake when we think of those served by government and non-profit groups as being a captive audience forced to listen and respond, whether by necessity or mandate. While money may not be needed, people have a choice concerning time. They may attend your program, watch TV, play poker, enjoy their kids or anything else.

   Even if a program could have required attendance, this would not be helpful. Indeed, there is little basis for forming a conclusion of any kind if no choice is at hand. One simply follows the one available path. Even in formal education, lessons that assume only one right answer are generally less effective than those that enable learners to actively engage content to analyze and conclude in more than one way.

   In convincing, the structure moves from options to choice. Recipients apply reasoning and judgment to draw a conclusion concerning the content and their disposition to it. Choice-making is decision-making. In this context, the persuader must often find a way to call the question. Whether it's choosing one car over another or yes or no to drug use, people can continually seek more information and defer deciding unless prompted to do so.

   Since choice is to lead to action, it is important to show the connection between decision and the behaviors needed to implement or express it. If conviction precedes this understanding, it is at best an attitude in search of a behavior. People can hold many of those. Expression of choice is especially critical in that in most instances the choice made is not simply a behavior but a change in behavior. People are not only asked to do something new, but to stop doing something old.

3. The recipient's problem must be solved. Persuading is usefully defined as problem-solving. What problem does my customer have for which my program can become a solution? Once

the problem is defined, some of the benefits of the program or message become critical; others become irrelevant. In weight reduction, for example, the problem individuals is rarely the pounds themselves. Rather, it is the perception of being unattractive to others, being uncomfortable in groups, or something else. A clinical discussion of the facts and figures of obesity in such terms as health risk and mortality are not likely to be relevant to the wants of many overweight people.

4. Disposition is the linchpin connecting interest and action. A person is disposed to do something when he or she is clear not only on what the information means but on how it helps to make a choice and implement it. In general, conviction involves an emotional as well as cognitive commitment. It ties to feelings and values as well as to facts and proof. For this reason, effective marketers use illustrations that will personally touch the lives of those whom they would persuade.

   A related distinction is the continuum of objective informing to normative convincing to subjective action. Information gains credibility from its objectivity, often defined as constancy over time and place. At the convincing step, data becomes meaningful as it is anchored to the beliefs and values the customer holds to be important. A choice that must fly in the face of previously held convictions creates cognitive dissonance, and will not likely be made or implemented. Thus, a legislator who believes that most people on public assistance are lazy will not readily form the conviction that an expanded public welfare program should be funded. At the same time, a belief that ties to an existing disposition will predictably be embraced. That same legislator, for example, may believe that government is too large and intrusive, and support a self-help program that enables people on public assistance to solve their own problems.

   Action—the exercise of choice once made—becomes personal. While it is guided by objective data and shaped by normative meanings, it happens subjectively. Indeed, impulses for action often best explain purchasing behavior. At some point of evident readiness, the right car, spouse, program or other choice comes along and is promptly embraced. If explanations are needed, most of us are highly capable of constructing them after the fact. The line between rationale and rationalization is a thin one.

5. Inform a population, convince people, prompt action from individuals. Informing can and is done on a mass-media basis. Once designed, information can be widely distributed. You need not see, hear, or touch the persons with whom you communicate. For convincing, some type of two-way communication is often needed...a telephone call, a visit, a highly tailored letter. Convincing often takes meetings or other activities which bring together those selected (and, generally, self-selected) for interest. At this point, names become faces and faces become differences. At the level of prompting action—the sale, interpersonal moves to personal. In general, this is a one-on-one relationship.

   The increased cost per person of convincing and prompting action suggests careful resource allocation. An "educational" campaign that spends all its money informing 20,000 persons may end up with fewer results than one that starts by informing only 5,000 persons, but with enough time and money left to follow-up with those interested to get at least 500 persons to do something differently as a result.

These and other distinctions among the three stages can be summarized as follows:

The Persuading Progression

Inform———>	Convince———>	Prompt action
options	choice	use of choice
what people need	what persons want	what individual uses
interest	disposition	behavior
objective	normative	subjective
retain data	integrate data	apply convictions
mass media	interpersonal media	personal media

As with all paradigm shifts, the change from informing to persuading is not easy. We must begin by questioning some cherished beliefs—including the reality that information is not enough and that providers always know best.

If this paradigm interests you, learn it by application. For yourself and for others, apply the paradigm to this shift itself. How would you move from informing others about the persuading approach to convincing them to try it and then prompting that action? When to begin? The next time you hear someone say, "We need to educate people to....."

The author is President of The Rensselaerville Institute and teaches workshops on marketing government programs. More detailed publications on marketing in public and non-profit sectors are available from
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