

“Eloquence is
reason set on fire”

Oliver Wendell
Holmes

HIGH STAKES PRESENTATIONS

Vol. 7, No. 5 — Resources for High Stakes Presenters and those who hire them

Message versus reality Did you fall for the Marlboro Man?



The Marlboro Man successfully linked his brand to our associations of cowboys and the West with masculinity, independence, and the great outdoors.

New ideas must
not oppose
existing beliefs

How could this work? How could intelligent people be swayed to buy Marlboros because they were presented to us as the favored smoke of cowboys?

The confirmation bias

Communications professionals think they have the answer. They say that we have within us a “confirmation bias” which makes us favor messages and arguments that confirm beliefs and connections we already have.

We American males believe that being outdoorsy, masculine, and independent is good. Therefore, acting like a cowboy—i.e., smoking Marlboros—is also good!

Here’s another example, from yet another form of entertainment—politics.

Bush hat okay, but Kerry...

George W. Bush wore a \$3,000 cowboy hat during his first campaign, and it was

not a problem for most of us, because it matched his image as a wealthy Texan.

But, John Kerry riding a \$6,000 bicycle was a problem. It sent a message that contradicted his claim that he represented the downtrodden.

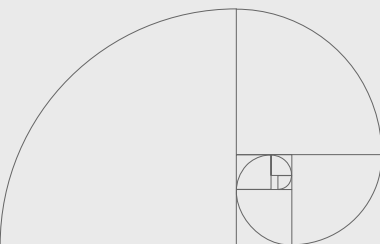
Kerry didn’t lose the election because of the bicycle, but the bicycle reinforced suspicions of hypocrisy.

As Andrei Shleifer, the Harvard economist, says, “Messages, not hard attributes, shape competition.”

Language or yellow

Another recent study provides an even more telling example of the confirmation bias—how an opinion once formed overwrites reality.

In this study, one group of volunteers was shown a shade of yellow on a strip of white paper for a few seconds. The group was then shown a strip with sev-



SIMS WYETH & Co.

38 Park Street
Montclair, NJ 07042

973-783-4205

swyeth@simswyeth.com

Avoid
conflict with
your
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eral shades of yellow (including the first shade), and asked to identify the original color. Of this group, 73% were able to identify the original color.

A second group, however, was shown a shade of yellow, *told to describe the color aloud*, and then were asked to identify the original shade of yellow from a strip containing multiple shades. Only 33% of the “describers” were able to accurately identify the original color!

This study shows how language can get in the way of experience—distorting it, altering it, and overwriting it.

Prescribing behaviors

To be accepted, new ideas must be presented in ways that avoid contradicting existing beliefs.

The confirmation bias explains what can happen when pharmaceutical companies attempt to introduce new treatment paradigms to doctors. Often, their messages fall on deaf ears because the new approaches contradict the doctor's existing beliefs.

Educating doctors—attempting to add new information or correct previous perceptions—is not the solution.

“Don't tell people, ‘You are stupid, and here is what to think,’” Shleifer said.

During presidential debates, he asserted, voters tune out or forget things that are inconsistent with their beliefs.

“Educational messages may be doomed,” he added. “They do not resonate.”

Description vs. reality

What are the implications of the confirmation bias to High-Stakes Presenters?

Clearly, you can't force someone to accept a message just because you think it's true. History—even current history—is full of examples when good intentions are seen as naked aggression.

A better approach is needed. New messages must be framed in ways that do not threaten existing beliefs. You must know your audience as well as you know your message!

Knowing your audience

Start by being able to state their argument in the strongest possible manner. Understand the story they are telling themselves about you, your product, and your ideas.

Use this knowledge to reposition your message in a way that avoids head-on confrontation with their beliefs.

Remember that, when making choices, “People are not responding to the *actual objects* they are choosing between,” says Eric Wanner of the Russell Sage Foundation. “There is no direct relationship between stimulus and response...the choice depends on *how the decision-maker describes the objects to himself.*”

As we compete for market share, budget allocations, and the trust and loyalty of those necessary to our success, let us remember: messages, not reality, shape the outcomes of High-Stakes Presentations.



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Montclair, NJ 07042
973-783-4205

swyeth@simswyeth.com