Why Being Persuasive Is More Important than Having a Great Idea



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As a product manager first at Google, then Reddit and Pinterest, Tyler Odean knows a thing or two about the power of persuasion.

The secret, he says, isn't so much having a world-changing idea. It's about getting people on the same page.

"The reality is that visionaries like Steve Jobs haven't been successful because they thought of something amazing and original out of thin air," Odean said in a 2018 interview. "Rather, they were gifted at constantly persuading many people

to follow them on their journey to something amazing and original."

Odean has been giving talks on persuasion for years, drawing on the principles that psychologist Daniel Kahneman outlines in his book, *Thinking Fast and Slow*.

Kahneman argues that the brain has two systems for experiencing information: System 1 is fast, automatic, and mostly unconscious. System 2 is slow and deliberate, and requires deeper, more analytical thought.

When it comes to constructing an argument or message, being logically correct is not enough. While an idea may appeal to System 2, you need System 1 on board, too.

"When we look at what visionaries really succeed at, they give us a confident, consistent and coherent plan that makes us feel safe," says Odean.

> *"We trust them not because their vision is perfect, but because they have it under control. They communicate clearly without giving us all the answers. What most people think of as vision is actually persuasion."*

To be a successful entrepreneur entails much more than convincing people to buy your product or invest in your company. It means creating a deep network of connections who are enthusiastic about your idea and seeing it grow. Here are a few ideas on how to start.

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Establish credibility

In addition to pathos (the appeal to emotion), and logos (logical arguments), Aristotle believed that good character, or ethos, was one of the three main pillars of persuasive

speech. This is because no matter how well-reasoned or logical an argument is, it won't matter if the audience doesn't trust the person making it.

In his now-famous TED Talk on reforming the criminal justice system, Human Rights Attorney Bryan Stevenson opens not with a list of degrees he's earned or prestigious awards he's won, but by saying: "I spend most of my time in jails, in prisons, on death row. I spend most of my time in very low-income communities in the projects and places where there's a great deal of hopelessness."

This information is far more important to listeners who don't know who he is, or why they should trust what he's saying.

Another integral component of establishing credibility, of course, is being honest. A single lie or misrepresentation can often be enough to cause permanent harm to a professional reputation.

As Warren Buffett said: "It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it."

Really listen

When it comes to being persuasive, it's important to show people that you can provide a real solution to a problem.

To do that effectively, you have to listen to your audience to really understand what they need and how you can help.

Most of us overestimate our ability to listen. But it's an important skill to cultivate if we want to be persuasive.

When talking to someone, give them your full attention. Look them in the eye and use their name throughout the conversation. Don't interrupt. This sends the message that you value that person and their opinion.

Moreover, research shows that if you want to persuade someone, it’s better to listen carefully and respond based on their perspective. With time, the trust that is built through careful listening will enable a leader to influence decisions.

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Make your voice effective

One of the great things about the art of persuasion is that it hasn’t changed much in the last 2,000 years. That’s partially thanks to the fixed nature of our attention spans.

“Aristotle had discovered that there are fairly universal limits to the amount of information which any human can absorb and retain,” Edith Hall, a professor at King’s College, wrote in *Aristotle’s Way*. “When it comes to persuasion, less is always more.”

When making a point persuasively, Aristotle said that an argument should be expressed “as compactly and in as few words as possible.”

To do this, drop every extraneous word you can from every message you send. Because, according to Odean, if the argument you’re making is too dense, System 2 will be called in to analyze it, and System 1 won’t even have a chance to take a swing.

In that vein, Aristotle also observed that the first thing you say is the most important, since “attention slackens everywhere else rather than at the beginning.” In other words, open strong, since that’s when your audience is the most captive.

Tell a story

When appealing to childlike System 1, there’s almost nothing

more effective than a well-told story. People pay attention differently when they're hearing a narrative instead of just facts—especially when it applies directly to their interests. According to a 2014 analysis of the 500 most popular TED talks of all time, stories made up 65 percent of the average speaker's talk.

How to use storytelling for persuasion? The key is to create connections between what your audience is thinking, what they already believe, and what you *want* them to believe. Layer in facts that will add credibility, using either yourself or someone you know.

As for picking a story, a good rule of thumb is that the most personal content is the most relatable.

As TED curator Chris Anderson put it, "The stories that can generate the best connection are stories about you personally or about people close to you. Tales of failure, awkwardness, misfortune, danger or disaster, told authentically, hastens deep engagement."

Be confident

In order for others to believe in you, you have to believe in yourself.

It may sound hokey, but it's true. Think about it: Are you more likely to believe in someone who appears anxious or unsure, or someone who speaks with authority?

When you speak, people begin to make decisions as a result of the way you communicate. To project confidence, speak calmly and in clear, straightforward sentences. The goal isn't to sound like a robot, but a competent person who's prepared and informed. Try to avoid filler adjectives such as "like," "uh," and "you know." If it helps, map out what you intend to say before you say it.

Even if you’re filled with self-doubt, you can fake it — until, eventually, it feels genuine.

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