

The science behind persuasive design: Capturing the emotional triggers that will transform exploration into action

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Abstract

Today, interactions with prospective customers start on the web. This means to be useful, a website must be more than usable. It must also be engaging and persuasive, like a charismatic salesman.

Persuasive designs do not "just happen". They are derived through rigorous research identifying the emotional trig-

gers that drive a customer to commit or fears that hinder a customer from acting.

Once key emotional responses are understood, organizations can develop content and messaging strategies which employ principles of social psychology to amplifying customers motivations and minimize their concerns.

By extending the traditional usability methods into the domains of emotional response and human decision making, designers can create content that transform exploration into commitment.

Keywords

persuasive design, content, content strategy, information design, Information mapping, trust, emotion

1.0 From exploration to action

The role of organizational websites have morphed. Initially sites offered "interactive" brochures, self-serve catalogs and print-it-yourself access to reports from known sources. Today websites act as sales representative, shaping the a customer's first impression of the organization. And first impressions count. Is the organization smart? Do they understand my needs? Do they have my best interests in mind? Or is it all about the sale? Do I trust them? Do I want to do business with them?

Impression formation is fast. But it is also complex. Information that is not relevant often creeps into the impression formation process. For instance, in situations where there is a real salesman, my first impression of the salesman influences my impression of the organization. Does this person know his products/services? Is he (not just listening to, but) hearing me? How scripted pressured is our interaction? Is he diagnosing my needs and creating the right package? Or just looking for an upsell?

If you've ever encountered a "used car salesman", you know how this works.

2.0 Characteristics of good salesmen applied to websites

Good salesmen listen to learn what customers want and needs as part of the initial conversation.

They explore peoples' aspirations. But they also listen for their limits, their fears and their barriers to commitment. Good salesmen then shape the conversation to amplify the customer's desire and need to engage, explaining why the product will fulfill their needs, improve their status and/or demonstrate their good taste. The best salesmen recognize that is also important to assess and address potential customer's reservations. Through a subtle combination of assurance and social pressure salesmen shift the customers beliefs and, by extension their behavior. This transformation from exploration to action results in conversion.

To be effective today, websites need to do the same thing.

3.0 Designing persuasive websites

Creating persuasive designs extends the domain of usability beyond the website. Usability is still critically

important. Users must be able to execute key and frequent tasks easily and efficiently. But as the role of the web has expanded within the broader communication strategy, success criteria for the website has expanded. Today, effective websites influence beliefs and change behaviors.

3.1 How persuasion interviews differ

In usability research, we seek to articulate and design to the user's mental model as they complete a journey. This means asking participants to describe what they are doing and why along the way. Essentially participants "watch" themselves act, and providing a play by play for those actions. The actions are concrete and the descriptions are objective. Even so, usability interviews can be challenging. Users tend to drift down to describing their experience of the action rather than the actions themselves (see Figure 1.)

Persuasion design interviews are very different. While there may be a series of topics to explore, there is typically no specific script of questions to follow. Discovery flows via guided explorations of the participants' experiences the emo-

tions that occur beneath and before behaviors and decisions.

Precursor feelings are often difficult for participants to access or articulate. Keeping participants at this level of description often entails laddering, pressuring participants to forge into areas of self exploration. (It is important to note the difference between describing emotional but visible responses to experiences and describing abstract feelings that drive beliefs and behaviors.)

Persuasive interviews force participants into (often somewhat uncomfortable) self discovery. Participants will tend to drift back up to describing their experiences rather than the emotions surrounding it. Managing this level of interview requires an experienced, empathetic interviewer capable of gently pushing participants beyond their comfort zone while effectively managing any emotional discovery. product/services itself. Therapeutic interview training and experience is helpful.

3.2 Applying the findings to the message/content strategy

After analysis, persuasion interviews describe a set of prioritized emotional themes that must be addressed through engaging copy. The themes corresponding to the two levels of commitment, which must be addressed separately in the content.

1. Am I convinced that this product/services meets my needs? Does it fulfill a need or reduce a drive?
2. Am I convinced that this is the right organization for me to do business with? Do I trust them? Will they help me know/do what is best for me?

In today's web communication space, both are necessary and neither alone is sufficient. Most organizations know how to "sell" their products online—they have been doing that for years. Fewer organi-

zations know how to sell themselves. In the real world, a salesman strikes up a conversation with a prospective customer and, within that conversation, explores motivations and barriers to commitment. He then reshapes his pitch to address those emotions in real time.

But the web is not real time. So accomplishing a similar 'pitch' in the web space means understanding enough about your consumer segments to predict their motivations and commitment challenges to design that conversation.

4.0 From copy to persuasive content

The last step in creating persuasive copy is to apply the social psychology of influence to encourage users to take action.

Historically the web has been about getting things done. To that end, calls to action on the web have traditionally been about actions. Supporting that goal, best practices have stipulated that the calls to action (or link names) should be verbs.

In persuasive design, describing the action is not sufficient. It is also important to convey the benefits conferred by the action.

Consider this example from a prominent international professional society website site:

Join

This link leads users to information about how to join the organization and the benefits that members enjoy. The single word "join" clearly describes what user can do in section of the site. To that end, it is a very usable link. Motivated joiners will have no difficulty understanding how and where to join on this site. But the role of the web

today is not to service users motivated to convert on a known product from a known firm. Rather it is to motivate new customers to explore, tip and commit.

As such, the usable link fails to "sell" the content in that site section which, in turn, sells the professional society to explorers. Consider this alternative:

Why join?

This link is more persuasive because it conveys the information value of content in this section: learn about the benefits of membership. Framed as a question (and providing an answer), it feels more conversational that could provide the right information to tip users toward action.

Now consider the third example:

Why I joined

This final link applies principles of the social psychology of influence to make the call to action most engaging. "Why I joined" conveys that the content includes testimonials in addition to simple descriptions of the benefits. Testimonials demonstrate that other people (ideally people similar others) find membership valuable. This type of evidence, called Social Proof, helps users short-cut the evaluation-to-decision process based on the logic that if other similar people join, it must be a sensible thing to do.

5.0 From copy to persuasive content

Just as with usability, designing effective content is a two part process. First you need to understand your users emotions, aspirations and fears. Then you need to design content—or conversation—to anticipate and address those emotions. Within the design stage, social psychology strategies can be applied to amplify emotions, driving consumers toward commitment and action.