

Attitude change

If you were the communicator who needed to identify and change an attitude, how would you proceed? Here are several attitude change models that reveal some of the intricacies of both the formation and change of attitudes. The first is McGuire's model of attitude change, which offers practical insights. He identified five "steps" in persuasion and four "communication factors."⁴ The five steps are:

1. **Attention.** Persuasion cannot begin until the listener's attention has been won. Advertisers have long been familiar with attention-getting techniques.

2. **Comprehension.** For communication to be effective, it must be understood.

3. **Yielding.** The listener must yield to the idea being presented. That is, if the listener rejects the information as useless or untrue, the persuasion will not succeed.

4. **Retention.** The listener must retain the communication long enough to act upon it. If the listener fails to retain it, persuasion likely will not succeed.

5. **Action.** The measure of success is whether the listener is motivated to action by the communication.

Subsequently, McGuire expanded the model to include:

a. **Exposure.** Attention cannot be gained if the individual is not exposed to the message.

b. **Interest.** Attention is more likely gained and retained if the message is of interest to the listener.

c. **Reinforcement.** If not reinforced, a message's impact can be lost over time.

d. **Consolidation.** If the attitude-behavior is rewarding, the new attitude will more likely be persistent over time.

McGuire suggested there were four "communication factors" that would also weigh heavily in any successful persuasion:

1. **Source.** The persuader might get the listener's attention, but be rejected because of *perceived bias, personal characteristics* or perhaps *semantic noise* (some form of interference in interpreting the message the way it was intended). In other words, attention is necessary, but not alone sufficient to be persuasive.

2. **Message.** The message may interact with any of the steps of persuasion. For example, a message that gets the attention of the listener may be comprehensible but too complex to retain in sufficient detail for action.

3. **Channel.** Persuasion effectiveness might depend on how the message is transmitted. For example, a brochure might be best in one case, a film in another.

4. **Receiver.** Characteristics of the receiver, such as education, experience and personality, all have a bearing on successful communication.

McGuire subsequently added **context** to his source variables. This suggested that the context in which the persuasion was received could affect its reception.

Fishbein and Ajzen proposed a more direct approach to defining attitudes.⁵ They said attitudes are a function of a person's beliefs (cognitions) about an attitude object, and those beliefs lead to *behavioral intentions* toward the object. Unless the intention is mitigated by other some factor, it should lead to overt behavior.

Notice that a behavioral intention and an action are different. For example, to change an attitude, the communicator must change the listener's beliefs about the object, such as convincing a skeptical buyer that an expensive car is safer. In this definition, the goal is to change a person's cognitions or beliefs about X. One method is to structure communication as McGuire suggested: by winning the listener's attention; enhancing understanding, yielding and recall; and urging action.

In the mid-1980s, Petty and Cacioppo offered their "elaboration likelihood model" (ELM) of persuasion.⁶ The ELM deals with how an individual processes a message: sometimes by consciously evaluating it, sometimes unconsciously. In the ELM, the first test of a persuasive message is whether the listener is *motivated* to process it. The listener might find it relevant, might have no need for the information or might find it beyond the level of personal responsibility.⁷