

What Happens When Messages Are Repeated?

Studies of the effects of repeating a persuasive message show that over time attitude change first increases and then declines. When a message is repeated a moderate number of times, attitude change is favorable; but with more frequent exposure, however, this gain is lost. Moderate repetition allows the generation of cognitive responses that reinforce the message. With too frequent exposure, however, subjects either become bored or feel their freedom is threatened and react by generating negative thoughts. The purpose of this study was to test these ideas and to examine how persuasive effects are related to the cognitive responses receivers generate.

The method was experimental. One hundred ninety-three students were exposed to messages differing in position advocated (either pro or con existing attitudes) and in number of presentations (either one, three, or five). The design was a 2 X 3 factorial design. Six experimental conditions were prepared. One group heard a pro-attitudinal message at each exposure level.

Researchers began by preparing two relevant and well-argued messages proposing a need for increasing university funding. Both messages argued that if more funds were available, then materials and services would improve. In the pro-attitudinal condition, subjects were told this could be done without tuition increase. In the counter-attitudinal condition subjects heard that a tuition increase of \$70.00 per quarter would be necessary.

The second step was exposing subjects to the messages. Subjects heard the message over headphones in language lab cubicles. After the appropriate number of exposures, they rated agreement with the message on a 15-point scale. To measure cognitive responses, the researchers asked them to list, in 3 minutes, all their thoughts while listening to the presentation. Researchers believed that "subjects are able to report accurately their recent and current thoughts and ideas." Subjects were also asked to recall and list as many message arguments as possible. Two independent judges then read the cognitive responses and classified them as either favorable, unfavorable, or neutral. Judges were able to agree on over 95 percent of the responses.

The results supported the importance of cognitive responses during attitude change. As expected, attitude change was related both to position and frequency of exposure. There was more agreement with the pro- than the counter-attitudinal advocacy, and more favorable attitude change was found in the moderate repetition condition. More important was analysis of the recall and cognitive response data. The authors found the correlation between number of arguments recalled and attitude change was near zero, indicating that change was not due to learning. Number of responses, however, was associated with attitude change. As repetitions increased and then decreased, negative cognitions first decreased and then increased, and neutral thoughts continually increased. This indicated that moderate levels of repetition allow subjects to elaborate in message arguments, realizing their cogency and implications. At high levels, tedium

or reactance seems to motivate subjects to attach the now offensive communication by generating negative or unrelated thoughts.

Source: John T. Cacioppo and Richard E. Petty, "Effects of Message Repetition and Position on Cognitive Response, Recall, and Persuasion," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 37 (1979), 97-109.