SECOND EDITION

PERSUASIVE COMMUNICATION

How Audiences Decide

RICHARD O. YOUNG

ROUTLEDGE

PERSUASIVE COMMUNICATION

This updated and expanded edition of *Persuasive Communication* offers a comprehensive introduction to persuasion and real-world decision making. Drawing on empirical research from social psychology, neuroscience, cognitive science, and behavioral economics, Young reveals the thought processes of many different audiences—from army officers to CEOs—to help students better understand why audiences make the decisions they make and how to influence them.

The book covers a broad range of communication techniques, richly illustrated with compelling examples, including resumes, speeches, and slide presentations, to help students recognize persuasive methods that do, and do not, work. A detailed analysis of the emotions and biases that go into decision making arms students with perceptive insights into human behavior and helps them apply this understanding with various decision-making aids. Students will learn how to impact potential employers, clients, and other audiences essential to their success.

This book will prove fascinating to many, and especially useful for students of persuasion, rhetoric, and business communication.

Richard O. Young is a Professor of Management Communication at Carnegie Mellon University, USA.

Richard Young's book is the most insightful work I've read on "audience" in years. Typically audience analysis is taught by considering demographic data, the nature of relationships, and content relevance. These types of analyses do not penetrate what it means to "get inside the heads" of those one needs to persuade. Richard's book tackles this challenge adroitly.

Priscilla S. Rogers, *University of Michigan, USA*

Persuasive Communication exemplifies Richard Young's intellectual commitments: it draws deeply from research in cognitive psychology, it reflects the importance that rhetorical scholars give to audience analysis, and it illustrates the real-world situations that communicators in business settings will face.

Davida Charney, *University of Texas, USA*

Richard Young's new edition of *Persuasive Communication* will be the standard reference work on the subject of rhetorical choices in decision-making processes for years to come. The empirical data from evidence-based research, including original cognitive models of rational, intuitive, and emotional decision making give this second edition added value to students and practitioners in the field of Managerial Communication. It will be our required reference in all our Managerial Communication courses.

Frank Jaster, *Tulane University, USA*

Richard O. Young has written the go-to resource for anyone interested in audience-centered communication. In the revised edition, Young pulls together diverse threads of research and provides numerous real-world examples. Ultimately, this book will help students as well as seasoned professionals achieve their communication objectives with business audiences.

Ronald J. Placone, *Carnegie Mellon University, USA*

PERSUASIVE COMMUNICATION

How Audiences Decide

Second Edition

Richard O. Young

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

Second edition published 2017
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

First edition published by Routledge 2011

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Names: Young, Richard O. author.
Title: Persuasive communication : how audiences decide / Richard Young.
Other titles: How audiences decide
Description: 2nd edition. | New York, NY ; Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon : Routledge, 2016. | Previously published in 2011 under title: How audiences decide. | Includes bibliographical references and indexes.
Identifiers: LCCN 2016019727 | ISBN 9781138920361 (hbk) | ISBN 9781138920378 (pbk) | ISBN 9781315687117 (ebk)
Subjects: LCSH: Business communication—Psychological aspects.
Classification: LCC HF5718 .Y686 2016 | DDC 658.4/5—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2016019727

ISBN: 978-1-138-92036-1 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-138-92037-8 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-315-68711-7 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

CONTENTS

This page intentionally left blank

DETAILED CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Persuasive Communication: How Audiences Decide could not have been written without Professor Herbert Simon's groundbreaking work in human cognition or without the aid and support of my family, friends, colleagues, students, and publisher. Among the friends and colleagues who generously came to my aid, I am particularly grateful to professors Evelyn Pierce, Patricia Carpenter, Priscilla Rogers, and Sandra Collins who read and commented on early drafts of the book and who encouraged me to keep working on it. For this second edition, I also owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to professors John R. Hayes, John R. Anderson, Ron Placone, David Kaufer, Davida Charney, Julia Deems, Frank Jaster, Lili Powell, and Judy Tisdale as well as to Dr. Karen Schriver, Samuel Perl, Robert Floodeen, Jennifer Cowley, and Thomas G. Young for the many ways they supported my quest to better understand audience decision making. I am especially indebted to Dr. Cliff Parsons for his friendship and the substantive contributions he made to this book.

Perhaps my best teachers over the last 30 years have been the MBA students at the Tepper School of Business at Carnegie Mellon. I greatly appreciate all those students who collected think-aloud comments of audience members, who tested, wrote, and revised business presentations and documents, and who shared their work-related stories with me. The think-aloud comments Kirk Botula collected so many years ago opened my eyes to the significance of audience decision-making expertise. This volume also owes a special debt to Aaron Oh and his teammates, Andrew Bennett and his teammates, Kurt Ernst, Alan Michaels, and Matt Lysaught and their teammates, to Vero Anderson, Raphael Matarazzo, and Louis Zaretsky and their teammates, to Eric Schwalm, Stephen Kraus, Kalpesh Dadbhawala, Dominic Joseph, Laurie Barkman, Pradeep U. N., William Pomper, Sung-Ju Pak, Kirk Pond, Jack Deem, and Noriko Sasaki, and to several other wonderful former students whose names now escape me.

Rosemarie Lang, Carol Salerno, Phil Conley, and my copy editor Lana Arndt all put in many long hours preparing the manuscript of the second edition for publication. And thanks to my publisher Sharon Golan and her colleagues Erin Arata, Olivia Hatt, and Autumn Spalding, the manuscript made its way from acquisition to publication without a hitch.

Barbara J. O'Brien Young helped me every step of the way, listening patiently to me explain each new problem I encountered and rejoicing with me in each new insight. To her I am forever grateful.

INTRODUCTION

It's a commonly held belief that knowing your audience—your readers, listeners, viewers, and conversational partners—is the key to persuasive communication. But what does "knowing your audience" really mean? Does it mean knowing your audience's name, age, gender, and socioeconomic status?

This book shows that if you want to be persuasive the most important thing you need to know about your audience is how your audience makes decisions. And it demonstrates with numerous examples and research findings that when experienced and otherwise highly skilled professionals—CEOs, medical doctors, magazine publishers—fail to grasp how their audiences make decisions they also fail to persuade them.

Part I encompasses the first four chapters of the book and describes how audiences make rational decisions. Chapter 1 explains what audiences already know about making rational decisions. Whether you ask your audience to try out a new product, vote for a political candidate, approve a loan, take a prescribed medicine, convict a felon, acquire a new firm, or reply to an ad in the personal columns, many members of your audience will already know what type of information they need in order to make a good decision. What's more, they will expect you to provide that information to them.

Chapter 2 describes 13 major types of decisions that professionals from a wide range of fields routinely ask their audiences to make and outlines the audience's information requirements for each decision type. Chapter 3 presents a simple model of audience decision making and explains why you need to attend to each of the six cognitive processes in it. Chapter 4 reviews communication techniques that help make rational decision making easy for audiences and demonstrates that different techniques enable different cognitive processes to operate more efficiently.

If audiences were entirely logical, an understanding of how they make rational decisions would suffice. But audiences base their decisions on intuitions and emotions as well as sound reasoning. Part II consists of Chapters 5 and 6 and describes how audiences make intuitive decisions, decisions based on their subjective feelings. Chapter 5 shows that the same communication techniques that make audience decision making easy also make your messages to them more intuitively appealing. Chapter 6 explains how your audience's subjective feelings about you as a person, as opposed to the information you communicate to them, influence and bias their decisions.

Part III consists of the final chapter of the book and describes the role of emotions in audience decision making. It demonstrates that when you are able to evoke the values of your audience, their decision-making process becomes truncated and their emotions come to dominate the decisions they make. Moreover, it shows that different emotions affect audience decisions in different ways. Taken together, the three parts of the book give a complete picture of audiences as decision makers. The three parts explain how audiences make decisions with their head, gut, and heart, based on appeals to what the ancient Greeks termed *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*.

Most of the chapters of the book include *think-aloud protocols* of real audience members using real documents to make decisions. Think-aloud protocols are verbatim transcripts of people thinking aloud as they make decisions or solve problems. Think-aloud protocols have been used to investigate decision making in an ever-increasing number of areas including chess,[1] writing,[2] policy-making,[3] business,[4] law,[5] and most recently, cyber security.[6]

In this book, think-aloud protocols provide a unique window on audience decision making. They reveal the information an audience considers to be important when making a particular decision, as well as the information it considers to be irrelevant, the information it has difficulty comprehending, and much more. Exposure to think-aloud protocols of audiences has been shown to improve communication skills. College students given think-aloud protocols of audiences reading one set of documents made dramatic gains in their ability to predict problems that audiences would have with another set of documents of the same genre.[7]

The book as a whole draws on a vast research literature and summarizes relevant theories and findings from the fields of social cognition, leadership, consumer behavior, decision science, behavioral economics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, affective science, cognitive science, and neuroscience. It delves into the hearts and minds of a wide array of audiences: from Wall Street analysts to viewers of the evening news, from army officers to hospital patients, from venture capitalists to grocery shoppers, from CEOs to college admissions officers, from corporate recruiters to mock jurors. It surveys a broad range of communication techniques—including those concerning speaking and writing, interviews and group meetings, leading and critical thinking, content and style, verbal and nonverbal behaviors, the use of charts and images, the construction of rational arguments and emotional appeals—and examines the empirical evidence supporting each of them.

If you agree that the key to persuasive communication is knowing your audience, if you are looking for techniques to influence the decisions your audiences make, and if you want a scientific understanding of why those techniques work, then *Persuasive Communication: How Audiences Decide* is the introduction to persuasive communication for you.

Notes

1 e.g., de Groot, A. D. (1965). *Thought and choice in chess.* The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton.
2 e.g., Flower, L. S., & Hayes, J. R. (1978). The dynamics of composing: Making plans and juggling constraints. In L. Gregg & I. Steinberg (Eds.), *Cognitive processes in writing* (pp. 31–50). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
3 e.g., Voss, J. F., Greene, T. R., Post, T. A., & Penner, B. C. (1983). Problem solving skill in the social sciences. In G. H. Bower (Ed.), *The psychology of learning and motivation: Advances in research theory* (Vol. 17, pp. 165–213). New York: Academic Press.
4 e.g., Hall, J., & Hofer, C. W. (1993). Venture capitalists' decision criteria in new venture evaluation. *Journal of Business Venturing*, *8*(1), 25–42.
5 e.g., Wright, D. B., & Hall, M. (2007). How a "reasonable doubt" instruction affects decisions of guilt. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, *29*(1), 91–98.
6 e.g., Perl, S., & Young, R. O. (2015, June). *A cognitive study of incident handling expertise.* Presented at the Annual Forum of Incident Response and Security Teams (FIRST) Conference, Berlin, Germany.
7 e.g., Schriver, K. A. (1992). Teaching writers to anticipate readers' needs: A classroom-evaluated pedagogy. *Written Communication, 9*(2), 179–208.

PART I

Understanding Rational Decision Making

This page intentionally left blank

1

AUDIENCE DECISION-MAKING EXPERTISE

In June 2008, a sourcing manager for a large networking company was asked to find a new subcontractor. The subcontractor had to be capable of designing an essential hardware component for one of the firm's multimillion-dollar networking projects. Although the firm had never contracted out the design of this component before, the sourcing manager soon found three interested design firms who appeared to be good candidates for the job.

In his initial discussions with the salespeople from each design firm via email or phone, the sourcing manager explained the goals of the project and gave them the information they would need to evaluate the opportunity they were being offered, such as the forecasted demand, the timeline expectations, and the technical performance requirements. In order to expedite his selection process, the sourcing manager also sent each sales team the following questions to be answered in a crisp one-hour meeting:

- How would you describe your company?
- How complex were your past projects, and when were they completed?
- How long did it take you to complete the projects?
- Were they completed on schedule?
- What kind of issues came up, and how did you overcome them?
- What do you see as the biggest risks, and how would you mitigate them?

The VP of Sales for the first design firm and his team of technical experts spent most of their hour-long meeting presenting an overview of their company. The sourcing manager reiterated his need to get answers to the rest of his questions. So the VP requested another meeting to answer them. The manager told the VP that he did not have time for another meeting. Later, when the VP sent emails and left voicemails asking for another meeting, the sourcing manager politely declined once again.

The salespeople who represented the second design firm were equally disappointing. They spent about half their allotted time giving an overview of their company and then asked the sourcing manager to supply more details about his firm's project. The sourcing manager declined to tell them more and spent the remainder of the hour re-asking his initial questions.

After the meeting, he wondered whether he wanted to work with a company that needed him to repeat his criteria for choosing a subcontractor.

The sales team for the third design firm was different. They addressed every one of the sourcing manager's questions during their one-hour meeting with him. They willingly disclosed the issues that had come up in similar projects just as the manager had requested, giving them added credibility in the manager's eyes. In addition, the third sales team asked relevant questions about the firm's objective for pursuing this particular networking project, the firm's required pricing, and the features they desired.

It should come as no surprise that the sourcing manager recommended the third design firm to his upper management. The favorable impression made by that firm's sales team led to two significant contracts for the design firm totaling $15 million per year or $80 million over the lifetime of the project.

Although most audiences do not spell out their information requirements as clearly as the sourcing manager did for the three sales teams who presented to him, we can still learn several lessons from this true story. One of the most important lessons we can learn is that experienced audiences, like the sourcing manager, already know what information they need from other professionals in order to make the types of decisions they make routinely. What's more, experienced audiences may judge the quality of a recommendation or firm on the basis of how thoroughly, efficiently, and honestly business people and other professionals address their information needs. Chapter 1 amplifies these lessons. It describes the nature of audience expertise in decision making and what professionals in many fields need to know about it in order to be persuasive.

The audiences of professionals include all the people who read the documents professionals write, attend the presentations professionals give, and listen to what professionals have to say either in person or on the phone. Some important audiences of business executives are board members, stockholders, customers, employees, bankers, suppliers, distributors, and Wall Street analysts. Some important audiences of physicians are patients, residents, nurses, pharmacists, hospital administrators, health insurance companies, state medical boards, and government agencies. A few of the important audiences of judges are litigants, attorneys, legal academics, other judges, ideological groups, and think tanks.[1]

Audiences use the documents, presentations, and other information that professionals convey to make informed decisions. Board members use executives' strategic plans to decide whether to allow management to pursue a new strategic direction. Consumers use manufacturers' advertisements, packaging, product brochures, and warranties to decide whether to purchase a product. Bankers use entrepreneurs' proposals for credit lines to decide whether to extend credit. Undecided voters use politicians' campaign speeches to decide whether to vote for a particular candidate. Even U.S. Army personnel do not blindly obey the orders of superior officers but use their directives to make decisions, decisions that might surprise the officers who issued the orders.[2] Research finds that 78% to 85% of all the reading employees do at work is for the purpose of making decisions and taking immediate action. In contrast, only 15% of the reading students do is for that purpose—students read primarily to learn and to recall later.[3]

Sometimes audience members make decisions as individuals, and at other times they make decisions as a group, usually after much discussion and debate. For example, jurors decide as a group whether defendants are guilty or innocent, school board members decide as a group which curricula can be taught in local schools, legislators decide as a group which bills to pass into law, and faculty selection committee members decide as a group which candidates to hire. Most strategic business decisions are made by groups, as opposed to individuals.[4] In all these cases, group members interact with each other, playing the roles of both communicators and audience members. As communicators, group members make arguments to the other group members for or against alternative proposals. As audience members, group members help decide which of the proposals made to the group is best.

Understanding audiences as decision makers differs dramatically from viewing them as passive receivers or decoders of information, the conventional view unintentionally inspired by the field of information theory.[5] Understanding that many audience members are expert at making the decisions professionals want them to make differs even more profoundly from the notion that audiences are empty cups waiting to be filled with the communicator's knowledge about a topic.

Audiences gain decision-making expertise as they make a particular type of decision repeatedly. For example, consumers, a primary audience of computer manufacturers, develop expertise that helps them choose the best computer after buying and using several different computers. Board members, a primary audience of business executives, develop expertise that helps them decide which new management proposal merits their approval by attending numerous board meetings. Voters, a primary audience of politicians, develop expertise that helps them decide which political candidate most deserves their vote by reading the news and voting regularly.

With time and experience many audience members learn how to make good decisions. More specifically, they learn what information to look for in a document or presentation and what questions to pose in meetings and conversations. Of course, audiences will sometimes lack the expertise they need to make some decisions. In these cases, audience members are dependent upon others to tell them what information they need to consider in order to ensure their decisions are well informed.

This chapter shows that professionals who understand audience decision-making expertise are in a good position to give novice or inexperienced audiences the information they need to make informed decisions. The before and after examples of documents in this chapter and others show that professionals who understand audience decision-making expertise are also in a good position to select and deliver the information expert audiences will find most relevant and persuasive.

Decision Criteria of Expert Audiences

Decision Criteria: The Audience's Mental Checklist of Questions

As audience members become expert at making a particular type of decision, they develop a set of *decision criteria.* Top management teams use decision criteria, both quantitative and qualitative, to make corporate financing decisions.[6] Experienced consumers typically decide whether to purchase products based on decision criteria regarding the product's price, quality, reliability, and warranty. Similarly, experienced board members decide whether to approve management's plans based on decision criteria regarding the plan's projected profitability, strategy, action items, and proposed source of financing. Even members of the public use decision criteria regarding the economy, international relations, and the environment when asked to rate U.S. presidents.[7] As the previous examples illustrate, different types of decisions require audiences to use different decision criteria. A job applicant does not use the same decision criteria to decide whether to accept a new job that a banker uses to decide whether to call an overdue loan.

Decision criteria for any particular type of decision can be thought of as a mental checklist of questions expert audience members want answers to before they make that decision.[8] For example, experienced used car buyers want answers to questions such as "What is the car's make, model, and year?" "What is its mileage?" "What condition is the car in?" "What is the car's maintenance history?" "What accessories are included?" and "What is the asking price?" before they are willing to purchase a used car. Decision criteria such as these guide the information search of expert audience members for the relatively small amounts of specific information upon which their decisions will be based.[9]

Because expert audiences possess decision criteria, they notice when important information about any option or alternative they are considering is missing.[10] If important information about an alternative is not available, they tend to discount the value of that alternative or reject it outright.[11] For example, if an experienced used car buyer is unable to determine the mileage on a particular used car, it is unlikely she will consider purchasing it.

Because expert audiences know exactly what type of information they are looking for, they may not read a document from start to finish but may jump around in it in order to more rapidly acquire the information each decision criterion demands.[12] For example, expert business appraisers jump around in the documents they are given to more quickly locate the information they need to evaluate the worth of a company.[13] During a presentation, expert audience members may ask questions or interrupt a presenter to more quickly gain the information they require.[14]

As soon as they find the answers to their decision criteria or mental checklist of questions, expert audience members stop searching and make their decisions.[15] Although experts in corporate real estate disposition ask many short-answer questions about each property under consideration, they make their decision to dispose of a property as soon as they acquire the answers to all of their questions.[16]

The Number of Decision Criteria in Audience Decisions

Audiences' mental checklists of decision criteria do not appear to be long or complex. Even when they are given large amounts of relevant information, expert audiences rarely use more than a few criteria to make their decisions.[17]

For most decisions, expert audiences seem to seek answers to only six or seven basic questions.[18] For example, expert investors selecting stocks use six "general evaluative factor categories," or decision criteria, that include both accounting and nonaccounting information.[19] CFOs and VPs of Development use six basic criteria, or "lines of reasoning," to make acquisition decisions as they read company descriptions: the strategic fit of the candidate with the acquirer, the competitive environment of the candidate, the management expertise of the candidate, the financial condition of the candidate and terms of the deal, the operational capabilities of the candidate, and the synergies between the candidate and the acquirer.[20] The overwhelming majority (94%) of comments expert venture capitalists make when screening business plans focus on only seven factors other than the way the plan is presented: the market, the product, the management, the company, the financials, the board of directors, and the terms of the deal.[21]

Other expert audiences also rely on a finite list of criteria to make decisions. A study of the selection criteria of more than 400 top executives finds they have 6.7 requirements on average that they look for in candidates for top leadership positions. Listed in order the top seven requirements are the following: specific functional background, managerial skills, interpersonal skills, communication skills, technical knowledge, leadership skills, and team skills.[22] U.S. Army officers use a core set of six criteria to evaluate noncommissioned officers: initiative, responsibility, organizational skills, technical proficiency, assertive leadership skills, and supportive leadership skills.[23]

A study comparing the commercial lending decisions of 10 real estate banking lenders and 10 private banking lenders finds that on average, the real estate lenders spend more than 30 seconds on just seven pieces of information—the guarantor's income statement, the guarantor's balance sheet, the project's rent roll, the project's profit/loss statement, the market demographics, the project's pro forma profit/loss statement, and the market rents. Private banking lenders, on the other hand, spend more than 30 seconds on only two pieces of information—the guarantor's income statement and balance sheet. Both groups of lenders use other available pieces of information much less if at all.[24]

Consumers also use a limited number of decision criteria when deciding to purchase goods and services. Although the typical American consumer is exposed to 300 advertisements per day,[25] consumers consider only a small proportion of the available information relevant to the products and services they buy.[26] Even when they are presented with a great deal of product information, consumers usually rely upon a common, small set of criteria to make their decisions.[27]

Under time constraints audiences may use even fewer criteria when making a decision. For example, most consumers do not use information about energy efficiency when under time pressure to choose a new refrigerator even though the information is prominently displayed on each new refrigerator's door.[28] Given their busy schedules, managers sometimes opt to base their business decisions on a single financial criterion such as a discounted cash flow or cost-based calculation. However, considering multiple criteria, both financial and nonfinancial, tends to produce superior results even for relatively routine business decisions such as supplier selection and evaluation.[29]

Metrics and Tests That Operationalize Decision Criteria

Although audiences seem to seek answers to only six or seven basic questions, each question may subsume several related or follow-up questions that operationalize or better define it. Audiences operationalize and elaborate on their decision criteria via *metrics* and *tests*. Metrics and tests indicate more specifically what audience members are looking for when they ask a decision-making question.

Metrics are quantitative in nature and provide results that can be measured and compared with other quantitative data. For example, many car buyers make their purchasing decision in part on the basis of the car's reliability. Metrics indicating the reliability of the various models under consideration might include the average number of days in the shop per year, the average number of repairs per year, and the average cost of repairs per year. Metrics indicating a firm's profitability might include its net income for the year, its return on equity, its return on assets, and its economic value added, to name a few. Metrics that sales force managers use to measure the productivity of their salespeople include sales volume, number of orders, profitability of sales, and the percentage of sales quotas attained.[30]

Unlike metrics, tests are qualitative in nature. For example, to test if management has recommended a reasonable competitive strategy, board members may try to determine if the strategy builds on the firm's core competency, offers a distinct competitive advantage, and matches the management's corporate objectives.

Metrics and tests are especially helpful for making decisions about difficult-to-describe sensory attributes such as the feel of a shirt, the comfort of a mattress, the fragrance of a perfume, the taste of a wine, or the sound quality of a stereo. Lacking the appropriate metrics and tests, consumers of products with attributes like these are more prone to trust biased product advertising than their own experience trying out the products.[31] However, if consumers are provided with metrics and tests that allow them to rate the sensory attributes of the products themselves, they make better decisions. In a study that provided novice consumers of stereos with one metric and two tests of a stereo's sound quality (the number of instruments audible, the sound's clarity, and the sound's "full-bodyness"), the consumers not only discounted misleading marketing information, they placed more weight on their own ratings of the stereos' sound quality when making their purchasing decisions. Ultimately, these consumers purchased higher quality stereos than they would have purchased otherwise.[32]

The Similarity of Decision Criteria Among Audience Members

What makes knowing an audience's decision criteria so useful to professionals is the fact that different expert audience members tend to use the same decision criteria to make similar types of decisions. Knowing how expert audiences make decisions would not be very useful if every individual audience member used different criteria when making the same type of decision. But studies of experienced audience members making decisions show they are highly constrained by the type of decision they make. For example, experienced investors of any age, nationality, political party, gender, education level, or income bracket all use the same basic criteria to evaluate a business plan before writing the entrepreneur a check.[33] If they forget to evaluate the nature of the new business, the management team's experience, the projected sales, ROI, and so on, then they know from experience that they are very likely to lose their money. And this is one thing few investors care to do! Similarly, studies of jurors making decisions find that most demographic variables—including the juror's gender, age, intelligence, marital status, race, and occupation—rarely have any significant impact on the verdicts they hand down.[34]

The commonality of decision criteria among experts in a field is a robust research finding. Public school administrators use similar decision criteria to make budget decisions.[35] Computer experts use similar decision criteria and give each criterion similar weight when selecting hardware and software products.[36] Middle school principals use similar criteria when hiring new teachers and, surprisingly, are not influenced by the unique characteristics of their schools.[37] Organizational buyers in the United States and Germany use the same five criteria when choosing domestic suppliers: quality, price, firm characteristics, vendor reputation/past business, and vendor attitude.[38] Finance directors from both U.S. and UK multinational corporations making overseas financing decisions use similar decision criteria and give each criterion similar weight.[39] Consumers use similar decision criteria for deciding among brands of exercise equipment in different product categories and use them consistently.[40] Consumers also use similar decision criteria, in this case similar product attributes, when choosing among brands within other product classes.[41]

Experts in other fields also use similar criteria to make similar decisions. For example, pharmacists use the same four to six criteria when deciding whether to counsel a patient on a prescription: indication, the patient's age, drug interactions, adverse reactions, new prescription versus refill, and the number of medications currently being taken.[42] U.S. apparel manufacturers use virtually identical criteria when they decide whether to outsource production to other countries. The criteria they most commonly use include price, quality, technology access, and lead time, as well as criteria related to the specific sourcing country, such as absence of labor disputes, proximity to the market, and cultural similarity.[43] Financial analysts employed by different financial institutions use similar types and amounts of information to assess a company's earning power.[44] As one researcher noted, "[The analysts from different banks] seemed to be discussing many of the same issues and offering similar insights to one another."[45] And as a review of the literature on venture capitalists' decision making reports, among the three most complete studies reviewed[46] "the most important area of consensus is the identity of the venture capitalists' criteria."[47]

Audience Expectations Based on Decision Criteria

Expert audiences expect professionals to address their decision criteria and are more likely to be persuaded by those who do. Jurors are more likely to be persuaded by fellow jurors whose arguments address their verdict criteria than by jurors who base their arguments on other grounds.[48] Both corporate recruiters and line managers rate job applicants' résumés more highly when the résumés address the criteria they have determined to be critical for success on the job.[49] Moreover, recruiters rate job applicants more highly when the applicants come to the job interview prepared to address their decision criteria.[50] Unfortunately, job applicants are usually prepared to address only one-third to one-half of the decision criteria recruiters use to evaluate them.[51]

Expert audiences in other fields also expect professionals to address their decision criteria. Buyers are more likely to purchase products from salespeople who accurately ascertain and explain the product attributes, or decision criteria, that are important to them.[52] Like the sourcing manager in the story at the beginning of this chapter, purchasing agents rate salespeople's effectiveness more highly when salespeople accurately assess their purchasing criteria.[53] Surprisingly, a salesperson's level of motivation has a negative relationship to purchasing agents' evaluations of their effectiveness. Other attributes of salespeople such as their personality traits, job tenure, and selling experience have little if any effect on their sales performance.[54]

Wall Street analysts expect firms to disclose specific financial and nonfinancial information pertaining to their decision criteria and may penalize firms that fail to do so. As one analyst notes, "Analysts are always skeptical that if you're not giving out the information perhaps it's because you overpaid for something or there's some other reason." Another analyst observed that when firms "didn't provide us with a lot of information, it was normally a sign that they didn't have a lot of good information themselves."[55]

Effective "issue selling," or focusing a group's attention on needed change within an organization, depends on one group's ability to address another group's decision criteria. A case study of issue selling in a large chip manufacturing firm tells the story of a group composed of only 11 members that was tasked with reducing the emissions of the firm's manufacturing processes. Initially, the small group was unsuccessful at convincing the firm's 1,500-person technology group to make the needed changes. The small group finally convinced their audience to make the necessary changes when they stopped enumerating the environmental benefits of lowering emissions and addressed the larger group's technical decision criteria for changing manufacturing processes instead.[56]

One important function of management consultants is to inform clients of the decision criteria of the clients' expert audiences. A study comparing an expert management consultant to a freshly minted MBA who had just been hired by a top consulting firm asked both the expert and novice consultants to analyze two actual business plans and to give advice to the entrepreneurs who wrote them. The expert consultant based his advice on the decision criteria of venture capitalists—entrepreneurs often send their business plans to venture capitalists in hopes of raising money for their new businesses. The expert consultant first explained to the entrepreneur the problems a venture capitalist would have with her current plan. He then helped her discover how she could change her business plan to satisfy the venture capitalist's decision criteria. For example, she could find a partner who possessed the business experience she lacked. In contrast, the new MBA relied on his function area or textbook knowledge to advise his client and never mentioned venture capitalists or their decision criteria. For the expert consultant the client's business problem was identical to her rhetorical problem—how to satisfy a venture capitalist's decision criteria. For the new MBA, the