Elaboration Likelihood Model [ELM]

Idea In Short

Persuasion occurs internally. You can persuade someone who trusts you by appealing with a convincing argument, backed up with solid facts, accessing emotions. However, nobody can hope to persuade anybody with 100% guaranteed success: you can only design for persuasion. Ultimately, that audience member (or user) has to persuade himself / herself of the validity of your message. This is where the Elaboration Likelihood Model [ELM] comes in.

You can think of elaboration as referring to how much conscious thought you put into making a decision. If you elaborate on something, then it means you are really thinking about it. If you're highly interested in a topic and have the ability to think about your decision, then you will be likely to elaborate on your decision. In this case, persuasion will occur using what the model calls central route processing. You will examine and weigh up the information carefully before making your decision. Conversely, if the decision is less important to you or you have little time available to think about it, you won't invest much or any time elaborating on your decision. In this case, persuasion will occur using what the model calls peripheral route processing. You'll be influenced by associating the decision with positive or negative cues or by using cognitive cues.

Origins

Developed in the mid-1970s by the co-founder of the field of social neuroscience, John Cacioppo, and Richard Petty, a distinguished psychology professor at Chicago University, the Elaboration Likelihood Model [ELM] seeks to explain how humans process stimuli differently and the outcomes of these processes on changing attitudes, and, consequently, behavior. They noticed that previous persuasion theories gave conflicting results and developed the model to explain better how people are persuaded. They did this by proposing two routes of persuasion that the results of previous studies can fall into.

The model

The ELM posits that when a persuader presents information to an audience, a level of elaboration results. Elaboration refers to the amount of effort an audience member has to use in order to process and evaluate a message, remember it, and then accept or reject it. Specifically, the ELM has determined that when facing a message, people react by using either of two channels (but sometimes a combination of both, too), reflecting the level of effort they need. As such, they either experience high or low elaboration, and whichever of these will determine whether they use central or peripheral route processing. If elaboration is high, then you will process the decision through your central route. If elaboration is low, you'll process the decision through your peripheral route.

Likelihood of elaboration

To determine which route to use, the model says that three factors determine whether your elaboration is likely to be high. These are:

1. Motivation
2. Ability
3. Opportunity

Motivation

If you have a high desire to process the message you're receiving, then your motivation will be high. For example, imagine the government announced new tax reliefs for recently married couples. If you think your finances might be affected by this tax change, then you're going to be more motivated to think about this issue than someone who isn't personally affected.

Ability

Even if we want to elaborate, it can be difficult if we don't have the ability. This can happen when, for example, you're in a noisy environment, or when you don't have enough knowledge about a subject to be able to think deeply about it.

Opportunity

Having the opportunity means you have the time available to receive the message, process it, and then make your decision.

Routes

Central Route Processing

Central route processing happens when elaboration is higher. Here, the audience scrutinizes the message's contents because of a high motivation level. They know what's important to them. Consequently, they invest in examining the message. Using central route processing, they will carefully listen to the message and evaluate the pros and cons before making a decision. Central route processing requires conscious thought and critical thinking. To be able to process in this way, the audience must be motivated, have the ability, and the opportunity. They will also be more likely to focus and ignore distractions as they seek their goals. Through central route processing, you can form attitudes and even beliefs. Views formed through central route processing tend to be long-lasting. When you create an attitude or view in this way, you're less likely to change your mind about it later and more likely to behave in ways that match your new position.

Peripheral Route Processing

Peripheral route processing involves a low level of elaboration. The audience is not scrutinizing the message for its effectiveness. As such, other factors can influence him / her, including distractions. These include such users as those who know that they want, but do not know much about the details. For example, someone wanting a new laptop that's good but cheap is more likely to process by the peripheral route than one who is knowledgeable about the specific features of laptops. When one or more of motivation, ability, or opportunity is missing or low, then you're more likely to process information via the peripheral route. Using the peripheral route you're not consciously examining information, and you'll often make your decision based on:

- Positive or negative cues you've picked up
- Rules of thumb
- What you've seen others do

In essence, you're trying to decide without investing any real thinking time. Peripheral route processing is essential because you simply don't have time to consider every decision you

make carefully. By making the minor decisions on auto-pilot using peripheral processing, you free up more time to think about the more significant decisions you need to make. Because you haven't invested any real effort into the decision making processes, you don't cling to attitudes formed using this route as strongly as you would if the central route had created those attitudes. Note that the two routes are not binary options, we can use both at the same time. Sometimes we might mostly use central route processing with a little bit of peripheral route processing. Sometimes we might mostly use Peripheral route processing with a little bit of central route processing. Both exist on a sliding scale.

Advantages

The model gives you a framework by which you can assess how best to persuade someone. It is possible to use both the central route and peripheral route persuasion at the same time.

Disadvantages

The model doesn't state when to use a particular form of persuasion, merely that the best model to use will be dependent on the elaboration level of the message recipient. More of a criticism than a disadvantage, but the model is based on the assumption that attitudes formed through central route processing will be stronger and harder to alter. When wishing to persuade a low elaborator, there is no indication of what's the best way to do this. Going back to our shampoo example, seeing your favorite celebrity might nudge you towards buying, but perhaps if you dislike the music in the ad it might nudge you away from buying.

Summary

The elaboration likelihood model is a theory of persuasion that explains that you can motivate people via one of two processing routes. When elaboration is higher, people use central route processing requiring conscious cognition. Conversely, when elaboration is lower, people use peripheral route processing where they are influenced by rules of thumb and what they have observed others doing.