Top Ten Persuasive Strategies Used on the Web
- Cathy SooHoo, 5/17/01

Introduction
Although there is nothing new about the human use of persuasive strategies, web technologies usher forth a new level of persuasive possibilities. Many aspects of these technologies, defined here as Internet-based software and hardware whose output is dependent on user input, can augment well-known persuasive tactics as well as create “new” strategies not easily implemented before the availability of interactive web technologies.

10. Moral Appeal
The use of moral appeal as a persuasive strategy takes on even greater weight when combined with the capabilities of interactive web technologies. By incorporating simulations of what could happen if the user does not comply (millions will die, children will starve, the rainforest will disappear), tailoring information to your local situation (www.unitedway.org), and other persuasive strategies, users may feel more compelled to listen to and act on moral appeal.

Example
The Kids AIDS Site (along with the five other web sites produced by greatergood.com) take moral appeal to a new level by showing interactive animations on the number of children infected daily with HIV. Coupled with the strong emotional appeal and the reduction technique (just one click to donate care for HIV infected children), it is nearly impossible to resist clicking. And it’s not too far away to buying items on the site to help those in need.
9. Allurement

A big part of the web’s allure is knowing that there is so much information out there – any piece of information a user seeks is only (perhaps) a few clicks away. The potential promise of finding what you always wanted to know, need to know right now, or something you didn’t even know you were looking for keep users endlessly clicking in a site.

Example

At Learn2.com the allure of finding information on how to “appreciate beer” to learning Microsoft FrontPage entices people to stay and look around the site. Haven’t you always wanted to learn how to X? It is likely that you’ll find the answer at this site. “We offer thousands of free, step-by-step tutorials, tips, and Q&A forums for everyday life, and thousands of affordable online, CD-ROM, and video courses that will enhance your business skills.”
8. Credibility
Credibility is an especially important issue on the web. With so many web sites on the Internet how is a user to know which ones are trustworthy and which give false or unreliable information? A user is more likely to comply with a behavior, if he/she believes the author of the message is credible.

Examples
One way to establish credibility is to demonstrate expertise. Although most users cannot get medical advice from Dr. C. Everett Koop in person, they are able to read content and advice supposedly approved the good doctor. With the backing of the former Surgeon General the information on this site must be accurate, right? When trust is established, the user is more likely to comply.

Another way sites attempt to establish credibility is by having the “seal of approval” from certain organizations such as the BBB. “BBBOnLine's mission is to promote trust and confidence on the Internet through the BBBOnLine Reliability and BBBOnLine Privacy programs.” (www.bbbonline.com)
7. Recognition - Positive/Negative Esteem
On the web, users can receive public recognition from viewers around the world. Using the same idea as posting a “student of the month” award at a school, the web takes positive recognition even further by providing a much wider audience. Negative recognition by a worldwide audience may also persuade users to change behaviors to gain more positive esteem (avoid negative esteem) from others (Stiff, 1994).

Example
The Environmental Protection Agency runs a partnership program with organizations in industry “to achieve measurable environmental results in a timely and cost-effective way”. Membership and compliance is completely voluntary. The EPA encourages businesses (over 7,000 thus far) to join by recognizing these companies on their web site. One of the major reasons most companies join is to promote positive esteem from the public.
6. Self-Monitoring
Self-monitoring through interactive technologies can provide users up-to-date information on their behaviors, health, progress on a certain task, or any other information that can be tracked. Partially relying on reduction, self-monitoring makes it much easier for a user to see their health, behavior, or progress levels, which can empower users to change the intended behavior (Skinner and Kreuter, 1997).

Example
SportBrain combines a small device worn on the body that dynamically tracks your exercise/activity with the ability to monitor your data via the web. Looking at how little activity a user might performs in a day, shown as a flat graph, might encourage a user to get more exercise. The SportBrain web site makes their persuasive strategies quite clear:

- Actually see your progress in black and white (and color!)
- Understand how your everyday activity contributes to your overall fitness
- Compare yourself to other members - and strive to beat the average
- Earn rewards for achieving your goals
- Share and compare with your friends and family - and encourage each other

(An especially noteworthy persuasive strategy is the product's claim "As seen on Oprah!")
5. Social Proof
Much of what we do is based on what we observe others doing in the same situation, taking on behaviors and attitudes that we believe to be appropriate. The *more people* we see performing an action, the more we believe that action must be the right thing to do (Cialdini, 1999). The web can be used to leverage social proof by showing the user how many millions of other people that visit the site, buy a certain product, and tout the site’s wonderful qualities (testimonials). The idea is the same as used on the Home Shopping Network, infomercials, and on public TV fund drives (“1,000 have already sent in their money!”), but the number of people participating on the web increases dramatically, which in turn increases the social proof that compliance is the “right thing to do.”

**Example**
Many web sites, including CyberRebate.com take advantage of social proof. These sites often have “Top Selling Product” lists, suggesting that because 1 million others have bought this product it must be a worthwhile purchase. Another feature of many web sites is a testimonial section (named “Happy Customers” in the example below). Supposedly real customers send in rave reviews of the product and/or service, attempting to convince the user that the sites’ claims are legitimate.
4. Reduction
Interactive web technologies can greatly increase user compliance by reducing the steps and barriers needed to comply. It becomes much easier to persuade someone to perform the intended behavior by making the process so easy they hardly have to put any effort (mental, physical, or emotional) into it.

Example
Hallmark makes it easy to find the perfect gift for your loved one by reducing the effort and frustration involved with gift buying. A combination of tailoring technology and a likable “Gift Assistant” make the process much simpler. No need to search the malls anymore, the user can sit back in his/her chair, choose one of the recommendations, and have it shipped to their loved one in a matter of minutes.
3. Simulations
One of the greatest advantages of simulations is the ability to show cause-and-effect relationships based on the user’s actions. This highly interactive technology, both on and off the web, allows the user to practice behaviors virtually, model real world situations, and see the consequences of their decisions in a safe environment. Simulations can be designed to positively influence the user’s outcome and self-efficacy expectations to increase the likelihood that the user will change their behavior (Efficacy Theory, Skinner and Kreuter, 1997).

Example
A water balance simulation asks students to choose activities (drink, eat, rest) and gives them a variety of choices (beer, water, juice, oyster, fish, banana). The goal is to keep the character alive for as many days as possible on a stranded island. A health meter and activity log track their progress. An important lesson is how much water we need to drink each day to stay healthy. An added feature recognizes the student who has “lived the longest” (See Strategy #7 Recognition).
2. Intrinsic Motivation
Interactive technologies can be used to create engaging adventure worlds that increase intrinsic motivation to comply with a target behavior (Malone and Lepper, 1987). The three main components of a successful persuasive environment are 1) providing the fantasy environment 2) giving the user control over the environment 3) giving the user positive reinforcement for performing the target behavior (King and Tester, 1999). Flash, Director and other highly graphical interfaces can be used to create such interactive environments over the web.

Example
Osmosis Jones provides a fun fantasy world in which the user is submersed in the human body, “the city of Frank.” Although the games are not currently on the web, the designers could easily use the metaphor of traveling through the body (as you would in a city) to engage users to learn about the human body. If the target behavior is learning, then Osmosis Jones may be used as an extremely engaging environment for users to simulate moving in different paths within the human body.
1. Tailoring
Personalized information usually “receives more attention – and is therefore potentially more persuasive – than general information.” (King and Tester, 1999) Interactive web technologies provide an easy and efficient way for users to input personal information and receive tailored feedback immediately. The user’s information may be input manually, as in a web site, or may be dynamically monitored (See Strategy #6 Self-Monitoring).

Example
SmarterKids.com invites parents to “strengthen [their] child’s love of learning” by purchasing products specifically matched to the child’s learning style. After taking a short quiz, the user receives tailored information on recommended products and can even set up a “custom education store.” It is clear that the primary goal of this web site is really about selling, not education and learning.
References


