

## The Elaboration Likelihood Model

*The Elaboration Likelihood Model states that there are two routes through which persuasive messages are processed: the central route, which provides complete information and is straightforward, and the peripheral route, which uses means like catchy tunes, colors, and celebrity endorsements.*

### **Introduction**

Persuasion plays a significant role in our everyday lives. From the time we were toddlers (“Can I have another cookie mom? Please, please, pleeease?”), to our present and future (“Are you going to gamble with your life? Buy *NeverDie* life insurance...”), persuasion is all around us. Communication of all types is persuasion. After all, what is a message worth if it is not intended to be persuasive? Depending on the message, there are many different persuasion tactics to utilize.

A popular model used as a principle in persuasion work is the Elaboration Likelihood Model created by Richard E Petty and John T Cacioppo. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) states that there are two routes through which persuasive messages are processed: the central route and the peripheral route. Developed in 1980, this relatively new persuasion model attempts to “explain how a persuasive message works to change the attitude of the receiver” (Moore, 2001). Central and peripheral routes: both are effective styles of persuasion techniques, but each one has strategies and guiding principles to make it more effective. Understanding the two routes of persuasion discussed in the Elaboration Likelihood Model is vital to the persuasion process.

## **The Central Route**

Messages sent via the central route of persuasion must be straight-forward and complete. The central route consists of “thoughtful consideration of the arguments (ideas, content) in the message” (Benoit et al., 2001). The receiver carefully scrutinizes the message and evaluates the subject matter of the idea. Messages sent through this route must possess a high level of receiver involvement, that is, the receiver must actually care about and be related to the subject. Because it is of importance to them, the message will be evaluated thoroughly. Central route messages must be strong. The message is going to be dissected and analyzed from every angle, so it had better have some substance to it.

For example, a golf course superintendent is very concerned about the condition of the grass on his course. When a new product advertisement comes out for weed spray, he will pay close attention. He will analyze the content of the message and what it means for him and his green grass. On the other hand, a business woman living in a 14<sup>th</sup> floor apartment in New York City has no concern with her lawn; she doesn't have a lawn! Therefore the weed spray advertisements are of no importance to her.

A disadvantage to sending messages by means of the central route is that receivers must have the motivation to analyze the message. If a receiver is not directly affected by the message, he or she will not put forth the effort to consider it. Therefore, the persuasive message is lost on many people. However, for those immediately involved with the issue, there are two important advantages associated with the central route of persuasion. “Attitudinal changes tend to persist longer and are more predictive of behavior than are changes induced through the peripheral route” (Scott, 1996). In other words, if the attitude of the receiver has been changed as a result, it will likely stay that

way. Feelings achieved by the central route of persuasion are more permanent than with the peripheral route.

### **The Peripheral Route**

The peripheral route of persuasion is successful for messages with low receiver involvement, low receiver motivation, and weak messages. Unlike the central route persuasion, messages sent via the peripheral route are not processed cognitively. Rather, the peripheral route states that “if a person is unable to elaborate on a message extensively, then she may still be persuaded by factors that have nothing to do with the actual content of the message itself” (Moore, 2001). This is where marketing, advertising, and public relations come in. According to Professors Dean Kruckeberg and Ken Starck, “the dominant public view of public relations, in fact, is one of persuasive communication actions...” (Wilcox et al., 2003, p.214). So how do you go about persuading someone who had absolutely no connection to your product or service to buy it? Catchy tunes, bright colors, and celebrity endorsements are all ways of peripheral persuasion. Peripheral route messages focus on practically everything but the message itself. “The message will attempt to grab attention by making the receiver think about something that she is already familiar with and has positive thoughts about” (Moore).

For example, Wilma, who is looking to purchase a long distance plan, begins to look at ads for various services. Seeing Michael Jordan in an advertisement for MCI, she thinks, “*Gee, he’s a great athlete, I’ll buy his long distance service.*” Wilma did not bother to examine the content of the ad; she made her decision based on a peripheral cue. Situations such as Wilma’s are evident every day. Cheerful infomercial salespeople rave

over the Premium Pencil Sharpener. A perfect point, every time! Do you really need a Premium Pencil Sharpener? Probably not, but they say they are going fast, so you had better get one while supplies last.

Peripheral persuasion is somewhat simpler to develop because it has no grounds in a strong factual message. Instead, peripheral cues such as scarcity (*For a Limited Time Only!!*) or perceived credibility (*Buy MCI, I do*) are the factors that receivers base their decisions on. However, peripheral persuasion is not as strong nor as long lasting as central persuasion. Although it can produce a positive change in behavior, “for it to become a more lasting change the message should be repeated over a period of time” (Moore, 2001). Attitude changes can be fleeting when simply based on promotions or jingles.

## **Conclusion**

Two different routes of persuasion for two different types of messages: the central route and the peripheral route. It is important to understand that when targeting receivers with high involvement, a message must be direct and full of substance. On the other hand, peripheral cues can persuade people that have no idea about the message whatsoever. Although it is a relatively new principle, the ELM helps to distinguish what types of messages work for specific audiences. Used wisely, the Elaboration Likelihood Model can be a very helpful tool in persuasion technique.

## References

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