

Definition and Content of Persuasion in Accounting

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Abstract

Accounting has often been described as a language and as an information system. Language instigates thought processes that may predispose participants in communication activities to a given mode of perception and behavior. Persuasion is a communication strategy designed to satisfy the needs of the parties involved. Hence, a clear understanding of the nature and role of persuasion in accounting is essential to academic and professional accountants. In this report a definition of persuasion in accounting is developed followed by a discussion of persuasion process, content and source. Factor analysis of CPAs' evaluation of several persuasion content variables reveals six factors underlying persuasion content. These are authoritative sources (tax regulations; accounting standards authorities; CPAs) and characteristics (qualitative; presentation; and novelty) of accounting information.

Introduction

Accounting has often been described as a language (Jain, 1973; Belkaoui, 1978; 1980) and an information system concerned with communication activities (Needles, et al, 1990, p. 3). According to linguistic relativists, language instigates actions that may predispose the parties in communication activities to a given mode of perception and behavior (Belkaoui, 1980). This explanation is consistent with persuasion theory. Persuasion is a communication strategy designed to satisfy the needs of the parties involved by influencing attitudes and beliefs, therefore, behavior. Persuasion is an integral part of the accounting system's structure. Indeed, the effect of persuasion extends from developing the qualitative characteristics of accounting information and standards to shaping relationships between professional accountants and their clients. Thus, a clear understanding of the nature of persuasion in accounting is essential to both academics and practitioners.

This study explores the characteristics of persuasion in accounting. The first section develops a definition of persuasion for this field, followed by a discussion of the role of persuasion in accounting. Persuasion content is considered in the third section. Finally, the perception of Certified Public Accountants (CPAs) regarding the role of authoritative bodies in structuring persuasion content is analyzed.

Definitions of Persuasion

Propaganda is defined as "the deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions,

and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist" (Jowett and O'Donnell, 1986, p. 16). That is, the propagandist is only and solely interested in self benefit. Persuasion, on the other hand, requires the persuader to "act in good faith" (Burnell and Reeve, 1984, quoted by O'Keefe, 1990, p. 14) to fulfill the needs of both the persuader and the persuadee. Thus, persuasion attempts to create winning outcomes for both participants.

A definition of persuasion in a profession must include the persuader's concern for the welfare of the persuadee. Adherence to this requirement has been emphasized throughout the centuries by theories of rhetorical persuasion (Jowett and O'Donnell, 1986, p. 32). The definition of persuasion appropriate to the accounting profession must also include a requirement of "concern for public interest". Mautz (1988, p. 122) argues that responsibility, wisdom, and concern for the public welfare are what differentiate a profession from a trade. He (p. 122) describes this responsibility as follows:

The essence of a profession in the traditional sense is found in the grant by society of a special franchise in return for which the practitioners of that profession accept responsibilities to provide a degree of regulation and enforcement through expert advice and persuasion, thereby relieving society of the burden of providing that control by other means.

Given these concerns, and after extending O'Keefe's

(1990, p. 17) definition, we define persuasion in accounting as follows:

Persuasion is an effort intended to influence another's mental state through communication in a circumstance in which the persuadee has some measure of freedom and both parties seek mutual benefits that do not undermine the public interest.

"and both parties seek mutual benefits that do not undermine the public interest", a phrase embracing fundamental elements of the persuasion concept, deserves further elucidation. The benefits mentioned in this definition imply the existence of goals or objectives for the two parties of persuasion. What are these goals or objectives?

Responsibility of Persuasion in Accounting

We assume that the goal of persuasion in a CPA firm is to produce sufficient volume of accounting services that are both necessary and desirable to clients. This assumption is consistent with Paton's (1971, p. 41) belief that "the goal of the professional accountant . . . is to provide the best possible services to his specific clients, the people who pay for his efforts." In order to continue its services to clients, a CPA firm has to establish and maintain service volume. Accordingly, clients benefit from the survival and growth of their service supplier. In brief, the direct benefit to the client is a continuous supply of accounting information upon which many business decisions are predicated; the benefit to the CPA firm is the revenue generated from providing these services.

Is the attainment of the goals set by the persuasion parties a condition for the successful act of persuasion? This question delves into a controversial area of persuasion. O'Keefe (1990, p. 15) argues that the notion of success is imbedded in the concept of persuasion when he wrote:

Notice, for instance, that it doesn't make sense to say, "I persuaded him but failed." One can say, "I tried to persuade him, but failed," but to say simply "I persuaded him" is to imply a successful attempt to influence." (Emphasis is in the original text.)

On the other hand, Reardon's (1991, p. 3) use of persuasion does not imply success:

It is important to note that the term persuasion, like communication is not used ... as an implication of success. Persuasion and communication are activities involving at least two persons whose joint actions determine the

outcome. Persuasion is not something one person does to another but something he or she does with another. Even if the persuader does not feel that the goal of changing the behavior of another has been accomplished, persuasion, as an activity, has still occurred. (Emphasis is in the original text.)

To add to this controversy, we invoke the dimension of time in the question: should this success be judged in the short-run, the long-run or both? Detailed arguments for and against these issues can occupy a substantial space. We present briefly our view as follows.

The controversy focuses on the activity (Reardon's position) versus the result of persuasion (O'Keefe's view). In the short-run, it may be difficult or inappropriate to assess the success of persuasion activities. Consequently, management of the persuader, in carrying out its control function, may concentrate on the propriety of the activity, i.e., the procedures rather than results. However, in the long-run, the activity as well as the success of persuasion are necessary and should lead to successful outcomes (expected net benefits), otherwise persuasion activities would be difficult to justify. Hence, success becomes part of persuasion in the long-run.

This short-term, long-term dichotomy can be further matched with the transaction/relationship antithesis. A transaction between provider and client is an event that requires a short time period to complete. A relationship may extend over a long period of time. Hence, we view effective persuasion as the one that focuses on the relationship and only secondly on the transaction. Consequently, a "loss" resulting from a single transaction in the short-run may be necessary for maintaining the long-term relationship with an important client. Thus, this short-term "loss" may become a long-term "investment" in the intangible, and often unrecorded, asset, "stable clientele".

Defining persuasion as given above creates several responsibilities: (1) evaluating the success of persuasion, (2) scrutinizing that net benefits accrue to both the persuader and persuadee, and (3) assuring that all of these factors are within the "concern for public interest" boundaries. Who is in the best position to assume these responsibilities: the persuader, the persuadee, a third party, or all of these entities? Conceptually, the persuader, persuadee, and a third party, e.g., the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA) should all be involved in these activities because a profession derives its rules of conduct and growth from all these sources. Practically, however, the management of a CPA firm may be in the best position of carrying on these responsibilities. This source has more knowledge,

experience, and stake in persuasion endeavors. It has a direct link to actual persuasion situations. Naturally, "educating" clients to carry on some of these responsibilities would help in these situations (McCroskey, 1969; Sterling, 1970; Jowett and O'Donnell, 1986.)

A significant part of the responsibilities associated with persuasion lies outside of the formal management information system, explicit programming, and manuals of operations in the CPA firm. The reason stems from the subjective and creative nature of persuasion. Indeed, the particularity of clients and their specific relationships and problems make persuasion a heavily insightful, judgmental phenomena. Thus, subjecting persuasion responsibilities entirely to routine steps or mechanical (computerized) programs negates the essence of its creative nature.

These considerations along with our definition of persuasion provide the vehicle to examine various persuasion content variables and their underlying dimensions.

Persuasion at the Setting and Implementing Stages of Accounting Standards

Persuasion influences accounting at two stages: the standard-setting stage and the delivery of accounting services. At the standard-setting stage, persuasion concepts are built into the fabric of accounting standards. The qualitative characteristics of accounting information are designed to increase comprehension and usefulness of the information. Relevance and reliability are the most important characteristics in producing "useful" financial accounting information (FASB, SFAC No. 2, 1980). Similarly, constructs of reliability and relevance play a significant role in the persuasion process (Morley, 1987; Morley and Walker, 1987; Shepherd, 1987; McQuiston, 1989). Persuasion studies have concluded that, "a persuader skillfully uses evidence to teach potential persuadees rather than to persuade them. Evidence itself does not persuade, but it can enhance a persuader's credibility" (Jowett and O'Donnell, 1986, p. 34; McCroskey, 1969). This conclusion concentrates on persuasion's activities instead of its outcomes. As activities, persuasion and teaching overlap because both are concerned with changing knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and behavior.

Sterling (1970, pp. 54-59) related relevance of accounting information to persuasion when he wrote: "The locus of the relevance criterion is at the transmission source ... [who] must be actively engaged in the evaluation, refinement, and construction of decision theories applicable to the problematic situations arising

from the object of concern." Sterling (1970, p. 63) agrees that accountants must devote part of their resources to the education of information receivers.

Persuasion helps accomplish several objectives when CPAs' implement (apply) accounting standards. These are: (1) persuasion can convince existing clients, during service provision, that specific additional accounting activities are necessary; (2) persuasion activities can be oriented toward retention of existing clients, i.e., maintaining ongoing relationships with these clients; (3) obtaining new clients; and (4) the impact on the relationship between the audit committee in the client organization and the external CPAs. Audit committees control the process of selecting external CPA firms that conduct annual audits of their corporations. Persuasion, through its effect on committee members' attitudes and behavior, can affect this selection decision.

In order to obtain/retain clients, some form of persuasion becomes necessary, especially when competition increases. When practitioners and the public interpret the persuasion methods used in these contacts as unethical, the image of the profession is adversely affected. Further, the persuasion activity is revamped as propaganda. Many CPAs still do not advertise (an act of persuasion) their services even though the AICPA lifted its ban on advertising by professional members in 1978 (Bates vs. State Bar of Arizona. 1977,97 S.Ct. 2691, 2699, 2700; Standards of Ethical Conduct, Rule 502; Ostlund, 1978; Hite, et al, 1988; Chesser et al, 1989). The fear that advertising is unethical or unprofessional creates confusion in the profession. A clear understanding of the nature of persuasion can overcome this confusion.

The Content of Persuasion Vs. The Process of Persuasion

In order to better understand the role of persuasion in accounting we divide persuasion into two major components; content and process. Persuasion content includes language used in communication, the words uttered, information bits and pieces (e.g., financial statements and their elements), authoritative sources (e.g., requirements of tax regulations, FASB, AICPA, and Securities and Exchange Commission), qualitative characteristics of information, and presentation content elements.

The process refers to the act of persuasion, how content is expressed, the modes of expression, and how these modes shape the relationship between the persuader and the persuadee. This paper is concerned with the content of persuasion.

Content of Persuasion

By studying the content of persuasion we can determine underlying dimensions (factors) and rank their importance in the act of persuading.

The content of persuasion in accounting includes both the primary and secondary qualitative characteristics of information specified in the FASB's conceptual framework project. Primary characteristics of financial accounting are: (1) Relevance, which is divided into predictive, feedback, and timeliness values; (2) Reliability with its three components of verifiability, representational faithfulness, and neutrality (FASB's SFAC No. 2, 1980.)

Other persuasion content pertains to the characteristics of presenting the information such as physical format, language or terminology, neatness, and novelty of presentation. Related to persuasion content is novelty of information (which is different from novelty of presentation), information overload, understandability of information by the receiver, cost/benefit relationship of the information, and knowledge of the receiver's information needs.

Most of these elements appear in persuasion theory. Morley's (1987) "subjective message constructs theory" includes elements of importance, plausibility, novelty, subjective warrant, and measurability, which resemble the qualitative characteristics of information imbedded in accounting theory. Morley and Walker (1987) found that the elements of importance, novelty, and plausibility are necessary conditions for persuasion to effect belief change. In this study, we will explore content elements used by CPAs in acts of persuasion.

Methodology, Sample and Respondent Profile

After a pilot study consisting of CPAs was conducted to improve and refine the questionnaire, a sample of 1,183 CPAs was randomly selected from the public practice group of the AICPA Directory. Two mailings of the questionnaire were made. The total number of usable responses received were 287 resulting in a response rate of 24.3%. Given respondents' unfamiliarity with the subject of persuasion in accounting, this response rate is satisfactory.

The definition of persuasion was given at the beginning of the questionnaire. From the pilot study we determined this definition was necessary since many accountants are unfamiliar with the subject of persuasion. Questions were presented in Likert form with a scale of 1 (very important/strongly agree) to 5 (very

unimportant/strongly disagree). A total of twenty questions addressing qualitative and authoritative content issues were asked.

Factor analysis is used to reduce a set of variables to a smaller number of elements representative of the phenomena being studied. Two sets of variables were factor analyzed using principal components analysis with VARIMAX rotation. A factor cutoff of 0.50 was used. It should be noted that the second highest factor loading score was greater than 0.05 difference. This is considered sufficient to reject multiple loadings (Srinivasan, et al. 1989) for simplifying the interpretation.

The majority of respondents, 74.9%, hold partner positions in their firms, have 15-20 years of experience, and concentrate on auditing or taxation (65.7%). Among the 287 respondents, only nine were female.

Results and Discussion

It should be mentioned that usefulness of accounting information is the first and main goal of financial reporting in the FASB Conceptual Framework project (FASB, SFAC No. 1, 1978). Nevertheless, usefulness may be considered an insufficient drive for affecting demand for information. To spur demand, a characteristic more potent than usefulness may be required. This potent factor posits as an invisible link between the two stages: the accounting standard-setting stage by authoritative bodies with its emphasis on "usefulness" and the implementation stage in practice by CPAs which strives to encourage clients to order accounting services. For persuasion to bridge this gap between the two stages, we assume that "necessity" is more urgent than "usefulness" for the purpose of influencing demand for accounting services. Thus, while the perception of usefulness may lead to a sense of "desirability", the necessity perception creates a requirement for the service. Consequently, need satisfaction may be not only desirable but also necessary, i.e., required. "Creating" a need for service, the art of crystallizing the problems facing the client, usually requires considerable effort from the persuader (CPA); often clients may not comprehend the problems they face or the remedies for these problems. Our use of the phrase "create a need for service" presupposes the existence of unsatisfied needs of which the client is unclear or unaware. Accordingly, a responsibility of the CPA firm's management is steering persuasion efforts toward a goal congruence of formulating and meeting client's needs by providing necessary accounting services.

Many CPAs may avoid persuasion activities that are both legitimate and important for the growth of their firm because they view them as unethical or unprofes-

sional. It is only when either the object of persuasion (client) or the public interest is abused that the use of persuasion is unethical and unprofessional (and we call it propaganda).

Factor Analysis of Persuasion Content

The first set of variables addresses elements that public accounting firms often use to persuade clients of the value and need for services (Table 1). The factor analysis results in three factors by both eigenvalue and scree tests. These factors are labeled "qualitative characteristics", "presentation characteristics", and "novelty".

The qualitative-characteristics factor includes not only the key accounting elements of relevance and reliability but also reflects the accountant's understanding of the information, the client's need and capability of understanding the information.

The presentation-characteristics factor addresses how the information is physically presented, whether the presentation overwhelms the client with information and the perception of benefits the client receives. This suggests that accountants expect clients to make judgments about the amount of information they receive as well as the value of the information obtained for the investment made.

Table 1
Factor Analysis of Characteristics of Persuasion Content

Variables	<u>I</u>	<u>II</u>	<u>III</u>	Commu- nality	Std Mean+Dev
Factor I: "Qualitative Characteristics"					
1. Relevance of information	.85			.72	1.59± .62
2. Reliability of information	.80			.66	1.65± .66
3. Understandability (enabling the client to understand the information)	.67			.49	1.48± .62
4. Knowledge of client's information needs	.58			.46	1.69± .62
Factor II: "Presentation Characteristics"					
5. Cost/benefit relationship of the information (from the client's viewpoint)		.62		.45	1.77± .82
6. Information overload		.48		.29	2.66± .99
Presentation characteristics:					
7. Format		.57		.59	1.84± .81
8. Neatness		.76		.67	1.89± .79
9. Language		.63		.64	1.88± .75
Factor III: "Novelty"					
10. Novelty of presentation			.89	.82	2.88±1.12
11. Novelty of information			.90	.82	3.03±1.05
Eigenvalues					
	3.68	1.87	1.06	6.61	
Percent of variance					
	33.50	17.00	9.70	60.20	

Novelty of information and its presentation comprise a third factor. We are not certain at this time where novelty may fit into the content of persuasion except to note that it may serve as an attention-getting mechanism. However, according to Morley (1987) and Morley and Walker (1987), novelty can be very influential in successful persuasion.

The second set of variables addresses specific content tools that public accountants may use in the persuasion process (Table 2). The three factors obtained from this analysis were labeled "tax regulations", "accounting and auditing standards authorities" and "service provider".

These results suggest that the accountant has opportunities to induce the client to authorize additional services: the fact that client's compliance with tax regulations and reporting standards is mandatory

constitutes a powerful argument for suggesting other related services. The third important tool that is used to persuade clients is the accounting firm and the specific accountant providing the services. The needs of the client for service while loading most highly on this factor, did not make the cutoff score of 0.50. The importance of each of these factors is also reflected in the mean scores (Table 2.)

Tables 1 and 2 present the communality for each variable. Communality shows how much variance the factors explain in each variable. The three factors account for 72% of the variance in relevance, 66% of the variance in reliability, and so forth (Table 1). Only 29% of the variance in information overload is accounted for in the analysis. This low percentage indicates that this variable has less in common with the other variables.

Table 2
Factor Analysis of Information Sources
Used in Persuasion Content

Factors	Communality			Std Mean+Dev
	I	II	III	
Factor I: "Tax Regulations"				
1. State tax regulations	.93		.91	2.48±1.12
2. Local tax regulations	.83		.72	2.17± .91
3. Federal tax regulations	.78		.64	1.74± .87
Factor II: "Accounting and Auditing Standards Authorities"				
4. FASB		.90	.83	2.78±1.14
5. AICPA		.88	.81	2.96±1.11
6. SEC		.73	.63	2.61±1.26
Factor III: "Service provider"				
7. The accountant(s) providing the service			.80	.64 1.63± .72
8. The accounting firm providing the service			.77	.60 2.11± .93
9. The client and the particular needs for the service			.29	1.79± .68
Eigenvalues	3.36	1.38	1.34	6.08
Percent of variance	37.30	15.30	14.90	67.50

Normally, different clients have varying capacities and interest for processing accounting information. Thus, information overload for one receiver may well be another's underload (Clampitt, 1991, p. 85). The "full disclosure" convention in accounting, which requires that financial statements and their footnotes present all information relevant to receivers' understanding (Needles, et al, 1991, p. 333), has the potential to produce information overload problems. As Walgenbach, et al (1990, p. 469) explain:

To some, the vast and increasing array of financial statement disclosures threatens to turn a wealth of information into an information "overload". Whether there is too much information, of course, depends on the needs and financial sophistication of users.

Given the variance each factor "explains", Factor I, "Qualitative Characteristics", has a more significant influence on demand for accounting services than Factor II, "Presentation Characteristics". Factor III, "Novelty", has the least significant influence on persuasion (Table 1). This is consistent with the mean score of each element.

The variable, "the client and the particular needs for the service", has a low communality of 29% (Table 2.) With most respondents (65.7%) concentrating on auditing or taxation, they may perceive corporate client compliance with tax regulations and reporting rules as mandatory. Therefore, the demand for these services is inelastic and persuasion efforts to affect this demand is minimal. Persuasion efforts, however, are still important for attracting and/or retaining clients as competition increases and to cross sell other services.

Relationship of Demographic Variables to Persuasion Factors

The demographic variables examined include education, age, experience in public practice, major area of concentration, and employment position. ANOVA's were performed in evaluating the relationships of these variables to the persuasion factors identified. No significant relationships were found.

Summary and Conclusions

As a language and information system, accounting shares a vast area of concepts and practices with persuasion. Since persuasion is not commonly discussed in accounting, an operational definition is developed that differentiates persuasion from propaganda. The dimensions underlying CPAs' perceptions of persuasion preserve the roles of information's qualitative character-

istics in accounting and persuasion theories. That is, CPAs perceive the qualitative characteristics of relevance, reliability, understandability, which are highly ranked in these theories, as constituting the most important factor for realizing persuasion goals.

The second factor, presentation characteristics, includes format, neatness, language, in addition to cost/benefit relationship and information overload. This factor, as perceived by CPAs, is less important than the first factor in realizing persuasion goals; it is more important, however, than the third factor of novelty of information and presentation.

From the information source variables three factors are produced. The first factor, "tax regulations", included in a descending order of importance for realizing the persuasion goals, the variables of state, local, and federal tax regulations. The second factor, "accounting and auditing standards authorities" is of moderate significance in its relation to persuasion goals. This factor addresses the three authoritative organizations of FASB, AICPA, and the SEC in that order of significance.

"Service provider" is the third factor and includes two variables: "the accounting firm providing the service", and "the accountant(s) providing the service". Occupying the third place, this factor has the least effect on the persuasion activity. Since most respondents specialized in auditing or tax services and given the inelastic demand for these services, it is not surprising to find that the service-provider factor declines to the third place in importance after the tax-regulations and accounting authorities factors.

Suggestions For Future Research

In order to preserve and enhance the franchise of professionalism granted by society (Mautz, 1990), CPAs need to adhere to persuasion - as defined in this paper - even in providing non-accounting services. Thus, top management of CPA firms may suggest guidelines for content of acceptable persuasion activities based on the results presented here. Adherence to these persuasion guidelines should strengthen the source characteristics of credibility and power of professional accountants. The authors recommend additional studies be directed toward the content and process of persuasion and issues relating to enhancing credibility of accountants in this process.

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