

THE PERSUADERS Teacher's Guide

About the film:

In "The Persuaders," a 90-minute documentary, media and culture critic Douglas Rushkoff examines how changes in marketing practices are influencing U.S. culture and politics.

The first part of the film looks at how advertisers are trying to break through the clutter that they have created, looking for new ways to reach potential consumers. It also looks at how the terrain has shifted -- from a time when there were real differences between products, and the job of advertising was to highlight what the product *did*, to the current situation where often the only real difference between items is their image, and the emphasis of advertising is on what the product *means*. This new marketing trend, in which marketers invite consumers to buy into an identity rather than simply purchase a product, is aptly illustrated by an in-depth look at the creation of an identity for Delta's new low-cost air carrier, Song.

The second part of "The Persuaders" looks at how these new marketing techniques are being applied to politics. A profile of Republican political strategist, Frank Luntz, asks whether changing language according to focus group preferences clarifies or clouds the issues.

A note to teachers:

Primarily for classes in U.S. History or Government/Civics. Also of interest to people teaching Economics, Business, Marketing, Ethics, or Media Literacy.
Grade Level: 9-12

"The Persuaders" considers the influence of new marketing techniques on the democratic process. It can help students deepen their understanding of the meaning(s) of democracy as well as key events in U.S. history.

One issue highlighted is the choice of names for government policies and congressional bills. The featured lesson builds on this issue by asking students to examine historical legislation through the lens of modern marketing. Students will consider and in some cases re-name landmark laws or policies.

Additional lesson ideas help students examine the role of advertising in their own lives.

Discussion questions:

A list of questions for students to discuss after viewing "The Persuaders."

Featured lesson plan:

What Difference Does a Name Make?

- Students will consider how people from a variety of political perspectives might have used current marketing techniques to craft names for major policies or pieces of legislation, such as the Emancipation Proclamation, the Monroe Doctrine, the Sedition Act, Affirmative Action, etc.
- Students will also look at the phrases used in debates over current issues to determine whether or not the language accurately describes content.

Additional lesson ideas:

Create an Advertising Map

Students will use mathematics and geography skills to map the presence of advertising in their school or neighborhood.

Debate: Naming Rights

Students will debate the merits of selling naming rights for any or all of the following reality-based situations: subway station, stadium built with tax dollars, or a local bridge.

Advertising Code of Ethics

Students will consider the responsibilities of an advertiser in a democratic society and develop a code of ethics for sponsors and creators of advertising.

Purchasing the Film

"The Persuaders" can be purchased from **Shop PBS for Teachers**

[<http://teacher.shop.pbs.org/home/index.jsp>]. Also, teachers and students can watch the film streamed in its entirety on **FRONTLINE's Web site**

[<http://www.pbs.org/frontline/shows/persuaders>].

Credits

This teacher's guide was developed by Simone Bloom Nathan of Media Education Consultants. It was written by Dr. Faith Rogow, Insighters Educational Consulting. Advisers were Ellen Greenblatt of University High School San Francisco and Patricia Grimmer of Carbondale High School, Carbondale, Illinois.

Discussion questions

The questions in this section can prompt discussion after viewing “The Persuaders.” In all cases, students should identify the evidence on which they base their opinions.

General

- What in "The Persuaders" surprised you? Name one new thing you learned about marketing or politics from watching the film. Name one new thing you learned about yourself from watching the film.

Marketing Products

- "The Persuaders" begins by questioning the increase in the amount of advertising we typically encounter in our daily lives. How would you assess the amount of advertising you see? Too much? Too little? Just right? In your view, what difference does it make to know that people today see much more advertising in their daily lives than people 20 or 30 years ago?
- What surprised you in the descriptions of how much demographic information marketers have about potential customers? What kinds of information would you be willing to share about yourself or your family in order to: enter a contest? Get a discount? Get online? Get a cell phone? Use a credit card? Would you be willing to reveal your name, address and phone number? What music you listen to or your favorite snacks? The grades on your last report card? How much your parents earn? What medications people in your family take? What kinds of information would you want to keep private and why?
- In "The Persuaders," marketer Kevin Roberts uses the term “lovemark” to identify brands to which people are loyal even when devotion is not logical. Are there brands (or music) to which you are devoted? When you stop to think about it, is your loyalty to any particular brand logical or a “lovemark?” If purchasing a particular brand isn’t logical, why would you (or other people) do it?

Marketing Culture

- Douglas Rushkoff asks, “What happens when advertisers assume the roles of our writers, journalists, and entertainers?” How would you answer him?
- Advertising executive Douglas Atkin argues that purchasing branded merchandise now provides that same sense of belonging that was once provided by community institutions like schools, churches, civic groups, or fraternal orders. What provides you with a sense of belonging or identity? What role, if any, does marketing play in what you identify with or where you hang out the most?

Marketing Politics

- Political consultant Frank Luntz tells his clients that, “80 percent of our life is emotion and only 20 percent is intellect. I am much more interested in how you feel than how you think.” Contrast this with Thomas Jefferson’s notion that democracy requires an “informed citizenry.” What is the potential impact of

Luntz's political strategy recommendations on the health of democracy?

- Rushkoff says that political strategist Frank Luntz "has built his career on a simple idea: It doesn't matter what you want to tell the public, it's about what they want to hear." Do you think the phrases that Luntz develops to "sell" political positions help clarify the issues or mislead voters?
- Douglas Rushkoff asks, "What does it mean when we begin to merge our once separate roles as consumers and citizens?" How would you answer Rushkoff's question? Given that the U.S. economy is based on consumer spending, is it patriotic to shop?
- "The Persuaders" points out that there are laws governing truth in advertising for products and services, but that "politicians can legally say whatever they want." Should political ads be governed by the same kinds of laws that govern product ads? Why do you think there aren't such laws?

Lesson plan

What Difference Does a Name Make?

Lesson Objectives:

By assuming the role of a political marketer, students will learn about a specific piece of legislation or important governmental policy, including historical context, arguments for and against, and ultimate impact.

Students will also understand the impact of word choice in constructing a persuasive argument, as well as the impact of modern marketing techniques on citizens' knowledge about issues.

Materials Needed:

VHS tape or DVD of "The Persuaders"

Student Handout: What Difference Does A Name Make?

Time Needed:

Two 90-minute class periods and one intervening 45-minute session.

Procedure:

1. In the first class period (90 min.), show and discuss "The Persuaders" (see discussion questions in previous section).
2. In the 45-minute class period, remind students of what Frank Luntz does:

“Frank Luntz doesn’t do issues, he does language around issues. He figures out what words will best sell an issue and he polls them and he tests them and he focus groups them and he comes up, issue by issue, with how to talk about it and how not to talk about it.”

Then tell students that they are each going to become a political strategist like Frank Luntz, but without using focus groups. Also let them know that each will be assigned a specific policy or piece of legislation to “wordsmith.”

- 2a. Help students practice what their process might be like by discussing two phrases that Luntz introduced into debates over U.S. policies:
 - “Global Warming” became “Climate Change”
 - “Estate Tax” became “Death Tax”Ask students to consider:
 - Is the phrase truthful or does it mask the content of the policy or legislation?
 - Which target audiences are likely to see the phrase as accurate?
 - Which target audiences are likely to see the phrase as misleading?
- 2b. Divide students into small groups (three to four). Decide ahead of time whether every group will work on the same issue or whether each group will be assigned a different issue. Choose the policies or pieces of legislation you will assign according to what

you are covering in your core curriculum. For example, if you are studying pre-Civil War America, you might assign students to examine the Homestead Act (1862).

Other options that would work well for this exercise might include (but are not limited to):

Pre-Civil War

Monroe Doctrine (1823)

Emancipation Proclamation (1863)

1900-1945

Selective Service Act (1917)

Sedition Act (1918)

Prohibition (1920-1933)

Emergency Quota (Johnson) Act (1921)

Social Security Act (1935)

1946-1979

Internal Security (McCarran) Act (1950)

Peace Corps (founded 1961)

Voting Rights Act (1965)

Affirmative Action (1970s)

Equal Rights Amendment (approved by Congress and sent to states for ratification 1972)

1980-Current

Patriot Act (2002)

Clear Skies Initiative (2002)

No Child Left Behind (2002)

2c. Students should research the policy or Act they have been assigned so that they know enough about the topic to answer the questions on the Student Handout included in this guide. You may wish to distribute two copies of the Handout to each student -- one for notes and one for the final copy to be turned in at the end of the lesson.

Once students are clear about the historical facts, they might divide responsibilities and brainstorm how different demographic groups might re-craft the name of the Act or policy. For example, white settlers who were eligible to get land from the Homestead Act would likely want to keep the title, but Native American tribes whose land was confiscated for those settlers might prefer a title like "Indian Displacement Act." In addition, Ranchers who saw the potential of farmers controlling the land as an infringement on their rights to open-range grazing might opt for something like the "Farming Rights Extension Act" or the "Anti-Grazing Act."

Let students know that they will be asked to present their final recommendations on whether to keep or change the name to the rest of the class, and that every group member must be involved in that presentation.

3. In the final class period (90 min.), have each group present their legislation or policy to the class, including their recommendation(s) on whether to keep or change the name. In seven to eight minute presentations, students should also introduce the alternatives they considered and the reasoning behind their final selection. At the end of their presentation, each group should turn in their completed handouts.

Wrap up the exercise by discussing the question that Douglas Rushkoff asks in "The Persuaders:" "Do the words used help the public see the issue more clearly or do they disguise it?"

Option: Let students pick current terminology used in political rhetoric and discuss why they think a particular phrase is used and whether or not it is accurate. For example, what is the difference between labeling opponents to abortion as being "anti-abortion" or "pro-life?" Or the distinction between calling someone a "freedom fighter" as opposed to a "terrorist?"

Method of Assessment:

Submission of completed handouts, level of comprehension of the assigned legislation or policy that is demonstrated in class presentations and by choice of final title.

Student Handout
What Difference Does A Name Make?

Names of Group Members:

What policy or Act were you assigned? _____

What did it say?

When was it passed or proposed?

What were the important events going on when it was passed or proposed?

Who favored it and why?

Who opposed it and why?

List any special impact that it had on particular demographic groups:

Is the current title truthful or does it mask the content of your policy or act?

Which target audiences are likely to see the title as accurate?

Which target audiences are likely to see the title as misleading?

Which group(s) of people would favor keeping the name as is and why?

Which group(s) of people would want to change the name and why? What more accurate phrase or title might they use instead?

Additional Lesson Ideas:

Create an Advertising Map

Assign students to create a visual representation of where advertising appears in their environment. Define an area to map (e.g., your school, a small neighborhood, etc.). Then let students determine how to count ads and how to represent the data they find. For example, students might create a color-coded blueprint of their school building to indicate the number of ads per square yard.

Follow up questions would include: How did you define “ad?” Where was advertising most common and what were the ads for? Can you draw any general conclusions about the prevalence or absence of advertising in your environment?

Debate: Naming Rights

Communities across the United States are considering whether or not to sell naming rights to things that were once named after locations, contributors, function, or in honor of special achievement. Choose one of these reality-based scenarios: a subway station, a stadium built with tax dollars, or a local bridge. Divide the class into pro and con factions and arrange for them to research and then debate the merits of selling naming rights for the place you chose.

Follow up with a discussion about the function of civic space versus the function of commercial space. Should these two kinds of spaces be kept separate, or is it okay to merge them? What kind of space should your school be and why?

Advertising Code of Ethics

“The Persuaders” makes clear that marketing has an impact on society beyond its ability to convince consumers to buy a particular product or not. Ask students to consider the responsibilities of an advertiser in a democratic society and then assign them to develop a code of ethics for sponsors and creators of advertising.

To get started, students may want to look at some examples of advertising ethics policies, like the Vatican’s **statement on advertising** [URL: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_22021997_ethics-in-ad_en.html]. An industry example is available from the **American Marketing Association**. [URL: <http://www.marketingpower.com/content435.php>]

Internet and other resources

A Note about Internet Sites

Students need to be aware that Web sites sometimes present only one view of an issue. Encourage them to think about Web sites as they are reading. Guiding questions as they review Web sites are: What did you learn from this site? What didn't you learn from this site? Who sponsors this site? What bias might the sponsor have? How current is the site?

Web sites

Center for Media Literacy

<http://www.medialit.org>

The Center for Media Literacy is the nation's clearinghouse for media literacy publications. Their MediaLit Kit, available on the Web site, provides an easy-to-use, skill-based framework for media literacy inquiry.

Media Literacy Clearinghouse

<http://medialit.med.sc.edu>

Run by educator Frank Baker, the Media Literacy Clearinghouse has gathered an impressive collection of articles on media literacy theory and practice, as well as an index of media literacy inclusion in state standards.

Media Awareness Network

<http://media-awareness.ca>

The Media Awareness Network runs Canada's premiere Web site supporting media literacy education. The site includes lesson plans, activity ideas, and curriculum connections on a variety of media-related topics, including advertising.

U.S. Congress

<http://www.congress.gov>

The official site of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives provides an easily searchable list of various bills that includes their official titles, popular titles, and content descriptions. The Senate site also provides a listing of lobbyists and clients.

Commercial Alert

<http://www.commercialalert.org>

Commercial Alert is an advocacy organization dedicated to protecting citizens from commercial infringement into civic space, including schools. It also opposes marketing to children. The site focuses on taking action (e.g., write a letter to your senator), but the action alerts provide valuable descriptions of relevant legislation and government policy.

Books by People Featured in "The Persuaders"

Douglas Rushkoff. *Coercion: Why We Listen to What "They" Say* (Riverhead Books, 1999). The book has a more detailed account of Rushkoff's views on how commercialism influences consumers and U.S. culture.

Naomi Klein. *No Logo* (Picador, 2002). Klein describes the shift from marketing (i.e., selling products) to branding (i.e., selling an image).

Douglas Atkin. *The Culting of Brands: When Customers Become True Believers* (Portfolio, 2004). Atkin suggests that marketers should use the desire for belonging exploited by cults to take advantage of (and make a profit from) the weakening influence of U.S. cultural institutions.