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## Book review:

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### Stiff, J. B., & Mongeau, P. A. (2003). *Persuasive communication*. (2nd Ed.). New York: Guilford.

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Within 30 minutes of this book arriving unexpectedly on my desk I had placed it as supplementary reading on a PR Writing course, as an option for undergraduates but a required text for postgraduates. It is not specifically a public relations text as such, and wouldn't stand alone on a specialist PR course, but it compensated precisely and accurately for the distinct lack in the readily available specialist PR writing manuals of solid communication theory grounding to both underpin, and challenge students to question, the skills being taught.

James Stiff is a former Michigan State University academic now working in litigation communication consulting in the US. He was sole author of the first edition of *Persuasive Communication* in 1993, co-authored the book *Deceptive Communication* in Sage's interpersonal communication series, also in 1993, and has a range of communication theory publications in all the right refereed international communication journals. Paul Mongeau, who teaches persuasion theory courses at Arizona State University including one based on this text, is similarly well endowed with academic street-cred, having published notable articles on various social influence theories, including previous co-publications with Stiff on elaboration likelihood. Mongeau edited the journal *Communication Studies* from 1999 to 2001. He is currently researching date initiation and influence factors in romantic relationships, an interest that has seen him establish something of a minor celebrity status in the US, with interviews about dating published in the *Washington Post* and various other mainstream media outlets.

Stiff comments in his acknowledgements on the strong friendship between the two authors,

and it shows in their cohesive work. This collaboration is seamless and single-voiced, with none of the moments of disparity or imbalance that sometimes creep into joint publications.

*Persuasive Communication* is comprehensively and painstakingly referenced, sensibly organised, and clearly written. It has a substantial and logical index to enable quick location of specific theories or concepts (indexing theorists by name would make it even better), and an extensive, meticulously up-to-date bibliography. It shines out from many books covering similar subject areas because it does not try to be simultaneously a 'how-to' guide for persuasion practitioners or business people, and a university text, but concentrates solely on the latter audience. This enables it to really engage with social science theory and research on persuasion with appropriate depth and complexity for advanced undergraduate or beginning postgraduate students.

It was apparent from the first glance at the contents page that this book aimed to provide detailed coverage of the research and evidence supporting its investigation of each component of the persuasion process, and reading the chapters showed that, on the whole, it delivers amply and ably on that promise. It uses a range of brief examples from advertising, political communication, health communication, etc., to illustrate the theory and elaborate important issues in the study of persuasion, but the primary focus is on the theory itself and the research behind it, allowing educators to fill in with their own case studies and provide their own local or industry-specific applications.

The broad, interdisciplinary, theory-based approach means that the text will probably date less readily than some of the more heavily case-

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study-based or discipline-bound alternatives, plus enables it to avoid too much United States of America flavour, even though it is still clearly a US publication. There are references throughout, for example, to campaigns by Gore, Carter, Perot, and other US politicians; but these are for the most part thoroughly explained and well-contextualised, so that the usefulness of the text does not rely upon students' familiarity with the specific politicians or their methods.

*Persuasive Communication* is divided into three sections; fundamental issues in persuasion research, components of persuasive transactions, and persuasion models. The first section introduces the field and key players, defines all the vital terms and areas of research, and firmly establishes the importance of using quantitative and qualitative research to verify persuasion myths and claims. Section two builds on that strong foundation by breaking persuasion into separate components and applying intense scrutiny to the theory and research resources available to explain each of the roles of source, appeal, receiver, and setting. Finally, the third section puts these components back together to examine overall theories and models of the persuasion process, finishing with a chapter on persuasive communication campaigns that shows how all the elements come together in the final applied product. The logical and clear structure makes what could have been a daunting theory tome into a readable text that really flows, carrying the reader effortlessly from one point to the next.

In short, *Persuasive Communication* is a truly useful book, both as a handy reference covering the history and evolution of persuasion theory and research, and as a textbook for a logically sequenced and comprehensive tertiary course enhancing students' understanding of the effects and implications of the various persuasion methods used by different groups in our society. It will be a particularly useful orientation text and basic reference for postgraduates who plan further research in persuasion because it does not try to be the 'last word' on the topic, but introduces areas of interest, summarises the findings to date, and poses questions and conundrums for future investigation.

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