



## Perception<sup>1</sup>

James Nehiley<sup>2</sup>

### Introduction

Perception is a very powerful and important part of the communication process. When we communicate we receive information and we organize it. However, the way we organize it is very influential and has great effect on us. When we go to a horror movie at the Mall we sit there scared within an inch of our lives. Why? We are in the MALL. No one has ever died in the mall. How about when we watch a magician? Do we really think that they cut their assistant in half? No, it's just our perception.

Perception is the process by which we process information. A newspaper has hundreds of stories and hundreds of thousands of words, but we can read the paper in about five minutes. How? **Selective perception.**

### Selective Perception

When most people read the newspaper, they read only those stories that interest them or that contain information they want. If there are eight stories on the front page, I may read only two. For example take the front page of the **Gainesville Sun**. It has a story about a recent plane crash (I'll read that), a story about a potential famine in Africa (I won't read that because there's nothing I can do and it's painful), a story about

high school bus drivers (I won't read that because I drive my daughter to school-- however, I might read it if I want to reinforce the fact that I am a good dad for driving my daughter to school), and so forth. In the end I read two of the eight stories. I select those stories to be perceived.

This is the same way we process all information. If my niece needs some elective surgery, I'll read those stories that support that idea. If I just bought an expensive Chevrolet, I'll read all the stories and advertisements that support that decision.

### Selective Distortion

However, some of the stories that I look at might NOT support my view. If that were true I would use **Selective (perception) distortion**. Suppose I look at a story that I think is pro-environmental (the title is "Number of environmental programs climbs"). If the story is a warning about the increasing number of unnecessary environmental programs, I perceive it as the work of biased and unthinking conservatives. When people around us have differing views, we assume they are stupid or misinformed. On the University of Florida campus once, a faculty member saw a car with two bumper stickers: one an anti-abortion sticker and one proudly announcing that that person's son or daughter was a national merit

1. This document is AEC 322, one of a series of the Department of Agricultural Education and Communication, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. First Printed: June 1998. Please the EDIS web site at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.

2. James M. Nehiley, professor, Department of Agricultural Education and Communication, Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611.

scholar. What was the reaction of the faculty member? He said: "I never thought I'd see those two on the same car." Why not? Because he perceived everyone against abortion as an uneducated red-neck.

## Selective Retention

The other perception factor is **Selective (Perception) Retention**. Research has shown that if a pro-smoker reads two articles about smoking (one a pro-smoking article in a zany tabloid and one a neutral article in a newspaper story about the prestigious **New England Journal of Medicine**) the pro-smoker will believe that they read about a pro-smoking article in the **New England Journal of Medicine**. Or, if I paid quite a bit for my racy foreign sedan and it has had many problems, I'll only remember the service it has rendered. If someone asks me about that brand of car? I'll say "It's been a lifesaver. I've had no problems." Whenever information disagrees with my perception? I distort it. This accounts for what the mother and father of a sadistic mass murderer will say after their son or daughter has been convicted as a result of a trial including many witnesses and hundred of pieces of grisly evidence. What do the parents say? "He's a good boy. He's a loving and sensitive boy. They're WRONG. He couldn't do it."

Some theories of selective perception (stereotyping) are well written about and well-known, but others--very powerful ones--are not generally well-known. Among the other types of perceptual bias are **Implicit Personality** theory, **Recency versus Primacy** theory, the **Self-Fulfilling Prophecy** theory and **Attribution** theory.

## Implicit Communication Theory

This theory holds that we see the world in sets and that we assume certain qualities of individuals naturally go together (although they may have nothing to do with each other). For instance: if I say that a person is overweight and in poor shape, you might also assume they are not very smart because being overweight and refusing to exercise will make you a prime candidate for a heart attack. The truth is you could easily be a brilliant physicist with a pituitary problem.

The following groups come from "Essentials of Human Communication" by Joseph Devito. Circle the third answer you think most people would assume because of the preceding two.

**John is energetic, eager, and (intelligent/unintelligent).**

**Mary is bold, defiant, and (extroverted/introverted).**

**Joe is bright, lively, and (thin/fat).**

**Jane is attractive, intelligent, and (likeable/unlikeable).**

This tendency we have for believing personality traits come in sets also carries over to other, non-personality attributes. For instance, in the following sentence which answer would you assume is true? **The high quality new computer is (expensive/cheap)**. Based on their experience, most people would assume that newness and quality will result in a higher cost. It wouldn't have to, though. We just assume it will. But how about if it does and you want to encourage your stingy boss to buy one? Then you would describe it using other terms that will lead your boss to think of something other than cost. For instance, if you describe the new computer in the following way, what assumption do you think the boss will assume describes the proposed system? **The new, high-speed computer is reliable, efficient, and (cost-effective/extravagant)**.

The same type of thing would occur if we proposed an upgrading of the company's distribution system at a meeting. Which of the third attributes would most people assume is true? **A new distribution system will be (difficult/easy) for the company to adopt**. However, if you proposed it carefully, they might change the way they **perceive** it. Which attribute in the following list do think most people would assume? **An improved distribution system designed to minimize past bottlenecks will be faster, more maintenance-free, and (cost-effective/costly) to maintain**. Probably they would think that it is cost effective-- and probably they would assume that because of the words "improved" and "maintenance-free".

## Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

Another, similar perception theory is the **Self-Fulfilling Prophecy** theory. Everyone knows that the way to persuade someone is to present a biased argument, but not everyone has practiced the art of helping others to see and react to specific attributes. For instance, how would most people react to the following sentence? **The new computer system is highly complex and will probably intimidate some of the people in the office.** Your prophecy would probably come true and some people might unnecessarily become intimidated. However, what if you had made the following TRUE statement? **The new computer system has many more features, so most of the staff will find it much more useful in solving their day-to-day problems.**

How would most people react to the following true statement? **Because of its speed, the new computer will probably frustrate many of our staff who are used to the more predictable old computers.** Well, the average person might like the idea of speedier computers, but the truth is we trust things that are logical (predictable) and familiar (old). What about if you used the following (also true) statement: **The speed of the new computer will allow members of our staff to work with greater flexibility and fewer bottlenecks because more of us will be able to use it.** The result would be an eager and open attitude.

## Recency Versus Primacy

Everyone knows that if you make a statement in an argument your opponent will counter it. And everyone knows that if you know someone is going to make a significant point in their argument you will try and counter it with another point. But what most people don't know is that when and where you make a point has a significant effect on the success of your argument. If you are running for office should you spend your advertising money early to get recognizability, or should you save it till the end so that you can motivate the voters? It depends on how well known you and your views are and how well known your opponents views are know. It varies. But one thing that is known is that recency versus primacy (most recent fact versus first-known fact) has

significant effects. In fact, to counter the effect a good prosecutor might have in a trial against a potentially innocent individual, the American system of justice requires that the defendant go first AND last.

The idea behind recency versus primacy is that if you present a positive term before a negative term the negative term will be perceived more positively (and visa versa). Therefore, if a group of people were asked to rank John on a scale of 1 (negative) to 10 (positive) their rankings would differ if they saw one of the following:

John is:

friendly

hardworking

dependable

careful

inflexible

John is:

hardworking

dependable

friendly

inflexible

careful

John is:

inflexible

hardworking

careful

dependable

friendly

As the word **friendly** goes down, and as the word **inflexible** goes up, the ratings go down and vice-versa. That might be hard to believe because the list is only five words and the words only go up or down one word at a time, but research conducted at the University of Florida showed that in a five question test students rated the first individual significantly higher than they rate the third individual when asked if they would like to know or work with those individuals. In each case, a change of one word had **significant** effect. In his classic study of this phenomenon, Solomon Asch found that when students were given a list of seven attributes (like **intelligent** and **practical**) they rated the individual as much more **important** when the word "cold" was added instead of the word "polite." Why? Apparently most people believe that important people are more likely to be cold than polite.

### Attribution Theory

Another very useful theory of perception is attribution theory. Attribution theory is a description of the four ways that we "attribute" motivation to ourselves and others.

(1) Attribution theory holds that people see the POSITIVE things that they do as being **inwardly** motivated and **simple**.

Therefore, if I master the use of the office computer, it is because I am smart.

(2) Attribution theory also holds that people see the NEGATIVE things that they do as being **externally** caused and **complicated**.

If I fail to master the computer? I am unsuccessful at learning the computer because the people who produce the computer and the people who create the computer-learning programs are idiots.

(3) Attribution theory holds that people see the POSITIVE things that OTHERS do are **externally** motivated and **complex**.

If YOU learn the computer? You aren't innovative enough to conduct your business without computerized assistance. Also, you are probably afraid of getting behind in the use of technology and you are sneaky enough to seek an unfair edge in business.

(4) Attribution theory holds that the NEGATIVE things that others do are **internally** motivated and **simple**.

If you fail to learn to use computers you are probably lazy down deep inside and stupid.

The process of perception is an important but usually un-thought-of part of the way we process information. When I ride the loop-the-loop, freight-train-like roller coaster I don't really think I'll die... it's just my perception. But if you think about perception when you communicate, you can use it to your advantage in a significant way. For instance, whenever the manipulation of other people's attitudes are explained in this publication, the statement is structured: "most people would probably believe this statement." Why refer to most people instead of directly to YOU? To keep you from thinking about 'manipulation' in terms of yourself. It might affect your perception of the information. The following is one small way you can adjust another's perception. It is an explanation of part of the recency versus primacy theory.

The process of offsetting or neutralizing the arguments of others is called **ATTITUDE IMMUNIZATION** and it works like any other kind of immunization. To protect someone from a powerful disease like smallpox, you expose them to a tiny amount of smallpox. The same is true of ideas. To protect yourself from powerful ideas, you must first weaken them by introducing a smaller or weakened version. To do this, you must determine the alternatives to your approach, and explain their liabilities while being honest about the liabilities of the approach that you propose.

Obviously, the purpose of attitude immunization is to prevent the need for a longer and more complicated process... the process of prescribing an antidote for existing attitudes that you must somehow offset before the audience can be persuaded.