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Nothing to Fear But Fear...Or Is There?

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Nothing to Fear But Fear...Or Is There?

Goal: To demonstrate how fear appeals are used in persuasive messages.

This class session is designed to dramatize the ways in which fear is used in persuasive messages and to introduce students to fear appeal research.

I begin in the period by showing a short film that uses fear as a persuasive technique. Safety films available in the audiovisual libraries of many colleges work well for this purpose. Two that I have used are "The Uncalculated Risk" (a film on water safety) and "How to Save a Choking Victim: The Heimlich Maneuver." Following the film, we identify the fear appeals made by the film producers and most types of fears that motivate us.

After I have recorded 10-12 fear appeals generated from the class and written on the board, students pair off to brainstorm a list of advertisements that use appeals to these fears and others to sell products and services. Examples of ads that rely on fear range from American Express travelers' checks ("Don't leave home without them") to anti-smoking commercials ("One cancer you can give yourself") to laundry products ("Ring around the collar").

Identifying commercials that use fear as a selling technique makes it clear that fear appeals are widely used. At this point, I summarize research on fear as a message variable to clarify what types of fear appeals are most effective. Among the findings emphasized are:

1. Moderate fear appeals are most effective. (Messages that are not scary enough do not motivate listeners to take action while messages that are too frightening cause receivers to tune out.)
2. The higher the credibility of the source, the more effective the use of fear appeals. (Receivers have a harder time ignoring fear appeals from highly believable sources.)
3. The introduction of a solution or course of action strengthens a fear appeal.

To close out the class session, students use the three points above to analyze the effectiveness of the fear appeal commercials identified earlier. This can be done by returning to dyads or in a large group discussion.

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