

The Customer Is Not An Idiot:
Empathy, Interconnection and the Ethics of Persuasion

By Kathleen M. Hosfeld

Once a year or so, my mentor and former professor, Cliff Rowe, asks me to return to Pacific Lutheran University to speak to one of his classes about communication ethics. I sit in front of a classroom of about 20 students who have varying degrees of interest in how I apply ethics to my work. Most are polite. Some fall asleep.

In recent years, the students have started asking if I use the TARES test in my work. I always have to say I don't, because I didn't learn the TARES test, which was published in 2001, when I was in school. But, in fact, the philosophy of the TARES test is reflected in everything we do at Hosfeld & Associates.

What is the TARES test? It's a five-point test for what the authors call "ethical persuasion." Published by Sherry Baker, a professor at Brigham Young University, and David L Martinson, of Florida International University, the TARES test seeks to establish robust principles for ethics in action and to support the creation of a more ethical approach to persuasion – particularly commercial persuasion such as takes place in the marketing process.

The TARES test consists of five principles: Truthfulness (of the message), Authenticity (of the persuader), Respect (for the persuadee), Equity (of the persuasive appeal) and Social Responsibility (for the common good).

The authors offer checklists of questions for each of the five principles that help the practitioner explore their implications:

Truthfulness examples:

- Is this communication factually accurate and true..? Does it lead people to believe what I myself do not believe?
- Has this appeal downplayed relevant evidence?

Authenticity examples:

- Does this action compromise my integrity?
- Do I feel good about being involved in this action?
- Do I truly think and believe that the persuadees will benefit...?

Respect examples:

- Is the persuasive appeal made to persuadees as rational, self-determining human beings?
- Does this action promote raw self-interest at the unfair expense of or to the detriment of persuadees?



Equity examples:

- Am I doing to others what I would not want done to me or to people I care about?
- Do the receivers of the message know that they are being persuaded rather than informed?

Social Responsibility examples:

- Does this action take responsibility to promote and create the kind of world and society in which persuaders themselves would like to live with their families and loved ones?
- Have I unfairly stereotyped constituent groups of society in this promotion/communications campaign?

There are many facets of the TARES test worth exploring. One of the first that strikes me is that ethical persuasion begins with the realization that our choices create the world we ourselves live in. This is not a new insight; it's been part of mainstream marketing thinking for a while. One of my first positions in marketing communications was with an Ogilvy & Mather division where I was introduced to the philosophy of advertising pioneer David Ogilvy. A prolific author, Ogilvy once wrote in a treatise to young advertising executives: "The customer is not an idiot; she is your wife."

I was startled the first time I read it. It took a moment to sink in. Ogilvy was speaking at the time when most of the industry was populated by white males. We can pardon him some 1960s sexism because he got the basic idea right. He may have gone on to say "Or your mother, or your daughter." He was trying to tap the innate empathy we have for people we love, for whom we want the world to be a good, safe and equitable place. He was trying to make the connection between what we do as persuaders and how that affects the world.

The TARES test is described as five principles of ethical persuasion. It's been my experience that discussions of ethics and what is ethical can be interpreted from the perspective of compliance. We set ethical codes in order to define the *minimum* standard of acceptable behavior. One of the things I like about the TARES test is that it flips this into a creative discussion. Instead of setting a minimum standard it sets one of the highest possible. It asks the questions: "What kind of world do I want to create for myself and people I care about? How can my marketing choices help create that world?"

So, consider the TARES test and how it applies to your advertising, sales materials, media relations – in short, all marketing speech. Let it spark your imagination as to the kind of world you'd like to create with your work. To learn more, you can order the original scholarly paper (an easy read that includes all the questions), from Lauren Erhlbaum Associates Online: <http://www.leaonline.com>
Title: The TARES Test: Five Principles for Ethical Persuasion.



Kathleen Hosfeld is the President of Hosfeld & Associates, Inc. Since 1989, Hosfeld & Associates' marketing expertise and services have launched, grown and inspired visionary for-profit and non-profit organizations and projects. We help clients think more clearly and boldly about their goals. We provide the skills and resources clients need to implement breakthrough strategies for profitability, service, and contribution. For more information, please visit <http://www.hosfeld.com>

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