9.11: Targeting by Using the Needs Theory in Persuasion

Targeting is a motivational theory which rests on the concept that all humans are motivated by certain common needs. Targeting concludes that audience acceptance of a position is more likely to occur when the position you want them to take meets one of their needs. An insurance commercial is a classic example where a person’s need for Safety can be met with the insurance product being advertised.

Targeting is focusing on the appropriate “need level” of your audience without necessarily telling them or asking them to acknowledge your needs.

“If you want to motivate others to cooperate with you—at home, in the office, or in a social setting—the best way is to try to see that their needs are met first,” says Dr. Marvin Glock of Cornell University.
Abraham Maslow developed a theory of personality that has been very influential in many fields of study from business to psychology to communication. The theory may seem simplistic at first, but the more we examine it, the more we can see our own actions following the pattern, or hierarchy he suggests.

Maslow was a humanistic psychologist who believed that the behaviors of human beings were guided by external influences. These influences were either external stimuli and reinforcements or of unconscious instinctual impulses. A “healthy person” looks to achieve a high stage of consciousness and wisdom.

Maslow believed that all humans shared a hierarchy of five levels of basic needs. At the base of this pyramid are a person’s basic needs. These basic needs must be met before a person can move up to the next level of needs. Until a need at a particular level is met, the person does not feel the need for the next level. For example, you need to meet your safety need before you can fulfill your love, affection or belongingness need. As a person achieves each level of need they move up to the next level of needs until they reach the highest level of needs, “Self-Actualization.”

Maslow's theory can be applied to your own life and your own goals. If you begin to realize that all humans share these same motivations, it becomes clear that all humans have something in common. Maslow's basic needs are as follows:

**Physiological Needs:** These are biological needs. They consist of needs for oxygen, food, water, and a relatively constant body temperature. They are the strongest needs, because if a person is deprived of these needs, the person will die.

**Safety Needs:** When all physiological needs are satisfied, and are no longer controlling thoughts and behaviors, the needs for security can become active. We have the need to feel safe and secure. To some it may be to own a gun, while for others, just locking their doors is enough. Being a member of a union or even a gang can make a person feel safe and secure. Even a loveless marriage allows for some degree of safety, which makes it difficult for people to end the relationship.

**Needs of Love, Affection and Belongingness:** When the needs for safety and for physiological well-being are satisfied, the next level of needs for love, affection and belongingness emerges. We want to be loved or at least appreciated. Once our physical and safety needs are met we look for ways to meet our need to be loved.

**Needs for Esteem:** When the first three levels of needs are satisfied the need for esteem emerges. Here we want not just to be liked, but also to be respected. This need involves both personal self-esteem and for the esteem a person obtains from others. We want to be respected for who we are and/or what we do. When this need level is satisfied, we are self-confident. When this need level is not satisfied, we experience feelings of inferiority, helplessness, and worthlessness.

**Needs for Self-Actualization:** When all of the previous need levels are satisfied, the need for self-actualization emerges. Self-actualization is the need to reach one’s potential. What is it you can be? This level is often associated with being creative in order to achieve your potential. At this level, we are less concerned with what other people think about us, but what we think about ourselves. Have we written a paper to our standards, or merely the standards of others? At this level, instead of relying on others to judge us, we judge ourselves using our standards.
Maslow writes,

“Even if all these needs are satisfied, we may still often (if not always) expect that a new discontent and restlessness will soon develop, unless the individual is doing what he is fitted for. A musician must make music; an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be happy. What a man can be, he must be. This need we may call self-actualization.”

Reference