

Book Review: Secret Sauce: How to Pack Your Messages with Persuasive Punch by Harry Mills (2017)

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Written in a forthcoming style and peppered with graphics and facts, you may find that you are able to complete Harry Mills's *Secret Sauce: How to Pack Your Messages with Persuasive Punch* (2017) in just one sitting. Mills, who is the CEO of a public relations company—The Aha! Advantage, with blue chip clients such as Ernst & Young, General Electric, and Toyota—describes the elements of persuasion that need to be considered when starting a new project involving promotional materials and/or online content. Mills argues that when you want to broadcast a message, you have to build it around the customer and be certain that you are creating demand through persuasion. From the very moment of introduction, the customer, or in this case, the library user, feels completely certain that s/he is has found exactly the right service to satisfy his/her needs.

The concept of marketing and outreach is not new to libraries; an examination of the ALA Store web site (alastore.ala.org) reveals that currently there are over 200 books and eBooks on the topic alone. Likewise, there are thousands of books in print discussing the psychology of persuasion. What makes *Secret Sauce* a standout title is that librarians will find that the parameters and perspectives that Mills introduces are immediately applicable in many student-facing projects, such as presenting a compelling library orientation session, creating online learning objects, or promoting campus-wide workshops. More broadly, I would recommend having the book on hand at the beginning of any web design or a long-term branding project, as the book has been mainly written for professionals going through such a process. Since it is a quick read—what I often call a 'bus ride book' because it does not necessitate deep concentration to follow and understand the line of reasoning—some librarians will selectively choose Mills's ideas as pointers to add interest and imagination to their projects.

In the same style that the reader is encouraged to adopt, *Secret Sauce* describes the desired ingredients in any persuasive initiative with precision and suc-

cinctness. Mills's style helps the reader to see how effective straight-forward and purposeful prose can be, and this approach may help librarians adopt such tactics in their teaching and outreach. The text itself addresses concrete ideas that librarians can appreciate and implement on a case-by-case basis. For example, those of you who are heavily invested in assessment, you will find that Mills is a kindred spirit. In the first chapter "Secret SAUCE: The Magic Recipe for Measuring Persuasive Impact," he identifies several different measures that librarians might use to determine the effectiveness of their library's messages: Simple, Appealing, Unexpected, Credible, and Emotional (SAUCE); these elements are what give a message its persuasive impact.

The subsequent five chapters, which each explore one of these SAUCE ingredients, begin by describing the three criteria of each element's composition. For example, "simple" is constituted of 1) one central truth, 2) clarity, and 3) visibility. Each ingredient is then explained and supported with interesting real-world examples and the chapters end with an assessment where readers can determine if a message they create fulfills Mills's criteria. For instance, in creating visibility for their one central truth, is their message difficult to picture (which scores a one), or is it concrete and vivid (scoring a three)? On this one-to-three scale, readers can quickly see how persuasive each criterion of their message's ingredients rate, with a possible total of nine points for each ingredient. These quick assessments may be helpful to librarians designing new instruction for the first time, or seeking to reach online learners in more persuasive ways. In particular, librarians interested in implementing these components into their practices may find it more beneficial to have reliable colleagues or a team of testers complete this scoring instead of just doing it solo. Whatever the case, this external assessment can help librarians more accurately judge how they have applied Mills's concepts to their marketing work.

Examples of the assessments in *Secret Sauce* do not lead readers to assume that they will easily score highly in all areas, let alone attain a perfect score; that is an ideal persuasive combination of a compelling logical argument (what Mills calls “head”) and also a moving emotional response (“heart”). Mills emphasizes the scarcity of this combination in a pie chart that displays how many corporate sales or marketing messages succeed at executing these persuasive measures. According to his analysis on page 87, 79 percent landed as unconvincing, 12 percent as promising and 9 percent succeeded to be compelling. With these statistics, he reminds his readers that it is a rare and precious thing to have a truly persuasive message! Adding to this text’s usefulness for personal assessment is chapter 7, “The SAUCE Persuasive Impact Test,” which compiles the entire 15 ingredient assessment tests together and demonstrates how to plot the data on a radar chart to see all the test data in one visual representation. This tool, and the information visualization, helps librarians to set realistic expectations for putting persuasive strategies to work.

In addition to these concrete strategies that librarians can use in their practices, there are other examples in Mills’s text that highlight practices they may want to employ. In the second half of the book, he includes examples of well-known companies and web sites as mini-case studies of how persuasion and artful branding shapes consumer behavior. Parallel to the ingredient chapters, each of these examples are direct—the point is introduced immediately and the supporting facts are concisely recounted thereafter. For instance, three pages describe user testing for the web site Barack Obama used when campaigning for POTUS in the 2008 election. When designing the web site, considerations involving the link names and which images were to be used by comparing one set of users’ behavior with (A) web site with another set of users’ behaviors with a different (B) web site. A/B testing determines quantitatively which images and link names users respond to, and when those numbers are compelling the decision as to which to use is obvious. The user testing model of decision-making is contrasted with opinion

-based decision making where the highest ranking or highest paid employee simply decides what they prefer. These few pages made this librarian reconsider the importance of user testing in general! My experience with user testing has been focused on functionality, but if there are sufficient resources and time to implement something such as A/B testing that will offer an enhanced user experience, and thereby stronger learning outcomes, I will certainly consider it in the next iteration of an online library tutorial or web page design.

In another useful example, consider the viewpoint of non-library faculty who might consider a one-shot library instruction in their classrooms. When you pitch your offer, how easy is it to for him or her to say yes? How easy is the process of requesting the instruction? Mills states that “just focusing on the ease of doing business can be profitable” (p. 122). Even the smallest hindrance that causes a faculty member to pause or think twice about signing up for an instruction may ultimately lead to losing his or her buy-in. If your institution has an online form for requests, can a submission allow for some fields to be left undecided or blank? Is the request web link sent directly to faculty, or do they have to search for it on the library web site? Is it routine to follow up with faculty in subsequent semesters to see if the service can become regular part of the syllabus? Accepting the offer should be so easy, even a caveman can do it.

Conclusion

While *Secret Sauce* offers a quick read with easy-to-implement principles, scholars who are used to thorough investigation and reflection may feel disappointed by these accounts in that they are startlingly brief. Of course, this is not meant to be an academic book, as the writing aims to immediately affect professionals’ practices. If you are interested in integrating more persuasive messaging into your teaching, instruction, or library work, Harry Mills’s *Secret Sauce* may help you to identify several easy-to-use, easy-to-implement techniques you can try today.