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This is an edited transcript of the December 17, 2014 SmallBusinessTalent.com podcast interview titled [8 Unorthodox Persuasion Tactics That Get Clients to "Yes" - An Interview with Ken O'Quinn](#).

Announcer: Are you a hard-working, self-employed professional striving for small business success? There is help. Welcome to the SmallBusinessTalent.com podcast featuring candid conversations about successful self-employment.

Stephen Lahey: Welcome to the SmallBusinessTalent.com podcast. I'm Stephen Lahey, and I'll be your host.

Most independent professionals I know seem confident in their ability to do outstanding work for their clients. However, many would also admit that they aren't particularly skilled as persuaders, and this deficit limits their ability to win new business. That's the very reason why I invited [Ken O'Quinn](#) to share his fascinating secrets of persuasion with us on the podcast today.

Ken helps his clients to tap the power of behavioral psychology to craft persuasive business messages, both spoken and written. For more than a decade now, Ken has taught thousands of professionals worldwide through his live workshops. His clients include major companies like Chevron, VISA, Oracle, Intel, UPS, John Deere, Campbell Soup, Burson-Marsteller, Edelman, and Fleishman Hillard.

In addition to conducting corporate seminars, Ken offers individual coaching to executives and independent professionals like us. He also speaks at many national business conferences and shares his insights on what behavioral psychologists have discovered about how to influence and persuade others.

What would becoming a better persuader mean to your ability to acquire more of the clients that you want in 2015? It might mean a lot. So please do listen carefully to the powerful persuasion techniques that Ken shares with us now.

Welcome to the podcast, Ken. Thanks for making the time to be here.

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Ken O'Quinn: Thanks, Steve. I appreciate the invitation and look forward to talking with you and your audience.

Stephen Lahey: First of all, give us a quick snapshot of your career. I think it's really interesting. So, tell us a little bit about your life before you started your own business and then share what triggered you to become an entrepreneur.

Ken O'Quinn: Well, I'm fortunate enough to be in a field that I always wanted to be in. Writing was actually the only thing I ever wanted to do since eighth grade. I found a path in journalism, and I was in it for a long time. I spent 12 years with the Associated Press. And then there came a time where I wanted to do something different because otherwise it would have required moving around the country and my children were getting older.

And so I started this business and actually started it—this dates me to some extent—on a typewriter in my cellar with no idea if it would fly. I had done some networking with people in management. I knew there was a dearth of writing skills in business based on what I had seen come across my desk and based on what people were telling me. So I started this business and it's been a challenge. I was an English Literature major. I was not a business major. I never had any fiery intense desire to own my own business, but this has been an interesting ride and I'm grateful that I've been able to be in a field that I enjoy.

Stephen Lahey: A lot of us would like to become more persuasive with our website copy, our sales proposals, sales conversations, etc. You've written about two fundamental approaches that we can take to persuading others. So, let's jump right in. Tell us about that, Ken.

Ken O'Quinn: Many times when people have an idea that they want to propose or they have a product or service that they're trying to sell, they think about different ways to be creative in trying to make that look better, and yet there is another side that they don't explore quite as much. A psychologist named Eric Knowles has done a lot of work in this area. He terms it alpha and omega approaches, but I just refer to them as looking at it from the perspective that you can either try to dress it up more to make it look more appealing or you can look at why your audience is resistant.

So, real quickly, if you want to make it look more persuasive or more appealing, you might make your argument stronger, you might give compelling reasons for taking a particular action, you might appeal to fear or emotion. But the other side, where I think that maybe people can gain more traction, is to really go after *the particular reasons* your audience might be reluctant or resistant. So let's talk about a few of those.

One suggestion is to get people to anticipate regret. The reason that you want to consider that is simply because there is what we call regret theory which says that anticipating things that will not turn out well affects our choices. People want to minimize the regret they will experience later.

Who really takes advantage of this? Well, of course, insurance people because whether it's insurance for your body or your car, you could have certain challenges later if you get in an accident and you don't have any insurance coverage. And so that's the image that they want to loom in your head as they are presenting their insurance options. So getting people to anticipate possible unfavorable outcomes is a way that you can make your idea a little more persuasive because you're, again, approaching a reason why they are hesitant.

Another way is to use concrete language simply because many people resist things that sound too much like a sales proposal. I started my business when we were still writing old-fashioned letters and sending them with those things they called stamps. What happened was I started getting responses from major corporations around the country before I even had a chance to follow up.

I didn't really know why. People have asked me, and I said the only thing I can think of is that the opening of my letter didn't really sound much like a sales letter. I simply told people in the first sentence why I was writing, what I did, and they knew it.

So one suggestion is not to use a lot of buzzwords that we have all become familiar with although they're epidemic in corporations but they linger in the business culture in general. And so watch out for words like "leverage" and "cutting edge" and "mission critical" and "bandwidth" and "up sell", whatever that means, simply because buzzword language doesn't resonate with an audience.

When we're talking about persuasion, we're talking about trying to move people and that language, it has two problems. One is that it's boring because those words have been around for a long time and people use them because millions of other people use them. They are clichés and like all clichés, they are simply stale from overuse. What people want in your communication is they want authenticity. They want some personality. And so use concrete language because it is everyday conversational language, words that relate to real things and real people and real actions. That's what you want to use.

Another thing you can do is to provide some sort of guarantee or reassurance. So what that gives somebody is it gives them an out. It gives them sort of an escape route, if you will. Where that can be helpful is let's say you're doing presentations and you're trying to persuade somebody to buy your service and they're afraid of a major cost, you might say, well, if you have to cancel at the last minute, you can either do it for half cost or whatever it might be. But if you do a presentation for let's say \$6000, the fact that they might have to cancel it later and get stuck with that \$6000, that might be a reason why they're hesitating. So give them an out.

There are companies that have fabulous customer service policies in which they have 100% guarantee and in some cases you can return the product even without a sales receipt. That's comforting to people. After all, the company is trying to persuade them to buy a product, that's comforting for the consumer. So if you can provide some reassurance. If you're trying to get somebody to sit on a committee and they don't want the commitment, you can say if it doesn't work out I can always find somebody else. So that can be helpful to reducing the audience's reluctance to accept your proposal.

Another possibility is imagining. Imagining means looking into the future. This relates to anticipating regret because they're looking into the future there, too. But here's an opportunity where you can get people to imagine a positive outcome. There's a lot of research showing that when we imagine a favorable outcome, it influences our judgment about the likelihood that it will happen.

A good example is a famous experiment was done in which a team of psychologists went around and they were selling cable TV subscriptions. What they used in their pitch was they got people to

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envision all of the shows they were going to watch and the parties they could have in their living room, gathering friends for a football game or whatever it might be. And they got far better results than people who were in another neighborhood as part of the same experiment but were not using that pitch.

So, what happens is that when you envision something happening, it raises the expectation that in fact it's going to happen. You even mentally rehearse it. You don't realize that this is happening, but it's linked to our self image and our sense of effectiveness and competence. It's linked to our feeling that we understand the world around us and we are competent to function in it.

So, when we envision something happening we want to follow through, again, because it's linked to our self image. If you get people to imagine a positive outcome that will reduce their resistance, as well.

Here's another tactic. Don't ask for the whole thing at once. Let's say you're selling a service and it's expensive. But, maybe you could persuade the person just to take it on like a pilot project. So for a smaller amount you can try it out for six months or something like that.

The reason that that can be effective is because it's less burdensome on the audience. It's less burdensome on the reader because there's less of a financial commitment involved. People are more likely to be persuaded to say yes.

If the person accepts your offer on that basis, and then you come back later and you ask the person to buy the full package, you are more likely to persuade the person to say yes then because of the persuasive **principle of consistency**. We have an inherent need to be consistent in a couple of ways, one of which is we want to be consistent in our actions. So if we have done something previously, we are far more likely to do it a second time. Fundraisers will take advantage of that principle all the time. They will go back to the same sources and invariably those sources will continue to donate.

You can also **reframe the comparison**. By the way, all these ideas apply to whether you're talking to somebody or whether you are writing to them, although this one I might vary slightly if I'm

doing it in writing. When I say reframe the comparison, let's say you have a product or service and we'll just say it costs \$10,000, and you have another version of that that you can sell for \$5000. Now, the \$10,000 might be the deluxe version, that's top shelf. The \$5000 is a good solid program and probably the one that your prospect is more likely to buy.

You could sell the person right up front because you think the person is more likely to pay \$5000, you could sell the \$5000 one. But if you do that then the person is comparing \$5000 to paying nothing. In other words, they could buy the \$5000 or not buy anything at all. If you present it that way, then \$5000 looms pretty large. However, if you instead present the \$10,000 version first and then present the \$5000 version, then \$5000 doesn't look nearly as intimidating anymore because the reference point has changed.

So what you can do is reframe the comparison so that instead of comparing it to zero, they're comparing it to the larger amount, and then you're more likely to get them to buy the \$5000 version, which, if you've done your homework, then that's what they're more likely to buy anyway. And the \$10,000, well, if they really like it, and you're not exaggerating the value, then that's just the most comprehensive approach that they could take, and if you're lucky then they'll go for it. But you've set yourself up so that it increases the likelihood they'll at least take the \$5000 version.

Another approach is to acknowledge resistance right up front. This is an important one because sometimes you know that there's resistance. But what people will sometimes do is they'll try to avoid it. They don't want to deal with it. They don't want to address it. My suggestion is—at least it's one tactic that somebody can consider—is to just get it out there right up front.

So, acknowledging the resistance honors the audience's point of view. When you validate their opinion and honor their point of view, you make yourself more likeable. And *likeability* in and of itself is a principle of influence because people are persuaded to do things for those they like. And so by acknowledging that you establish some rapport with the audience by just getting it out there and dealing with it up front and you make yourself more likeable at the same time.

Another one is that you can recast the relationship. If you are a consultant and you're talking with someone, rather than making it sort of your standard kind of either sales call or salesy conversation, *recast* that as a consultation. And by making it more collaborative, what you do is you reduce the resistance significantly because you're approaching it now more as colleagues and that you are trying to provide some counsel.

Another tip is to be careful in the conversation about using the word you. You can use the universal you. That's fine. But rather than say to the person to solve that problem you need to do such and such. You can depersonalize the conversation, and that's important to do because then the person is not quite as resistant.

Another idea to keep in mind is highlighting benefits. We all know we've been told many times emphasize the benefits. But we need to understand what a benefit does versus a feature. A feature is a thing. A feature is a quality, a property of a product or service. The benefit is what it does to improve the buyer's life, to make life easier, to make the person richer, whatever it might be.

You can also keep in mind the idea of functions. People often overlook these. There are features, there are functions, and there are benefits. If you have let's say a hammer, the hammer might have sort of a rubber sheath on the handle. That's a feature. It's not a benefit. The function of that is to prevent slippage. To prevent it from slipping out of your hand. The benefit is safety. It's no one gets hurt and you don't get sued. That's really the benefit of that rubber sheath on the handle of the hammer. So just be mindful of distinctions between benefits and features and things that sometimes are confused as features but they're really only functions.

So those are a few ways in which I think that we can make our proposals or some of our conversations more persuasive. I guess if I had to throw in one other, I'd say that just the opening paragraph if you're writing something can make a huge difference. And **here are two tactics** that you can use. One is open with something—when I say open, like in your first line or within your first two sentences—open with something that the reader already accepts as true. Why? because we know in the behavioral psychology research, where I spend a lot of my time, people are more likely to be persuaded to do things when they are compatible with

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preexisting beliefs. So consider opening with something that the reader already agrees with.

Another thing that you can highlight in that opening line or two is something that the reader wants, needs, or values. Appealing to something that the reader wants, needs, or values. Now, that requires that you know some about your audience in order to know what they value. That, too, can be helpful. Opening paragraphs, I think, in persuasive messages can make a big difference.

Stephen Lahey:

Well, we've covered a lot of ground and as we've gone through this, I've been thinking about my own situation and situations I've seen in business in the past. I have to say that it all resonates with me.

As an example, I would say that when you're thinking in terms of influencing people to anticipate regret, one of the things that I've found is that it's important to just to be very honest with them. To level with them and to say something like, look, it's almost the end of the year—this is just an example—and I realize you have some money left over in your training budget and if you don't use it, you might lose it. I also know that within your department you've recently hired a number of people who aren't US Citizens and they may need some help with their writing skills. Based on that challenge, what if I were to create a training for you to help them improve their skills, and you can use the training budget that you have this year even if I deliver the training in 2015. On top of that, I'll guarantee that you'll see the results you want. I'm willing to do that for you for 5000.00 versus my usual 7,000.00 fee, because I want to build a relationship and help you to get to know me. I realize that that's a concern.

So, Ken, I'm just saying all this now completely off the cuff. But I've pretty much used all of those tactics that you're talking about. Right?

Ken O'Quinn:

Yes.

Stephen Lahey:

And what I just said may not be the most effective way to go because that was just me thinking it through for the first time. But it flows pretty naturally because what you've taught us plays into a normal way of engaging with people in an empathetic manner. And when it comes to regret, well, you know people and I know

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people, Ken. They don't necessarily want to think about what they might regret if they don't take action, but they probably should.

Ken O'Quinn: They should. And the important thing, that you mentioned there, is they don't, and so it is important for people to understand, our audience here, you need to explicitly ask people to anticipate the unfavorable outcome because they won't do it automatically.

Stephen Lahey: And you're doing them a favor because this potential for problems and regret is real.

Ken O'Quinn: Yes.

Stephen Lahey: If someone is a training manager, as in my example, they have a budget. And if you don't use it, they'll basically be told – hey, we need to cut back somewhere, and you obviously didn't need that robust a training budget, so, we're cutting it back.

There are so many things you said that make sense to me. I'm fascinated by what you do and I would love to talk further, but I have to keep the podcast to 25 or 30 minutes. So, I'm going to urge my listeners to find you online and delve into the wonderful resources you have available. How can they do that, Ken?

Ken O'Quinn: My website is WritingWithClarity.com. You're welcome to send me an email. It's Ken@WritingWithClarity.com. And if you want to sign up for my periodic writing tips, one every three weeks, maybe every four. There are no ads. [They're free and you're welcome to sign up for those on the website as well.](#)

For people who have a Facebook account, I also have a business page on Facebook and it's [Facebook.com/WritingWithClarity](https://www.facebook.com/WritingWithClarity). Writing tips are all I put there. And I always like to connect with people on LinkedIn and so you're welcome to do that as well. I post a few times a week writing tips on LinkedIn as well.

Stephen Lahey: It's great stuff. And the other thing I would say to people is if you do visit WritingWithClarity.com and you sign up, there are some free downloads available. For example, I know you wrote an article for *Fast Company* and you have a version of that article on your website.

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And I think all of us, Ken, unless we're professional writers, we know that we can improve how we present our ideas in writing. All of the persuasion tactics that you talked about today can help us to get our prospective clients closer to wanting to work with us. They're about building trust and getting people closer to the point where they're ready for a productive sales conversation.

Really interesting stuff, Ken. I urge everybody listening to visit your site, WritingWithClarity.com, and sign up by email for your updates. Thank you so much for joining me on the podcast, Ken.

Ken O'Quinn: Thank you, Steve. I appreciate the invitation.

Stephen Lahey: And to our listeners, thank you so much for spending some time with us today. If you like what you heard, I encourage you to visit SmallBusinessTalent.com now and subscribe to the podcast by email. When you do, you'll be alerted whenever I post fresh podcast content, of course, but you'll also receive special resources for email subscribers only, including my LinkedIn guide to social selling, and much more. Thanks again for listening today and best wishes for your success.

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