

Book Review

Duarte, N. (2012). *HBR guide to persuasive presentations*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press. (229 pp., paper \$19.95; e-book \$9.99).

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Nancy Duarte's book, *HBR Guide to Persuasive Presentations*, provides quality insight into the ideas, creation of, and performance of various types of presentations. Duarte's text provides a quick, enjoyable read that should be seen as an entry point for inexperienced presenters and a resource in educating others. The text is comprehensive in its coverage of presentation topics. Every time I thought of something that was missing, it would show up in a following chapter. One might quibble about the inclusion of certain items, such as bring backups of the technology you might need, even if it is provided. Readers, thus, should use common sense as they think through best presentation options and what might work best for them.

The guide is broken up into seven areas of focus: Audience, Message, Story, Media, Slides, Delivery, and Impact. Each section is composed of brief chapters directed at a specific idea. For example, in the Message section, one chapter is entitled "Anticipate Resistance," and Duarte provides a skeleton to help readers think through potential challenges to one's message, such as recognizing potential areas of disagreement and the practicality of the ideas in your presentation. This consultation-friendly format would be useful in communication centers, learning commons, and other similar higher education hubs. In effect, the text can be used to support clients, offer more nuance to

ideas, and provide opportunities to open discussion. While Duarte provides a litany of suggestions, she backs away from giving directions. As such, the text is set up to be read as an idea generator. The strength of this approach is readers decide the direction and feel of the presentation, while understanding the outcomes and potential shortcomings of those decisions.

In concert with helping one with ideas, most chapters have an example that helps make the point more clear. In the Story section, she provides an anecdote from Rowan Trollope as he spoke to his company, Symantec.cloud. He describes the real life-and-death decisions related to climbing, the proper use of safety equipment, and checking it more than once. This example points to consistency, vigilance, and procedures. Through this example, we might believe the work we've done is "good enough," but sometimes good enough is taking a shortcut and it's that shortcut that can have devastating outcomes. This ending narrative of the Story section reinforces that entire section with a personal, impactful anecdote. Much of the book is also tied together this way.

As with all texts, there are some shortcomings. The shape of the book is wrong for the purpose. Several times slides are presented, but the text is half the size of the main book font size. Instead of the typical rectangle-shape book, a more square shape would be useful to accommodate larger, more readable visuals. A reader will

probably need to bring the book closer to adequately see these examples. Another minor criticism is, for the most part, there is little here that is new. Yes, it provides good examples and insight, but beyond a few technology (e.g. social media) suggestions, much of the text is another perspective on classic or traditional presentation skills and techniques.

Nevertheless, these minor quibbles should not suggest the text should not be read. I consider myself a seasoned presenter and I made a few notes to consider the next time I present. Readers may be tempted to gloss over the book, but I would caution against doing so. Here is one example why: I would not have thought about the use of an interpreter. Interpreters are not something I've needed in the past, but the information made me think more about the potential challenges I might need to manage if I did. Another idea, that I'm not sure I agree with, is checking social media during your presentation. Duarte does not explicitly state check social media, but she implies that the backchannel chatter is useful and might aid in your presentation. While this point is

unclear, a case can certainly be made for having a partner work social media as you are presenting, which could manage any damage, but more likely would enhance the impact of a presentation. Both of these examples point back to the earlier note that the text is meant to help you generate ideas, and in this way, it succeeds.

The audience for this text is early professionals with limited presentation experience, but also can be easily tailored for use in higher education tutoring/training centers, community partnerships, and generalized leadership organizations. Those that will find the most value are those that may (feel they) lack confidence in their presentation abilities or want to review good and reasonable presenting skills. Others that may find HBR Guide to Persuasive Presentations useful are those that help others improve their presenting skills, such as tutors, business/sales trainers, coaches, or teachers. While there are nuggets of insight and new ideas, less experienced or less confident presenters will find useful information that even experienced presenters should take the time to review.