

Persuasive Communication Strategies in Building Loyal Relationships with Local Media Stakeholders

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Abstract

This study examines the persuasive communication strategies implemented by Suara Merdeka in building strategic relationships, particularly with advertising partners, as well as two other key stakeholder groups: the government and the private sector. Facing the dynamics of a competitive media industry, Suara Merdeka faces the challenges of media disruption and intense competition between media outlets. The research method used is descriptive qualitative, with data collection techniques through in-depth interviews with editors-in-chief. The results show that Suara Merdeka uses various strategies, such as public policy publications, win-win solution-based advertising collaborations, and personal approaches through informal communication forums and social activities. The establishment of a special Marketing Communication (Markom) division also plays a crucial role in managing external relations in a more structured manner. This persuasive communication strategy has proven effective in maintaining ongoing collaborations, enhancing the media's image, and strengthening Suara Merdeka's position as an adaptive and collaborative press institution amidst the challenges of today's media industry.

Keyword: *Persuasive communication, Mass media, Strategic relations, Advertising partners, Suara Merdeka.*

INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly competitive media environment, the ability to build strong relationships with various stakeholders is key to the sustainability of a press institution. Suara Merdeka Daily, which was founded on February 11, 1950, is now 75 years old. As one of the oldest and largest media outlets in Central Java, Suara Merdeka once dominated the market with a market share of more than 90 percent. However, in the last decade, the dynamics of the media industry have undergone significant changes. Competition with other print media such as Kompas, Jawa Pos, Solopos, Tribun Jateng, and Wawasan has become increasingly fierce. Competitors have even expanded their reach by introducing local media such as Radar Semarang

(Jawa Pos Group), Tribun Jateng (Kompas), Solopos in Solo, Radar Banyumas, and Satelit Pos in Purwokerto. This competitive pressure has had a direct impact on the decline of Suara Merdeka's market share, although this media still maintains its position as the market leader with a market share of 61.67 percent (Source: Suara Merdeka Research and Development, 2013). This decline confirms that the quality of journalistic products alone is no longer sufficient to maintain business existence without the support of a competent relationship management strategy.

Responding to these competitive pressures, media institutions are required to reconstruct their business approach from mere providers of information space to strategic partners. Suara Merdeka Media recognizes that the power of communication is key to maintaining its existence and building stakeholder trust. In this context, the power of relational communication is a crucial instrument for maintaining trust with the government, advertising partners, and the private sector. Emphasizes that persuasive communication essentially aims to influence audience opinions, attitudes, and actions so that they make voluntary and conscious decisions. This approach is highly relevant for the media industry, where media not only functions as a medium for transmitting public information but also as a catalyst for cross-sector business interests. Through a comprehensive persuasive strategy, media can communicate their professional values while simultaneously shaping an institutional image that is adaptive to the dynamics of stakeholder needs.

The effectiveness of persuasive communication in building customer loyalty has been demonstrated in various previous studies. For example, a study by Sulistyastuti (2020) found that interactions based on empathy, responsiveness, and friendliness have a direct impact on increasing user trust. However, literature examining how interpersonal persuasive communication principles are applied on a business-to-business (B2B) scale, particularly between legacy print media institutions and their advertising partners, is still limited. Given the current situation, for media companies, the intensity of persuasive communication is a key foundation in maintaining long-term relationships that ensure financial stability and retention of advertising partners.

The importance of intense and persuasive communication is a key factor in building long-term, mutually beneficial relationships, especially with advertising partners. By implementing the right communication strategy, media outlets like Suara Merdeka can maintain relevance and trust amidst the rapid flow of information and competition between local and national media outlets. A positive and professional media image will support business sustainability and strengthen cross-sector partnership networks. This study highlights how Suara Merdeka has transformed its institutional communication into an adaptive and professional interpersonal approach. Tactically, Suara Merdeka consistently initiates direct meetings with advertising partners, utilizes digital platforms (WhatsApp Groups) as informal communication channels, and actively participates in various partner activity agendas. Furthermore, the institution implements the principle of reciprocal feedback to ensure that advertising partners' needs are met proportionally. However, persuasive communication is crucial in transforming them into loyal partners.

Persuasive communication is a form of tactical interaction specifically designed to influence, modify, or change the audience's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors toward a particular product, service, or issue (Ali et al., 2019; Triezenberg et al., 2014). Persuasion can be achieved through rational and emotional approaches, often involving affective aspects, namely matters related to a person's feelings or emotional life. The purpose of persuasive communication is divided into two main parts. First, to change or strengthen the audience's beliefs and attitudes. Second, to encourage the audience to take action or adopt certain desired behaviors (Afiati 2015; Kamila, 2025). Meanwhile, in the competitive digital era of media companies, media companies are not only required to present relevant content but also to build strong and sustainable business relationships with advertising partners. Therefore, this study aims to analyze in depth how Suara Merdeka Daily implements persuasive communication strategies in fostering sustainable and mutually beneficial relationships with advertising partners amidst media industry disruption.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to gain a holistic understanding of the phenomenon of organizational communication in the context of mass media. This method aims to comprehensively understand social phenomena through narrative and descriptive data collection. Descriptive qualitative research provides an in-depth overview or explanation of the situation being studied based on empirical data obtained in the field (Creswell, 2014). The descriptive design was chosen to provide an in-depth explanation of the empirical reality on the ground regarding the persuasive communication strategies implemented by media institutions. The main focus of this study is to analyze the persuasive strategy of Suara Merdeka, a market-leading mass media outlet in Central Java, in managing strategic relationships with stakeholders (government, advertising partners, and the private sector) to maintain loyalty and business sustainability amidst a dynamic industry competition climate.

The data collection technique in this study was conducted through in-depth interviews. Interviews were conducted directly with an informant who holds a strategic role within the media institution studied. Informants were selected using purposive sampling, based on their experience, knowledge, and direct involvement in the research topic (Sugiyono, 2017). In this context, the Editor-in-Chief of Suara Merdeka was designated as the sole representative informant due to his crucial role in formulating and executing the institution's communication vision. The data obtained were analyzed using the interactive model data analysis technique developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which includes three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions or verification

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A Collaborative and Symbolic Approach to Building Advertising Partner Loyalty

Research results show that Suara Merdeka has implemented a paradigm shift from a conventional media business model to a collaborative one. As one of the largest and oldest media outlets in Central Java, Suara Merdeka has developed a strategic approach to establishing long-term relationships with its advertising partners. The institution's awareness of the disruption in the media industry demands flexibility in establishing relationships with advertising partners. Strategic agreements, through persuasive, collaborative, and symbolic communication strategies, build strong loyalty and mutually beneficial relationships. Suara Merdeka positions itself not only as a provider of advertising space but also as a strategic partner that actively supports the existence of stakeholders. One concrete example of this collaborative approach is Suara Merdeka's involvement in public activities with advertising partners, such as the Fun Run and the Satria Brand Awards, which not only provide media exposure for partners but also strengthen engagement with the community. This strategy enables advertising partners to benefit beyond simply advertising exposure, but also gain added value in the form of image strengthening and emotional connection with the local community. According to the informant, a collaborative strategy through an event approach such as the "Simpang 5 Movement" demonstrates an integration of interests. Suara Merdeka acts as the event organizer and publication channel, while partners provide sponsorship support with visual compensation in the form of logo placement on participant attributes (jerseys).

"Suara Merdeka wants to be a strategic partner that understands our partners' needs as best as possible, and we will be actively involved in them. Through a collaborative approach, we have proven to have long-lasting relationships, such as with one of our partners, Kopi Luwak, who has been working with us for over a decade." Source: interview, 2025.

This collaborative approach builds loyalty because partners are no longer viewed as marketing objects, but rather as strategic partners involved in the media's creative ecosystem. This media outlet's long-term commitment to building partner loyalty is based not only on transactions but also on emotional connections and trust.

"...this is the era of collaboration. Without collaboration, we'll all be finished... Kopi luwak is the design on the front of the jersey. It's mutualism." Source: interview, 2025.

In the perspective of persuasive communication, persuasion aims to change or strengthen the audience's beliefs, attitudes, and behavior (Afiati, [2015](#)). Suara Merdeka has implemented this principle through emotional and rational approaches, such as in-person visits, awards, and participation in social activities with partners. Furthermore, the principle of "selective exposure" states that audiences are more receptive to information that aligns with their values and beliefs (Gobel, S. A. M., & Usman, I. [2025](#)), Pellu, M. N., & Kom, S. I. [2026](#)). By tailoring messages and approaches to the characteristics of each stakeholder, Suara Merdeka builds effective persuasive communication.

In terms of strengthening trust, awareness of the increasing competition and the structural-collaborative aspects is insufficient to address the challenges of digitalization. Suara Merdeka also uses a symbolic approach to maintaining relationships to build interactions that convey a sense of respect for partners. According to informants, the editor-in-chief's presence at informal forums and invitations to partner activities is a form of symbolic communication, conveying support and appreciation for the partner's existence, which can foster deeper relationships.

"I'm also involved in several discussions on invitations, at events they invite us to, and request our presence. We also provide services related to their activities..." Source: interview, 2025.

This symbolic act serves as an "emotional investment." From a partner loyalty perspective, recognition through positive publicity or physical presence often carries greater value than mere formal advertising exposure. Suara Merdeka leverages its bargaining position as a mass media outlet to secure partner deals, creating a bond of loyalty that is resistant to competitors' offers.

Persuasive Communication Strategies to Grow Advertising Partner Loyalty

An effective persuasive communication strategy to grow advertising partner loyalty involves a combination of interactivity, personalization, emotional engagement, and trust-building. By integrating these strategies, mass media can create stronger and more sustainable relationships with advertising partners (Bermejo-Berros, 2020; Zangnaa et al., 2020; Bocci Benucci & Di Gesto, 2025; Arora et al., 2026; Mouratidis et al., 2025). Suara Merdeka uses various forms of persuasive communication that are personalized and adaptable to partners' needs. This strategy includes service personalization, a solution-based marketing approach, and fostering an intensive dialogue between the Marketing Communications (Markom) team and partners. Communication is not one-way. In many cases, Suara Merdeka involves partners in designing content, campaign formats, and selecting publication media that best suit the target audience. This approach strengthens partners' trust because they feel valued and part of the creative process. Suara Merdeka employs a persuasive strategy that integrates rational (business) and emotional (relational) approaches. Suara Merdeka aims to shift communication patterns from asymmetrical (simply providing advertising space) to symmetrical (equal partnerships).

One internal program, "Sahabat Suara Merdeka," is an effective strategy for building humanistic relationships. Through direct visits to partner companies, the editorial and Marketing and Communication teams strive to understand their values, challenges, and culture. This makes communication more meaningful and less transactional. The organization emphasizes the importance of service quality and innovation. Suara Merdeka Media provides personalized service, fosters informal relationships through WhatsApp groups, and actively follows up on invitations and sends greetings to partners. This demonstrates that Suara Merdeka utilizes a variety of media to build relationships.

In building relationships, Suara Merdeka Media demonstrates strategic segmentation and diversification in managing stakeholder relationships. According to informants, the institution does not adopt a single approach but rather maps stakeholders specifically based on their needs. For example, government stakeholders are focused on policy publications, while advertising partners are

directed to brand activation through collaborative activities. This mapping is based on the management philosophy that amid media disruption, a company's sustainability depends on the ability to synergize.

"We were briefed by the CEO that this is the era of collaboration. If we don't collaborate, we'll be finished on our own... So we don't necessarily mean that when we report something bad, it's no longer the era.", Source: interview, 2025.

Suara Merdeka's persuasive communication strategy has proven to transcend the boundaries of conventional promotional rhetoric. Advertising partner loyalty grows not due to structural coercion or mere discounts on advertising rates, but rather as a result of collaborative synergy that ensures business mutuality, and a strategy for building interpersonal relationships that foster trust. The success of this persuasive strategy is structurally supported by the institutionalization of the communications function. Suara Merdeka's persuasive communication strategy is built on two main pillars: transactional professionalism based on mutual collaboration, and the maintenance of symbolic interpersonal relationships.

Strategy's Impact on Advertising Partner Loyalty

Suara Merdeka's persuasive, collaborative, and symbolic communication strategies have demonstrated tangible results in building advertising partner loyalty and maintaining long-term relationships. According to informants, partnerships with government agencies and the private sector have significant economic significance. Suara Merdeka recognizes that the company's revenue is heavily supported by the retention and loyalty of these two advertisers. This structural dependency requires the media outlet to continuously and intensively cultivate good relationships.

"It's very influential. In the media, there are private advertisements and government advertisements, right? Then there are display advertisements, condolence advertisements, job advertisements, and so on. Well, our biggest influence is in display and government advertisements." Source: interview, 2025.

Maintaining the trust of stakeholders, particularly the government and the private sector, is not merely a public relations tactic but a key foundation for the media's financial stability. High retention rates attest to the success of this approach. Some partners, such as Kopi Luwak, have been with Suara Merdeka for over ten years, reflecting the strong loyalty and trust built through effective communication and adapting to their needs. In addition to Kopi Luwak, Suara Merdeka has a broad and diverse network of business partners, which contributes to the sustainability of these relationships. These partners include: Hotel Sahid Raya Solo, a hospitality partner that utilizes the Suara Merdeka platform to promote services and tourism; Bank Jateng; and various broadcast media outlets such as Metta FM, Radio Republik Indonesia (RRI), and PT Radio Swara Bening Ati, which operate advertising barter partnerships and support each other's promotions. Advertising agencies such as Dede Kencana, Tecma, Warna, FBC, and Refo serve as key intermediaries in advertising marketing, helping to maintain effective and mutually beneficial relationships.

In an effort to maintain long-term loyalty, Suara Merdeka regularly evaluates and adjusts its communication strategy to remain relevant to market dynamics. This adaptation process is realized through the expansion of the publicity services

portfolio offered to partners, which is now no longer limited to conventional print media penetration. According to the informant, the institution responds to shifting advertising trends by integrating digital platforms and event management as a new value proposition. This diversity demonstrates Suara Merdeka's ability to assess the importance of media convergence and understanding audiences to expand its network of relationships. Suara Merdeka is able to adapt its communication approach and partnership forms according to the characteristics and needs of each sector.

"We're also adapting to where the trend is going... Well, we now also have an online media, suaramerdeka.com... then we also have events that we offer to them. This is something new, you know, we have an online media...", Source: interview, 2025.

The initiative to combine conventional and online media, as well as the execution of field events, acts as a crucial persuasive communication instrument. Through this service diversification (media convergence), Suara Merdeka clearly communicates its innovative capacity in responding. Furthermore, challenges from communicative resistance from stakeholders still occur. The classic stigma that media is only oriented towards the "bad news is good news" narrative still dominates. Strategies and efforts to deconstruct this defensive perception by narrating the media as a strategic partner, not a threat, are Suara Merdeka's strategy in building synergy. A paradigm shift towards the "good news is good news" principle, where positive achievements such as achievements in the arts are managed as inspirational content that not only builds the image of leaders but also serves as a means of education and preservation of cultural values for the community.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the resilience of local media in the era of disruption depends heavily on a paradigm shift from a conventional, asymmetrical, transactional business model to a symmetrical, relational, collaborative model. Suara Merdeka has successfully implemented an effective communication strategy in building and maintaining long-term relationships with its stakeholders, particularly advertising partners, through a collaborative, symbolic, and persuasive approach. This collaborative approach transforms the media's position from merely a provider of advertising space to a strategic partner through value co-creation, such as event management integration and media convergence. Meanwhile, the symbolic approach, through the awarding of awards (Satria Brand Award) and the physical presence of the editor-in-chief, serves as an emotional investment that strengthens trust. Personalized communication through the "Sahabat Suara Merdeka" program has proven crucial in deconstructing defensive stakeholder perceptions, and demonstrates the effectiveness of humanistic interpersonal communication in deconstructing defensive stakeholder perceptions of the mass media. The success of this strategy is evident in the loyalty of advertising partners that has been maintained for decades and the continued growth of collaboration opportunities. Thus, Suara Merdeka not only maintains its existence in the media industry but also builds sustainable partnerships. Future research is expected to conduct comparative studies with other local media.

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