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The Top Underdog Persuaders of 2012

People with Little Name Recognition Can Yield Great Influence

Every year I keep a running tally of lesser-known people who successfully influenced up the food chain. We can often learn more from them than the powerful. Power does not equal persuasion skills. In fact, successful underdogs are more skilled at persuasion because their task is much more difficult, yet they succeed. Most people don't realize the people who have power can be lazy communicators.

"We naturally assume that dominant, successful people are gifted persuaders: [Barack Obama](#), [Steve Jobs](#), [Warren](#) Buffet, etc. And perhaps they were, at some point in their careers. But persuasion is a "gateway skill" to success. When one becomes sufficiently powerful, continued success relies more on the skillful allocation of accumulated power than on persuasion. The powerful simply don't need the tools of persuasion as much as the rest of us do. They have coercive tools at their disposal that the rest of us don't," according to professor Kelton Rhoads of USC's Annenberg School for Communication.

"Steve Jobs was a great example. As a CEO he was forceful, challenging, peremptory, and by all reports relied on the stick more than the carrot. Persuasive people tend to be open to persuasion from others. But Jobs was highly resistant to persuasion from his engineers, his physicians, even his wife, who pleaded with him to treat his cancer using standard medical practices. Likewise, any current list of "most persuasive people" would include President Obama, who at

this point of his career relies much more on the momentum of consolidated power, than on his gifts of persuasion,” Rhoads said.

We know that those who influence up, as documented in [The Underdog Edge](#), probably have more influence skills than those at the top, and we can learn from them. When underdogs reach their goals, it gives hope to other underdogs who are afraid to bark because they think only the rich, the powerful and the connected can get their way.

So drum roll, please, here is my list of the top underdog persuaders of 2012.

[Amy Showalter](#)’s Top Underdog Persuaders of 2012



English: Nate Silver in Washington, D.C. (Photo credit: Wikipedia)

[Nate Silver](#) — Our research found that winning underdogs almost always have to use unconventional tactics to win; they can’t play by Goliath’s rules. Silver changed the way people analyze the hyper-abundance of political polling information, winning praise from some and criticism from others. Like many underdog influencers, he took the unconventional path. He predicted election outcomes by including in his methodology the pollster’s historical track records, assigning each a value to indicate “pollster-introduced error.” In essence he evaluated the pollster’s reputation when using polls to predict election outcomes, something never attempted until now.

[Laura Vikmanis](#) — Want to persuade Hollywood to make a movie about your life story, but haven’t changed the world through your inventions or by fostering world peace? Try to get a job competing against those twenty years younger than you, a job that is based on youth, good looks and fitness. Laura’s status as the NFL’s oldest cheerleader at age 43 influenced women to think less of their age and more of what they want from life. After her husband left her in her late 30’s, she thought being a

cheerleader “looked like fun,” so she tried out. And failed. Most women would quit at her age, but not Laura. She tried again, and made the squad. This is her fifth year as a Ben-Gal.

Jeremy Lin – Who can forget “Linsanity”? The fever overtook not only New Yorkers but sports fans everywhere when the undrafted Harvard graduate came off the New York Knicks bench to help win games and a spot in the starting line-up.

Jeremy displayed patience and grit to reach his goal, reminding all of us what’s possible. He shattered stereotypes about Chinese-Americans in the process.

Texas Road House – Want to get free advertising? Be unconventional and turn a negative into a positive. When Consumer Reports surveyed more than 47,000 diners, TexasRoadhouse won the dubious honor of “the noisiest chain in America.” To turn the “negative” publicity in their favor, they hit the media with their “Proud to Be Loud” campaign, reminding readers that it’s more fun to be in a loud restaurant than “one with wine sipping or chirping crickets and clinking silverware,” according to their founder and CEO, Kent Taylor. Roadhouse reports over half a million dollars in free advertising – they have no national ad budget (another unconventional characteristic) and improved employee morale.

Jean Kabre – This concierge to power brokers of Washington D.C., persuaded employees in the 101 Constitution building to raise money to provide wells for safe drinking water in his home African village of Tintilou – even though there is no tax write off for those charitable contributions. He also raised \$10,000 for leukemia research.

Jean is remarkable because he is known as a generous, sacrificial giver himself. He was raising money for leukemia research without telling anyone his home village had no running water or electricity. Employees in the building report that Jean is genuinely kind and nice, a required trait for successful underdog influencers. ‘Hair on fire’ individuals do not engender our help.

Gurbaksh Chahal – This multi-millionaire was a bullied kid who says his adversity is his greatest gift. He was bullied because he looked

different. Kids tried to routinely knock his turban off his head. He created the start-up company ClickAgents at age 16, and sold it for \$40 million. His second company, BlueLithium, was sold to Yahoo for a mere \$300 million in 2007. His latest business, RadiumOne, is an advertising network harnessing social interaction data.



Image via CrunchBase

Chahal proves our research findings, which showed a pattern of adversity and loss is prevalent among high achievers and effective underdog communicators. Adversity makes a great teacher and develops a fortitude that others cannot replicate. We find it in the arts and business. Paul McCartney and John Lennon both lost their mothers at a young age. Wendy's founder Dave Thomas grew up an orphan in multiple foster homes.

If you have an underdog for consideration in my 2013 list, email me: amy@showaltergroup.com.

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