CHAPTER SEVEN

2. Distraction Moderates the Effects of Argument Quality

In the Petty and Cacioppo (1984) study, personal involvement affected participants’ motivation to carefully consider a persuasive appeal. Petty, Wells, and Brock (1976) conducted a comparable study to determine how distraction affects attitude change. These researchers argued that distraction makes weak arguments more effective, because even if people are motivated to think about the message, they aren’t able to do so when they are distracted. To test these ideas, Petty, Wells, and Brock had college students listen to a persuasive message regarding tuition increases at their university (an issue with high personal relevance). Some of the messages contained strong arguments; others contained weak arguments. In addition, half of the students were distracted during the presentation of the message and half were not distracted. Figure 7.10 shows the results from this investigation. As predicted, argument quality mattered more when distraction was low than when distraction was high, and this occurred because distraction made weak arguments more effective (and strong arguments somewhat less effective). This pattern is consistent with the claim that distraction blocks central route processing and induces peripheral processing.

FIGURE 7.9
Personal Involvement, Argument Quality, Argument Quantity, and Attitude Change

The left-hand panel shows that strong arguments produced more attitude change than weak arguments only when involvement was high. When involvement was low, argument quality didn’t affect attitude change. The right-hand panel shows that nine arguments produced more attitude change than three arguments only when involvement was low. When involvement was high, argument quantity didn’t affect attitude change. This pattern supports the claim that attitude change occurs through the central route when involvement is high and through the peripheral route when involvement is low.