IN MOST battles, outnumbering your opponent will hand you victory, and it would seem common sense that the more arguments you can call on, the more persuasive you'll be. Yet, the evidence suggests otherwise. A number of studies have revealed that the more reasons people are asked to come up with in support of an idea, the less value they ascribe to each. The result: asking people to "think of all the reasons why this is a good idea" is likely to backfire, and may serve to harden their views.

Zakary Tormala and Richard Petty of Ohio State University, working with Pablo Brîñol at the Autonomous University of Madrid in Spain, demonstrated the effect in 2002. The researchers told 59 university students that there was a plan to introduce new exams into their courses—an unwelcome prospect. They then asked half the students to produce two reasons why this was a bad idea, and the other half eight reasons. On average, students who supplied just two arguments against the proposal were subsequently more opposed to the exam policy than those who gave eight.

Tormala and colleagues argue that the ease with which we can summon up thoughts affects how much confidence we place in them, and it is generally easier to think of two reasons for believing something rather than eight. This finding has some clear practical implications. "If you want to persuade people by getting them to think positively about your message, idea, product or whatever, ask them to generate just a few positive thoughts—three at most—because that's easy and they'll feel confident about their positive thoughts," says Tormala.

Conversely, next time you're in an argument, avoid the temptation to spin the "give me one good reason" line; it'll only strengthen your adversary's hand.

HUNGER is a powerful thing, but how many times have you reached for a quick snack, only to regret it when it's lying heavily in your stomach? Just as your standards for food quality can slip when your stomach is empty, so you should avoid engaging in argument or doing battle with sales people when your mental batteries are running low. Conversely, if you're trying to be persuasive, strike when your target is running low on mental energy.

Edward Burkley of Oklahoma State University in Stillwater studied the impact of cognitive exhaustion on the resistance levels of 78 students. The plan was to try to convince them to accept one month's summer holiday instead of three. Half the students came to the study fresh. But the other half first had to complete a self-control task in which they wrote down all thoughts that came into their heads while suppressing any thoughts about a white bear.

This task, Burkley argued, would use up some of their reserves of self-control. He found that the students who had performed the white bear task were less resistant to the idea of giving up two months of holiday.

Burkley also studied the flip side of this effect. He asked a different group of 72 students to rate the plan to shorten their holidays. Half were told it would be implemented within two years, making it personally relevant. The other half were told it would not be implemented for 10 years. He wanted to test the hypothesis that students presented with the two-year scenario would use up more of their mental resources, because they would be more motivated to argue against that unwelcome suggestion.

The students then had to try to complete an (unknown to them) unsolvable puzzle—a technique commonly used in such studies to measure how much self-control a person has. On average, students in the 18-year group persisted for more than a minute longer before giving up, suggesting they were less mentally exhausted than those in the two-year group (Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, vol 34, p 419).

Of course, there is a form of mental exhaustion that doesn't require thought: nag them into submission. Children have got this technique sussed, says Burkley.

IN THIS fast-paced world, we seldom have time for face-to-face meetings. You are just as likely to conduct your personal and business negotiations by email, or some other electronic medium, as you are in person. How does this impact your powers of persuasion?

The question intrigued Rosanna Guadagno of the University of Alabama and Robert Cialdini of Arizona State University, who have been comparing the persuasive power of online communication with face-to-face meetings.

In a study published in 2002, Guadagno and Cialdini had a group of students discuss the introduction of new exams (Group Dynamics: Theory, Research and Practice, vol 6, p 38). The group was split into same-sex couples. Unbeknown to the subjects, each pair included an accomplice of the experimenters whose role was to provide arguments in favour of the idea. Half the discussions took place in an online chatroom, the other half sat face-to-face.

While overall men rated the proposals similarly whether they participated in the...
Get them angry

ANGERING people may seem like an odd way to go about persuading them, but according to Monique Mitchell Turner, a communications professor at the University of Maryland, College Park, it is seriously underrated as a tool of persuasion.

Much study has gone into how emotions aid persuasion. The best known and most studied is fear. It serves well in campaigns that try to steer you clear of certain activities, like smoking or unprotected sex.

But fear doesn’t always work, says Turner. An over time, people become more resistant to scare tactics. The same applies to guilt. It can be effective (think of maternal guilt), but not once people clue into the fact they’re being

naturally suspicious of attempts to persuade them. This is especially true if they think they are being duped.

In laboratory studies, merely reminding people that they are vulnerable to manipulation – for example, showing them magazine adverts with celebrities or models endorsing products they clearly know nothing about – makes them generally more difficult to persuade (Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, vol 83, p 526).

So far so obvious, but there’s a useful point here. Resistance means that very persuasive arguments can backfire. People who successfully resist persuasion often become even more entrenched in their wrong-headed opinions, and the stronger, more credible or authoritative they perceive the attempt at persuasion to be, the more of their opinions they become when they resist it (Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, vol 83, p 1298).

At first blush, this seems paradoxical. You might think a strong, authoritative argument

would hold greater sway. Not necessarily. It seems that if people resist good arguments presented by an expert, they conclude their own arguments must be even stronger.

This sets up a bit of a catch-22. “If you want to change people’s attitudes, it’s good to have strong arguments,” says Zakary Tormala of Stanford University. “But if they manage to resist your message, they might become more certain of the very attitudes you want to change.”

How to overcome this deadlock? Tormala’s colleague Richard Petty of Ohio State University says: “Present positions closer to your target’s views, then move them towards your goal a little at a time.” You could also try charming them by boosting their self-esteem. “When people feel good about themselves, they are more open to challenging messages,” he says.

Resistance isn’t futile

HISTORICALLY, psychologists studying persuasion have concentrated on what makes certain messages more appealing than others. But over the past few years researchers have begun revising that idea. A growing body of evidence suggests that breaking down people’s resistance to persuasion can be even more important.

The reason for this is that people are

manipulated. Worse, it has to be carefully calibrated: too much and people resist. “We don’t want people telling us we’re bad people,” says Turner.

Anger is different. For one thing, it’s focused on someone else’s misdeeds, not your own. Also, it’s a very utilitarian emotion, she says, usually in response to a perceived injustice. “Anger makes people feel empowered,” Turner says.

There has been a long debate, she says, about whether anger can be constructively harnessed. In studying groups that employ anger as a tactic – most notably animal rights groups such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, as well as environmental organisations and even political campaigns – she has found that, given the right conditions, it can.

First, people have to be convinced that the issue is relevant to them, that it affects them or their children or their community. At that point, says Turner, you need to hammer home what’s wrong with the world as it is. Once you have got people rolled up, you can offer them a way to remedy the situation (Public Relations Review, vol 33, p 114).

“When those feelings of anger are accompanied by the feeling that there is a solution to this problem, then the message is more likely to be persuasive,” she says.