

The Psychology of Compliance

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Compliance is a type of social influence where an individual does what someone else wants them to do, following his or her request or suggestion. It is similar to obedience, but there is no order – only a request.

According to Breckler, Olson, and Wiggins (2006, p. 307) "Compliance refers to a change in behavior that is requested by another person or group; the individual acted in some way because others asked him or her to do so (but it was possible to refuse or decline.)"

"Situations calling for compliance take many forms. These include a friend's plea for help, sheepishly prefaced by the question "Can you do me a favor?" They also include the pop-up ads on the Internet designed to lure you into a commercial site and the salesperson's pitch for business prefaced by the dangerous words "Have I got a deal for you!" Sometimes the request is up front and direct; what you see is what you get. At other times, it is part of a subtle and more elaborate manipulation." (Kassin, Fein, & Markus, 2011, p. 271)

There are many techniques a person can use to ensure compliance:

The Foot in the Door Technique

The foot in the door technique (Freedman & Fraser, 1966) assumes agreeing to a small request increases the likelihood of agreeing to a second, larger request.

So, initially you make a small request and once the person agrees to this they find it more difficult to refuse a bigger one.

For example, imagine one of your friends missed the last psychology class and asked to borrow your notes. This is a small request that seems reasonable, so you lend the notes to your friend. A week later, the same friend asks to borrow all of your psychology notes. This is large request – would you agree or not?

The foot-in-the-door technique works on the principle of **consistency** (Petrova et al., 2007). This means that as long as the request is consistent with or similar in nature to the original small request, the technique will work.

Sherman (1980) called residents in Indiana (USA) and asked them if, hypothetically, they would volunteer to spend 3 hours collecting for the American Cancer Society.

Three days later, a second experimenter called the same people and actually requested help for this organization. Of those responding to the earlier request, 31% agreed to help. This is much higher than the 4% of a similar group of people who volunteered to help when approached directly.

The Door in the Face Technique

Refusing a large request increases the likelihood of agreeing to a second, smaller request.

Initially you make a big request which a person can be expected to refuse. Then you make a smaller request which the person finds difficult to refuse because they feel they shouldn't always say NO!

For example, negotiating a pay rise with your boss. First you make a request that will not be met and ask for 20%. When this is refused you make a more realistic request and ask for 10%.

Cialdini (1975) asked pps if they would escort a group of young criminals to the zoo; most refused (control group). In control group 2 pps were approached and asked to spend 2 hours per week as a peer counsellor to young criminals for around 2 years; again most said no.

However in the experimental condition pps were asked to be peer counsellors and then the request was downgraded to escort children to the zoo (the target request). 50% agreed to the request.

It has been found the door-in-the face technique produces high levels of compliance only when the same person makes the request, and the requests are similar in nature.

This technique works due to the principle of **reciprocity** (Cialdini et al., 1975). Saying "no" to a large request may make the person feel they owe the other person who made the request a favour.

The Low-Ball Technique

Agreeing to purchase something at a given price increases the likelihood of agreeing to purchase it at a higher price.

Initially you get the individual to agree to your request and then afterwards you increase the original terms. Trick them into agreeing more than they intended.

For example, when buying a car the salesman agrees a price, but must "check" with his manager if this is acceptable. While waiting you think you have secured a good deal. The salesman returns and says his manager would not agree the deal and the price is raised. Most people agree to the higher price.

Cialdini (1978) asked students whether they would participate in a psychology experiment that started at 7 am and most pps refused (control group). In an experimental condition Cialdini asked pps whether they would participate in a psychology experiment, and even though they weren't told a time most pps agreed. Later they were told that it started at 7 am and given the chance to drop out if they wanted. On the day of the experiment 95% turned up.

This success of this technique works on the principle of **commitment**. Because the person has said “yes” or agreed to an initial request, commitment has been given.

When the request changes or becomes unreasonable, the person will (to a degree) find it difficult to say “no” because of having originally committed themselves.

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