

Famous 'door-in-the-face' persuasion strategy results in verbal, but not behavioral compliance, study finds

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The well-known "door-in-the-face" (DITF) persuasion strategy predicts greater compliance with a target request if it is preceded by a larger and more objectionable request. It has been a popular tool of those in the persuasion trade since it was introduced nearly 40 years ago.

A new study by researchers at the University at Buffalo, however, has found that while DITF has a significant effect on verbal compliance, its effect on behavioral compliance is statistically insignificant. In other words, it may get people to agree to a donation, for instance, but it is not effective in getting them to follow through with their verbal commitment.

The study, "The Door-in-the Face Persuasive Message Strategy: A Meta-Analysis of its First 35 Years," appears in the September issue of *Communication Monographs* (Routledge, Vol. 79, N0. 3).

Its authors are Thomas Hugh Feeley, PhD, professor and chair of the UB Department of Communication; Ashley E. Anker, PhD, research assistant professor in the UB Department of Communication; and Ariel Aloe, PhD, assistant professor, UB Department of Counseling, School and [Educational Psychology](#).

They found that the strategy works in getting the receiver to agree to the target (or "real") request, but it is far less successful in provoking him or

her to actually hand over the cash.

In practice, the first request (say, for a loan of \$500) is rejected by the receiver. The requester, in a strategic move, permits a metaphorical door to be slammed in his or her face. Apparently unfazed by rejection, however, the requester immediately seeks compliance with a comparatively lesser and more realistic target request (a loan of \$20) and, according to DITF theory, the receiver of the request is much more likely to agree to that than to the initial request.

"The DITF strategy was introduced in 1975 by University of Arizona psychologist Robert Cialdini, et al., in the [Journal of Personality and Social Psychology](#)," Feeley says, "and since then, has become exceptionally popular among 'persuaders' in fields such as marketing, political campaigning, sales, media advertising and communication.

"This simple very effective strategy has been the subject of more than 80 research studies over four decades," says Feeley.

"Many of these studies validated the claim by Cialdini et al. that the strategy works well to achieve verbal compliance to a request," Feeley says, "but Cialdini also claimed a level of behavioral compliance as high as 26 percent."

Analysis of previous study results does not bear this out, according to Feeley and co-researchers. "In fact, in our study the correlational coefficient of DITF strategy on behavioral compliance was .126—demonstrating a small effect.

"Because the problem with behavioral compliance was not evident in prior studies, the strategy has been applied by thousands of communications specialists who assumed all claims for the strategy to be universally valid and reliable," Feeley says.

"The earlier studies used different conditions and contexts to assess the effectiveness of DITF, however, and when results were not consistent, they came up with at least six theories that offer to explain the results of prior research," he says.

In this study, which analyzed all previous studies including two prior meta-analyses, Feeley and his co-researchers found that the door-in-the-face strategy does indeed work much better than a simple request for compliance in securing a verbal agreement to help, but that agreement to help doesn't often lead to actual helping behavior.

No psychological tool of persuasion works in every situation and cannot be relied upon to do so, Feeley notes. "In the end, we see through these transparent message strategies, so people working in sales should probably write their own material," he says.

"The strategy remains popular because marketers and campaigners seldom rely on proven evidence to guide their communication activities. Instead, they are lazy and use past practices that, when examined in the light of good data, are often found to be unsubstantiated."

Provided by University at Buffalo

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