

# Popular 'Door-in-the-Face' persuasion strategy can sometimes backfire, study shows

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(Medical Xpress)—A manipulation strategy often used in marketing and fundraising known as "Door-in-the-Face" could backfire among less concrete thinkers, according to new research from The University of Texas at Austin.

Used widely for decades, the Door-in-the-Face persuasion strategy begins with an extreme request (say, for a donation of \$500) that ends with a proverbial door being slammed in the requester's face and quickly follows up with a more moderate, smaller request (a \$10 gift). The goal is to get the person to agree to the small request, which presumably happens because the person feels guilty rejecting the extreme request.

This technique is considered by professional solicitors and fundraisers to be more effective at getting people to agree to a small request than asking outright for the small request. However, a new psychology study, published this month in *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, shows an outright request may be more effective than the Door-in-the-Face method. In fact, the manipulation strategy could potentially cause some people to turn away from good deeds altogether, says Marlene Henderson, assistant professor of psychology and lead author of the study.

"People who think in the abstract are more likely to have a sweeping perception of their core selves than those who consider only concrete aspects of themselves," Henderson says. "So when abstract thinkers turn down extreme requests, they're likely to make a connection between

selfishness and their core self, leading them to assume that they are not generous. This in turn causes them to refuse more opportunities to donate or volunteer."

As part of the study, Henderson prompted the respondents to think of themselves in abstract terms by asking them questions about their broad life goals (as opposed to the specific steps they take to carry out their actions).

In a preliminary experiment, Henderson and his team either presented the respondents with an extreme request (organizing a blood drive in their neighborhood) or no request at all. As expected, virtually everyone declined the extreme request. The researchers then asked participants to rate their level of selfishness on a seven-point scale. Compared with concrete thinkers, more abstract thinkers rated themselves higher on the selfish scale after rejecting the extreme request. However, when no request was made, abstract thinkers were no more likely to think of themselves as being selfish than concrete thinkers.

Abstract thinkers take in the broader picture, rather than the concrete details of the here and now, Henderson says. For example, a concrete thinker can look at the American flag and just focus on the stars and stripes. Yet those who think in the abstract would see the flag as a symbol of freedom and liberty.

In three subsequent experiments, the researchers tested the effectiveness of the Door-in-the-Face method versus a simple outright request with 710 participants. About half of the participants were first presented with an extreme pro-social request, which most respondents rejected, and then with a small request, such as donating \$10 to the fundraiser. The other half of the participants were simply presented with the small request. In each experiment, more abstract thinkers were less likely than concrete thinkers to agree to the small requests after they had just turned

down the extreme request. However, a high percentage of both concrete and abstract groups agreed to the small request when asked in an outright manner.

"Our findings suggest the Door-in-the Face technique is a riskier strategy than simply making an outright request," says Erin Burgoon, a University of Texas at Austin psychology researcher and co-author of the study. "If a potential donor is thinking more concretely, the strategy works just as well as asking outright. However, if a potential donor is thinking more abstractly, the technique actually backfires."

If solicitors are still keen on using this strategy, the researchers suggest it would be best to guide people to think of themselves in more concrete terms. This can be achieved by highlighting specific facts and details about how charitable organizations are making a difference in people's lives, rather than broad, general reasons why these organizations go about helping people.

Provided by University of Texas at Austin

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