

## Differential Perception of Source Legitimacy in Sequential Request Strategies

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**ABSTRACT.** Foot-in-the-door (FITD) and door-in-the face (DITF) techniques were compared in a telephone survey that also sought to assess how legitimate the source of the request seemed to the respondents. Calls were made to 120 Americans by an interviewer from a fictitious private consulting firm, using a source name designed to have low perceived legitimacy. It had been expected from previous research that only the FITD technique would successfully produce compliance under these circumstances, and that the FITD compliers would also yield higher ratings of the source's legitimacy than either the DITF or a control. This prediction was confirmed, but some evidence suggested that the source legitimacy question in the procedure also affected the compliance level of DITF subjects.

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**RESEARCH** on the effectiveness of sequential request strategies of compliance shares a common assumption regarding perceived sources of influence. For both the foot-in-the-door (FITD) technique (Freedman & Fraser, 1966) and the door-in-the-face (DITF) technique (Cialdini et al., 1975), researchers assume that the perceived legitimacy of the source remains constant within and across experimental conditions (e.g., the source is viewed similarly by both treatment groups and controls). In essence, this is to say that either acceptance or refusal of a prior request has a measurable impact upon compliance to a second request without any commensurate effect upon attitudes toward those whose interests are served.

Concern that this assumption may be unwarranted extends, in theory, to those findings that appear to demonstrate a difference in the effectiveness of the two techniques. Patch (1986) recently found evidence suggesting that although the FITD technique can be effective under cir-

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cumstances where source legitimacy is relatively low, the DITF is not. The latter finding is consistent with earlier research on request legitimacy by Schwarzwald, Ray, and Zvibel (1979). Patch interpreted his results as stemming from differences in source dependency and suggested that the FITD technique, because it is based on acceptance of the first request, operates on pressure for self-consistency, whereas the DITF technique, because it is based on refusal of the first request, relies on normative pressure and obligation to the source.

Patch's findings and his interpretation suggest the possibility that FITD subjects may have perceived the source in low-legitimacy conditions ("Multi-Media Associates") as more positive or legitimate than did either DITF or control subjects. Because the FITD effect in these circumstances may involve some degree of self-justification, subjects may reevaluate the source after complying with the first request, thus increasing the perception of legitimacy. In contrast, source evaluations for the DITF strategy under these conditions may be in the opposite direction, particularly when compliance patterns reflect a "boomerang effect" (e.g., less compliance than with the moderate request only) as reported in Schwarzwald et al. (1979). It is thus conceivable that refusal in the DITF can in this case lead to a parallel evaluative response, thereby decreasing the perception of legitimacy.

Such then is the basis of a differential perception/evaluation hypothesis in the present study. The FITD and DITF techniques were contrasted with control requests in the same manner as in the earlier Patch (1986) study, employing a phone survey that sought to have respondents fill out and return a lengthy questionnaire about television programming. The key difference, however, was that the subjects were asked to evaluate the legitimacy of the source just prior to the second or moderate request (following the initial requests for the FITD and DITF conditions). It was predicted that source legitimacy would be rated higher by FITD subjects than by those in either the DITF or control conditions and would be rated lower by DITF subjects than by those in the control condition.

### **Method**

The survey was conducted by three assistants who telephoned 120 male and female subjects, selected at random from telephone directories in the San Francisco Bay Area. The interviewers identified themselves as representatives of Multi-Media Associates (a fictitious organization that ostensibly represented private rather than public interests) and proceeded to make various requests asking each respondent to supply information about his or her television habits. In the FITD condition, subjects were asked to follow a small request, and then, upon compliance with that request, a larger, moderate request was made. For the DITF condition a larger request was

made first that, as expected, all subjects refused. They were then asked to perform the same moderate request asked of the subjects in the FITD condition. The control group was only asked to perform the moderate request.

To make the telephone calls as homogeneous as possible the interviewers followed a prepared script, and numerous pilot calls were made to insure uniform delivery. The specific requests mentioned above were delivered as follows:

**Small request:** If we could have a few minutes of your time, I would like to ask you a few short questions. Do you own a television? Do you watch more than 10 hours of television a week? Do you think there is too much violence on television? Do you think your children should be allowed to watch television without supervision?

**Moderate request:** May we send you a 50-item questionnaire concerning your viewing habits and your opinions concerning violence on television? We will include a stamped, preaddressed envelope in which to return your questionnaire. Can we count on your cooperation?

**Large request:** We would like you to keep a journal on all the programs you watch in the next 2 weeks. At the end of the 2-week period we would like to send a representative to your house to discuss your viewing choices. Will you participate in our study?

Preliminary testing of these requests had confirmed subjects' likely responses to the small and large requests (namely, that the former would be accepted and the latter refused by virtually all respondents), thus establishing the essential criteria for both the FITD and DITF strategies. If the subject agreed to cooperate with the final (moderate request), he or she was thanked and informed that this was an initial contact only and that he or she would be telephoned again and given further instructions.

Subjects were asked to evaluate the source immediately following their response to the first request. The control subjects were asked as soon as the interviewers had identified themselves. The exact wording of the question was important because pilot testing had shown that people frequently were reluctant to evaluate an organization with which they were completely unfamiliar. The following approach, which allowed the subjects to give their impressions of source legitimacy based on the sound of the title alone, was used to deal with that problem:

We know the public does not have much information about our organization. Many people have not even heard of us until this initial contact. Nonetheless, it is important for us to know how you might perceive us at this moment. In other words, we need to know how positive or negative your impression is of our organization even if all you really know about us is our name. So, on a scale of 1 to 10, could you indicate your feelings about how legitimate Multi-Media Associates seems to you? Score a 10 for the most legitimate and a 1 for the least.

### Results

Compliance levels to the moderate request for the three conditions are shown in Table 1. As is evident from these figures, the FITD technique was the most successful under these circumstances. Statistically, although chi-square analysis revealed a significant overall association of strategy and compliance,  $\chi^2 = 6.45$ ,  $p < .025$ , only the FITD exceeded the control in specific comparisons,  $\chi^2 = 6.37$ ,  $p < .025$ .

A summary of the subjects' evaluations of source legitimacy is presented in Table 2. Included are separate data for those subjects who refused the final request and for those who complied with it. Hence the mean scores shown in the table reflect unequal frequencies for both cases across the three conditions. As suggested by the findings presented here, only the evaluations obtained from those who complied with the moderate request yielded significant differences. A one-way analysis of variance indicated that source legitimacy evaluation significantly differed across the three conditions,  $F = 9.32$ ,  $p < .01$ . As predicted, this difference was attributable to the evaluations of subjects in the FITD condition. Specific comparisons indicated that only the FITD responses differed statistically from the control responses (though the DITF exceeded the control, a comparison yielded an  $F$  value at only  $p < .06$ ) and that the FITD evaluations significantly exceeded those of the DITF,  $F = 6.25$ ,  $p < .025$ .

**TABLE 1**  
Frequency of Compliance With Moderate Request

Response	FITD	DITF	Control
Compliance	30 <sup>a</sup>	23	19 <sup>a</sup>
No compliance	10	17	21

<sup>a</sup>Significant chi-square comparison.

**TABLE 2**  
Mean Evaluations of Source Legitimacy

Subjects	FITD	DITF	Control
Compliers	6.53 <sup>ab</sup>	5.17 <sup>a</sup>	4.21 <sup>b</sup>
Noncompliers	5.10	4.41	4.05

*Note.* Common superscripts indicate significant differences between conditions.

### Discussion

The results indicate that it may often be unwarranted to assume that perception of source legitimacy remains constant in sequential-request-strategy research. Further, it appears that the observed variation across conditions applies only to those who have complied with the final request and not to those who have refused it. This finding has particular significance for explaining in part the relative effectiveness of the FITD technique under circumstances of low source legitimacy, as demonstrated both in Patch (1986) and in the present study. As hypothesized, the FITD strategy appears to have generated an increase in the perception of source legitimacy (viewed in comparison with the control group), quite possibly because acceptance of the initial request under such circumstances sets in motion a need for self-justification. Thus, what began as a request from an unknown source may become a "good cause" for the subject after he or she has taken a small step in that direction.

It was also hypothesized that a negative reevaluation effect might be evident for the DITF strategy, but this prediction was not confirmed. In fact, DITF source evaluations exceeded those of the control, and the difference was only marginally short of significance. This point is made in conjunction with the observation that compliance levels in the DITF condition (with the source legitimacy question included in the procedure) were strikingly improved over those reported in Patch's (1986) earlier study. This comparison is shown in Table 3, which includes parallel results from both studies. Asking for a source evaluation was associated with compliance for the DITF only,  $\chi^2 = 4.07$ ,  $p < .05$ ,<sup>1</sup> suggesting that the intermediate position of the DITF may reflect something more than chance. Furthermore, this pattern of results tends to dismiss the suggestion that the source evaluation question created reactivity problems across all request conditions.

Perhaps, then, the possibility of a connection between compliance and source evaluation for the DITF technique should not be discounted. Though the evidence is clearly not definitive, consideration should be given to the manner in which the DITF process may have been altered by including the source legitimacy question in the procedure. Certainly it is plausible to suggest that, following refusal of the initial (high) request, the source evaluation response becomes a convenient, however modest, means of forestalling embarrassment in the encounter. By answering the source legitimacy question, the respondent may in effect offer the interviewer a modicum of legitimacy, and consequently the DITF reciprocal concession

<sup>1</sup>A Compliance  $\times$  Strategy  $\times$  Source Question interaction, using a chi-square analysis for all three conditions in each of the two studies, was not significant. This particular comparison should be viewed in that context.

**TABLE 3**  
**Frequency of Compliance With and Without Source Evaluation Question**

Condition	With question	Without question <sup>a</sup>
<b>FITD</b>		
Compliance	30	30
No compliance	10	10
<b>DITF</b>		
Compliance	23 <sup>b</sup>	14 <sup>b</sup>
No compliance	17	26
<b>Control</b>		
Compliance	19	18
No compliance	21	22

<sup>a</sup>Data obtained from Patch (1986). <sup>b</sup>Significant chi-square comparison.

dynamic (Cialdini et al., 1975) is partially restored. Another possibility is that the source evaluation response represents a degree of compliance and thus functions in much the same manner as the initial request in the FITD strategy. The data in Table 3, however, which show no differences in the control conditions, seem to indicate that responding to the source question in and of itself does not necessarily lead to a weak FITD effect.

The wider perspective of this study is difficult to assess. The correspondence between source evaluation and compliance has been demonstrated under rather specific circumstances, first where legitimacy of the source is relatively low, and second where the degree of effort is also relatively low (Patch, 1986; see also Dillard, Hunter, & Burgoon, 1984). Also, as mentioned above, it cannot go unacknowledged that some sequential request procedures (the DITF technique in particular) may well become something that is psychologically different from their traditional and theoretical operations when other elements (in this case the inquiry having to do with source legitimacy) are interjected. In addition, the source evaluation effects obtained here may conceivably be unique to an American or Western cultural perspective. Specifically, Americans may be more restrictive in their responsiveness to the DITF compliance strategy. In a Middle Eastern context, for example (see Schwarzwald et al., 1979), respondents to this strategy may have more positive attitudes toward those who attempt this approach.

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