

# Disrupt then reframe

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## Overview

The disrupt-then-reframe is a technique that is intended to distract attention from the potential costs or limitations of a product, service, or proposal. In particular, individuals first introduce a subtle disruption to a sales script, such as pretending to inadvertently state the price in pennies rather than dollars, before correcting themselves and then highlighting the benefit of some product.

## Empirical support

In a series of studies, Davis and Knowles (1999) asked participants whether or not they would like to purchase a set of Christmas cards, sold by a charitable organization. Sometimes, the experimenter would include a subtle error, such as "The price is 300 pennies...I mean 3 dollars". Informing the participants the cards are a bargain increased the likelihood of purchases, but only if this statement followed the reference to 300 pennies. Indeed, this slip virtually doubled sales in some situations.

Fennis, Das, and Pruyn (2004) also verified the utility of this technique, showing that disrupt then reframe diminishes the incidence of counterarguments-in which customers demonstrate dissent and opposition towards the proposal. Furthermore, the disrupt then reframe approach also amplified the benefits of other sales tactics.

## Theoretical explanations

### Ericksonian Confusion Techniques

Several theories have been proposed to explain the benefits of this technique. Erickson (1964) recognized that patients who desired hypnosis were concurrently somewhat resistant to this approach. To override the resistance, Erickson (1964) applied several confusion techniques, as enumerated by Gilligan (1987), such as interrupting a handshake, intended to distract attention from the doubts. Confusion seemed to foster compliance with subsequent suggestions.

Fennis, Das, and Pruyn (2004) offered a similar explanation, but with reference to the dual process framework (Chaiken, 1980; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In particular, when individuals evaluate a message or advertisement, they either consider the issue carefully, systematically and analytically or process the information superficially, rapidly, and effortlessly, relying more on cues such as the appearance or age of the speaker. When customers process information superficially, not analytically, they are apparently more susceptible to sales tactics. Conceivably, any disruption or confusion might divert attention, precluding a systematic analysis and inviting superficial processing.

### Action identification theory

Action identification theory has also been invoked to explain the disrupt then reframe technique. Vallacher and Wegner (1985, 1987) developed action identification theory, a series of propositions that characterize the factors that influence changes in the mental construction of events. Specifically, according to this theory, individuals can construe, construct, or conceptualize a specific act with reference to specific details and features. Alternatively, they can construe the same act with reference to more abstract labels, such as the purpose, goals, or implications of this action.

On the one hand, individuals sometimes prefer to focus on specific details and features, because such information can facilitate performance on this act in the future. On the other hand, individuals might prefer to focus on abstract characterizations, which uncover broader implications and facilitate mastery. These conflicting inclinations conflict with one another to determine the level that individuals use to construct an act.

Vallacher and Wegner (1985, 1987) identify the processes that affect which level will prevail. When individuals construct an abstract representation of an act, but then experience some form of disruption, they begin to focus progressively on the details, ultimately enhancing their capacity to modulate and control the action. Once mastery is regained, they will then construct an abstract representation of an act, somewhat modified from before, which represents a form of reframing.

To illustrate, in a study conducted by Vallacher and Wegner (1985), some students were instructed to eat Cheetos either with their hands or with a pair of chopsticks. The chopsticks, which represents a form of disruption and thus facilitates reframing, was shown to increase susceptibility to social influence.

## **Factors that enhance or inhibit the benefits of disrupt then reframe**

### **Non-verbal language**

As Fennis and Stel (2011) showed, whether the disrupt then reframe technique is effective partly depends on the non-verbal language of salespeople including gestures and mannerisms. That is, salespeople can utilize either an eager or a vigilant non-verbal language. When they adopt an eager style, they speak quite excitedly and rapidly with their hands away from their body, in an open posture. When they adopt a vigilant style, they speak more carefully and slowly, with their hands nearer to their body in a closed posture.

When salespeople adopt a vigilant style, rather than eager style, they highlight the need to avoid problems rather than seek gains. That is, this vigilant style emphasizes the importance of caution. The customer also experiences this motivation to avoid problems and to behave cautiously. Therefore, these customers become more susceptible to sales tactics that obscure or diminish problems. The disrupt then reframe technique, arguably, deflects attention from problems, fulfilling the motivations of people who strive to avoid problems rather than seek gains.

Fennis and Stel (2011) substantiated this possibility. In one study, some participants interacted with a salesperson who utilized the disrupt then reframe procedure to sell boxes of candy. While selling these boxes, they alluded to a price of 100 Eurocents, before correcting themselves and referring to the price of 1 Euro. Other participants interacted with a salesperson who utilized the same script, but did not refer to the 100 Eurocents. Participants were more likely to purchase these boxes of candy when exposed to the disrupt then reframe procedure, but only if the salesperson also utilized a vigilant style. If the salesperson utilized an eager style, the disrupt then reframe procedure was ineffective.

A vigilant style, thus, enhances the utility of disrupt then reframe as well as perhaps other tactics that diminish problems. However, an eager style might enhance the utility of other sales tactics. Specifically, when individuals are exposed to an eager and excited style, they are more likely to focus on the opportunities they could gain instead of the problems they should avoid. They are, therefore, more susceptible to sales tactics that offer incentives to pursue some gain rather than avoid a problem. For example, they might be influenced by the door in the face technique, in which the salesperson first offers an ambitious offer, such as 6 boxes for \$6 but, when rejected, offer 1 box for \$1. The second offer proposes a gain that does not seem too expensive. This technique, therefore, fulfills the motivation of customers to acquire a gain. Consistent with this possibility, another study, conducted by Fennis and Stel (2011), showed this door in the face technique is more effective when salespeople utilize an eager style instead of a vigilant style.

## Practical implications

Individuals often want to present some favorable information about a product, service, or proposal they would like to promote. They might, for example, want to highlight how their product is a bargain. Immediately before they present this information, they should commit some seemingly inadvertent slip, such as "The price is 2500 cents...I mean 25 dollars", intended to disrupt attention.

Other possible techniques to disrupt attention include sentences that do not end, errors such as "Nice ray" rather than "Nice day", or other interruptions to a pattern, such as beginning a handshake but then tapping the thumb of this person lightly as you proceed. Furthermore, items with one odd element, such as a coffee cup with a lead base, have been used.

## Related practices

### Pique technique

A technique that resembles the disrupt then reframe is called the Pique technique, illustrated by Santos, Leve, and Pratkanis (1994). These authors found, for example, that ask for "17 cents" was more effective than asking for "any change", indicating that unconventional requests might promote compliance. Supposedly, unconventional questions stimulate interest and, indeed, promote more questions and fascination from customers. In contrast, the disrupt then reframe technique is more subtle, usually operating outside focal awareness.

### Foot in the mouth

As studies indicate, when salespeople or market researchers first ask a potential customer a question about their mood or availability, their requests are more likely to be accepted later (e.g., Howard, 1990). This technique is called foot-in-the-mouth.

Meineri and Gueguen (2011) reported an excellent example of this effect. In this study, the participants were telephoned at home. All of the participants were asked whether or not they would be willing to complete a questionnaire over the telephone.

Before they received this request, the market researchers first said to some participants "I hope I'm not disturbing you, am I?" and then waited for an answer before proceeding. In contrast, other participants, however, were not granted an opportunity to answer. Finally, some participants were not even asked this question.

Compared to the other participants, the individuals who were granted an opportunity to answer the question about whether they felt disturbed were more likely to comply with the subsequent request. That is, they were more willing to complete the questionnaire.

Specifically, most of the participants conceded they were not disturbed by the phone call. This answer cultivates a more candid, rather than business, relationship. Once these relationships form, participants may become more willing to follow requests. Similarly, this answer implies the participants are obliging. In general, people like to demonstrate they are consistent over time and, therefore, like to acquiesce to subsequent demands.

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