



PERGAMON

Computers in Human Behavior 18 (2002) 11–15

www.elsevier.com/locate/comphumbeh

Computers in
Human Behavior

Foot-in-the-door technique and computer-mediated communication

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Abstract

The “Foot-in-the-door” is a compliance technique which consists in proposing a little first request to a subject then to submit him/her a second more expensive request. In this way, more compliance to the second request is obtained than in a control situation where this request was not preceding by the first solicitation. Many investigations on this paradigm generally used an interaction in face-to-face or by phone. So, an experiment was carried out by means of the electronic-mail. Fifty students in computer science received an e-mail containing a 40 question survey on their food habits which required 15–20 min of their time. This questionnaire came from a hypothetical student of the university in which the subjects were registered. Thirty minutes before, half of the subjects, had responded to a small solicitation (information about file’s conversion) made by this same solicitor. Results show that the compliance to the first request increased the likelihood of later compliance to the second, more costly request. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Foot-in-the-door; Compliance; Computer-mediated-communication; Asynchronous influence

In 1966, Freedman and Fraser incited 43% of a group of housewives to allow a team of 5/6 investigators to stay at their homes during 2 h to make an inventory of all the products used for cleaning and cooking. Three days before this visit, the women were asked to fill out a little questionnaire containing eight questions concerning their consumption. Without this preliminary request only 22% of the persons accepted the visit of the investigators. This technique of preparing the subject by a small request before submitting the request sought after, has been called the “foot-in-the-door” technique. Various meta-analyses of numerous studies on this technique have shown its efficacy on submission (Beaman, Cole, Preston, Klentz, & Mehrstens-Stebly, 1983; Dillard, Hunter, & Burgoon, 1984; Fern, Monroe, & Avila, 1986). It is known that

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this technique is particularly efficient for inciting people to positively respond not only to prosocial requests but also to demands of a more commercial character. A certain number of studies have shown that this technique could effectively be used to incite women to undergo a medical exam for diagnosing breast cancer (Dolin & Boot-Butterfield, 1995) or to incite students to take a cart designating them as organ donor (Carduci, Deuser, Bauer, Large, & Ramaekers, 1989). Recent studies show that this technique has a positive effect on the compliance rate to a request as well as on the involvement of the subject. For example, Guéguen and Fischer-Lokou (1999) showed that asking the time to someone in the street before asking him/her for money predisposed the subject to accept more easily this request (43%) than after a direct demand (28%). Moreover, these authors observed that the gifts of the first group were larger than those for the control group. In the literature various theoretical explications for the “Foot-in-the-door” effect can be found. The first one, called the self-perception theory (Freedman & Fraser, *op. cit.*), considers that the preliminary request makes the subject feel that he/she is helping other people, caring for others and, once this perception is activated it favors the compliance to the second request. Another explication, called the contrasts theory, considers that the first request, even if it doesn’t cost much (answering three or four questions, giving the time, putting a sticker onto its car, . . .), leads to the perception that the second request costs less effort than if it would have been asked directly. Therefore, the second request is more easily accepted (Shanab & O’Neill, 1982). These two explications which are not exclusive are often put forward in the literature but have never been empirically validated and today this model explaining the “foot-in-the-door” effect still remains to be demonstrated.

Methodologically speaking, most of the studies on this technique used an interactive face-to-face or telephone conversation method. The physical presence of the investigator is not essential for the success of this technique and considering the actual experience, hardly any difference can be observed between the communication methods used. For this reason, it seemed useful to study if the “foot-in-the-door” effect could be obtained by computer interaction. It is known that requests by questionnaires of all sorts are being developed thanks to Internet and that numerous Internet users show a certain saturation for these requests (Zhang, 2000). It became, therefore, interesting to study the impact of this technique as part of the communication with the computer as a medium. Taking into account the convincing efficacy of this technique clearly demonstrated in the studies mentioned before, it could be expected that a small request to a person by means of an electronic mail would predispose him/her to give his/her consent more easily to an ulterior request asking for more time and effort, compared to a direct request situation.

1. Method

1.1. Subjects

The subjects consisted of 58 students in their first year computer science at the University of Bretagne-Sud in France. These subjects were recruited at the moment

of their Internet connection on a free-to-use workstation at the university. The experiment took place after 17:30 to be sure that the subjects were not in class. Eight subjects were eliminated from the experiment: three of them because they did not respond to the first request, two because they did not know how to respond and three because they logged out during the time assigned to the experiment.

1.2. Procedure

Two electronic addresses, one of a boy and one of a girl, have been created for the occasion, containing the name of a server of another part of the university in the same town. Moreover, the e-mails sent to the subjects contained a signature showing that the sender of the mail was a student in statistics at the same university. The subjects were randomly allocated to the experimental or to the control situation. Two investigators were used in this experiment. One of them was situated in the same building as the subject and was able to check if the subject was connected and if he had the corresponding profile. He then transferred the subject's address to his collaborator who consulted a random allocation list. According to the order of the subject allocation to the experimental or to the control situation took place. The collaborator then took care of sending the message(s). The second investigator was located in a laboratory of another building. In the experimental condition an e-mail was sent to the subject asking: "*I have to send my CV to a company in a Word RTF format. I don't know how it works, can you help me?*". This relatively simple preliminary request was chosen because it did not ask for a lot of effort and because most of the subjects would be able to answer. Only a few words would be sufficient to offer the solution ("click save as, choose save as type, take RTF format"). At the most, it would take 1 min to answer this question. It should be noted that any of these subjects was surprised by this question while the sender was a complete stranger to them. Fifteen minutes later another message was sent to the subject thanking him for his advice. In the second part of the message a new request for help was made as follows: "*I don't want to take advantage but could you help me once more. Well, with 3 of my study friends we have to perform a statistical analysis of the diet habits of students. For this we will have to analyze a questionnaire and we will be evaluated on the analysis of the collected data. Would you accept answering it. Just in case, I attached an HTML form that was given to us and that you will have to send back by clicking on the send button at the end of the form. Thanks in advance and have a nice day*".

In the control situation the same request was made but without the preliminary thanks and the message started as follows: "*Hi, I don't want to take advantage but could you help me. Well, with 3*". This request was chosen for the sufficient effort it required; a preliminary test showed that 15–20 min were needed to fill out the questionnaire containing 40 questions of the type "*How many times of week do you eat fresh vegetables? What type of drink do you normally take with your lunch: beer, wine, soda, fizzy or flat water?*". Besides, such a request seemed in accordance with the training of the senders who were supposed to be students in statistics. The return rate of the questionnaire was then measured and a delay of a maximum of 7

days was allowed before declaring a no-response. The response time was also taken into account as a dependant variable.

2. Results

Concerning the compliance rate to the final request (completing the questionnaire and sending it back) 76% (19 out of 25) in the experimental situation did sent back the filled out questionnaire against 44% (11 out of 25) in the control situation. The difference between these two rates was significant ($X^2(1, n = 50) = 5.33, P < 0.03$). So, consenting to the first help request predisposes the subjects to accept more easily the second request. The latency time for answering was initially calculated in minutes. Considering the fact that some subjects have been waiting 1–4 days before answering, a log transformation of these periods has been made. The mean value of the latency time of 1.76 (S.D. = 0.64) was found for the experimental condition against 2.15 (S.D. = 0.91) for the control situation. Despite the appearances, the difference between these two means was not statistically significant ($t(28) = 1.38, P > 0.10$, two-tailed). The “foot-in-the-door” technique did not lead to a quicker response time for the subjects that accepted to answer.

3. Discussion

Once more, it was observed that accepting a simple initial request predisposes in a positive way a subject to accept a subsequent request asking for a greater effort. Our experience shows that the “foot-in-the-door” technique can be transposed to situations in which the interactions occur by e-mail. Earlier studies have shown that the physical presence of the demanding person is not necessary to guarantee the compliance to the request. It appears now that this presence not even necessitates a synchronous communication between the applicant and the target of his request. This “electronic foot-in-the door” turns out as effective as in a situation where the interaction is synchronous (face-to-face or by phone). Besides, the solicitor was a complete stranger to the subject and only the sequence of the requests could explain the higher compliance rate in the experimental condition. These results tend to show that the efficacy of this technique does not lie in the nature of the interaction between the demanding person and the subject but rather in the sequence of the requests. This directs to the theoretical explication of the “foot-in-the-door” technique in terms of self-perception (Freedman & Fraser, 1966) or on perceptive contrast (Shanab & O’Neil, 1982).

We observed that the “foot-in-the-door” technique effectively functions in the case of an interaction between strangers communicating by means of a computer. Obviously, the traditional social factors for influencing can be transposed without any problem to this type of communication medium, like e-mail. Numerous manipulation techniques without pressure, like the “foot-in-the-door” are present in the psychosocial literature and using the computer to test and build up a theory

explaining the efficacy of these techniques appears once more particularly heuristic. Indeed, a communication medium like a computer should permit a better control of various variables that could have an effect on the influence of an applicant and, therefore, permit a better control of independent variables.

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