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Fund-Raising on the Web: The Effect of an Electronic Foot-in-the-Door on Donation

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ABSTRACT

In an attempt to test the foot-in-the-door (FITD) technique in a computer-mediated communication context, 1,008 men and women taken at random in various e-mails lists were solicited to visit a web site for the profit of a humanitarian organization. In the FITD condition, subjects were first solicited to sign a petition form and, after that, they were solicited for a donation. In the control condition, the donation solicitation was formulated directly. In all cases, the formulation of the requests was manipulated by the order of the successive HTML pages of the site. Results show that the FITD procedure increases compliance to the final request.

INTRODUCTION

The foot-in-the-door (FITD) is a compliance technique that consists of proposing a small first request to a subject, then to submit to 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 preceded by the first solicitation.[1] Various meta-analyses of numerous studies on this technique have shown its efficacy on compliance.[2–5] It is now well known that this technique is particularly efficient for inducing people to positively respond, not only to prosocial requests, but also to demands of a more commercial character.[6] Some studies have shown that this technique could effectively be used to incite women to undergo a medical exam for diagnosing breast cancer[7] or to incite students to take a card designating them as an organ donor.[8] 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. Guéguen and Fischer-Lokou[9] showed that asking the time of 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 of the FITD effect can be found. One of them, called the self-perception theory,[1] 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 compliance to the second request. Another explication, called the contrast theory, considers that the first request, even if it doesn't cost much (answering three or four questions, giving the time, putting a sticker

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onto a 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.[10] Recently, a new theoretical explanation of the FITD was proposed by Rind and Benjamin,[11] who argued that impression management is the process that explains the FITD effect; that is, when agreeing with the first request, the subject would be perceived by the solicitor as a positive person who helps other people. When asked for a second request of help, the subject would tend to comply more favorably in order to maintain the initial good impression activated by compliance to the first request.

We considered that communication, with the use of the internet, could help us in a theoretical and practical way concerning the FITD theory. Practically, research on the FITD technique has always been done in a face-to-face interaction or by phone. Both techniques are equally effective, which means that the physical presence of the person asking for a favor is not necessary for the FITD technique to function. However, we are talking about a synchronical communication, where the person asking for a favor interacts with the subject in real time. Thus, the characteristic of a communication by computer is its asynchronicity, making it possible to overcome distance as well as time problems. We can even go farther in the case of an internet site, insofar as the person asking for a favor becomes even more impersonal because the help request can be evoked on one of the pages browsed by the subject. So, when testing the FITD effect in such a context, we could not only evaluate the general effectiveness of this technique in the case of communication by computer but also in situations not supposing a determined interlocutor.

Thus, if the theory of impression management is valid, insofar as a person asking for a request cannot be identified, it should not be possible to prove the effect of the FITD technique used via computer. On the other hand, if a contrast effect exists, produced by the succession of requests or by self-presentation activated by compliance to the first request, we should observe a FITD effect in the case of a request made by computer.

The objective of the study hereafter has been to evaluate the FITD effect in the case of an interaction between a subject and a site made for the occasion where the different sequences of the requests, which are characteristic for this technique, were manipulated by the order of the web pages.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Subjects

A total of 1,008 men and women were randomly chosen from a list of mail addresses taken from the internet. Because of the way these addresses were obtained (family name or initials only, or pseudonym), it is impossible to make a more precise description of the samples in terms of gender or age. These addresses were obtained by using various software for browsing the internet and for procuring personal e-mail addresses according to different parameters. In our case, the only parameter was a limitation to the addresses on a French server (name@server.fr). Various directories have also been used to constitute our file of addresses. After the elimination of company addresses, a total of 2,519 addresses were available; 341 of these addresses were invalid at the moment of the experimentation (no server or unknown destination on the server). In the end, 2,178 persons were solicited by electronic mail to connect themselves to our site. A total of 1,008 persons (46.3%) actually visited the site.

Procedure

A site was constructed for our experimentation. Considering the fact that most of the requests in studies on the FITD effect have a prosocial character, we opted for a site in favor of humanitarian cause—in this case, children who were victim of mines all over the world but mainly in war zones. The site was called "Childhood Victim of Mines" and showed, at the home page, various photos of children who were victims of mine injuries as well as a sensitizing text. Two variants of the same site were constructed for the needs of the study. The choice of which page would be activated was made randomly per bloc of 100 subjects contained in the final data base with the electronic

addresses. A letter was sent by using software for sending electronic mail. This message contained the following text: "Spend five minutes of your time on the children that were victims of mines by clicking on:." This sentence was followed by a hypertext link containing the server and site address. In order to be connected to this site, the subject only had to click on the link.

In the control situation, the home page contained a link inviting the subject to donate to the children victim of mines. Subsequently, the subject was connected to a second page showing a photograph of two children and a message of acknowledgment. This page contained another link, which included the following phrase: "Help the children by asking for a donation form." Clicking on this link led the subject to another page, which again showed a photograph of a child and a text informing the subject that this was a new site and that it was not possible to receive donations. However, in large characters, a message was shown that it was possible to send gifts to humanitarian associations for children followed by hypertext links of three well-known humanitarian organizations to which such donations could be sent.

In the FITD situation, the home page contained the same information but the link with the title "Help these children!" appeared on this page. Activation of this link brought the subject to a HTML page presenting a petition against the mines, and a photograph of a child thanking the subject for his or her help was presented. The subject of the petition was also presented (a petition for respect of the antipersonal-mines treaty). The petition form was presented on the second half of the web page.

The form contained four fields that the subject should fill out: name, first name, electronic address, and gender. A sending button was presented on the end of the form. The activation of this button sent the petition to the data base of the site. After the sending, the subject was sent back to the same HTML page as for the control group presenting the request for a donation to the children victim of mines. At this stage, the experimentation continued as in the control situation.

The activation of the different links was recorded, but the assessment of the behavior of the subject was stopped after the activation of the selected link to one of the three humanitarian organizations. It was, therefore, impossible to know if the subjects actually made a donation on the official site of the selected humanitarian organization.

RESULTS

The two dependent variables measured in our experiment were the choice to consult or not the page where the donation could be made and the choice to click or not on the hypertext link which permitted access to the site of one of the proposed official humanitarian organizations. These results are presented in Table 1. The first two percentages were calculated on all samples of subjects that visited our site. The last percentages were calculated on subjects that clicked on the donation page.

A significant difference appeared between the two experimental groups that activated the donation page (χ^2 [1, N = 1,008] = 33.93; $p <$ 0.001). When subjects agree to sign the petition, they are more favorably encouraged to click on

Table 1. Percentage of People who Have Visited the Web Page Where a Donation Could Be Done and Who Have Activated the Link to a Humanitarian Organization that Permits a Donation on the Internet

	Experimental conditions	
	Foot-in-the-door, n = *506*	*Control,* n = *502*
Activation of the donation page	13.64%	3.39%
Activation of the link to a humanitarian organization to actually donate		
Compared to the total number of subjects tested	4.94%	1.59%
Compared to the subjects who have activated the donation page	36.23%	47.06%

the subsequent donation page. A significant difference has been observed concerning the percentage of clicks on one of the proposed sites when the number of clicks is compared with the total number of subjects that visited the home page (χ^2 [1, N = 1,008] = 8.92; $p <$ 0.005). The subjects in the FITD condition have visited the site of one of the proposed humanitarian organizations for a donation in larger numbers. Despite the appearances, comparison between the number of subjects that have clicked on the donation page shows no statistical difference (χ^2 [1, N = 86] = 0.68; *ns*).

DISCUSSION

It has been observed, again, that agreeing with a small first request predisposes a subject to accept more favorably a second, more expensive request. Our experience shows that the FITD technique can be used in a computer-mediated communication context. Earlier studies have shown that, with this technique, the physical presence of the solicitor was not necessary to increase compliance to the request.[1,6,12] Our results seem to show that the interaction does not require a synchronous communication between the solicitor and the target of his/her request.

From a theoretical perspective, these results have implications for the comprehension of the FITD process. One of the explanations of the FITD technique cannot be compatible with the results observed above. For Rind and Benjamin,[11] when agreeing with the first request, the subject would be perceived by the solicitor as a positive person who helps other people. When asking for a second request of help, the subject would tend to comply more favorably in order to maintain the initial good impression activated by compliance to the first request. This impression management explanation seems to be incompatible with our findings, because the desire to exhibit a good self-image to the solicitor is particularly high in a social context where the interlocutor is clearly identified. Our web site was not a social system constituted by clearly identified people. So, this absence of social interaction suggested that pressure to exhibit a good image of herself/himself was low. It seems then that the self-perception theory[1] or the contrast theory[10] is more clearly compatible with our findings. Nevertheless, our experiment does not allow us to say which of these two explanations could explain the FITD technique.

From a practical perspective, our results suggest that computer-mediated communication is a good setting to test the efficiency of compliance techniques on human behavior. Experimental costs are relatively low, very large samples can be tested, and an experiment can be conducted rapidly. From an applied perspective, the electronic FITD also appeared as a good technique to induce people to explore a web site. Marketing professionals could increase the rate of people who respond to a survey or buy something on a business site by using this technique. Guéguen and Jacob[16] had found that an electronic "door-in-the-face" technique is a good compliance procedure to increase donation's rate. Further research will be necessary to test other compliance-gaining techniques such as the "low-ball,"[13] the "even a penny will help,"[14] or the "lure"[15] approach in a computer-mediated communication setting.

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