

Fund-Raising on the Web: The Effect of an Electronic Door-in-the-Face Technique on Compliance to a Request

NICOLAS GUÉGUEN, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

In an attempt to test the door-in-the-face (DITF) technique in a computer-mediated context, 1,607 men and women taken at random in various e-mail lists were solicited to visit a web site for the profit of a humanitarian organization. In DITF condition, subjects were first solicited by an exaggerated request and, after refusing, were solicited for a small donation. In control condition the donation solicitation was formulated directly. In all the cases, the request was manipulated by the order of the successive HTML pages of the site. Results show that the DITF procedure increase compliance to the last request. The theoretical implication of the effect of this technique in a computer-communication context is discussed.

INTRODUCTION

THE DOOR-IN-THE-FACE (DITF) is a compliance (without pressure) technique, which consists in asking a first substantially larger request to a person, which had a high probability to be refused, then submitting a second less expensive request. By this way, the second critical request has more probability to be accepted than if it was formulated directly (without the first expensive request) to the subject.¹ Numerous replications of the DITF paradigm have shown that this procedure is particularly efficient to gain compliance: Dillard et al.² show that compliance increased about 17% in average with this technique. Most of the studies conducted on the DITF technique have used requests for the profit of humanitarian organizations, health or charity, but exceptions exist in the literature. Goldman and Creason³ have shown that DITF is an effective technique to encourage subject to respond to a survey for a private local radio.

Different theoretical explanations of the DITF phenomenon exist in the literature.⁴ For the initiators of the paradigm,¹ the higher rate of compliance to the second critical request could be explained by

the effect of the reciprocity norm.⁵ Because the solicitor makes a concession by decreasing his/her requirement after the subject refusal of the first request, the subject would then feel a psychological obligation to make a concession in return. Then this psychological pressure would lead him/her to comply to the final request. To date, many experimental studies attest that the DITF leads to increase compliance to a pro-social request relative to control subjects who receive only the critical requests.^{4,6-8} Of course, new theoretical explanations were formulated to explain the effect of this technique. For O'Keefe and Figge,⁹ the culpability generated by the refusal of the first request will lead to encourage the subject to accept more favorably the critical request. For Reeves et al.¹⁰ the DITF was explained in terms of self-presentation: The subject would be led to accept the 2nd request in order to give a good image of him/her to the solicitor and not an image of an unhelpful person. For Miller et al.¹¹ or for Shanab and O'Neill,¹² contrast theory could also explain the positive effect of the DITF technique on compliance. For these authors, the final request would be regarded as less expensive because of contrast with the first request submitted by the solicitor a few

seconds before. This contrast leads the subject to under-evaluate the critical request and then to accept it more favorably.

We considered that communication with the use of internet could help us in a theoretical and practical way concerning the DITF theory. Practically, research on the DITF technique has indeed always been done in a face-to-face meeting or by telephone. Both techniques are equally effective which means that the physical presence of the person asking for a favor is not indispensable for the DITF 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 further in the case of an internet site insofar that 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 DITF 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. On one hand, proceeding to such an evaluation would permit us to test certain theories invoked to explain the effect of the DITF practice. Thus, if the theory of the reciprocity is valid, insofar as a person asking for a favor can not be identified, it should not be possible to prove the effect of the DITF. On the other hand, if a contrast effect exists produced by the succession of requests or by the feeling of guilt after refusing the first one, we should observe a DITF effect in the case of a request made by computer.

The objective of the study hereafter has been to evaluate the DITF 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 via the order of the Web pages.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Subjects

A total of 1,607 men and women randomly chosen from a list of mail addresses taken from internet. Because of the way these addresses were obtained it is impossible to make a more complete description of the samples in terms of gender and age (family name or initials only, pseudonym).

These addresses were obtained by using various softwares 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 4,307 addresses were available. Of these addresses, 638 were invalid at the moment of the experimentation (no server, unknown destination on the server). In the end, 3,669 persons have been solicited by electronic mail to connect themselves to our site. A total of 1,606 persons (43.8%) actually visited the site.

Procedure

A site has been constructed for our experimentation. Considering the fact that most of the requests in studies on the DITF effect have a prosocial character, we opted for a site in favor of humanitarian cause, in this case children that were victim of mines all over the world but mainly in war zones. The site was called "*Childhood Victim of Mines*" and showed already at the home page various photos of children that were victims of these 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 block of 100 subjects contained in the final data base with the electronic addresses. A letter was sent by using a software for sending electronic mail. This message contained the following text: "*Spend five minutes of your time on the children that were victim 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 acknowledgement. This page contained another link which mentioned the following phrase: "*Help the children by asking for a donation form.*" Clicking on this link led the subject to another page that 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 3 well-known humani-

tarian organizations to which such donations could be sent. In the DITF 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 photograph of a child thanking the subject for his help. Then the request for help was made as follows: "We need to sensitize people. For this, we need to reach the maximum number of people. Therefore, we would like to ask you to help us by regularly assuring the organization of a discussion forum dedicated to this problem and by helping us to find new people who can give their support to our organization. For this, you should be able to spend 2 to 3 hours per week during the next 6 months in order to contribute to the in-depth evolution of our site. If you accept, it is very important to stick to your engagement in order not to interfere with the rest of the work of the other collaborators of this organization." This text was followed by two buttons. One of them showed "Yes, if I accept I will engage myself to accomplish this role during the required period," whilst the other button mentioned "No, I can't engage myself for this time period." A message below the buttons indicated that in case of acceptance the subject would be guided to an electronic mail containing a form that will be used to send his family name, first name, contact address, and telephone number to the association.

If the subject accepted (two out of 771 subjects: 0.26%), he or she was guided to an electronic mail window containing the engagement form described above. If the subject clicked the button "No, I can't," he was sent back to the same page as for the control group presenting the request for a donation to the children victim of mines. From then on, 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 have actually performed donation on the official site of the selected humanitarian organization.

RESULTS

Our two dependent variables were the choice to consult or not the page where the donation could be done and the choice to click or not on the link permitting the access to the site of one of the proposed official humanitarian organizations. The results are presented in Table 1. The first two percentages were calculated on all samples of subjects that have visited our site.

The comparison of the two groups has been made by using a Khi-Square test for contingency tables. A significant difference appeared between the two experimental groups that activated the donation page ($X^2(1, N = 1,607) = 34.74, p < 0.001$): refusing an earlier extremely expensive request made people more willing to visit the Web 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 ($X^2(1, N = 1607) = 14.40, p < 0.001$). The subjects in the door-in-the-face situation visited the site of one of the proposed humanitarian organizations for a donation in larger numbers. However, it can be seen that compared to the number of subjects that have clicked on the donation page, we do not observe more subjects in the door-in-the-face situation amongst the subjects who visited one of the sites of the three humanitarian organizations accepting on-line donations ($X^2(1, N = 114) = 0.29, ns$).

TABLE 1. PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE WHO HAVE VISITED THE WEB PAGE WHERE A DONATION COULD BE MADE AND WHO HAVE ACTIVATED THE LINK TO A HUMANITARIAN ORGANIZATION PERMITTING A DONATION ON THE INTERNET

	<i>Experimental conditions</i>	
	<i>Door-in-the-face,</i> <i>N = 771</i>	<i>Control,</i> <i>N = 836</i>
Activation of the donation page	11.02%	3.47%
Activation of the link to a humanitarian organization to actually donate		
Compared to the total number of tested subjects	5.46%	1.91%
Compared to the subjects who have activated the donation page	49.41%	55.17%

DISCUSSION

Once more time, it has been observed that the refusal of a first expensive request predisposes, in return, a subject to accept a second later request. Our experience shows that the DITF technique can be used in a computer-mediated communication context. Earlier studies have shown that the physical presence of the solicitor was not necessary to increase compliance to the request.³ It appears now that this presence does not require a synchronous communication between the solicitor and the target of his or her request.

From a theoretical perspective, some theoretical explanations of the DITF technique could not be really compatible with the results observed above. For Cialdini et al.¹ the DITF technique would create a psychological obligation to donate because of the pressure to reciprocate produced by the norm of reciprocity.⁵ The rejection of an initial request by the subject acts to define the solicitor's smaller, subsequent request as a concession. This preparation of transaction should then foster a psychological obligation in the subject to reciprocate the solicitor's retreat by granting the second request. This reciprocity theory seems to be invalid because the norm of reciprocity involves an interaction between a solicitor and a person solicited. If the solicitor makes a concession by decreasing his/her requirement then, in return, the person solicited, after refusing the first request makes a concession too and accepts the second request. Numerous studies have shown that this norm of reciprocity is more influential in face-to-face interaction. So, when no solicitor was present or when the solicitor is impersonal as in our experiment, the pressure to reciprocate the concession is low and leads to decrease compliance to the request. In the same way, the self-presentation theory¹⁰ seems 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 person. Then this absence of social interaction implied that pressure to exhibit a good image of herself/himself was low.

So it seems that the FITD would be more easily explained by an other theory like the contrast theory.^{11,12} The unreasonable first request serves as an anchor against which the second is compared. Thus, this comparison leads one to evaluate the second request as smaller than it really is. So, this false perception of the real cost of the last request could increase subject's compliance. This contrast

effect could explain our findings because this perception bias in the evaluation of the real cost of the request does not necessitate a social interaction. In effect, this perception is induced by the perception of the request cost and not by the perception or the evaluation of the solicitor or of the solicitor's behavior. Previous studies have shown that the manipulation of an anchoring point leads to increase helping behavior in a mail solicitation of donation for a charitable organization. Schwarzwald et al.¹³ found that asking people to donate with a larger request leads to increase the generosity of the donor comparatively to a situation where this anchoring point is smaller or is absent in the letter sent to subjects. A recent research conducted by Perrine and Heather¹⁴ shows that the effect of this amount suggestion which serves as an anchoring point is obtained by the means of placards around the area where the experiment took place. Because the positive effect of amount suggestion on compliance is obtained in a situation where there is no personal solicitor, we think that contrast effects may explain our findings. After the evaluation of the unreasonable first request the later request was evaluated as more reasonable and smaller than it actually was in the control condition. So this perceptual bias could explain why people complied more with the request of donation in the DITF condition. Further research had to test this contrast hypothesis by varying the cost of the first request.

Another theory used to explain the DITF phenomenon is the guilt hypothesis.⁹ The refusal of the first request produced culpability which, in return, increased compliance to the later request. Some studies have shown that guilt enhances helping behavior.¹⁵⁻¹⁷ As for the contrast effect, activation of culpability is generated by the refusal of a prosocial request. So, in our experiment, the refusal of the first request of help may have been activated without any interaction with a solicitor. Of course, as for the contrast theory, further experiments need to be conducted to explain such a hypothesis. If guilt hypothesis could explain the DITF, then no effect of this technique could be obtained with a solicitation for a private profit. If the effect of the DITF is obtained in both prosocial/nonsocial solicitation such results could be compatible with the principles of contrast theory.

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, an experiment can be conducted rapidly. From an applied perspective, the electronic DITF also ap-

peared as a good technique to induce people to explore a web site. Professionals of marketing could increase the rate of people who accept to respond to a survey or to buy something on a business site by the way of such technique. Guéguen (in press) had found that an electronic FITD is a good compliance technique to increase response rate to an electronic survey. Further research will be then necessary to test other compliance-gaining techniques such as the "low-ball,"¹⁸ the "even a penny will help,"¹⁹ or the "lure"²⁰ in a computer-mediated communication setting.

REFERENCES

1. Cialdini, R., Vincent, J., Lewis, S., et al. (1975). Reciprocal concessions procedure for inducing compliance: the door-in-the-face technique. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 31:206–215.
2. Dillard, J., Hunter, J., & Burgoon, M. (1984). Sequential-request persuasive strategies: meta-analysis of foot-in-the-door and door-in-the-face. *Human Communication Research* 10:461–488.
3. Goldman, M., & Creason C. (1981). Inducing compliance by a two-door-in-the face procedure and a self-determination request. *The Journal of Social Psychology* 114:229–235.
4. Abrahams, M., & Bell, R. (1994). Encouraging charitable contributions: an examination of three models of door-in-the-face compliance. *Communication Research* 21:131–153.
5. Gouldner, A. (1960). The norm of reciprocity: a preliminary statement. *American Sociological Review* 25: 161–178.
6. Bell, R., Abrahams, M., Clark, C., et al. (1996). The door-in-the-face compliance strategy: an individual differences analysis of two models in an aids fundraising context. *Communication Quarterly* 44: 107–124.
7. Cann, A., Sherman, S., & Elkes, R. (1975). Effects of initial request size and timing of a second request on compliance: the foot-in-the-door and the door-in-the-face. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 32:774–782.
8. Dillard, J., & Hale, J. (1992). Prosocialness and sequential request compliance techniques: limits to the foot-in-the-door and the door-in-the-face. *Communications Studies* 43:220–232.
9. O'Keffe, D., & Figge, M. (1997). A guilt-based explanation of the door-in-the-face influence strategy. *Human Communication Research* 24:64–81.
10. Reeves, R., Baker, G., Boyd, J., et al. (1991). The door-in-the-face technique: reciprocal concessions versus self-presentational explanations. *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality* 6:545–558.
11. Miller, R., Seligman, C., Clark, N., et al. (1976). Perceptual contrast versus reciprocal concession as mediators of induced compliance. *Canadian Journal of Behavioral Science* 8:401–409.
12. Shanab, M., & O'Neill, P. (1979). The effects of contrast upon compliance with socially undesirable requests in the door-in-the-face paradigm. *Canadian Journal of Behavioral Science* 11:236–244.
13. Scharzwald, J., Bizman, A., & Raz, M. (1983). The foot-in-the-door paradigm: effects of second request size on donation probability and donor generosity. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 9:443–450.
14. Perrine, R., & Heather, S. (2000). Effects of picture and even-a-penny-will-help appeals on anonymous donations to charity. *Psychological Reports* 86:551–559.
15. Harris, M., Benson, S., & Hall, C. (1975). The effects of confession on altruism. *Journal of Social Psychology* 96:187–192.
16. Konecni, V. (1972). Some effects of guilt on compliance: a field replication. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 23:30–32.
17. McMillen, D. (1971). Transgression, self-image, and compliant behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 20:176–179.
18. Cialdini, R., Cacioppo, J., Bassett, R., et al. (1978). Low-ball procedure for producing compliance: commitment then cost. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 36:463–476.
19. Cialdini, R., & Schroeder, D. (1976). Increasing compliance by legitimizing paltry contributions: when even a penny help. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 34:599–604.
20. Joule, R.-V., Gouilloux, F., & Weber, F. (1989). The lure: a new compliance procedure. *The Journal of Social Psychology* 129:741–749.

Address reprint requests to:

Nicolas Guéguen, Ph.D.
 Université de Bretagne-Sud
 IUT de Vannes, Département TC
 Laboratoire GRESICO
 8, rue Montaigne
 BP 561
 56017 Vannes, France

E-mail: Nicolas.Gueguen@iu-vannes.fr