

IMPROVING THE RESPONSE RATE TO A STREET SURVEY:
AN EVALUATION OF THE "BUT YOU ARE FREE
TO ACCEPT OR TO REFUSE" TECHNIQUE

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The "but you are free to accept or to refuse" technique is a compliance procedure in which someone is approached with a request by simply telling him/her that he/she is free to accept or to refuse the request. This semantic evocation leads to increase compliance with the request. Furthermore, in most of the studies in which this technique was tested, subjects have been asked to give money to a confederate. A new evaluation of the effect of this technique was tested in an experiment in which subjects in the street have been approached to respond to a survey. The results show that, when the semantic evocation of freedom is included in the request, a higher compliance rate occurred. The commitment theory was used to explain such results.

Telling someone that he/she is free to accept a request made by somebody leads to increased compliance with the request, whereas this is not the case when the semantic evocation of freedom is not mentioned. Guéguen and Pascual (2000), in the first evaluation of this technique, found that when subjects were asked by confederates in a street to give them money, only 10.0% of the sample did accept the request under the controlled condition. However, 47.5% did accept the request under the experimental condition, when the confederates finished their request by: "*but you are free to accept or to refuse.*" This technique, called by the authors the "But you are free of" technique, tends to increase compliance with a request but also increases the subject's involvement. Guéguen and Pascual (2000) have also found that the average amount of gifts granted by the subjects was larger under an experimental condition than under a controlled one. Another recent experiment showed that the "but you are free to accept or to refuse" technique was efficient leading someone to give money to a pro-social organization (Pascual & Guéguen, 2002). This technique is also effective in gaining compliance to a request consisting of visiting a Web site of a humanitarian organization when this is made by

E-mail. Guéguen, Pascual, Jacob, and Morineau (2002) pointed out a higher compliance rate when the semantic evocation of freedom is included in the message than when it is not.

Indeed, the "but you are free to accept or to refuse" technique seems robust, but its generality needs to be evaluated in further studies. It would be interesting to test the effect of this technique in order to enhance the response rate to a street survey. Survey researchers who use written questionnaires are concerned about maximizing the response rate in order to enhance the statistical power and the external validity of the research findings. A number of techniques have been quoted as enabling an increase in street surveys.

The "foot-in-the-door" is one of these compliance techniques which consists of proposing a little first request to a subject, then in subjecting him/her to a second more expensive request. In this way, more compliance to the second request is obtained than under a controlled condition when the request is not preceded by the first approach (Freedman & Fraser, 1966). Several studies have shown that the "foot-in-the-door" technique enhanced the response rate to street surveys (Fern, Monroe, & Avila, 1986; Tybout, 1978; Weyant, 1996) and also to mail surveys (Allen, Schewe, & Wijk, 1980) or phone surveys (Hornik, Zaig, & Shadmon, 1991; Reingen & Kernam, 1977). Another technique which affected positively compliance is the so called "door-in-the-face." This technique consists of making a first substantially larger request which is much more likely to be refused, to a person and then in subjecting him/her to a second less expensive one. In this way, the second critical request is more likely to be accepted than if it had been directly formulated (without the first expensive request) to the subject (Cialdini, Vincent, Lewis, Catalan, Wheeler, & Lee Darby, 1975). Again, studies pointed out that the "door-in-the-face" technique is a good method to enhance compliance to a survey (Fern et al., 1986; Mowen & Cialdini, 1980). A slight touch on the forearm of the person approached to respond increases the probability of compliance. Hornik (1987) pointed out that touch increased the number of persons responding to street surveys. It has also been pointed out that people are more persistent when executing a difficult task consisting of answering a long questionnaire on very intimate subjects (Nannberg & Hansen, 1994). These techniques had something in common with the "but your are free to accept or to refuse" technique. No pressure or external factors (e.g.: incentives) were used to enhance subject's compliance. Subjects were free to accept or to refuse the survey request. In most of these techniques and in those the techniques were tested in order to enhance the response rate, the request traditionally ended with sentences such as: "*it is up to you to see,*" "*up to you to choose,*" or "*but you are free of.*"

Surprisingly, the effect of these sentences has never been tested alone even though scientists know that the feeling of freedom is one of the main factors predisposing to compliance (Kiesler, 1971). Some studies have shown that the linguistic manipulation of a request had an

effect on compliance to the request. Cialdini and Schroeder (1976) have found that adding the sentence "*even a penny helps*" in a request, for a charitable organization, leads to an increase in the amount of donations. This sentence also increases the number of donors (Reeves, Macolini, & Martin, 1987; Reeves & Saucer, 1993). In the same way, Enzle and Harvey (1982) have shown that an indirect negation (e.g., "*You will help me, won't you?*") elicited greater help than a direct one in a rhetorical request, (e.g., "*Won't you help me?*") or a controlled positive form (e.g., "*Will you help me?*"). Asking someone how he/she feels, improves compliance with a request for help, if it has been formulated immediately after the subject's response (Howard, 1990). In a similar way, Burger (1986) has succeeded in obtaining more purchases from the subjects in his experiment when he first gave a price for a product to a customer and left him/her after some seconds: He apparently did not present the remaining content of the offer, saying instead "*and that's-not-all.*" He repeatedly pointed out that this "*that's-not-all*" technique turns out to be more effective than when no dissection of the contents of the offer was made. So, overall, such studies seem to attest that the innocuous semantic characteristics of a request can increase the subject's compliance.

The above cited studies show that some semantic aspects of the request have an effect on compliance. Thus, it is interesting for social psychologists to study these aspects. Some time ago, Kiesler and Sakumura (1966) made the assumption that the degree of commitment may be manipulated by the degree of perceived choice when performing an act. The semantic evocation of freedom can increase this degree of perceived choice, which in return can increase the compliance to the approached behavior. Our first investigations have shown that semantic evocation of freedom can increase compliance to a request (Guéguen & Pascual, 2000; Guéguen et al., 2002; Pascual & Guéguen, 2002) but further studies are now necessary to generalize this effect to various requests and to appreciate the size effect of this technique.

If the effect of the "but you are free to accept or to refuse" technique had been found in various experiments, the effect of this technique had never been tested in street surveys. Thus, the experiment presented below was carried out in a face-to-face street survey. Because the positive effect of the "but you are free to accept or to refuse" technique was found in literature and because the positive effect of many compliances without pressure techniques was shown on the response rate, we hypothesized that people would have responded more favorably to a survey approach when the request ended with the "but you are free to accept or to refuse" sentence.

Method

Subjects

Participants were 73 men and 89 women (between 18-70 years old), walking alone, chosen at random in a pedestrian walk of a small-sized

(approximately 6000 inhabitants) provincial tourist town situated on the Atlantic coast in the west of France. Three subjects (1 man and 2 women) were eliminated from the study because they did not live in the town where the survey took place.

Procedure

Four investigators (2 males and 2 females between 20-22 years old) were used in this experiment. They were dressed neatly and in a traditional way for young people of the same age (jeans/sneakers/T-shirt). The experiment was conducted when an evaluation of the local merchants and craft work was requested by the Town Council.

The experiment took place in a mall, during particularly sunny spring days. An investigator approached a subject taken at random after counting a number of pedestrians walking by in a defined zone. If he/she was a child, or a teenager or a group, the confederate took the person coming just after, so that he/she corresponded to the expected profile. Under the controlled condition, the investigator approached the subject saying politely: "*Sorry Madam/Sir. We are currently conducting a survey on the perception of the local merchants and craft work of your town. Would you accept to respond to the questionnaire that will take you 5-8 minutes?*". Under the experimental condition, the investigator formulated with the same tone the following request: "*Sorry Madam/Sir, I have something to ask you but you are free to accept or to refuse. We are currently conducting a survey on the perception of the local merchants and craft work of your town. Would you accept to respond to the questionnaire that will take you 5-8 minutes?*". If the person refused, the investigator thanked him/her. If he/she complied, the questionnaire was administered.

Results

The dependent variable used in this experiment was evaluated by the response rate to the investigator's request. Under the controlled condition, 75.6% of the subjects (75.0% for the women and 76.5% for the men) complied to the request whereas it was 90.1% (90.7% for the women and 89.5% for the men) in the "but you are free to accept or to refuse" condition. A 2 (experimental/controlled) x 2 (male/female subjects) log-linear analysis was used to analyze our data. Results show a main effect of experimental conditions, $\chi^2(1, 159) = 6.05, p < .02$. The semantic evocation of freedom in the request led the subject to agree more favorably to respond to the questionnaire. No gender effect was found, $\chi^2(1, 159) = 0.18, ns$, and the interaction between the experimental condition and subjects' gender was not significant, $\chi^2(4, 159) = 6.28, ns$.

Discussion

Our results show that the "But you are free of" technique leads to

increased response rate to a street survey of males and females. This finding confirms previous studies which have shown that this technique led to increased donations to a requester (Guéguen & Pascual, 2000) or the number of people agreeing to visit a Web site of a humanitarian organization (Guéguen et al., 2002). Our experiment shows that this technique is also efficient in improving the response rate to a street survey. From an applied perspective, this technique has several advantages: the "but you are free to accept or to refuse" is easy to use and does not require additional costs or time. Survey researchers using written questionnaires are concerned with this new technique.

The efficiency of the "but you are free to accept or to refuse" technique on compliance to verbal requests is consistent with other studies which have shown that the semantic properties of a request are sufficient to induce compliance. Some grammatical aspects of the verbal request may have an effect on compliance: In a rhetorical request, indirect negation elicited greater help than a direct one (Enzle & Harvey, 1982). It has been found that the addition of the sentence "*even a penny helps*" in a request for donations to a charitable organization leads to increased compliance (Cialdini & Schroeder, 1976; Reeves et al., 1987; Reeves & Saucer, 1993). Asking someone how he/she feels before requesting something increases compliance (Howard, 1990). These studies combined with the studies on the "but you are free to accept or to refuse" technique show that it could be interesting for social psychologists to study the semantic aspects of the request because this verbal content could be manipulated in mass communication (poster, TV, or radio message).

From a theoretical perspective, we think that it is not the additional verbal content which explains the findings, but rather the activation properties of freedom. Kiesler and Sakumura (1966) have made the assumption that the degree of commitment may be manipulated by the degree of perceived choice when performing an act. It seems that a semantic evocation of freedom is sufficient to induce people to perform an act more favorably. Furthermore, this effect on compliance needs to be explained theoretically. Several explanations could be used to show the efficiency of the "but you are free to accept or to refuse" technique.

Firstly, it is possible that the verbal evocation of freedom has the property of activating a real feeling of freedom on the subject. Several studies have found that increasing the feeling of freedom acts as a facilitator commitment towards the expected behavior (Cialdini, 1993; Kiesler, 1971). Secondly, this evocation of freedom might decrease the weight of external factors and increase the weight of internal ones. With the "foot-in-the door" technique when a request strengthens the weight of external factors to compliance, less compliance to the survey approach was obtained if an external factor (monetary incentive) was used to gain compliance to the first request (Zuckerman, Lazzaro, & Waldgeir, 1979). On the contrary, more compliance was obtained if the attribution of internal factors (self-perception) was favored (Gorassini & Olson, 1995).

Obviously, further research will be necessary to test these

hypotheses. It would be interesting to test the effect of the "but you are free to accept or to refuse" technique varying requests in terms of cost. The effect of this technique in the context of mass communication needs to be explored. Nevertheless, because more compliance was obtained under the experimental condition, this research report demonstrates the generality and the robustness of the "but you are free to accept or to refuse" technique and the efficiency of this technique in marketing.

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