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Interpersonal Communication and Compliance: The Disrupt-Then-Reframe Technique in  
Dyadic Selling Situations

## Abstract

Two experiments tested the impact of the Disrupt-Then-Reframe (DTR) technique on compliance. This technique is comprised of a subtle, odd element in a typical scripted request, the “disruption”, followed by a persuasive phrase, the “reframing”. Based on the thought-disruption hypothesis (Petty & Wegener, 1999), we argued that its impact is generalizable across interpersonal selling situations and that disrupting a conventional sales script not only increases the impact of the new reframing, but also increases susceptibility to influence resulting from other persuasion techniques embedded in the influence setting. Two experiments provided support for our expectations. Exp. 1 (N = 80) showed that the DTR technique fostered compliance with both commercial and non-profit sales scripts. The results of Exp. 2 (N = 75) replicated this finding and supported the thought-disruption hypothesis: the impact of brand familiarity was larger under DTR as opposed to control conditions. The theoretical and practical implications will be discussed.

## Interpersonal Communication and Compliance: The Disrupt-Then-Reframe Technique in Dyadic Selling Situations

Have you ever tried to get someone to comply with a simple request, such as letting you cut in to use the Xerox machine or agreeing to act as a participant in a study you designed? Did you feel awkward and embarrassed to ask? Then you're not alone. The reluctance to ask someone even a simple favor is almost universal and stands testimony to the aversion felt by many to approach and try to persuade a target (e.g., Cialdini, 2001). Interpersonal social influence is often perceived as a game of hurdles in which the target's rejection response appears almost inevitable. Wouldn't it be convenient if there was such a thing as a "magic formula" that circumvents this rejection response and induces compliance on the part of a target recipient, without much effort on the part of the agent? According to Davis & Knowles (1999) such a formula may well exist. These authors have recently identified and tested a rather subtle social influence tactic, which they termed the Disrupt-Then-Reframe (DTR) technique. This technique operates by gently "destabilizing" a target and, hence, makes use of what Kardes (2002) terms "the confusion principle" of social influence. The DTR technique is characterized by a small "twist", or odd element, in a typical scripted sales request, the "disruption" (e.g. stating the price of the offer in pennies first, then in dollars: "They're 200 pennies,... that's \$2"), followed by a persuasive phrase which concludes the script, the "reframing" (e.g. "It's a really good deal"). Thus formulated, a request is posited to be more than 1.5 times as "powerful" in gaining compliance, than its conventionally stated counterpart (Davis & Knowles, 1999; Knowles, Butler & Linn, 2001).

Notwithstanding the persuasive potential, research on this technique is still in its infancy. To date, only one study apart from the two publications by the original authors has examined the generalizability of the phenomenon and the factors that mediate and moderate it (Fennis,

Das, & Pruyn, in press). Still, there is a clear need for further study. The present research extended previous research by examining the processes underlying the effectiveness of the DTR technique and its generalizability across various types of compliance behaviors and across differing types of persuasion settings.

In the following section, we briefly review the limited empirical evidence on the DTR procedure and the theoretical assumptions underlying it. Next, we discuss related theory and research in the fields of compliance and persuasion that is relevant to the object under study. Finally, we report two studies that test the generalizability of the DTR construct and its implications for the persuasiveness of other influence techniques.

#### *Research on the Disrupt-Then-Reframe Technique*

In a series of four studies, Davis and Knowles (1999) demonstrated that disrupting a sales script, followed by a reframing significantly enhanced purchase rates. In all studies, sets of note cards were sold door-to-door by confederates who claimed to be associated with a non-profit organization for disabled children and adults, the “Richardson Center”. Each study followed the same scenario. The note cards were presented and it was said they had been made by clients of the center. After a general introduction of the sales person, the Richardson Center and the note cards, the prospective buyer was asked whether he or she wanted to know the price. Then, in some conditions, a disrupting phrase was inserted. This phrase consisted of a small but unexpected element, stating the price in pennies rather than dollars. After presenting this odd element, the confederate paused for two seconds before stating the price in dollars and the reframing. The DTR condition would thus read: “This package of cards sells for 300 pennies... That’s \$3. It’s a bargain!” The original studies found purchasing rates to be more than 1.5 times and in several instances twice as high in DTR as opposed to control conditions.

The authors provided evidence that both the disruption and the reframing were necessary conditions to increase compliance. The DTR technique was tested against various control conditions, such as price only (“They’re \$3”), reframe then disrupt (“It’s a bargain... . They’re 300 pennies. That’s \$3”), disruption only (“They’re 300 pennies... . That’s \$3”), and reframe only (“They’re \$3. It’s a bargain”). In all these instances, DTR conditions yielded significantly higher purchase rates than any of these control conditions. Note, however, that the effectiveness of the technique has only been demonstrated in a non-profit setting. Hence, one of the main objectives of the current studies is to extent the generalizability of these findings to other types of compliance settings.

In addition, an important objective of the present research is to examine *why* the technique is so effective. The original authors (Davis & Knowles, 1999) forwarded two frameworks to explain the phenomenon: Ericksonian confusion techniques (Erickson, 1964) and action identification theory (Vallacher & Wegner, 1985, 1987). Erickson, pioneer in the field of clinical hypnosis, used unexpected elements in his interaction with clients to reduce resistance in order to foster hypnosis. He proposed that his techniques engaged the mind of the client, thus diverting it from maintaining resistance to the hypnotic attempt. He found that confusion increased compliance with any of the hypnotic suggestions that immediately followed.

On a more theoretical level, action identification theory (Wegner et al., 1984) was used to explain the DTR effect. It states that any form of behavior can and will be constructed at different hierarchical levels by a perceiver, ranging from low-level characterizations that pertain to specific details of the behavior to high-level qualifications that include the goals and broader implications of the actions. Action identification theory would predict that a disruption in an on-going sales-script would shift the recipient’s focus from the higher level

meanings ascribed to the behavior and indeed the entire dyadic encounter, to a more concrete lower-level focus. This attention to the details of the action brought about by the disruption, would then make the recipient susceptible to influence presented by the reframe. In this paper, we present a more comprehensive theoretical framework to understand the DTR effect that will yield additional hypotheses not necessarily following from Ericksonian confusion principles or action identification theory.

### *Alternative Perspectives*

Davis and Knowles (1999) have suggested that their findings might well be the result of peripheral or heuristic processing on the part of the target individual, but they have not explicitly tested this notion, nor considered a dual-process framework (Chaiken, 1980; Chaiken & Trope, 1999; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) as an explanatory construct for their findings. Nevertheless, based on dual-process reasoning, we argue that the disruption in the DTR-technique may well function as a distracter, fostering mindlessness by reducing the ability of the target individual to produce counterarguments to the sales script (cf. Harkins & Petty, 1981; Petty & Wegener, 1999; Petty, Wells & Brock, 1976). Hence, based on this thought-disruption hypothesis, the disruption in the DTR may induce lower levels of processing and the reframe could have an impact on compliance to the extent that it functions as a heuristic or peripheral cue. Thus, we propose that the reframe in the Disrupt-Then-Reframe technique affects persuasion only when accompanied by the disruption, not when the disruption is absent. In addition, the thought-disruption concept yields predictions that are not directly implied by either Ericksonian confusion techniques or action identification theory. That is, if the disruption reduces the recipients' ability to counterargue and consequently fosters mindless acceptance through heuristic processing of the reframe, this implies that *any* peripheral cue present in the influence situation will be more effective under DTR conditions

than it will be when the DTR technique is absent. This would imply that the type of influence technique used (DTR versus control) would moderate the impact of additional persuasive elements on consumer compliance.

In a recent study, evidence was reported that supported both postulates. In a series of three experiments, Fennis et al. (in press) demonstrated that the disruption in the DTR-technique distracts individuals and, consequently, lowers the extent of counterargumentation. This reduced counterargumentation, in turn, affected compliance rates. Moreover, two additional experiments found evidence that the disruption in the DTR-technique not only boosts the persuasive impact of the reframe, but also of other persuasive elements present in the influence setting (Fennis et al., in press). Nevertheless, in these studies, the type of organization that the confederate claimed to be associated with, was held constant (either commercial or non-profit). Consequently, the objective of study 1 is to assess whether the type of organisation (profit or non profit) moderates the impact of the DTR-technique on compliance. In addition, the evidence that the DTR boosts the effectiveness of other persuasive elements, pertained to two different persuasive strategies, both based on the principle of congruence (Mandler, 1982). Thus, there is a need to generalize these findings to include other types of persuasive elements. This will be the main objective of study 2.

### Study 1

The first study was designed to test the generalizability of the disrupt-then-reframe technique to requests made on behalf of other than not-for-profit sources. More specifically, the question underlying the present study is: is the DTR technique is also effective in gaining compliance when used by a commercial sales representative as opposed to the typical non-commercial sales persons that solicited in the interest of the charity organizations in the original DTR studies (Davis & Knowles, 1999; Knowles, Butler & Linn, 2001)? Hence, we

wanted to examine whether the effectiveness of the DTR technique was contingent on the nature of the organization that the sales representative claimed to be associated with.

### *Method*

#### *Overview and participants*

The study employed a 2 (type of organization: profit vs. non-profit) \* 2 (influence technique: DTR vs. no disruption) between subjects factorial design. A male confederate, acting as salesperson, went door to door in different neighborhoods selling small sets of postcards. A household participated when a resident answered the doorbell and he or she was willing to listen to the entire sales script. Following this procedure, a total of 80 persons participated in the study. The salesperson introduced himself, presented the postcards and subsequently proceeded with the appropriate sales script.

#### *Conditions*

To permit a clear replication and assessment of the generalizability of the DTR-technique, all versions of the sales request closely mirrored the original DTR-statements (cf. Davis & Knowles, 1999).

*Type of organization.* When the salesperson indicated to act on behalf of the non-profit organization, he stated that he was with an international organization for animal welfare. More precisely during this part of the script and in line with Davis & Knowles' (1999) sales procedure, he stated: "I am with the IFAW, the International Federation for Animal Welfare and I would like to show you some IFAW postcards. Are you familiar with the IFAW? Then you know that it is an officially registered non-profit organization that fights animal maltreatment and supports international projects for animal welfare".

In the profit condition, the confederate indicated to work for a commercial postcard manufacturer. More specifically, in this condition, he stated: "I am with Luckycard and I



would like to show you some Luckycard postcards. Are you familiar with Luckycard? Then you know that it is an international company that designs and produces a wide variety of postcards for any occasion”.

*Influence technique.* After the appropriate introduction, participants were told that “these postcards with images of nice young pets have been photographed by our members (employees) and come two to a package. Would you like to know the price?”

Then, based on a random schedule, participants were either presented with the DTR-script or a no-disruption control script. In the DTR-condition, the salesperson presented the participant with a subtle disruption, followed after a 2 sec. pause by a reframe: “they’re 100 Eurocents [approximately 100 pennies]...that’s one Euro. It’s a bargain!” In the control condition the disruption was omitted, and the price was simply stated in Euro’s: “they’re one Euro...It’s a bargain!”

### *Compliance*

The confederate waited until the resident responded to his offer. A purchase of any number of packages was recorded as complying with the sales request (cf. Davis & Knowles, 1999)<sup>1</sup>. Regardless of any purchase made, all participants were thanked for their time and interest before the interaction was terminated by the confederate.

### *Results and Discussion*

In total, 41% of the participants purchased cards. Given the dichotomous nature of the dependent variable, the data were analyzed using logistical regression. This analysis yielded a main effect of the type of influence technique on compliance ( $Wald(1) = 4.10, p < .05$ ). Results indicated that 53% of participants exposed to the DTR procedure complied with the

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<sup>1</sup> After the study, all proceeds were donated to the charitable cause.

sales request, whereas only 30% of residents in the no disruption control condition did so. Neither the main effect of type of organization ( $Wald(1) < 1$ ), nor the interaction between type of organization and social influence technique ( $Wald(1) = 1.31$ ) was significant.

First, these results provide a replication of earlier findings, obtained under similar circumstances (Davis & Knowles, 1999; Fennis et al., in press; Knowles, Butler & Linn, 2001) indicating that employing a subtle “twist” in an otherwise conventional sales script increases compliance rates among participants. Moreover, in line with the original findings, our effects were of comparable magnitude, indicating a powerful and robust social influence procedure. Next, the observation that the DTR is more effective than the no-disruption control condition is in accordance with the notion that the disruption, by reducing the participants’ ability to counterargue, heightens the impact of the reframe. As such the reframe can indeed be viewed as a peripheral cue (see also Howard, 1997). Furthermore, the impact of the DTR-technique was not moderated by type of organization, suggesting that its effectiveness is not limited by the nature of the source organization with which the sales person is associated. This underscores that the DTR-impact is more robust across situations than its architects (Davis & Knowles, 1999) have assumed.

Based on the distraction hypothesis (see Petty, Wells & Brock, 1976) it may be expected that the participants’ decreased ability to scrutinize the request may result in higher compliance levels, provided that the persuasion context includes heuristically operating influence tactics or persuasive elements (i.e. elements acting as peripheral cues, Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Hence, we may expect that the DTR technique may serve as a moderator to affect the impact of these persuasive elements. Recent research indeed supports this hypothesis (Fennis et al., in press), but was restricted to a specific class of elements (based on

the concept of congruence, see Mandler, 1982). Thus, the main objective of Study 2 is to assess whether this moderating role also extends to other types of persuasive elements.

### Study 2

To examine whether the distraction brought about by the DTR technique affects the effectiveness of other persuasive elements embedded in the influence context, we tested the impact of *brand familiarity* on compliance with a commercial sales offer made in a dyadic encounter. Earlier research has established that brand familiarity affects persuasion primarily under limited processing conditions when involvement is low, not when it is high (e.g., Vaidyanathan, 2000). Hence it may be expected that brand familiarity has a stronger impact on compliance under DTR as opposed to control conditions.

### *Method*

#### *Overview and Participants*

The central hypothesis of the present study was tested in a 2 (brand status: familiar vs. unfamiliar) \* 2 (influence technique: DTR vs. price-only) between-subjects factorial design. To extend the generalizability of our findings, the present study employed a different type of control condition. In addition, a female, instead of a male, confederate was employed to rule out the possibility that the earlier results were gender specific. She approached passersby in the center of a large Dutch city with a request to buy a set of playing cards. Individuals who were prepared to listen to the entire sales script were counted as participants. This resulted in a total of 75 participants in this study.

#### *Conditions*

*Brand status.* In the familiar brand condition, the salesperson introduced herself as a representative of “Amstel” a familiar Dutch brand of beer. In this condition, she stated: “I am with “Amstel” and apart from beer, we also manufacture a range of entertainment products.

We want you to enjoy yourself this summer, so we're selling sets of Amstel playing cards. Would you like to know the price?" In the unfamiliar brand condition the script was identical except that the brand name was replaced with "Listera", a fictitious (and hence unfamiliar) beverage brand.

*Influence technique.* Following the introduction and the presentation of the brand status manipulation, the scripted influence technique was presented randomly. In the Disrupt-Then-Reframe condition, participants were exposed to the subtle disruption, the 2-sec. pause and the reframe in the following way: "A set of cards costs 200 Eurocents [approximately 7500 pennies]... that's 2 Euros. It's a bargain!". In the price only condition, the disruption was omitted, as was the reframe. In this condition, the script simply stated "A set of cards costs 2 Euros".

### *Compliance*

Similar to Study 1, purchasing one or more sets of playing cards was recorded as complying with the request made by the female salesperson. In addition, the number of sets purchased (if any) was registered as an additional dependent measure. All participants were thanked for their time and interest before the interaction was terminated.

### *Results and Discussion*

Overall, 77% of the participants agreed to buy one or more sets of playing cards. A logistic regression analysis of compliance as a function of brand status (familiar vs. unfamiliar) and influence technique (disrupt-then-reframe vs. price only) indicated that the DTR technique again proved to affect overall compliance rates. 89% of participants exposed to the DTR condition complied with the request whereas only 68% of participants exposed to control conditions did so ( $Wald(1) = 4.69, p < .05$ ). In addition, a marginal significant main effect of brand status revealed that participants exposed to the familiar brand showed higher

compliance rates (86%) than participants exposed to the unfamiliar brand (68%;  $Wald(1) = 3.65, p < .06$ ). The interaction effect between brand status and influence technique on compliance failed to reach significance ( $Wald(1) < 1$ ).

An additional analysis of variance on the *number* of sets purchased ( $N = 58$ ) did not yield any main effects of brand status ( $F(1,54) = 1.12, n.s.$ ) or influence technique ( $F(1,54) = 1.12, n.s.$ ). However, this analysis resulted in a significant interaction effect ( $F(1,54) = 4.92, p < .05$ ). Inspection of the means revealed that, as expected, the impact of brand status was larger under DTR as opposed to price-only conditions. More specifically, in DTR conditions, a familiar brand resulted in the purchase of more sets of playing cards ( $M = 1.24$ ) than an unfamiliar brand ( $M = 1.00$ ). No such difference was observed under control conditions ( $M_{\text{familiar brand}} = 1.00$  vs  $M_{\text{unfamiliar brand}} = 1.01$ ).

These findings again demonstrate the effectiveness of the DTR technique in gaining compliance. This result is even more interesting given the fact that a different type of compliance setting and confederate was employed in the present study as compared to study 1. In addition, our findings show that brand familiarity affected compliance rates. More important, however, is the fact that the effectiveness of this persuasive element was boosted by the DTR technique. Although the interaction effect was not significant with regard to compliance per se, there *was* a significant interaction effect between both factors on the number of purchased sets of playing cards. Accordingly, our results underscore the notion that the effectiveness of the brand familiarity is especially large under limited processing conditions (cf. Vaidyanathan, 2000). This finding is compatible with our hypothesis that the disruption in the DTR technique reduces participants' ability to scrutinize the sales pitch and promotes mindless acceptance through heuristic processing of not just the reframe, but also of other persuasive elements present in the influence situation.

## General Discussion

The present research replicated and extended earlier findings on the impact of the Disrupt-Then-Reframe technique of social influence in interpersonal selling situations. Our studies support the findings reported by Davis and Knowles (1999) that adding a simple odd element in an otherwise conventional sales script can have an impressive impact on various types of compliance behavior. The DTR technique appears to be a very robust phenomenon. In line with the original findings, it is approximately 1.5 times as effective as a regular sales script in inducing compliance with a monetary request. The technique proved effective in selling various types of products, sold by different types of sales representatives. In addition, the technique was found to work for both non-commercial and commercial purposes, which broadens the domain of application beyond the non-profit purposes for which the technique was originally designed. In the next sections, we will discuss the implications of our findings for the proposed mechanisms underlying this subtle social influence technique, and provide some suggestions for future research.

### *Mechanisms Underlying the Disrupt-Then-Reframe Effect*

Why then is the Disrupt-Then-Reframe technique so effective? The architects of this technique, Davis and Knowles (1999) forwarded action identification theory (Vallacher & Wegner, 1985) as an explanatory framework, suggesting that the disruption makes people vulnerable to an alternative identification of the situation they are involved in (i.e. the sales encounter). Our findings suggest a more comprehensive account of the DTR effect, rooted in dual-process reasoning (Chaiken & Trope, 1999), which suggests that the DTR technique decreases resistance to the unsolicited persuasive attempt, thus making participants more susceptible to all kinds of persuasive elements, as long as they do not require too much cognitive effort (Fennis et al., in press). It was argued that the introduction of an odd element

in a sales script –the disruption- would reduce participants’ ability to scrutinize the merits of the proposed request. This reduced ability, in turn, would make consumers more susceptible to low-effort persuasion strategies. Based on this thought-disruption hypothesis, then, the essence of the reframe (“It’s a bargain!”) simply functions as a persuasive element (i.e. a heuristic or peripheral cue). The findings of Study 1 are compatible with this contention and constitute additional evidence for findings reported earlier (Fennis et al., in press). The reframe in this study only affected compliance when accompanied by the disruption and not without it. In Study 2 this reasoning was extended. In this study, an interaction was found between the DTR technique and brand familiarity. Although both factors did not interact in their effects on compliance per se, the interaction effect *was* significant with regard to the number of sets of playing cards purchased. On this dependent variable, the DTR technique was found to foster the effectiveness of brand familiarity. These findings are in line with the notion that the impact of persuasive elements other than the reframe, are boosted by the DTR technique (Fennis et al., in press). In addition, the findings support earlier research suggesting that brand familiarity is particularly effective under mindless, heuristic processing conditions (e.g., Vaidyanathan, 2000). Hence, the reported effects of the DTR technique can all be accounted for by our more parsimonious theoretical account of this creative and simple social influence strategy.

One possible concern in research on social influence is the employment of confederates and hence the possibility of experimenter bias. This could open the door to possible confounds, since it cannot be ruled out that confederates may have become aware of the hypotheses. Nevertheless, we have good reasons to believe that this was not a serious problem in the current research. First, the confederates were not trained. Thus, the sales scripts of the different confederates were only standardized as to what they

would have to say, but otherwise were not void of various idiosyncrasies. Second, it seems less likely that any such unconscious idiosyncrasy has *systematically* distorted our findings. Indeed, this assumption would require that certain unconscious encouragements (e.g., a smile) should have systematically accompanied certain types of scripts but not others (e.g., the DTR scripts, but not the regular scripts). This is unlikely to be the case. Finally, in the original studies by Davis and Knowles (1999) the issue of experimenter bias has been addressed, showing robust DTR effects regardless of whether confederates were aware or unaware of the hypotheses and regardless of whether confederates presented all experimental scripts or only one script (without knowledge of the other scripts in the study).

In sum, our findings and account of the observed results seem to fit quite elegantly with the well-established theoretical and empirical principle of mindlessness and automaticity in compliance research (Langer, 1989, 1992; Cialdini, 2001). This states that many compliance techniques are particularly effective under mindless conditions and trigger a fixed behavioral pattern leading to giving in to the request. Thus, by gently confusing the consumer, the DTR sows the seeds of compliance by reducing rejection responses, and fostering mindless acceptance through heuristic processing of the reframe and any other persuasive element present in this influence setting. Moreover, we demonstrated this impact across various types of compliance behavior, various types of DTR messages, various control conditions and various sales persons.

#### *Future Directions in DTR Research*

The studies reported in this paper have employed a similar type of disruption, where the price was stated in cents before it was stated in Euros to provide a fair replication of the original study by Davis and Knowles (1999). This does raise the question, however, whether



the impact of the technique is restricted to this type of disruptions, or whether alternative distracters might prove less, evenly, or even more, effective. For instance, one could wonder whether the disruption should constitute an integral part of the sales script. If so, a car horn or a cell-phone ringing would not be effective in inducing compliance. This should constitute an interesting domain for future research.

Similarly, given the limited reservoir of studies on the DTR technique, several alternative conditions remain open for testing. For example, a sales script which simply *ends* with the unusual element, i.e. stating the price in pennies (e.g., “They’re 300 pennies!”) without spelling out the amount in dollars, has not been run yet. Possibly, this condition fosters mindfulness, which in turn may affect compliance. Additional research may provide a more definitive answer to this intriguing possibility.

A final thought pertains to the ethical considerations surrounding DTR research. The critical observer might argue that using the DTR technique may open the door to manipulative persuasion attempts on the part of the influence agent, or, for that matter, to involuntary “obedience” on the part of the target. However, we would like to emphasize that this is only half the story. Indeed, informing consumers of research findings such as those reported in the present paper, may inform and educate them to become more enlightened to the ways of sales representatives, political candidates, lawyers and other professional influence agents. Consequently, the present research may also be viewed as contributing to consumer resistance to illegitimate or malevolent influence. Hence, compliance research may help individuals to discern a sincere from a malicious persuasion attempt when it is played on them. It is then up to them to consciously decide whether to respond positively to the attempt or decline the offer.

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