

Interpersonal Touch and Compliance with a Marketing Request

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Shoppers in a supermarket were approached with a request to sample a new food product. Half the shoppers were touched during the request and the other half were not. Touch increased the probability of both trying the food sample and buying the product. The touch and no-touch groups did not differ in their taste rating of the product. The probability of sampling or buying the product was not related to the gender of the shopper or the experimenter.

Compliance in a face to face situation has been shown to be affected by characteristics and behaviors of both the person making the request and the target person. Two studies have related interpersonal touches to compliance.

Kleinke (1977) found that a light touch on the arm increased compliance with request to return a dime left in a phone booth or to lend the experimenter a dime. With a similar touch, college students were more likely to sign a petition and shoppers were more likely to agree to serve as subjects in a psychological study (Willis & Hamm, 1980). In the later study, touch was particularly effective in same gender pairs. As one might expect, the probability of compliance decreases as the level of effort required of the subject increases (Kleinke, 1977; Willis & Hamm, 1980). A brief review of interpersonal touch used as an independent variable may be found in Willis and Hamm (1980).

The past research on compliance has required on the part of the subjects,

The authors wish to thank Karla Rodebush and Beth Donnelly for their assistance in gathering the data for this study.

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effort that was relatively low level and atypical of everyday life. The present study was designed to assess the effect of touch involving a more usual request, to sample and buy a food product. The results of past research were sufficient to suggest useful applications for direct sales.

METHOD

Subjects. Ninety-four female and 42 male caucasian adults were approached as they shopped alone in a supermarket. All were judged to be over 18 years of age.

Setting. The subjects were approached in a 15 ft. × 15 ft. area adjacent to the frozen food section of a Kansas City supermarket. The area was frequently used for the presentation of sample foods.

Procedure. A brokerage firm had planned a free sample demonstration in local supermarkets in order to introduce a brand of pizza new to the area. The firm agreed to allow the demonstration to be used for a study in exchange for free labor in the demonstration. As a lone shopper approached the demonstration area, he or she was met by a demonstrator (experimenter) who made the following request: "Hello, would you like to try a free sample of _____ pizza? It's a new product in this area and it's made with all natural ingredients." Two female and two male experimenters were each available for one-fourth of the display time. During alternate half-hour periods the experimenters either touched the subjects lightly on the upper arm while making the request or did not touch them. The experimenters smiled in each approach and maintained a constant interaction distance in the touch and no-touch conditions. If the shopper agreed to sample the pizza, he or she was given the sample and shown the location of the product in the frozen food section. No further interaction between the subject and the experimenter took place. An observer recorded the subjects' gender, the experimenter's gender, and touch condition, and the acceptance or rejection of the sample. As the subject left the demonstration area, the observer approached with the following request: "Hi, I noticed that you sampled the new _____ pizza. We're interested in people's opinion of the product. Would you mind rating the pizza on a scale from 1 (very poor) to 10 (very good)." No subject who tried the sample refused the rating. In order to obtain an equal number of subjects in the touch and no-touch conditions, the study was ended in the final period when equal numbers in the two conditions were obtained. A second observer unobtrusively monitored the checkstands to record whether or not the shopper purchased the pizza.

RESULTS

Without regard to gender, shoppers who were touched were more likely to sample the product ($X^2(1) = 11.74, p < .001$), and were more likely to buy the product ($X^2(1) = 5.24, p < .05$). With touch 79% sampled the product compared to 51% without touch. With touch 37% bought the product compared to 19% without touch.¹ There was no difference in the probability of trying the product in response to same versus other gender experimenters for either touch condition. Nor was there a difference in buying the product in response to same versus other gender experimenters for either touch condition. Similarly the probabilities of trying or buying the product were not related to the gender of the experimenter or of the shopper in either condition.

The ratings of the pizza for those who sampled it were analyzed in a two (touch condition) by two (experimenter gender) by two (shopper gender) ANOVA. There were no significant differences for any of the main effects or interactions. The mean ratings for the touch ($\bar{X} = 8.65$) and the no touch ($\bar{X} = 8.57$) conditions were quite similar.

DISCUSSION

Touch was a useful procedure in securing both sampling and purchase of a food product, but did not effect the taste rating of the food. Silverthorne, Noreen, Hunt, & Rota (1972) found that touch resulted in more positive ratings of a visual stimulus pattern in a laboratory setting, but unlike the present study, the touch was present during the rating. Both the decision to purchase and the rating took place in the present study after the touch was discontinued. The purchase was affected but the rating was not. One could reason that the decision to buy an inexpensive item is not as important as a change in stimulus evaluation. In addition, the increased intimacy implied by touch may effect a rating with which a subject has had little experience but not be sufficient to modify the more ordinary sensations in a common food product.

The relationship between gender and compliance is not clear. Regan and Brehm (1972) and Bickman (1974) found that males were more likely to comply with a request from a female, and the former study involved request to buy a product in a supermarket. Willis and Hamm (1980) reported that females were more likely to secure compliance with or without touch, when

¹Frequency tables may be obtained from Frank N. Willis, Psychology Department, University of Missouri-Kansas City, Kansas City, Missouri 64110.

compliance required little effort (petition signing on a university campus) and that other gender experimenters received more compliance with a more effortful task (serving as a subject in a study while shopping in a shopping center) if the subjects were not touched. Touch, however, produced high levels of compliance in all gender combinations and the gender effect was not present. Similarly, we found high levels of compliance in the touch condition and no gender difference, but we also failed to find gender differences in the no-touch condition. Regan and Brehm reasoned that males were more likely to comply with a food sales request because they felt less competent in this setting. We could speculate that males feel more competent now in food shopping than they did in 1972. More importantly, however, the variations in settings and types of effort involved in research to date do not permit simple statements about gender and compliance.

The sources of these positive reactions to touch may be physiological as well as social, eg. touch has been shown to reduce arousal levels in adult humans (Geis & Viskne, 1972). The association of touch with stress reduction beginning at an early age may result in a positive reaction to being touched for most subjects assuming that the touch modality and body areas involved are appropriate for the setting. One can easily imagine touch patterns which would produce very negative responses. We conclude that interpersonal touch has useful applications for sales requests. The importance of variations in touch modality and body areas has yet to be explored.

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