

# Raising the Price of Agreement: Public Commitment and the Lowball Compliance Procedure<sup>1</sup>

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Three studies examined the effect on compliance when a requester raises the price of the request. Participants in Experiment 1 were told that they would receive a free coffee mug for donating money to a fundraiser but were interrupted before they could respond and were told that the fundraisers were out of mugs. These participants were less likely to donate money than a group told nothing about the mugs. Experiments 2 and 3 compared this interruption procedure with the lowball procedure, which also uses a small-to-large price progression. The results from these two studies indicate that allowing people to respond to the initial price is critical for producing the lowball effect. Without a statement of public commitment, the small-to-large price progression led to a decrease rather than an increase in compliance relative to a control group.

A chain of art supply stores recently introduced a sale in which the price of the item was lowest during the first hour of the day, and then went up 10% each hour. One can imagine the satisfaction that buyers felt during the initial hour of the sale, but what about subsequent customers? Restaurants often promote grand openings with coupons for remarkably low prices on meals. The bargains probably bring additional diners through the doors, but will these customers return to pay full price for the same meal? Many distributors offer cellular phones for free or extremely low prices. People who fail to read the fine print soon discover that these inexpensive phones come with several additional costs that push the final price far beyond what they expected. Will these surprised customers purchase the phones anyway?

Although lowering costs is still a standard method of increasing compliance with requests, as these examples suggest, sometimes requesters rely on a small-to-large cost progression to sell products and to secure favors. *Sequential-request techniques*—the simple procedures that result in significant increases in compliance with a request—have been the focus of a great deal of research in social psychology (cf. Burger, 1999; Cialdini & Trost, 1998; Weyant, 1996). Numerous studies have found that relatively easy and inexpensive steps, such as getting

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potential buyers to say “Yes” to a small request (Freeman & Fraser, 1966) or allowing them to reject an outrageous request (Cialdini et al., 1975), can lead to notable increases in agreement to the real request. In addition to what they tell us about social influence and attitude change, the apparent simplicity of these procedures and the accumulated evidence of their effectiveness has obvious implications for those interested in sales, recruitment, and the like.

What do research findings on these sequential-request techniques suggest about the effectiveness of the small-to-large price progression? One answer can be derived from research on the *that’s-not-all* procedure. This compliance procedure begins when an individual is presented with a request at a specific price. For example, a salesperson may state a price for an item, or a recruiter might ask for a specific number of hours of volunteer work. However, before the person can respond to the request, the requester improves the deal, either by lowering the cost or by adding something to the package. The salesperson might give a lower price for the same item, or the recruiter might mention that volunteers receive a free meal. If the *that’s-not-all* procedure is effective, the individual is more likely to agree to the request at the final price than if he or she was presented with the lower price or the entire deal at the outset.

Several investigations have demonstrated that the *that’s-not-all* technique significantly increases compliance with a variety of requests (Burger, 1986; Burger, Reed, DeCesare, Rauner, & Rozolis, 1999; Pollock, Smith, Knowles, & Bruce, 1998). For example, researchers in one experiment increased the sale of \$1 boxes of chocolate from 45% to 76% when they told potential buyers that the price was \$1.25, but quickly dropped the price to \$1 before the participants could respond (Pollock et al., 1998). Similarly, would-be buyers in another experiment were told that the price of a cupcake was \$0.75 (Burger, 1986). Before these participants could respond, the experimenter explained that the price included two medium-size cookies. This procedure increased sales from 40% to 73% over a condition in which participants were presented with the entire package and price together.

Why does the *that’s-not-all* technique increase compliance? Borrowing from adaptation level theory (Helson, 1964) and social judgment theory (Sherif & Hovland, 1961; Sherif & Sherif, 1967), Burger (1986) argued that the effectiveness of the procedure can be explained in part by the use of anchor points. According to social judgment theory, judgments often are made in reference to an anchor point. For example, \$200 will seem like an excessive amount for a watch to a woman who has never paid more than \$50 for a watch in her life. Similarly, \$0.50 for a candy bar seems like a lot to a man who last purchased candy when it was \$0.05. Other studies find that these anchor points often are susceptible to manipulation. For example, men in one experiment rated models as less attractive after they had looked at photographs of very attractive women (Kenrick, Gutierrez, & Goldberg, 1989). In the *that’s-not-all* situation, individuals are said to use the

initial price as an anchor point when deciding whether to go along with the final price for the request. Because these people are using an anchor point that is more expensive than the ultimate asking price, the final price is likely to appear reasonable, and perhaps even a good deal.

In demonstrations of the that's-not-all procedure to date, researchers attempted to move the participant's anchor point upward by presenting an initial price that is slightly higher than the eventual asking price. But what would happen if the initial price were lower than the final asking price? If the initial price offered for a product affects the anchor point as described, then we would expect the small-to-large price progression to reduce the likelihood of agreeing to the request. Imagine the reaction of a potential buyer who is led to believe that a cupcake costs \$0.75, but then discovers that the actual price is \$1.00. According to the anchor-point explanation, the \$1.00 price should seem too much to pay for an item with a \$0.75 anchor point. We would expect this customer to be less likely to buy the cupcake than if presented only with the \$1.00 price.

The findings from one previous set of studies are consistent with this prediction. Doob, Carlsmith, Freedman, Landauer, and Tom (1969) conducted a series of field studies in which they looked at the sales of products introduced in stores at a low price and then raised to the regular price a few weeks later. The researchers found that the low price led to an initial increase in sales when compared to sales in stores that introduced the product at the regular price. However, after a few weeks (presumably when customers returned to buy the product again), stores that had introduced the product at a lower price had poorer sales than did those who had kept the price the same all along. Among the explanations offered by the researchers for this phenomenon is one similar to the position advocated here. That is, Doob et al. suggested that the customers might have decided that the price of a given product was, for example, \$0.25. When these customers were later presented with a \$0.39 price for the same product, the cost seemed too high.

### Experiment 1

Experiment 1 is designed to test the notion that an initial price can alter the anchor point that participants use when deciding whether to comply with the final version of a request. We presented participants with a modified version of the that's-not-all procedure in which the initial request was followed by a more expensive request. We expected participants in this condition to agree to the request less often than people presented only with the higher priced request.

#### *Method*

*Participants.* Participants were 100 undergraduates (61 females, 39 males) living in on-campus residence halls.

*Procedure.* Participants were randomly selected from a telephone directory of students living in on-campus dormitories. The experimenter telephoned the selected students, and those who answered the phone were assigned to one of two conditions according to a prearranged random order. The experimenter explained that he or she was collecting donations for the student's class fund. Students assigned to the small initial request condition were told that they would receive a coffee mug with the name of the university on it if they donated \$5. At this point, the experimenter pretended to be interrupted before the student could respond. The experimenter said, "Wait, hold on a second. OK. I just found out that we ran out of the mugs." He or she then asked if the participant would be willing to donate \$5 to the fundraiser, even though mugs were no longer available. Participants assigned to the control condition were told nothing about a mug. These students were asked only if they would contribute \$5 to the fundraiser. Participants who agreed to the request were told that someone would be in touch soon about how to donate. These participants were called back about a week later, thanked for their offer, and told that the fundraiser had been canceled.

### *Results and Discussion*

We compared the percentage of students agreeing to the request in the small initial request condition with those in the control condition. As predicted, participants in the small initial request condition (8/50, 16%) agreed to donate \$5 less often than did participants in the control condition (19/50, 38%),  $\chi^2(1, N = 100) = 6.14, p < .02, \phi = .25$ . Consistent with our analysis, the initial size of the request appears to have modified the anchor point that participants used when deciding whether to comply with the more expensive request. Because this anchor point was lower than the subsequent cost, the likelihood of agreeing with the request was reduced.

The findings are consistent with the analysis derived from the anchor-point explanation for the that's-not-all procedure. It seems that mentioning the price of an object affects what people believe to be an acceptable price for that object, and this appears to be the case whether the initial price is higher or lower than the eventual asking price. Of course, the ability to manipulate anchor points probably is limited to objects for which people do not already have a solid anchor point. Someone who frequently buys the same kind of cupcake already has an idea of what the item costs and is unlikely to be susceptible to a that's-not-all manipulation to increase cupcake sales.

### Experiment 2

The small-to-large price progression used in Experiment 1 appears to be effective in reducing compliance with a request. However, this observation seems to contradict the findings from a large number of studies on another social

influence technique. Specifically, the lowball procedure also relies on a small-to-large price progression. Briefly, the *lowball procedure* consists of presenting a request at a given price, then raising the price after the individual agrees to the initial request (Cialdini, Cacioppo, Bassett, & Miller, 1978). For example, you might agree to purchase a used stereo system at a rummage sale for \$200, only to be told a few minutes later that the owner will not let the item go for less than \$225. If the procedure is effective, you are more likely to purchase the stereo for \$225 than if you had been presented with the higher price at the beginning. Numerous investigations have demonstrated the effectiveness of the lowball procedure (Burger & Petty, 1981; Cialdini et al., 1978; Joule, 1987). For example, undergraduates in one experiment were asked if they would be willing to participate in a psychology experiment (Cialdini et al., 1978). When participants in the lowball condition agreed, they were told that the experiment was held at 7:00 a.m., thus making the cost of participation higher than the students probably had imagined. The researchers found that these students agreed to participate and showed up for the experiment at a higher rate than did those who were told the full cost of participation at the outset.

In short, many lowball studies find that the small-to-large price progression is an effective way to increase compliance, whereas the small-to-large price progression in Experiment 1 led to a decrease in compliance. How can we reconcile this inconsistency? The obvious difference between the two procedures concerns whether the individual is allowed to state his or her agreement with the initial request. Participants in lowball studies must agree to the request at the initial price before the experimenter raises the price. However, in the variation of the that's-not-all procedure used in Experiment 1, participants were not allowed to reply to the initial request before the final price was given.

Why might this procedural difference result in different response rates to the final request? Lowball researchers argue that the procedure is effective because agreeing to the request at the initial price creates a sense of commitment in participants (Burger & Petty, 1981; Cialdini et al., 1978). Social psychologists have long recognized that such a commitment increases the likelihood that the person will perform the task, even when additional obstacles are introduced (Kiesler, 1971). In the lowball procedure, agreeing to buy a product at a certain price from a particular salesperson is said to create a sense of commitment that then leads the person to buy the product at the slightly higher price.

Thus, because Experiment 1 participants were prevented from agreeing to the initial price, the sense of commitment that drives the lowball effect was not present. Of course, lowball participants also are presented with a low initial price that they can use as an anchor point. However, the findings from several investigations suggest that the commitment generated in a lowball manipulation is so strong that it overpowers the tendency to decline the request because of an unfavorable anchor-point comparison.

To test the importance of a public commitment in the small-to-large price progression, Experiment 2 participants were presented with an initial request and then either allowed or not allowed to respond. Participants then were told that the price of agreeing would be costlier than initially stated. We predict that, compared to an appropriate control group, those allowed to respond to the initial price will show the classic lowball effect of higher agreement to the request at the final price. Alternatively, we expect the opposite response from participants who learned about the initial price but who were not allowed to respond to this price. As in Experiment 1, we predict that these latter participants will be less likely to agree to the request at the final price than control participants.

### *Method*

*Participants.* Participants were 216 undergraduates (121 females, 95 males) living in on-campus residence halls.

*Procedure.* Participants were randomly selected from a directory for students living in on-campus housing. The experimenter telephoned the selected students and randomly assigned those who answered to one of three conditions. Participants in the lowball condition were told that the caller was a student interested in recruiting other students for a fundraiser. She explained that sponsors had been lined up to donate money to needy families for each student who participated in a 3-mile (5-km) walk. The experimenter then asked if the student would like to participate in the walk. If the student asked about the time or the date, the experimenter said there were different times available and that now she just needed an idea of student interest. Participants who declined the request were thanked for their time. Those who agreed to participate were told that they could walk either at 8:00 Saturday morning or 8:00 Sunday morning the coming weekend. As in earlier lowball studies, the early time was used to make participation more costly than the students had likely suspected. The experimenter then asked students which day, if either, they wanted to participate.

Participants in the interrupt condition heard the same request, but the experimenter excused herself immediately after asking the first time if the student wanted to participate in the walk. The experimenter appeared to not be on the line for a second or two, thus preventing the participant from responding. When the experimenter returned, she explained that the student could participate in the walk either 8:00 Saturday morning or 8:00 Sunday morning. She then asked if the student wanted to participate. Participants assigned to the control condition were told the times of the walk and then were asked if they wanted to participate.

Students who agreed to participate in the 3-mile (5-km) walk were thanked for their interest and were told that at this point the experimenter was merely collecting names to determine the level of interest in the walk. She said she would

get back to them within a few days if enough people volunteered to make the walk worthwhile.

### *Results and Discussion*

We compared the percentage of people who complied with the target request across each of the three conditions. There was a statistically significant pattern across the three conditions,  $\chi^2(2, N = 216) = 13.83, p < .001, \phi = .18$ . Participants in the lowball condition were more likely to agree to the target request (23/58, 39.7%) than participants in either the interrupt condition (10/69, 14.5%) or the control condition (14/89, 15.7%). Specific cell comparisons reveal that the rate of compliance in the lowball condition was significantly higher than in either the interrupt condition,  $\chi^2(1, N = 127) = 9.11, p < .003, \phi = .27$ ; or the control condition,  $\chi^2(1, N = 147) = 9.44, p < .003, \phi = .25$ . The interrupt and control conditions did not differ significantly.

The findings thus demonstrate that the effectiveness of the small-to-large price progression depends on whether the individual is allowed to agree with the initial price of the request. Consistent with past research on the lowball procedure, students who agreed to participate in the charity walk at the lower price were more likely to agree to participate at the higher price than those who were presented only with the higher price. However, when students were prevented from giving their reply to the lower priced request, they were no more likely to agree with the higher priced request than those in the control condition.

Although the findings from Experiment 2 identify a crucial component of the lowball procedure, we failed to replicate the finding from Experiment 1. In that experiment, we found a significant decrease in compliance among participants in the interruption condition relative to the control group. Looking at the data, it appears that our ability to demonstrate this same phenomenon in Experiment 2 was most likely limited by a floor effect. That is, the rate of compliance in the control condition was so low that there simply was not sufficient opportunity to demonstrate a significant decrease from this already low figure. Experiment 3 was conducted to remedy this problem.

### Experiment 3

We again compared the lowball procedure and the interruption procedure against a control condition. However, we used a request that previous work suggested would be less susceptible to the floor effect problem that we experienced in Experiment 2. We again predict that the lowball procedure will increase compliance relative to the control condition, but that the interruption procedure will lead to a decrease in compliance.

*Method*

*Participants.* Participants were 149 undergraduates living in on-campus housing. There were 81 females and 68 males in the final sample.

*Procedure.* Participants were randomly selected from a directory of on-campus residents. The experimenter telephoned the selected students, and those who answered the phone were randomly assigned to one of three conditions.

The experimenter identified herself in each condition as a recent graduate who was calling as part of a fundraiser for the Eastside Scholarship Fund. She explained that the organization was raising money to fund scholarships for underprivileged students. In the lowball condition, she said, "We're asking for a \$5 donation from undergraduates, and for your donation we will send you a coupon for a free smoothie at Jamba Juice. Would you be willing to donate to the scholarship fund?" If the student declined the request, he or she was thanked and the phone call ended. If the student agreed to the donation, the experimenter said, "Wait, hold on a second. OK. I just found out that we ran out of coupons. But would you still be interested in donating to the scholarship fund?" If the student still agreed to the request, he or she was thanked and told that the experimenter was just trying to get an idea of student support. The experimenter explained that if there was enough interest, someone would call back and explain how to send the donation.

Participants in the interrupt condition heard an identical request with one exception. The experimenter did not pause after asking the first time if the participant wanted to donate to the fundraiser. Rather, the experimenter immediately told the participant to "Wait, hold on a second" and then, as in the lowball condition, explained that there were no more coupons. Thus, these participants did not have the opportunity to agree to or to decline the request before learning that they would not receive a smoothie coupon. Finally, participants in the control condition were simply asked to donate \$5 to the scholarship fund, with no mention of coupons.

*Results and Discussion*

The number of participants who agreed to the request in each condition was compared, revealing a statistically significant pattern across the three conditions,  $\chi^2(2, N = 149) = 38.15, p < .001, \phi = .36$ . Consistent with the Experiment 2 findings, the lowball participants (38/49, 77.6%) agreed to the request significantly more often than did the control condition participants (21/50, 42.0%),  $\chi^2(1, N = 99) = 11.55, p < .001, \phi = .34$ . More importantly, the interrupt condition participants (8/50, 16.0%) were significantly less likely to agree to the request than the participants in the control condition,  $\chi^2(1, N = 100) = 6.99, p < .01, \phi = .26$ .



The findings thus demonstrate that the small-to-large price progression can lead to either an increase or a decrease in compliance, depending on whether participants are allowed to respond to the initial price. Experiment 3 appears to have avoided the floor effect problem from the previous experiment, thus allowing for successful replication of the Experiment 1 results.

### General Discussion

Taken together, the findings from the three studies demonstrate that a small-to-large price progression can lead to either an increase or a decrease in compliance. The key variable appears to be whether the individual is allowed to state his or her agreement to the initial request prior to hearing the final cost. When participants in our studies agreed to the request at the lower cost, they were more likely than a control group to agree to the request at the higher cost. This is the basic lowball effect. However, when participants were prevented from stating whether they would agree to the lower cost, they were less likely than the control group to agree with the higher priced request. This finding is consistent with the prediction derived from the anchor-point explanation for the that's-not-all effect.

Although the psychological processes underlying the two effects were not tested directly in the studies reported here, the findings are consistent with the explanations proposed for the lowball and the that's-not-all phenomena. Lowball researchers have argued that the small-to-large procedure causes the individual to develop a commitment to the action and the requester (Burger & Petty, 1981; Cialdini et al., 1978). This commitment then leads to an increased likelihood of agreeing to the request when the price is raised. Research on the that's-not-all procedure suggests that the individual uses the initial price as an anchor point against which he or she judges the reasonableness of the higher price. In the absence of a public commitment, this social judgment process can result in a decreased likelihood of agreeing to the higher priced request.

We have identified two psychological processes that might account for compliance rates in the situations studied here, but other processes could play a role. For example, forcing people to state their agreement to the initial price may generate impression-management concerns (Leary, 1995). That is, someone who agrees to buy a product at the lower price might be concerned about looking like a "cheapskate" for refusing to go along with the higher price. Although lowball researchers have argued that impression management by itself cannot explain the results of all lowball findings (Burger & Petty, 1981), we cannot rule out that these processes may have been operating in some of the studies reported here.

Another possible explanation for the findings concerns participants' reactions to the requester. It may have been that participants in the interrupt condition were suspicious about the announcement that the mug or coupon was suddenly unavailable, and perhaps rejected the request because they thought that it was a

tricky sales ploy. Yet another possibility is that these interrupt participants reacted with a simple reciprocation response (Gouldner, 1960). That is, the participants may have responded to the recruiter taking something away by taking away their cooperation. However, arguing against these last two explanations, lowball participants in Experiments 2 and 3 also heard the "ploy" and also had something taken away from them. Yet, participants in these conditions increased their level of compliance. Thus, it does not appear that either of these possible alternative explanations can account for the findings.

Another remaining point concerns the results of Doob et al.'s (1969) research, which found a drop in sales when stores raised an initially low price for an item back to the regular price. Presumably the customers bought the item at the low price and used that low price as an anchor point when they returned to purchase the item again. One might say, therefore, that the customers were allowed to state their intention to purchase the product. According to our analysis, this stated intention should have created the sense of commitment said to underlie the lowball effect and thereby should have led to an increase in sales. However, the researchers found the opposite effect.

Of course, as with other field studies, there are many unknown variables that may have affected the findings in Doob et al.'s (1969) investigations. But we also can identify an important difference between the customers in these studies and the participants in the lowball investigations that may explain the discrepancy. That is, the store customers presumably were allowed to fulfill their commitment to purchase the product at the initial price. If that were the case, then these customers may not have experienced a strong sense of commitment to purchase the item during their second trip to the store. Consistent with this analysis, when lowball participants in one experiment were allowed to fulfill their commitment to the requester before receiving the final request, the increased compliance associated with the lowball manipulation was reduced (Burger & Petty, 1981).

Finally, there may be other ways that individuals develop a sense of commitment beyond the verbal agreement that we elicited in our studies. For example, when people express interest in a behavior or take steps toward performing a behavior, they also might develop a sense of commitment to that action. This phenomenon may have been demonstrated in one lowball experiment in which participants were selected only if they approached a bake-sale table and asked about the price of the items (Coscarelli, Kroll, & Burger, 2000). Lowball participants in that experiment were more likely to purchase an item than were control-group participants, even when the lowball participants were not allowed to state their agreement publicly. Thus, the investigators found the opposite pattern demonstrated in Experiments 2 and 3 reported here. We can speculate that approaching the table and engaging the salesperson in a discussion about a purchase created a sense of commitment in the Coscarelli et al. participants that was sufficient to increase compliance with the final purchase request. In contrast,

participants in our studies received an unsolicited phone call and thus expressed no interest in fulfilling the request until they were asked directly by the experimenter.

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