PSYCHOLOGY OF COMPLIANCE AND SALES TECHNIQUES

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INTRODUCTION

Lippa (1994) defines compliance as "acceding to a request made by another person". This is the simplest form of social influence. It is the response to a request from another person. The requested person is not already doing that behaviour, nor would they necessarily want to do it.

Compliance can vary from an everyday request to get another person something through to advertising and sales techniques. Certainly with the latter, a lot of thought goes into how to request the person to buy a particular product. Face-to-face selling makes use of many of the factors affecting compliance.

Research has established that individuals often comply to everyday requests whether reasons are given or not for the request. Langer et al (1978) set up a series of requests to jump the queue to use a photocopier to make twenty copies. Compliance occurred on 1 in 4 occasions (with or without an explanation for why the person wanted to jump the queue). Interestingly, when the request was to jump the queue to make five copies, compliance was around 90%. There was no difference whether an explanation that made sense or not was given for jumping the queue.

Often giving in to social influence is painted as a negative thing or a sign of weakness, but it has everyday advantages for society. Flexibility to requests produces the give and take that allows society to function without conflicts. Imagine if nobody agreed to any requests.

FACTORS AFFECTING COMPLIANCE

Whether an individual complies or not can be affected by different situational factors. Many of these factors are used as sales techniques, but they can be resisted. Table 1 lists the factors affecting compliance.

Table 1 - Factors affecting compliance.
SELF ESTEEM

There is an inverse relationship between self-esteem and compliance. Apsler (1975) found that by lowering self-esteem, by getting people to say and do foolish things, resulted in a high level of compliance afterwards. This is probably as an attempt to recover loss of face.

TRANSGRESSION

Wallace and Sadalla (1966) found that people caught in acts of wrong-doings complied more when asked, than those not caught.

RECIPROCATION

There tends to be greater compliance from people who have been done a favour. For example, when driving, if you are let out by another driver, you are more likely to let someone else out. Certain groups make use of this tactic by giving a "free gift" before asking for a donation (eg: Society for Krishna Consciousness).

Applying this tactic to selling, it is called the "that’s-not-all" technique (figure 1). The seller offers the product at a certain price. But before the buyer can agree or refuse, the price is lowered. Significantly more people take this product now then when the same price is offered straightaway. The buyer is reciprocating the apparent concession of the seller. This is used by many market traders who appear to keep reducing the prices as they talk to the buyers.

![Diagram](image-url)

**Figure 1 - "That’s-Not-All Technique".**
Freedman and Fraser (1966) showed this technique at work in two experiments. The first experiment was set up in a small town in USA to see how many home-owners would display a large sign saying "Drive Carefully" in their gardens (figure 2). The control group were asked directly, and 17% agreed. There were two experimental groups in this field experiment. The first group was asked to display a small sign, then two weeks later asked to display the large sign. Of those who agreed to the small sign, 76% agreed to display the large sign. The second experimental group was asked to sign a petition about driving safely as the small request. Of those complying to this request, 50% complied to the large sign when asked later.

Figure 2 - Example of sign used by Freedman and Fraser (1966).

In Freedman and Fraser's second experiment, the large request was to get housewives to agree to five observers watch them use particular household products in their own homes for two hours. Around 50% of the women approached who agreed to the small request did comply to the large request. The small request was to fill out a detailed questionnaire about the household products.

Freedman and Fraser see the foot-in-the-door technique working because of the desire for consistency. Having complied with the small request, and attempting to be consistent with their self-image of being helpful, people feel compelled to go along with subsequent requests.

But this technique does not work if the first request appears too small or the second request too large.

```
SMALL REQUEST = AGREE
↓
LARGE REQUEST = AGREE
```

Figure 3 - Foot-in-the-Door Technique.
DOOR-IN-THE-FACE TECHNIQUE

This is the opposite to the foot-in-the-door technique. If a large request is refused, then a subsequent smaller request will be agreed (figure 4). But this only works if the same person makes both requests.

Cialdini et al (1975) asked college students to commit themselves to counsel a group of juvenile delinquents for two hours per week for two years. There was no agreement to this request. Then the students were asked to take the group of juvenile delinquents on a day trip to the zoo - 50% agreed. This compared to 17% in the control group, who were asked directly about the day trip.

The reason for the compliance here is once more impression management (1). People do not like to be thought of as inconsiderate and tend to agree to the second request to not appear too unhelpful.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{UNREASONABLE/LARGE REQUEST} & = \text{REFUSED} \\
\downarrow & \\
\text{SMALLER REQUEST} & = \text{AGREED}
\end{align*}
\]

Figure 4 - Door-in-the-Face Technique.

WHICH TECHNIQUE IS BETTER: FOOT-IN-THE-DOOR OR DOOR-IN-THE-FACE?

Cann et al (1975) compared the techniques of foot-in-the-door and door-in-the-face for a request to distribute pamphlets, and found similar results between the two techniques. But the key was a delay between the requests or not.

Where there was no delay between the requests, approximately 80% agreed to help when the foot-in-the-door technique was used, and approximately 85% for the door-in-the-face technique. But where there was a delay between the requests, the figures for compliance were approximately 65% and 20% respectively. In other words, the foot-in-the-door technique is less affected by a delay between requests.

Goldman (1986) tested the two techniques with a more complex experiment. The target behaviour was a request to stuff 75 envelopes to help the Kansas City Zoo in a fund-raising campaign. The sample used were 380 participants phoned at random in the Kansas City area.

The easy request was to answer three questions; the moderate request was an extended phone interview; and the hard request was to be a phone interviewer of 150 people.
Table 2 shows the five different conditions of this field experiment, and the rates of compliance to the target behaviour.

A combination of both techniques proved most effective; i.e.: presenting two requests before the target request.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONDITION</th>
<th>% COMPLIANCE</th>
<th>TECHNIQUE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Target behaviour only</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>control group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate request only</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>control group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easy then target</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>foot-in-the-door</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard then target</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>door-in-the-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard then moderate then target</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>combination</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 - Results from Goldman (1986).

LOW-BALL TECHNIQUE

This technique makes use of a commitment to an initial request to increase subsequent compliance. For example, an individual agrees to buy a car with certain features. Later they are told that some of the features are not available, the individual still buys the car. In other words, people still comply after the commitment to comply, even when what they have complied to changes.

The low-ball technique works in selling because it creates the illusion of irreversibility about the original decision, and, in fact, less reputable sellers may emphasise this. There is also the anticipation of the reward by the purchaser, and they want to avoid disappointment. Or the purchaser may continue to believe that it is still a "good deal".

In an experiment with students, Cialdini et al (1978) asked them to take part in an experiment at 7am in the morning. Half of the students were told the time after agreeing to take part: 56% still agreed to comply (and 53% turned up). The other half of the students (control group) were told the time before agreeing. In this group, 31% agreed to take part (and 24% turned up).

Pallak et al (1980) made use of a real life situation for their experiment. The aim was to get Iowa residents to reduce their fuel consumption. They were told that those who did reduce consumption would have their names published in the local newspaper. This produced an overall reduction of 12%. The residents were then told that their names would not be in the newspaper. This produced a subsequent greater reduction in fuel consumption.
consumption. Cognitive dissonance (2) can be used to explain this behaviour.

POSITIVE MOODS

Making a request in a setting that creates a positive mood or the request from those we like are more likely to get compliance. The former is shown in advertising that attempts to make the viewer feel good. The latter is the technique used in "party selling": an individual invites their friends to their house to sell the items (rather than a stranger selling); eg: Tupperware, or Ann Summers.

INGRATIATION

Saying flattering things to the target before the request gets greater compliance.

REACTANCE

Get the target to comply by threatening their freedom of choice; eg: scarcity of the item. The sales techniques of "limited editions", "closing down sales", or "not many left" are examples of this factor.

AUTHORITY AND CONSENSUS

Following the lead of an expert, or that everybody else doing it. This latter factor is also linked to conformity to the majority. Thus the use of terms like "largest selling" or "fastest growing" by advertisers.

COMMITMENT

Cialdini (1993), who spent three years doing participant observations in the sales and advertising industries, talks of "foolish consistency". This is the tendency to avoid rethinking decisions once made (and thus commitment to past decisions). In other words, once individuals have complied, they continue to comply subsequently in the same situation, and do not assess each repeat situation as a new one.

Aronson et al (1999) prefer to call this "mindless conformity": "obeying internalised social norms without deliberating about one's actions" (p312).

Langer (1989) sent 40 secretaries at New York university a memo: "This paper is to be returned to Room
238 through inter-office mail" and left it unsigned. 90% of the secretaries returned the memo because their job involved following instructions without thinking. But when the same memo was signed: "Sincerely, John Lewis", which is unusual, only 60% of the secretaries returned the memo.

WHY DO PEOPLE COMPLY?

The main reason that individuals comply, other than wanting to help the requester, is to maintain "face" (ie to give a good impression of themselves to the requester). It is this that is manipulated in selling. For example, the seller may suggest that not buying this product is a sign of being mean. Because most people are concerned about not appearing mean, they comply to the request. At one level, why does it matter if a complete stranger (the salesperson) thinks you are mean? What does it matter what they think of us?

The answer is that we are socialised into maintaining a good impression of ourselves. Known as impression management in social psychology. At another level, Western societies are based upon the idea of "good" and "bad" people, as much as the possessions we have. In other words, status in society comes from being seen in a positive light by others. There is the belief that "good people" succeed, and "bad people" don't. This is part of the "just world hypothesis" (3) (Lerner 1980).

COMPLIANCE APPLIED TO SALES TECHNIQUES

Marwell and Schmitt (1967) list sixteen compliance-gaining strategies that can be used in selling (table 3)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STRATEGY</th>
<th>TECHNIQUE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Promise</td>
<td>compliance gains something desirable; eg: &quot;you will be popular if you buy X&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threat</td>
<td>compliance to avoid something undesirable; eg: &quot;You will miss out if you don't buy X&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive expertise</td>
<td>expert tell you benefits of complying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative expertise</td>
<td>expert tell you disadvantages of not complying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-giving</td>
<td>reward given before request; eg: Reader's Digest free entry to prize draw and details of book to buy (similar to reciprocation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aversive stimulation</td>
<td>continuous punishment only cease when comply; eg: dissatisfaction with life removed by purchasing X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debt</td>
<td>indebted to requester; eg: companies sponsoring events or giving gifts to schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liking</td>
<td>compliments before request (similar to ingratiation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral appeal</td>
<td>moral person would comply; eg: &quot;caring person would give to this charity&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive self-feeling</td>
<td>compliance will make you feel better</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative self-feeling</td>
<td>non-compliance will make you feel bad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive altercasting</td>
<td>person with &quot;good qualities&quot; would comply</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative altercasting</td>
<td>only person with &quot;bad qualities&quot; would not comply</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altruism</td>
<td>compliance helps others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive esteem</td>
<td>people who you value will think highly of you if you comply</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative esteem</td>
<td>people who you value will think bad of you if you don not comply</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 - Compliance-gaining strategies used in selling.
FOOTNOTES

1. Schlenker (1980) defines impression management as a "conscious or unconscious attempt to control images that are projected in real or imagined social interactions".

2. Cognitive dissonance is an explanation put forward by Festinger (1957) to account for attitude changes. When two "cognitions" are inconsistent, the individual is motivated to resolve this.

3. The just world hypothesis is part of the process of making sense of events in the world that happen to others and to the self. It is a form of attributional bias. For Lerner and Miller (1978), "people have a need to believe that their environment is a just and orderly place where people usually get what they deserve".

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Goldman, M (1986) Compliance employing a combined foot-in-the door and door-in-the face procedure Journal


