

## Legitimizing Paltry Contributions: On-the-spot vs. Mail-in Requests<sup>1</sup>

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Two versions of the legitimization-of-paltry-contributions technique (Cialdini & Schroeder, 1976) were compared with respect to their effectiveness in generating compliance with requests for charitable donations. When immediate, on-the-spot donations were requested, the technique significantly increased compliance rates relative to control conditions; but when the respondents were asked to mail in their contributions, virtually none did. The results offered some support for an image-maintenance explanation of the technique and were viewed as indicating that the effectiveness of the technique is reliable, but primarily under conditions that impose a high degree of situational constraint upon respondents. Implications of the results for door-to-door fundraising and for future research were discussed.

Charitable organizations, which depend heavily upon private donations, have found the elicitation of such support to be increasingly difficult in recent years (Cook, 1979). Obviously, an important applied issue concerns how best to make appeals for funds to maximize their effectiveness. A number of strategies, such as social labeling (Kraut, 1973), the door-in-the-face (Schwarzwald, Raz, & Zvibel, 1979), the foot-in-the-door (Pliner, Hart, Kohl, & Saari, 1974), legitimizing paltry contributions (Brockner, Guzzi, Kane, Levine, Shaplen, 1984; Cialdini & Schroeder, 1976; Reingen, 1978; Weyant, 1984), the list technique (Reingen, 1982), and the low-ball technique (Brownstein & Katzev, 1985) have been shown to effectively increase compliance with donation requests.

The present study involves a test of an extension of the legitimization of paltry contributions strategy, which is implemented by adding the phrase, "even a penny will help," to a standard request for donations. Cialdini and Schroeder (1976) proposed that the technique enhances compliance

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because it makes noncompliance difficult by rendering most excuses inapplicable, but they also suggested that image-maintenance concerns of donors could possibly mediate the effectiveness of the technique. The image-maintenance explanation maintains that donors may comply more with the even-a-penny request because to refuse such a minimal request would necessitate behaving in a socially undesirable manner. Although the technique has been found to reliably increase compliance, further research is needed to test the image-maintenance explanation of the technique as well as its generality across different request modes (e.g., face-to-face vs. mail-in).

Cialdini and Schroeder (1976) and Reingen (1978), for example, found that legitimizing paltry contributions in face-to-face requests significantly increased donation rates relative to a control request without producing differential mean donations across conditions. Brockner et al. (1984), however, varied both type of request <sup>4</sup> (control vs. even-a-dollar vs. even-five-dollars) and mode of request (face-to-face vs. telephoned) and tested the effects of these variables on both pledges and actual donation rate. All participants, regardless of experimental condition, were initially asked to pledge a donation, and those who did were sent a pledge card that could be mailed in along with the amount pledged. It was found that, for pledge data, legitimizing paltry contributions produced greater compliance than a control condition and that face-to-face contact produced greater compliance than phone contact. Actual donation rate, however, showed no main effect of mode of request, but the main effect of request type was still observed. Although 44 of 90 participants pledged, only 12 of 44 pledgers actually donated.

This latter finding is somewhat consistent with an image-maintenance explanation of the technique and suggests that the legitimization-of-paltry contributions technique may not be as effective in situations where actual donation behavior is unknown to the requester (e.g., as in mailing in a donation) as it is when donations are taken directly by the requester. Brockner et al., however, did not vary the mail-in nature of their requests, since all participants who pledged were asked to mail in their donation. The present study, therefore, was designed to test the image-maintenance explanation of the technique by comparing the effectiveness of a direct, on-the-spot version of the legitimization-of-paltry-contributions technique

<sup>4</sup>The even-a-dollar and even-five-dollars conditions were more effective than the control condition in generating greater frequency of both pledges and actual donations. This was attributed to the participants' perception of both of these amounts as being paltry, due to inflation and to the fact that participants were residents of an upper middle class suburban neighborhood.

with a mail-in version of the same request in generating charitable donations. It was predicted that, if the image-maintenance explanation is correct, the effectiveness of the technique, if it could be shown in the on-the-spot conditions, would be attenuated or possibly even completely undermined in the mail-in conditions. On the other hand, if the technique effectively increased compliance in both on-the-spot *and* mail-in conditions, then image-maintenance could be ruled out as an explanation of the technique. Furthermore, and consistent with previous research, it was predicted that mean amount donated would not differ significantly across the various experimental conditions.

### Method

#### *Subjects*

Participants were 240 suburban community residents of a small southeastern town who were contacted in their homes between the hours of 5:00 and 8:30 p.m. on weeknights. Only those participants who allowed the experimenter to complete his or her request without interruption were included for the purposes of the study.

#### *Procedure*

A pair of experimenters, one male and one female, approached each residence. The first adult to come to the door was addressed by the experimenter who was of the same sex and was randomly assigned to one of the eight experimental conditions. A  $2 \times 4$  factorial design was formed by using both an on-the-spot and a mail-in version of the four request types used by Cialdini and Schroeder (1976, experiment two). The procedures and request types used were identical to those of Cialdini and Schroeder except that the present study represented a local charity rather than the American Cancer Society.

The four request types were as follows. In the *control condition* the experimenter stated, "We're collecting money for the Good Friends Shelter Group, an organization that is planning to open a short-term crisis intervention facility for adolescents next year. We've already received some contributions and I wonder if you would be willing to help by giving a donation." In the *even-a-penny condition* the phrase, "Even a penny will help," was added to the control request. In the *even-a-dollar condition* the phrase, "Even a dollar will help," was added to the control request. This condition was used to test the assumption that legitimizing only minimal requests produces the enhanced compliance rate observed in the

even-a-penny condition. Finally, in the *social legitimization condition*, potential donors were told that some contributions had already been received ranging from a penny on up. This condition was used to legitimize minimal donations without suggesting that the organization was in desperate need of funds.

All participants were given a printed information sheet containing the names of the officers of the organization and detailing the history and purpose of the organization. In the on-the-spot conditions the donations were accepted directly by the experimenters. In the mail-in conditions those who wished to donate were then given an envelope imprinted with the logo and address of the organization and asked to mail their contribution within 2-3 days to help in coordinating fund raising efforts. The addresses on the envelopes were color-coded to indicate the type of request received. These participants were also given a printed form on which their name, address, and amount donated could be entered. The dependent measures were the frequency and size of contributions. For the mail-in conditions only those responses received within one month of the completion of the study were included in the data analyses. The sex and race of participants was also recorded. All funds collected were given to the charity.

### Results

Only one donation was received under the mail-in conditions, so all analyses were conducted only across the on-the-spot conditions. In the mail-in conditions, a \$1 and a \$5 donation were physically handed to the experimenters, in violation of the mail-in request, in each of the control, even-a-dollar, and social legitimization conditions. One \$5 donation was mailed, as requested, in the even-a-penny condition.

There were no sex or race differences in compliance rate with .24 of both males (19/80) and females (38/160) donating. *z*-tests for the differences between proportions (Guilford & Fruchter, 1978) showed that the proportion of those donating in the even-a-penny condition was greater than that in the control condition ( $z = 2.10, p < .02$ , one-tailed), as expected. Likewise, the proportion of those donating in the even-a-penny and social-legitimization conditions combined was greater than that in the control and even-a-dollar conditions combined ( $z = 1.89, p < .03$ , one-tailed). The proportion donating in the even-a-penny condition did not differ from that in the social-legitimization condition ( $z = 1.09, ns$ ). Table 1 shows the proportion donating and the total amount given for each on-the-spot condition and the corresponding values from experiment two of Cialdini and Schroeder (1976).

Table 1

*Proportion of Participants Donating and Total Amount Donated in the On-the-Spot Conditions of the Present Study and in Cialdini and Schroeder (Experiment Two)*

| Condition             | Present Study       |                      | Cialdini & Schroeder |               |
|-----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------------|
|                       | Proportion donating | Total donated        | Proportion donating  | Total donated |
| Control               | .30 (9/30)          | \$29.00 <sup>a</sup> | .32 (10/31)          | \$20.74       |
| Even-a-dollar         | .37 (11/30)         | \$18.00              | .47 (14/30)          | \$19.35       |
| Social legitimization | .43 (13/30)         | \$18.66              | .65 (20/31)          | \$28.61       |
| Even-a-penny          | .57 (17/30)         | \$25.25              | .58 (18/31)          | \$31.30       |

*Note.* The data in columns 3 and 4 are from Cialdini and Schroeder (1976, p. 602). Reprinted by permission.

<sup>a</sup>See footnote 5.

Also as predicted, analysis of amounts donated showed no significant difference across conditions with respect to mean amount donated,  $F(3, 46) = 2.44, ns^5$ . The median and modal contribution for those who donated was \$1 in each public condition, with the exception of a median of \$2 in the control group.

### Discussion

The results for the on-the-spot conditions were very similar to those of Cialdini and Schroeder (1976), as shown in Table 1, and indicate that legitimizing paltry contributions reliably enhances donation rate, even when

<sup>5</sup>The magnitude of this  $F$ -ratio is due partly to an extreme \$10 donation by a man in the control condition. This man was quite empathetic to the goal of the organization, since he had a foster child and had previously worked as a counselor with children. The same analysis, excluding this contribution, resulted in  $F(3, 45) = 1.46, ns$ . The standard deviation for the control condition was 2.86 with, and 1.65 without, the \$10 contribution. The standard deviations of the other conditions were: even-a-penny, 1.11; even-a-dollar, .88; and social legitimization, .46.

used in the service of a less well-known charity. The majority of participants had not, in fact, even heard of the organization that the experimenters represented in the present study. The compliance rate in the social legitimization condition was somewhat smaller than might have been expected, based on Cialdini and Schroeder's results. However, the present finding may have been due to lower credibility of that request since one participant expressed disbelief that a donation of 1¢ had actually been collected.

The results of the analysis of mean amounts donated were also consistent with past research (Brockner et al., 1984; Cialdini & Schroeder, 1976; Reingen, 1978) in that no significant differences were found across conditions. Therefore, as expected, legitimizing a paltry contribution avoided the undesirable consequence of producing a small payoff. The even-a-penny condition did, however, generate a total amount donated (see Table 1 and footnote 5) that was comparable to that in the control group (and greater when the extreme \$10 donation is excluded from the control group), supporting past research (Cialdini & Schroeder, 1976) that has demonstrated the practical advantage of using the technique.

Although the results discussed thus far indicate that the legitimization-of-paltry-contributions technique reliably enhances compliance with on-the-spot requests, the main purpose of the present study was to test the image-maintenance explanation of the technique by comparing on-the-spot and mail-in versions of the technique. Somewhat surprisingly, compliance was dramatically reduced across all mail-in requests to the extent that only one \$5 donation (in the even-a-penny condition) was mailed in.

This finding offers some support for the image-maintenance explanation and suggests that compliance with the requests used in the present study may be produced to some degree by the situational pressures present in the on-the-spot conditions and that when such pressures are removed, as in the mail-in conditions, compliance is reduced. Recall that in the on-the-spot conditions donations were taken directly by the requester, but in the mail-in conditions the requester did not know if the participant would eventually donate. This finding is consistent with the results of Jackson and Latane (1981), who proposed that compliance with door-to-door requests for charity donations was due to externally imposed social pressure and not altruism. The manipulations used in the present study, however, were apparently not sensitive enough to assess whether image-maintenance concerns are more salient for the even-a-penny request than for other requests. The present results instead intimate the possibility of an image-maintenance component in each of the four request types used.

The results of the present study have implications for both door-to-door solicitation of funds and for future research. For those who are interested in maximizing the effectiveness of requests for donations, legitimizing paltry contributions appears to produce a fairly good payoff because of the relatively high compliance rate obtained with the technique. Research to date, however, indicates that solicitors should capitalize on the situational pressures present in direct, on-the-spot requests.

Future research concerning the legitimization of paltry contributions should further examine the generalization of the technique across different request modes. With mail-in requests the use of procedures that induce commitment (cf. Kiesler, 1971), such as recording potential donors' names or getting their signatures on pledges, may be able to enhance compliance rates. The fact that Brockner et al. (1984) recorded the names of pledgers could have induced commitment and may explain in part why 12 donations were finally mailed in in their study. Names were not recorded in the present study, and therefore it is possible that donors in the mail-in conditions may not have felt committed and therefore, except for one person, did not donate.

Finally, future research should attempt to clarify the mediator of the effectiveness of legitimizing paltry contributions by designing manipulations that can assess whether image-maintenance concerns have differential impact on the effectiveness of various request types. To test more adequately the image-maintenance explanation of the legitimization technique, a direct, face-to-face condition should be compared with a condition in which both initial intention to donate (observable by requester) and actual subsequent donation (not directly observable by requester) are measured. The basic effect for actual donations must be observed in the face-to-face condition. Then, in the other condition, if the effect is obtained for measures of both intention and actual donation, the image-maintenance explanation can be more effectively ruled out. If, instead, the effect can be observed only for the intention measure in the latter condition, the image-maintenance explanation will be supported. Of course, even if the image-maintenance explanation is supported, it would not necessarily preclude the possibility that both image-maintenance concerns *and* the making of excuses inapplicable simultaneously mediate the effectiveness of the technique.

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