

Organizational Fundraising: Further Evidence on the Effect of Legitimizing Small Donations

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Prior research has shown that by legitimizing paltry donations in face-to-face contact with prospective donors, fundraisers may increase the amount of money allocated to highly visible charitable organizations. The present study suggests that this "legitimization effect" also occurs when donors are requested to allocate funds to a relatively less well-known organization, through telephone as well as face-to-face contact.

Organizational fundraisers have long been concerned with identifying techniques which render prospective donors more likely to comply with requests for donations. The social psychological literature on compliance has delineated several possible strategies. For example, the "foot-in-the-door" technique has received much research attention (see DeJong 1979 for a review) since Freedman and Fraser's (1966) initial demonstration of its efficacy.

Another compliance-increasing ploy is one which legitimizes, but does not specifically request, small donations (Cialdini and Schroeder 1976). The rationale underlying this technique is that donors typically will not make large contributions (for economic reasons), and will not make small contributions (because paltry contributions are perceived as inappropriate). Thus, potential donors may make no contribution at all. Cialdini and Schroeder reasoned that if paltry contributions were made to seem legitimate, then subjects could no longer fail to donate on "perceived illegitimacy" grounds. Moreover, once deciding to donate, individuals may make contributions larger than the trivial, legitimized amount, perhaps in order to look good in their own and/or others' eyes.

More specifically, Cialdini and Schroeder (1976) asked subjects to make donations to the American Cancer Society. In the condition in which paltry donations were legitimized, the experimenter said at the end of the standard request, "even a penny will help." The rate of compliance was

much greater in this "even-a-penny" condition than in the control condition. In addition, the mean donation did not differ between conditions. Reingen (1978) also found that the even-a-penny technique increased the rate of compliance with requests for funds to the Heart Association.

The present study was designed to explore further the effect on compliance of legitimizing, without specifically requesting, small donations. First, we wished to study the consequences of legitimizing different (levels of) small requests. What if solicitors said at the end of their requests, "even a dollar will help"? In a second study, Cialdini and Schroeder (1976) did include such a condition and found that it produced a rate of compliance in between those obtained in the even-a-penny and control conditions, though not significantly different from either. It seems plausible, however, that in the years since the Cialdini and Schroeder data were collected in 1975, economic inflation would cause the even-a-dollar request to be seen as more paltry, and consequently yield greater compliance than that observed in a control condition.

Second, what are the limits to the size of paltry requests? What if subjects were told, "even five dollars will help"? To answer these questions, three requests were utilized in the present study (control, \$1, and \$5).

Third, does the mode of request affect rate of compliance? Cialdini and Schroeder's (1976) experimenters made requests at subjects' doorsteps (i.e., in a face-to-face contact). However, many organizational fundraising campaigns are conducted through telephone contact. Thus, it would seem important to determine whether the legitimization-of-small-requests effect generalizes to telephone interaction contexts. Accordingly, half of the subjects in this study received the requests for funds in a face-to-face encounter and half received it over the phone.

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Subjects were randomly assigned to one of six conditions in this 3×2 (type of request \times mode of request) factorial design. The primary dependent variables were frequency and mean level of donations. It was predicted that subjects would comply with greater frequency in the \$1 than in the control condition. Moreover, greater frequency of compliance was expected in the face-to-face than in the phone condition, based on the results of previous research in which the effect of this variable was studied (e.g., Werner 1978).

In addition, several exploratory hypotheses were tested:

1. The \$1 condition would produce greater frequency of compliance than the control condition in both the face-to-face and phone conditions.
2. The \$5 request would produce greater frequency of compliance than the control request, but perhaps not as much as that observed in the \$1 condition. This speculation was based on the assumption that a \$5 donation would still be perceived as paltry, but less paltry than a \$1 donation.
3. In accordance with the results of Cialdini and Schroeder (1976) and Reingen (1978), the mean magnitude of each donation was not expected to differ between experimental conditions.

METHOD

Participants

Subjects were arbitrarily chosen from the Lexington, Massachusetts phone book (i.e., every tenth name in the book was selected), and then randomly assigned to an experimental condition. A total of 146 subjects were contacted. However, 56 participants informed the experimenter before she was able to administer the type of request manipulation that they were not interested in making a donation. Put differently, we continued to contact subjects until 15 individuals in each of the six conditions listened to the request long enough to experience the type of request manipulation. The data of these 90 subjects were then analyzed. Subject attrition rate did not differ by condition, $\chi^2(5) < 1$.

Procedure

All subjects were contacted at home, either at their front door or over the phone, by a female experimenter. The experimenter asked to speak to the person whose name had been chosen from the phone book (or to that individual's spouse). In all conditions the experimenter introduced herself as a college student who was collecting money on behalf of the National Reye's Syndrome Foundation. They were given a brief description of Reye's Syndrome (a fatal childhood disease), as well as of the Foundation's activities. In all conditions subjects were asked if they wished to pledge a contribution. In the \$1 condition the experimenter then said, "even a dollar will help." In the \$5 condition she said, "even five dollars will help." No such addendum appeared in the control condition.

The experimenter recorded the amount that subjects pledged to donate (if any). Those agreeing to pledge were told that they would receive a pledge card in the mail. They were instructed to sign the pledge card and return it to the specified address along with the amount that they had pledged. Pledge cards were mailed to subjects within one day after they had been contacted.

Follow-up

One month after subjects had been mailed pledge cards, the experimenters contacted the Reye's Syndrome Foundation to determine whether those individuals agreeing to make pledges had, in fact, donated money. The amount actually donated was also made available by the Foundation.

RESULTS

Pledge Data

Frequency of Compliance. The proportion of subjects agreeing to make a pledge was computed in each of the six experimental conditions. An arcsin transformation (Winer 1971) was then performed on these proportions, and a two-factor analysis of variance was conducted. As predicted, the frequency of compliance was greater in the face-to-face than in the phone contact condition (untransformed percentages = 62 vs. 36 percent, respectively; $F(1, \infty) = 8.16, p < 0.01$). The type of request main effect was also significant, $F(2, \infty) = 5.97, p < 0.01$. Specifically, the compliance rate was greater in the \$1 and \$5 conditions than in the control condition (untransformed percentages = 63, 57, and 27 percent, respectively). The Tukey multiple comparison test revealed that the rate of compliance was significantly lower in the control than in the \$1 ($p < 0.01$) and \$5 ($p < 0.05$) conditions, and that the latter two groups did not differ. The type of request \times mode of request interaction was not significant, $F < 1$.¹

Amount Pledged. For those subjects making pledges only, we computed the mean size of pledge within condition. Consistent with the findings of Cialdini and Schroeder (1976) and Reingen (1978), no significant differences emerged. Those in the face-to-face condition pledged \$4.39 on the average, whereas those in the phone condition pledged an average of \$4.56, $F < 1$. The mean amounts pledged in the control, \$1, and \$5 conditions were \$3.75, \$3.68, and \$5.59, respectively, $F(2, 41) = 1.69, p > 0.15$.

¹An alternative statistical analysis was also performed. Specifically, subjects who did not agree to make a pledge and those who did were assigned scores of 0 and 1, respectively. A two-factor analysis of variance on these dichotomous data was then conducted (Winer 1971). The results were identical to those found in the analysis of the transformed data, although the levels of statistical significance were slightly lower. Both main effects attained significance, whereas the interaction effect did not. The frequency of compliance was greater in the face-to-face than in the phone contact condition, $F(1, 84) = 7.31, p < 0.01$. In addition, the compliance rate was greater in the \$1 and \$5 conditions than in the control condition, $F(2, 84) = 5.21, p < 0.01$.

Actual Donation Data

Somewhat disappointingly, only 12 out of the 44 pledgers had made donations within one month after the pledge cards were mailed to them. The proportion of subjects who actually made donations was calculated in relation to the total number of people who were initially contacted in each condition ($N = 15$). Once again, an arcsin transformation was performed before the data were analyzed. The mode of request main effect was no longer significant, $F < 1$. Seven subjects in the face-to-face condition and five in the phone condition actually made donations. However, there were still condition differences associated with the type of request variable. Only one subject in the control condition donated, while five in the \$1 and six in the \$5 conditions did so, $F(2, \infty) = 2.75$, $p < 0.07$. Moreover, a planned orthogonal contrast, based upon the pledge data, pitted the control condition against the \$1 and \$5 conditions, taken together. As expected, a significant effect emerged, $F(1, \infty) = 5.40$, $p < 0.025$.²

The mean amounts donated did not differ by experimental condition (all p values > 0.10). In all, a total of \$68 was collected by the charitable organization. More than twice as much money was sent by those in the face-to-face condition (\$46) compared to the phone condition (\$22). The figures in the \$1, \$5, and control conditions were \$42, \$24, and \$2, respectively, yielding a (dramatic) ratio of 21:12:1 in the amount of money actually raised in the three conditions. Interestingly, two subjects—both in the \$1, face-to-face condition—actually donated more money than they had pledged. One pledged one dollar, but sent in five dollars, whereas the other pledged one dollar but sent in \$25 dollars! The remaining donors sent the exact amount pledged.

DISCUSSION

The pledge data provided additional evidence that organizational fundraising efforts may be enhanced when the requester legitimizes, but does not specifically ask for, small donations. The \$1 and \$5 conditions yielded significantly greater frequencies of compliance than that obtained in the control condition. Furthermore, the mean amount pledged did not differ between conditions. The actual donation data, while disappointing overall (only 27 percent of the pledgers actually donated money), still showed that the frequency of compliance was greater in the \$1 and \$5 conditions than in the control condition. Finally, from the organization's perspective, the bottom line was that more than 20 (10) times as much money was raised in the \$1 (\$5) condition than in the control condition. The condition differences that did emerge have considerable internal validity, in that subjects were randomly assigned to experimental condition.

This set of findings raises a number of theoretical and

practical issues. On the theoretical front, the pledge data revealed that the efficacy of legitimizing small donations has considerable generality. Relative to the studies performed by Cialdini and Schroeder (1976) and Reingen (1978), the effect has now been extended to a new population, to a different charitable organization, and to two modes of contact (face-to-face and phone). The last two points are worthy of further mention. Cialdini and Schroeder (1976) collected money on behalf of the American Cancer Society, while Reingen (1978) did so for the Heart Association. Both of these organizations are far more visible than the Reye's Syndrome Foundation. Thus, the consistency in results is all the more impressive. Second, many charitable organizations use primarily phone rather than face-to-face contact with which to solicit funds. Unfortunately, phone contacts are normally quite ineffective in gaining compliance. The present findings suggest that phone contacts may meet with greater success to the extent that the fundraiser legitimizes, but does not specifically request, small donations.

The frequency of compliance was enhanced in both the \$1 and \$5 conditions, relative to the control. Cialdini and Schroeder (1976) also included a \$1 condition, but found no significant increase in frequency of compliance. In accounting for the apparent discrepancy between the results obtained in the \$1 condition in the two studies, we speculate that the present subjects perceived \$1 as more paltry than did those in the earlier experiment. In support of this conjecture, it should be mentioned that:

1. The eight years of economic inflation between studies probably eroded the perceived value of one dollar.
2. The present study was conducted in an upper-middle-class suburban neighborhood, in which \$1 (and apparently \$5) were viewed as minimal requests.

At the practical level, the results have straightforward implications. Charitable organizations obviously are quite dependent on private donations for their survival. The legitimization of paltry donations may prove to be an effective means of enhancing fundraising efforts. Also, several practical issues for future research are suggested by the present findings. For instance, it would be important to delineate those compliance techniques that yield both the greatest frequency and the greatest magnitude of donations. The present findings, as well as those of Cialdini and Schroeder (1976) and Reingen (1978), suggest that the legitimization of small donations increases frequency of compliance, with no effect on magnitude. Finally, future investigators should identify the factors that affect pledgers' willingness to make actual donations. That is, under what conditions will pledgers make good on their verbally stated intention to donate money? The commitment (e.g., Salancik 1977) and attitude-behavior (e.g., Ajzen and Fishbein 1980) literatures may provide some useful leads in this fundamentally important matter.

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²Identical conclusions were reached from the analysis of variance of dichotomous (rather than transformed) data.

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