

Don't Throw in the Towel: Use Social Influence Research

April 24, 2005

Commercial decision-makers commonly base important program or policy choices on thinking grounded in the established theories and practices of a variety of business-related fields (e.g., economics, finance, distribution, accounting, supply management). What is vexing is how seldom these decision-makers avail themselves of established psychological theories and practices.

Take, for example, hotels. Via a card strategically placed in their room, guests in many hotels are urged to reuse their towels to help conserve environmental resources. According to the Project Planet Corporation, which supplies such cards to hoteliers, most guests will recycle at least one towel sometime during their stay, provided that they are asked to do so. For a social influence researcher like me, of course, the question becomes: “What wording of the request card will most effectively spur the desired behavior?” Because hotel managers typically don’t know and don’t consult the psychological literature on social influence, my guess is that their message choices are less than optimal and, consequently, are costing them plenty in replacement of (rather than reuse of) towels.

To make this point, my graduate students Noah Goldstein and Vladas Griskevicius and I have been registering what the request cards typically say in a wide variety of hotels. Although there is some variation, the cards most frequently try to increase recycling by focusing guests on: 1) *environmental protection* and 2) *environmental cooperation*. That is, guests are almost invariably informed that reusing their towels will conserve energy and help save the environment. In addition, they typically are told that towel reuse will allow them to become cooperating partners with the hotel in furthering its conservation efforts; to encourage such cooperation, guests may be told that the hotel will donate some of the savings from its towel-reuse program to environmental causes. This is expected to increase recycling above the simple environmental-protection appeal.

Notable in its absence from these persuasive appeals is a focus on *descriptive social norms* — that is, what most other people are doing in this situation (Goldstein & Cialdini, in press; Schultz, 1999). Compared to the existing types of communications, we wondered what would be the effect of simply informing guests that the majority of their counterparts *do* reuse their towels when requested. To examine that question, we enlisted the aid of the management of the Holiday Inn of Tempe, Arizona, where we randomly placed cards with conceptually different recycling appeals in its 190 rooms. The room attendants were trained to record the relevant reuse data. The cards were identical in two respects. First, on the front, they informed guests that they could participate in the program by placing their used towels on the bathroom towel rack or curtain rod. Second, on the back, the cards provided information regarding the amount of energy that could be saved if most guests participated in the program.

The cards differed, however, in the persuasive appeals designed to stimulate recycling. One focused guests on environmental protection. It stated:

HELP SAVE THE ENVIRONMENT.

You can show your respect for nature and help save the environment by reusing your towels during your stay.

A second type of card focused guests on environmental cooperation. It stated:

PARTNER WITH US TO HELP SAVE THE ENVIRONMENT

In exchange for your participation in this program, we at the hotel will donate a percentage of the energy savings to a nonprofit environmental protection organization. The environment deserves our combined efforts. You can join us by reusing your towels during your stay.

A third type of card focused guests on the descriptive norms of the situation. It stated:

JOIN YOUR FELLOW GUESTS IN HELPING TO SAVE THE ENVIRONMENT

Almost 75% of guests who are asked to participate in our new resource savings program do help by using their towels more than once. You can join your fellow guests to help save the environment by reusing your towels during your stay.

Before presenting the outcomes of this study, I'll need to describe certain aspects of the data that will help in their interpretation. First, we only looked at the data from single guests, as it was only single-occupancy rooms that allowed us to assure that the person reading the card was the person making the reuse decision. Second, we only examined the data from the first night's stay, as all subsequent data would be subject to statistical dependencies. Finally, we did not count as a reuse effort a towel that was hung on a door hook or doorknob, as we wanted to eliminate the likelihood of guests complying unintentionally with the request. For each of these reasons, we believe the overall percentage of reuse was artificially depressed. Nonetheless, there were interesting differences among the varying communications.

The environmental-protection message produced a reuse rate of about 38 percent. The environmental-cooperation message fared no better, stimulating reuse only 36 percent of the time. But, the descriptive-norms message was significantly more effective than either of the others, generating recycling activity about 48 percent of the time.

Two aspects of these data are worth noting. First, the most successful of the communications was the one that we have never seen among the wide range of such messages that we have registered. This simple-but-effective appeal didn't emerge from a history of trial and error to become a hotel "best practice." Instead, it emerged from knowledge of the psychological literature on social influence.

Second, in the environmental-cooperation condition, the hotel's pledge to donate to an environmental cause if guests reused their towels didn't increase recycling at all. Why not? Perhaps the guests didn't trust the hotel's promise. Or perhaps they didn't trust the hotel to choose an environmental cause for them. But when we conducted this study, we thought the reason for a poor showing of the cooperation condition might be due to something else: There is no sense of social obligation to cooperate with someone who offers you something, provided that you perform a favor first. However, there is a

powerful sense of social obligation — embodied in the norm for reciprocation — to cooperate with someone who does something for you first and then asks for a favor in return (Cialdini, 2001). That is, members of all human societies are trained from childhood to reciprocate the favors they receive from others (Gouldner, 1960). We have very nasty names for those who don't play by this rule: We call them moochers, or takers, or ingrates. Or teenagers. And, no one wants to be labeled in those ways. Consequently, people will go to great lengths to reciprocate a benefactor.

Therefore, we thought that the cooperation message got the concept (of cooperation) right but got the sequence wrong. According to a social psychological analysis, the better way to induce the desired response would be for the hotel to give the donation first and then ask guests to cooperate in this effort by conserving resources.

To test our thinking, we included a fourth type of message in our design, a *reciprocation* appeal. It read as follows:

WE'RE DOING OUR PART FOR THE ENVIRONMENT. CAN WE COUNT ON YOU?

Because we are committed to preserving the environment, we have made a financial contribution to a nonprofit environmental protection organization on behalf of the hotel and its guests. If you would like to help us in recovering the expense, while conserving natural resources, please reuse your towels during your stay.

The result was an almost 47 percent success rate, significantly greater than the cooperation condition. Once again, we see that a relatively minor change, informed by social psychological theory, can serve as a corrective to the existing practices of otherwise astute businesspeople who would never leave themselves comparably uninformed in other arenas of business practice.

References

1. Cialdini, R. B. (2001). *Influence: Science and practice* (4th ed.) Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
2. Goldstein, N. J., & Cialdini, R. B. (in press). Using social norms as a lever of social influence. In Pratkanis, A. R. (Ed.), *Science of social influence*. New York: Psychology Press.
3. Gouldner, A. W. (1960). The norm of reciprocity: a preliminary statement.
4. *American Sociological Review*, 25, 161-178.
5. Schultz, P. W. (1999). Changing behavior with normative feedback interventions: A field experiment on curbside recycling. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 21, 25-38.