

The Law of Obligation and Marketing

A film developing company thrived on the Law of Obligation. They would send a roll of film in the mail along with a letter explaining that the film was a free gift. The letter then outlined how the recipient should send the film in to their company to be processed. Even though there were a number of stores that could process the film at a far lower price, most ended up sending in it to the original company anyway. The technique worked because their “pre-giving” incurred a sense of obligation to repay the favor. We often see this method at work when companies give out complimentary calendars, business pens, T-shirts, mugs, etc.

The same principle applies when you go to the grocery store and you see all those alluring sample tables. It is hard to go to the supermarket, see the free samples, take one, and then walk away without at least pretending to be interested in the product. Some individuals, as a means of assuaging their indebtedness, have learned to take the sample and walk off without making eye contact. Some have taken so many samples, they aren't even phased by the guilt anymore. They seem to no longer feel an obligation to buy or even pretend they're interested in the products anymore. Still, the technique works, so much so that it has been expanded to furniture and audio/video stores. On Saturdays, such establishments offer free pizza, hot dogs, and soft drinks to get you in the store and create instant obligation.

Pre-giving is effective because it makes us feel like we have to return the favor. Greenburg said this feeling of discomfort is created because the favor threatens our independence. The more indebted we feel, the more motivated we are to eliminate the debt. An interesting report from the Disabled American Veterans Organization revealed that their usual 18% donation response rate nearly *doubled* when the mailing included a small, free gift!

In a local suit store, the salesmen are trained to ask customers if they want to have their suit jackets pressed at no charge while they are shopping. Of course, hardly anyone ever refuses. While they wait on their jackets, they naturally have to spend more time in the store, whereby they occupy themselves by checking out all the merchandise. While the nice salesman presses their jackets, the customers feel more indebted to buy! Moreover, when they do decide to buy something, they are more likely to buy it from the salesman who presses their jacket.

Another study found that survey takers could increase physician response to a long questionnaire if they paid the physicians first. When a \$20 check was sent along with the questionnaire, 78% of the physicians filled it out and sent it back. When the \$20 check was promised to arrive after the questionnaire was completed and sent in, only 66% followed through. The pre-giving incentive increased the sense of obligation. Another extremely interesting result stemming from the study was this: Of the physicians who received the \$20 check upfront but did *not* fill out the questionnaire, only 26% cashed the check. Of the physicians receiving the \$20 check who *did* fill out the questionnaire, 95% cashed the check! This demonstrates that the Law of Obligation works conversely, as well. The fact that many of the physicians who did not fill out the questionnaire also did

not cash their checks may be interpreted as a sign of their psychological and emotional discomfort at accepting a favor that they were not going to return. If they cashed the checks, they would have to cope with their indebtedness by complying and filling out the questionnaire. Rather than take on that uncomfortable sense of obligation or indebtedness, it was easier to sacrifice the benefit of gaining \$20 altogether.

Another common example of our indebtedness is how we feel obligated to tip when we eat out just because someone brought our food and kept our glass full. We tip our hairdressers, cab drivers, the skycaps who get our luggage on the plane... Why do we do that? In a large sense, it is our psychological and emotional need to reciprocate. The act of tipping, however, may also be labeled "conformity," since doing otherwise in our culture would be considered rude or inconsiderate.

The Law of Obligation also presents itself in the following situations:

- Taking a potential client out to dinner or to a golf game
- Offering free tire rotation or fluid fill up between services
- Paying unwanted car window washers who performed the task at the stoplight whether you want them to or not
- Free car washes that generate more money by asking for a donation after the service is rendered
- Carpet cleaners offering to go ahead and clean your couch for free