

Getting Your Foot in the Door (FITD)

One aspect of the law of dissonance is the urge to remain consistent with our commitments. Even if someone begins with a small request then follows it up with a larger request, we still tend to remain consistent in our behavior and answers. This technique of capitalizing on such a principle has been called by several names, including “foot-in-the-door,” FITD, self-perception theory, or the “Sequential Request.” Basically, it is a means of using a person’s self-perception to motivate him or her to partake of the desired action. When an individual complies a first time, they perceive themselves to be helpful. If they are asked to comply a second time in an even greater way, they are likely to consent. In an effort to maintain consistency with the first impression and with their own self-perception, they agree to give even more of themselves.

The key in FITD is to get the person to initially grant a small request. For example, if you were to ask someone, “Can I have just thirty seconds of your time?” most individuals would respond affirmatively. According to self-perception theory, the person would observe his own behavior and, in regard to this interaction, consider himself to be a helpful person. The second step in the FITD principle is making another, more involved request. “Can I try this on the stain on your carpet?” The person feels he should consent to the second request because he is “that kind of person.” He has already seen himself do other behaviors in support of the product or service, so he willingly complies with the second request.

A 1966 study by psychologists Jonathan Freedman and Scott Fraser highlights just how effective FITD is. In their study, a researcher acting as a volunteer canvassed a California neighborhood, asking residents if they would allow a large billboard reading, “Drive Carefully” to be displayed on their front lawns. So they’d have an idea of what it would look like, the volunteer showed his recruits a picture of the large sign obstructing the view of a beautiful house.

Naturally, most people refused, but in one particular group, an incredible 76% actually consented. The reason for their compliance was this: Two weeks prior, these residents had been approached by another volunteer and asked to make a small commitment to display a three-inch-square sign that read “Be a Safe Driver” in their windows. Since it was such a small and simple request, nearly all of them agreed. The astounding results were that the initial small commitment profoundly influenced their willingness to comply with the much larger request two weeks later!

Another study involved testing to see if introductory psychology students would rise early to take part in a 7:00 a.m. study session on thinking processes. For one group, the students were called and told upfront that the session would begin promptly at 7:00 a.m. Of these students, only 24% agreed to participate. For the second group, the students were first told what the study was and that their participation was desired. The 7:00 a.m. time was not mentioned until after 56 % of them consented to take part. When the opportunity to change their minds was presented to them, however, none of them took advantage of it. Ninety-five percent of students actually followed through and showed up for the 7:00 a.m. session.

In another case, social psychologist Steven J. Sherman wanted to see if he could increase the number of people who would be willing to collect door-to-door donations for the American Cancer Society. He called a sample of residents and simply asked them what their response would be if they were asked to volunteer three hours of their time to collect charitable donations for the American Cancer Society. Not wanting to seem uncharitable, many responded that they would indeed volunteer. The final outcome? When a representative of the American Cancer Society actually called and asked for volunteers, there was a 700 % increase of individuals agreeing to participate.

Using FITD Effectively

When utilizing this technique, you must first determine exactly what end result you are seeking. This will be the big commitment you ask for. You will then create several small and simple requests that are related to your ultimate request, making sure they can be easily satisfied. As the examples above demonstrate, taking these measures will greatly increase the likelihood that your ultimate request will be granted.

Here are some more key points to remember in using FITD:

1. **The first request:** The first request needs to be “of sufficient size for the foot in the door technique to work,” but, on the other hand, it cannot be so big that it seems inappropriate and/or is not easily and readily accomplished. Basically, you want to present the largest possible request that will still realistically be accepted.

2. **Your prospect’s viewpoint:** The FITD tactic is not effective if your prospect senses that you are acting in your own self-interests instead of in his or society’s. What is in it for you? Why are you requesting this from him/her?

3. **External incentives:** The FITD technique loses impact if your prospect is offered external incentives for agreeing to your first request. Researchers typically use self-perception theory to explain this phenomenon. For example, if you are given a gift for listening to a sales person, you will not consciously or subconsciously perceive yourself to be one who is willing to readily listen and agree to the salesperson’s offer. Instead, you agree to listen only for the incentive being offered to you.

4. **The source of the request:** Having the FITD technique be employed by different people for the initial and subsequent requests can be an effective strategy. This way, the same person isn’t required to make both the initial and the follow-up requests and your prospects won’t feel like they are being taken advantage of.