

How to Get Anyone to Do a Favor for You

Obligation has been used as a persuasive technique since the beginning of time. Door-to-door salesmen offer free brushes, free encyclopedias, even free estimates in the hopes of securing a sale. People throw parties in their homes giving away free Tupperware, refreshments, or other MLM products. We all know how hard it is to attend a friend's party, eat their food, take their free gift, and then go home without buying a thing. So, what do we do? We order the cheapest item in the catalog to get rid of the obligation or indebtedness we feel to the host.

During the Great War, special soldiers were often given assignment to turn sorties into enemy territory. They were then instructed to capture and question enemy soldiers. A particularly skilled German soldier was solicited to fulfill another such mission. As he had on numerous other occasions, he negotiated the area between fronts and caught a soldier off guard, eating some lunch alone in his trench. Unaware of what had just happened, the startled soldier was easily captured. Not knowing what else to do, the soldier tore off a piece of bread and gave it to his captor. The German expert was so surprised by the friendly gesture that he couldn't follow through with his assignment. Turning away from the soldier, he headed back into neutral territory and on to face the wrath of his superiors.

Maybe this has happened to you. You are attempting to buy a car and are playing hardball with the sales rep. You've negotiated back and forth and are getting nowhere. You are ready to walk away, when he says, he will talk to his manager one last time. As he gets up, he says, "You know, I'm thirsty, so I'm going to get myself a soda. Would you like one?" "Sure!" you say, oblivious to his tactic. He comes back with the soda and a better deal from his manager. It's not the deal you wanted, but you feel it's the best you're going to get. So, you accept it. As you think about it later, it dawns on you that you bought the car because of a subconscious trigger. The moral of the story is to never take a drink from the car sales rep before you've settled on a price. That drink serves as

an obligation trigger. You feel indebted to the car dealer because of this small courtesy, and he knows it. He created the obligation with a fifty-cent can of soda. You return the favor and get out of his debt by buying a \$20,000 car.

Definition of The Law of Obligation

The Law of Obligation, also known as “reciprocity,” states that when others do something for us, we feel a strong need, even a push, to return the favor. Returning the favor rids us of the obligation created by the first good deed. In all cultures, the adage “one good turn deserves another” seems to universally be a part of social conditioning. And, even beyond that, the maxim serves as an ethical code that does not necessarily need to be taught but nevertheless is *understood*. For example, when someone smiles or gives a compliment, we feel a great need to return the smile or compliment. Even when these gestures are unsolicited, we feel a sense of urgency to repay the person who has created the mental or psychological debt. In some cases, our need to repay this debt is so overwhelming that we end up dramatically exceeding the original favor. The obligation trigger created by the car salesman’s soda offer is a classic example of this principle: The need to reciprocate resulted in a very lopsided and unfair exchange.

People often conscientiously trigger feelings of indebtedness and obligation in others by carrying out an uninvited favor. Even if we don’t want or ask for the gift, invitation, or compliment, we still feel the need to return the favor when we receive it. Merely being indebted, even in the slightest sense of the word, can create enough psychological discomfort (and sometimes even public embarrassment) that we go to extraordinary lengths to remove the burdensome obligation we feel. This is when we often disproportionately reward the original giver.

When my family moved to a new area, we gave a small Christmas gift to all our neighbors. I don’t think the gifts cost more than \$5.00 each. We were new on the block and wanted to get to know our neighbors. About thirty minutes after hand-delivering the

gifts to our new neighbors, the doorbell rang. There stood one of the neighbors with a large box of truffles in one hand. I emphasize *large* – this box had to have been holding at least \$50 worth of chocolates. She said, “Welcome to the neighborhood and Happy Holidays,” and with that she was off and on her way. She couldn’t cope with the sudden debt she felt toward my family so, to rid herself of her feelings of obligation, she gave back ten times more than she’d originally received. This is why many people buy extra holiday presents to have on hand just in case someone delivers a gift they did not count on.

The Law of Obligation also applies when there are favors we wish we could ask, but we know we are not in a position to repay them or perhaps even ask for them in the first place. The psychological and emotional burden created by such circumstances is often great enough that we would rather lose the benefits of the favor by not asking for it at all than experience the embarrassment and likely rejection that might come from asking. For example, it is a common complaint among women receiving expensive gifts and favors from men that, although they are flattered by and like getting the gifts, they feel an uncomfortable sense of obligation to repay their suitors. Furthermore, these same women expressed frustration at the perception held by these men that, because of their favors, the women would or should be more sexually accessible. Studies have shown that the converse is also true: When individuals break the reciprocity rule by showering favors on someone without giving them a chance to repay, there is an equal amount of discomfort.

The drive to alleviate feelings of obligation is so powerful that it can make us bend toward people we don’t even know. One university professor chose names at random then sent these complete strangers his Christmas cards. Holiday cards addressed to him came pouring back, all from people who did not know him and, for that matter, who had never even heard of him.