

Door in the Face

“Door in the Face” is one of the most common techniques for implementing the Law of Contrast. Basically, an initially large and almost unreasonable request is made. Likely to be declined, a second smaller and more reasonable request is made. People accept the second request more readily than if they’d just been asked outright because the relativity between the two requests makes the second one seem so much better. The technique is effective because social standards state each concession must be exchanged with another concession. When you allow a rejection, it is considered a concession. The person you are persuading will then feel obligated to agree with your smaller request.

Demonstrating this point, researchers first asked college students to donate blood every two months for three consecutive years. Requiring a long-term commitment of not only time, but also of physical and emotional responsibility, the request was overwhelmingly turned down. The very next day, the same students were asked to donate blood just one time, the following day. Forty-nine percent agreed. The control group, wherein students were only approached with the second request, only demonstrated a 31% compliance rate.

The study continued the next day. As students showed up to donate blood, they were asked if they would provide their phone numbers so they could be called to see if they’d donate again later on. Of the first group (those who’d been given both requests), 84% consented to giving their phone numbers. Of the students in the control group, only 43% agreed to give their phone numbers.

The main reason the Door in the Face technique is so effective is because the contrast between the two requests makes your prospects feel like they are getting more/or less than they would have if they’d gone with the original offering. They feel like they’ve made a fair compromise, while you get exactly what you wanted in the first place. Author Alan Schoonmaker made an especially interesting point:

“A conservative first offer also creates the bargaining room needed for the mutual concession ritual (you give a little; they give a little; you give a little; and so on). You may regard this ritual as silly, but many people insist on it. If you do not perform it, they may feel you are not negotiating in good faith...It is far better for them to feel that they

have defeated you, that they have driven you right to the wall. Lay the foundation for their victory with an initial offer that creates lots of bargaining room.”

By way of example, pretend your local scout troop is canvassing door to door to ask for donations to the scouting program. They ask you to donate \$200, saying that all the other neighbors have donated this amount. After some discussion, you give them a \$50 donation – and you feel lucky that you got away with giving less than your neighbors.

In these examples, the second request seems much more logical and reasonable in comparison to the outrageous first request. We are creating a perceptual contrast whereby we are defining what we think the standard of comparison should be. When the second request comes along, it seems much smaller than the first request, and in our case, much smaller than the request would seem when presented alone.

In my university class, students learning about the Law of Contrast were asked to write letters to their parents requesting money. They were instructed to create a scenario so the request seemed inconsequential.

Dear Mom and Dad,

I hope this letter finds you both well and happy. I wish I could say that is how I feel. I know you love me, but it is hard to come to you in such an embarrassing situation. Now, I don't want you to worry too much. I can see Mom now, already skimming through this letter to find out exactly what is wrong, so I guess I'll cut right to the chase. I'm really worn out, but I'm getting better. At least I have a place to stay, especially

during this cold winter weather. The last couple of weeks I have been sleeping on the streets, looking for food and shelter. I finally met this nice man who is letting me stay in his room for free. It sure is nice to have a roof over my head. Sometimes I still get wet at night though, because there's a crack in the wall on my side of the bed. But with five of us sharing the room, we've got some body heat going and that helps out. We hope that between the five of us, we can make rent this month. They sure have been nice letting me stay here, and letting me keep out of sight. It seems there is some type of warrant out for me and I am unfortunately "on the run," as they say. I'm afraid I can't tell you exactly where I am; I don't want to endanger you with too much information in case the authorities come to question you. As you may guess, I am in desperate need of a large sum of funding so that I can settle my accounts before another, more ruthless party begins to hunt me down. I was hoping for, but not counting on, your assistance. I know I have done wrong, but I plead for your forgiveness and prayers.

Just kidding! I wanted you to see my problems in the proper perspective. I crashed my car last weekend. No one was hurt. I did have \$300 in damage to my car though. I was wondering if you could send me the money so I could get back on my feet.

I love you forever,
Jill

In the negotiation process, the Door in the Face can be a powerful tool. Watch a skilled property developer. He may look for quality properties that have been on the market for some months, often because of the seller's high asking price of \$500,000. To drive down the seller's expectation, the property developer employs an agent who, acting anonymously, displays great enthusiasm for the property and then makes a very low aggressive offer – say \$350,000 – which the seller angrily rejects. The real developer then moves in and offers a much more reasonable price – say \$430,000 –

which, after some negotiating, is accepted. Labor negotiators frequently deploy this tool as well. They begin with extreme demands that they expect to be turned down.

Abruptly, they repeat a series of smaller demands, or concessions, which will then be more easily accepted. These smaller demands are the real target of the labor group.

The Door in the Face technique can also save you from lots of headache and hassle. You can get people to go from hating you to thanking you for the same exact thing. For example, when I assign my college students a ten-page final paper, it makes the students tense and vocal. They complain about time, length, font size, etc., etc. You name it; they'll bring it up. I was getting tired of the complaining, so I changed the way I approach the subject of the paper. I use this principle: I bring up the paper and wait for the moans, but then I tell them this twenty-page paper will have to include the following.... The uproar starts: "Twenty pages! I won't have time for that!" I then graciously acquiesce and tell them if they promise to do a great, concise paper with the proper research, I will make it only ten pages. The cheers erupt and everyone is happy. The students see the ten-page paper as a great deal compared to the twenty-page paper. Now the students thank me rather than hate me.

Many times, we can fly under the radar with the contrast principle. There is a theory called the "Just Noticeable Difference" (JND) that states the minimum amount of difference in the intensity of the stimulus that can be detected. What does this mean? How much can you raise the price of a product without anyone noticing? How many ounces can you take out of a can of soup before people start to catch on? Can we really tell the difference between 21 ounces and 20.25 ounces? Many marketers would rather change the packaging and offer less of their product than resort to charging more. When we don't notice the difference, we think we are getting the same deal. Just the opposite is true if we want to promote a new larger size product or a significant price reduction. In this case, we want to pass that threshold and make the change extremely noticeable. This is also true for taste. Companies want the best taste for the lowest cost. The quality of the ingredients causes people to notice or not notice the quality of the product.