
Institute for Research in Marketing

Press Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Date: December 16, 2008

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Charitable Chit-Chat: U of M Researcher Shows that Making Small Talk Can Increase Donations

MINNEAPOLIS / ST. PAUL – The next time a telemarketer opens with a friendly question, you might stop and wonder why. A new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* shows that it is surprisingly effective when salespeople or fundraisers ask how your day has been or which football team you support before broaching the subject of a purchase or donation.

Kathleen D. Vohs, a marketing professor at the University of Minnesota's Carlson School, and co-authors Bob M. Fennis (Utrecht University, the Netherlands) and Loes Janssen (University of Twente, the Netherlands) found that questions that seem like polite chitchat actually soften you up for a pitch. And this strategy succeeds at increasing donations.

“Across six field and lab studies we found that influence agents’ initial questions deplete the self-control resources that are needed to resist an unwanted influence attempt,” write the authors. “This state of reduced self-control renders consumers vulnerable to the persuasion ploys foisted upon them by influence agents, thereby resulting in increased willingness to acquiesce to the agent.”

The researchers broke down the process into two stages. The first is the initial question, or series of questions, that softens up the listener and gets him or her to essentially yield to the request. The first step takes away some of the resources we might normally use to control our spending and refuse the request.

“What influence agents want to do with the first step is to get consumers to try to make a good impression or make a series of decisions, acts that we know reduce consumers’ ability to cope with tempting situations, such as wanting to donate money or buy a new product,” says Vohs, whose previous research has proved that making choices is mentally exhausting.

The second stage is when the actual donation appeal is made. Vohs adds “In the second stage, a cue is given to consumers to give them a small push – the cues, like giving a compliment or doing a favor for you (such as a free gift), increase compliance. Hence, when people have already been stripped of the resources needed to resist temptations and then encounter these cues, it’s like a one-two punch. In the end, it’s hard not to be swayed.”

In a state weakened by answering questions, we end up giving more, the authors explain. So when a telemarketer asks “How are you today?” consumers might beware of what is coming next. “The initial act of answering seemingly harmless questions is enough to produce a state of mindlessness which increases the odds of complying with a larger target request,” the authors conclude.

The Institute for Research in Marketing is part of the Carlson School of Management at the University of Minnesota. Established in 2005, the Institute fosters innovative, rigorous research that improves the

science and practice of marketing. More information can be found at www.carlsonschool.umn.edu/marketinginstitute.