Journal of Business Research 68 (2015) 56–59

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Business Research

Effect of an unexpected small favor on compliance with a survey request

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 12 June 2013
Received in revised form 13 May 2014
Accepted 17 May 2014
Available online 4 June 2014

Keywords:
Compliance
Favor
Reciprocity
Response rate
Survey

ABSTRACT

This experiment examines whether individuals return favors when they receive an initial favor in an interviewer-administrated street survey solicitation setting. In the favor condition, a confederate offers a piece of candy to the participants walking in the street and then asks them to participate in a survey. In the no-favor condition, participants don't receive a piece of candy, but are only solicited for the survey. Results show that a favor compared to no favor is associated with greater compliance with the request.

1. Introduction

In face-to-face street surveys, in which the overall response rate is generally higher than in webmail, telephone or mail surveys (Hox & de Leeuw, 1994; Krysan, Schuman, Scott, & Beatty, 1994), several factors, positively affecting survey response rate, are identified. Some of these are related to the interviewer's physical appearance. Guéguen (2002a) finds that interviewers wearing formal attire in a street survey setting increase the number of passersby who agree to respond, compared to interviewers wearing casual clothes. Guéguen and Lamy (2013) report, in an interviewer administrated survey, that male, but not female, passersby respond more readily to a female interviewer wearing a blond wig than to the same confederate wearing a brown or a black or a red wig. Interviewers' nonverbal behaviors influence also participants' compliance with a survey request. Several experimental studies report that interviewer touch increases the response rates observed in interviewer administrated street surveys about food habits (Hornik, 1987; Hornik & Ellis, 1988) or jewelry (Guéguen, 2001, 2002b). Slight touching also leads to greater persistence when participants execute a difficult task, such as answering a long questionnaire about very private subjects (Nannberg & Hansen, 1994).

Numerous studies have examined the effect of various incentives on mail surveys. However, studies examining the effect of incentives on face-to-face surveys are scarce. Research into the effect of incentives on face-to-face surveys is limited to household surveys and evaluates only monetary incentives (Ryu, Couper, & Marans, 2005; Singer, Van Hoewyk, Gebler, Taghunathan, & McGonagle, 1999; Willimack, Schuman, Pennell, & Lepowski, 1995). The literature on nonmonetary incentives used in mail surveys considers a wide range of inducements such as lottery tickets, phone cards, key rings, tie pins, postage stamps, tea bags, coffee sachets and chocolates (Brennan and Charbonneau, 2009). However, the effect of such nonmonetary incentives on face-to-face surveys and particularly on face-to-face street surveys has never been reported.

Dommeyer, Hirao, Ikeda, Linkletter, and Watanabe (2010) use a nonmonetary incentive to encourage participants to respond to a self-administered survey. In their study, a confederate asks 300 students, leaving their university library, for an interview (about attitudes toward websites that rate professors). Half of them receive a nonmonetary incentive (an ice cold Coca-Cola) while the other half do not. The experimenters report a dramatic impact on the response rate to the survey: 39% of the treatment group responds positively versus 11% of the control group. The results of the study show that a nonmonetary incentive is effective to improve response rates in face-to-face survey situations. However, a previous study reports the reverse effect. Dommeyer, Romero, and Tafazzoli (2009) ask college students to complete a self-administered, four-page survey measuring their attitudes toward websites that rate professors. In the nonmonetary incentive condition, the participants receive a free Scantron form. Contrary to their expectation, results show that the participants in the treatment group are less likely to respond to the survey than those in the control group.

These last two studies report opposite findings but they also have methodological differences. Thus, replication appears necessary. In Dommeyer et al. (2010), only participants, who agree to complete the survey, receive a free coke while, in Dommeyer et al. (2009), potential

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2014.05.008
0148-2963/

respondents gain a free Scantron form before they are asked to complete the self-administered survey. The incentive could finally be considered as a form of remuneration for those who have accepted the proposition. Second, in Dommeyer et al.'s (2009, 2010) studies, the value of the nonmonetary incentives used is not the same. Third, in both Dommeyer et al.'s (2009, 2010) studies, a self-administered survey is used. Thus, the effect of incentive on a face-to-face administration survey is not examined. This influence is studied in the present experimental research based on the theory of reciprocity.

2. Reciprocity in human behavior

The power of the reciprocity principle is known for a long time in the literature (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1961), and the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) is perhaps the most widely accepted social rule in our societies. This norm implies that when a person receives a favor, he frequently feels that he should do a favor in return. Research shows that the norm's rules of exchange are culturally different (Befu, 1980) but the norm of reciprocity seems to have a universal character in human societies (Mauss, 1966), and some authors go even so far as to speak of Homo Reciprocus (Becker, 1956). An individual's respect for the reciprocity principle is generally associated with a positive evaluation of this same individual (Burger, Horita, Kinoshita, Roberts, & Vera, 1997).

Regan (1971) does the first experimental research testing the reciprocity norm on compliance with a request. In this study, the participants work on an art evaluation task in the same room as a confederate presented as another participant. The confederate is instructed either to do an unexpected favor for the real participant or not. In the favor condition, the confederate leaves the room during a break and returns with a soda for himself and the participant. In the no-favor control condition, the confederate leaves the room but does not return with drinks. A few minutes later, the confederate asks the participant if he would like to buy some raffle tickets for a high school project. In the final, participants buy more tickets when they have first received a favor from the requester than when they have not received a favor. It is also found that the initial perception of the requester has no effect on reciprocity.

Two theoretical explanations could explain these opposite results. According to the self-presentation theory (Cialdini, 2001), people return a favor in order to be perceived positively by the requester who previously did them a favor. According to the internalized social norm theory (Perugini, Gallucci, Presaghi, & Ercolani, 2003), the norm of reciprocity helps the individual to evaluate his/her own behavior. People can perceive themselves as "good" when they return a favor. Consistent with this theoretical explanation, the pressure to reciprocate explains why in Regan's (1971) study, the participant returns the favor even if he/she is perceived as unpleasant.

In most of the studies manipulating reciprocation of a favor, the participants are undergraduate students while the favor-doer is presented as being a student, and the experiments are carried out on a campus (Burger, Sanchez, Imberi, & Grande, 2009; Burger et al., 1997; Regan, 1971; Whatley, Webster, Smith, & Rhodes, 1999). In all these studies, the experiments are conducted in a laboratory setting, not a natural one. Thus it would be interesting to study favor reciprocation among participants in a field setting. The use of unexpected favors in studies examining the effect of reciprocity is different from the use of incentives in the survey studies cited above. In the former one, the favor is done before the request is made to the participant, while, in the studies examining the effect of incentives on response rate, the incentive is given at the same time that the request is made, and it is clearly stated that the incentive would be used to reward the participant for responding to the survey. In Dommeyer et al.'s (2009) study, the participants are given time to respond to the self-administered survey. However, previous study reports that, when the delay between receiving a favor and reciprocating the favor increases, the probability of returning the favor decreases (Burger et al., 1997). Thus, it appears interesting to control the amount of time the favor is used to create pressure to reciprocate and the amount of time given to the participant to reciprocate. In order to examine the effect of an unexpected initial favor on later compliance with a real street survey request in a face-to-face interaction, a confederate offers a piece of candy to passersby in the street and immediately asks them to participate in a survey, while, in a control condition, passersby are only solicited for the survey. In line with the reciprocity norm, more compliance with the survey request is expected in the favor condition.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants are 407 (156 males and 251 females) passersby (between 30 and 40 years of age in appearance) walking alone in pedestrian areas of a town (between 60 and 70,000 inhabitants) situated on the south coast of Brittany in France.

3.2. Procedure

Four 19 year-old undergraduate women serve as confederates in this study. To prevent possible multiple solicitations of the same pedestrian, the study is conducted at the same time in different areas of the town.

The confederate stations herself in the street and approaches the first participant walking in her direction. If a child, an adolescent, an older person, or a group of people passes, the confederate waits until a person corresponding to the profile (men or women of roughly 30 to 40 years of age walking alone) come along. The confederate has been instructed to approach the first person who arrives and not to select the participant. The confederate alternates the two experimental conditions every 15 min according to a random order. More female participants were tested because more women than men were walking alone in the pedestrian areas where the experiment was conducted.

In the favor condition, the confederate approaches the participant with a wicker basket filled with candy and politely says to him or her, "Hello, would you like some candy?" The confederate waits for the passerby's response and gives him/her candy if the participant accepts it (only 9 participants politely refuse the candy). Whether he/she accepts the proposed candy or not, the participant is immediately asked to respond to a short survey on "clubs and associations." In the no-favor condition, the confederate hides the basket containing the candy in a shoulder bag and does not offer any candy to the participant, but make the survey request directly. The confederates have been instructed to act normally and in a similar way in each condition. To avoid possible variations in the confederates' behavior according to the experimental conditions, they are not informed about the experimental hypothesis. A pretest was conducted in the street in order to train the confederates in the use of the procedure and to verify that they act in the same way in the two experimental conditions.

The number of participants who comply with the survey request made by the confederates is the dependent variable in this study. Participants who have refused are thanked. For those who have complied, the interviewer administers immediately the 8-item survey. At the end of the survey, the participant is thanked by the interviewer.

4. Results

No differences are observed among the confederates regarding the participant's gender or experimental condition. Thus, the data are combined across confederates and are presented in Table 1.

To account for the effects that the variables may have, a 2 (participant's gender) × 2 (experimental condition) binary logistic regression using compliance to the survey request as the dichotomous criterion variable is applied. The analysis reveals that, taken together, the independent variables have a significant effect on the interview