YES!

50 secrets from the science of persuasion

Noah J. Goldstein PhD, Steve J. Martin and Robert B. Cialdini PhD

PROFILE BOOKS
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Which office item can make your influence stick?

If you’re reading this at your desk, the answer to the question above may be within arm’s reach. What could it be? Paper clips? Pens? Pencils? Pads? Protractor? Planners? Paperweights? Printer? Your office drawers are full of practical items. Which can make your influence stick?

Social scientist Randy Garner wondered whether sticky notes – the best known are Post-it notes, made by the 3M Corp. – might have the power to enhance compliance with a written request made to another person. In an intriguing study, he sent out surveys to people with a request to complete them. The survey was accompanied by either (a) a handwritten sticky note requesting completion of the survey, which was attached to a cover letter; (b) a similar handwritten message on the cover letter; or (c) the cover letter and survey alone.

That little yellow square packed quite a persuasive punch: more than 75 per cent of the people who received the survey with the sticky-note request filled it out and returned it, whereas only 48 per cent of the second group and 36 per cent of the third group did so. But what made it work? Could it be the simple fact that sticky notes are attention-grabbing in all their neon glory?

Garner asked himself the same question. To test this
possibility, he sent out a new batch of surveys. This time, a third of the surveys came with a Post-it note with a handwritten request, a third came with a blank Post-it note, and a third had no Post-it note at all. If the plus of using Post-its is simply that the neon-yellow colour draws people’s peepers to the paper, then response rates should be equally high for both sets of Post-it note surveys. But that turns out not to be the case. The handwritten sticky note outperformed its competition, with a response rate of 69 per cent compared with 43 per cent for the surveys with a blank sticky note and 34 per cent for the surveys with no sticky note.

So what’s the explanation? Although no one’s going to break a sweat looking for a Post-it note, slapping it on a cover sheet and handwriting a message on it, Garner suggests that people do recognise the extra effort and personal touch that this requires, and they feel the need to reciprocate this personal touch by agreeing to the request. After all, reciprocity is the social glue that helps bring and keep people together in cooperative relationships—and you can bet that it’s a stronger adhesive than the kind you find on the back of a sticky note.

In fact, the evidence is even more telling. Garner found that placing a personalised sticky note on the survey did more than simply persuade more people to respond to the survey: those who filled out the survey with the handwritten sticky-note message returned it more promptly and gave more detailed and attentive answers to the questions. And when the researcher made the note even more personal in nature by adding his initials and ‘Thank you!’ to the handwritten message, the response rate shot up even higher.

Broadly speaking, this research provides a valuable insight into human behaviour: that the more personalised you make a request, the more likely you’ll be to get someone to agree to it.

More specifically, this research shows that in the office, in the community or even at home, a personalised sticky note could highlight the importance of your reports and communications and prevent them from becoming the proverbial needle in a haystack of other reports, letters and mailings that are vying for attention. What’s more, the timeliness and quality of compliance with your request are likely to be enhanced as well.

What’s the bottom line? If you use personalised messages for your persuasive practices, the 3M Corp. won’t be the only ones who profit from it.