
ARTICLES

Post-It® Note Persuasion: A Sticky Influence

Randy Garner

Sam Houston State University

Four studies examine the influence of attaching a seemingly insignificant Post-it® note to a survey packet on the likelihood of completing the survey. Participants who received a packet with an affixed Post-it note request had significantly higher return rates than participants who received the identical survey with (a) no sticky note, (b) the same message written on the cover sheet but without a Post-it, or (c) a blank Post-it with no message provided. Furthermore, they returned the materials more promptly with higher quality responses. A more personalized Post-it appeal increased returns when the survey was long and time consuming but was no more effective than a nonpersonalized Post-it when the survey was easy to complete. Results suggest that the Post-it leads the request to be interpreted as a solicitation for a personal favor, facilitating a normative compliance response.

Behavioral influence can be realized from seemingly insignificant features of the request or the situation in which the request is made. For example, merely manipulating the way in which a person communicates attitude-related information can produce differences in later measures of attitude potency and can impact actual behavior (Allison & Messick, 1988; Cioffi & Garner, 1996, 1998; Fazio, Sherman, & Herr, 1982). Garner (2004, 2005) found that participants were more likely to comply with a request from someone whose name was similar to their own than a request from a person whose name was not similar. This name-similarity effect elicited greater attention to the material, greater perceptions of similarity, increased liking, and behavioral action. Several studies have found that merely asking people to do something results in compliance with the requested behavior, even if the request is not fully explained or justified (e.g., Cialdini, 2001; Langer, 1989; Milgram & Sabini, 1983). This may be especially true if the request is perceived as a favor (see Regan, 1971).

Langer (1989) and her colleagues (Langer, Blank, & Chanowitz, 1978) showed that individuals often comply mindlessly with a request that is accompanied by a reason for making it, even when the reason offered is uninformative. Langer suggested that people do not pay attention to what they do or why they are doing it, especially if the request is relatively simple and appears to be legitimate (Langer &

Moldoveanu, 2000). People will sometimes automatically activate and apply a learned social norm of polite compliance with minimal cognitive deliberation.

In consumer research, issues of compliance may arise when people are confronted with a decision about whether to complete a survey or questionnaire. Researchers desiring increased rates of response may wish to capitalize on the cognitive economizing that may occur by finding ways to activate a social norm that stimulates compliance. One such approach may be the use of a Post-it® note request affixed to survey materials. A Post-it note may have an attention-gaining effect that could elicit greater consideration of the materials and, more important, the request. Since their introduction in 1980, Post-its or other similar sticky notes have become a staple in the American workplace. The 3M corporation (2004) indicated that Post-it notes are among the top-rated consumer products. Post-it notes are used to call attention to particular documents, serve as a place mark, create reminders, or serve numerous other functions. Kanner (1989) found that yellow (same as the Post-it) is registered by the eye faster than many other colors and has been associated with a sense of novelty and attention in consumer choices. Of interest here, however, is the potential influence that the use of Post-its may have on eliciting overt behavioral actions and the underlying psychological mechanisms that contribute to such findings.

Placing a typical brightly colored Post-it note on a survey packet, for example, may elicit a greater attention to the material, especially when contrasted with other items that are often found in one's mailbox or desk. That is, the Post-it may

Requests for reprints should be sent to Randy Garner, Behavioral Sciences, College of Criminal Justice, Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, TX 77340. E-mail: rgarner@shsu.edu

suggest that the packet is important or requires attention (Kanner, 1989). Once attention is gained, individuals may be more inclined to consider the material.

This effect is not self-evident, however. The use of Post-it notes has become so pervasive that any potential attention-gaining effect might be “drowned out” by their overfamiliarity and routine use. Further, simply noticing a document, request, or survey packet as the result of an affixed Post-it does not necessarily imply that this will impact behavior based on this attention. One may notice the material, but such notice may be insufficient to prompt action. Thus, the impact of Post-its may not be a result of their attention-getting influence *per se*.

In practice, Post-its are usually associated with a message or request written on the note. As a result, it is unclear whether a Post-it elicits attention to the document to which it is attached, to the message on the Post-it, or to both. If the Post-it message is important, some may view it as a personal request or favor, requiring a reciprocal response (Cialdini & Trost, 1998; Kunz & Woolcott, 1976; Whatley, Webster, Smith, & Rhodes, 1999). If someone has taken the time to write a request on a Post-it, this may elicit a feeling of social obligation to comply. The norms of reciprocity and social helping (Hoffman, 1981) are ingrained in our culture. The Post-it note may convey that the request is important to the requester who has taken the effort to affix the note, resulting in more altruistic behavior. Helping others who request a favor is an important norm in virtually every society.

However, at what point will the demands of the request exceed the willingness of an individual to help? If the task is relatively easy, individuals might simply comply mindlessly (Langer, 1989), whereas a more effortful request may be dismissed. Further, the attention gained by the Post-it may cause the individual to scrutinize more carefully the request itself and the materials to which it is affixed. In this case, only requests that are deemed to be reasonable or important to the solicitor may benefit from the effects of the Post-it request (Langer et al., 1978).

OVERVIEW AND PREDICTIONS

This series of studies examines the potential behavioral effect—responding to a mail survey—that may be realized by merely affixing a Post-it note request, the conditions under which this might be most salient, and the psychological processes that contribute to this phenomenon. Study 1 examined the influence of a Post-it note request on increased survey return rates as compared to surveys that have the same handwritten request on the cover sheet or to controls with no added request. We expected that the attention-gaining effect of the yellow Post-it would result in greater consideration of the materials and the request, resulting in significantly increased returns for the Post-it group. Study 2 more directly assessed the role of the Post-it note itself in calling attention to the survey

packet, the request, or both. In particular, the relative influence of a blank “alert” Post-it versus a Post-it with a written request was examined. If the attention-getting nature of the Post-it alone accounts for the greater consideration of the survey, the return rates should be equivalent. However, if some combination of the Post-it and the message is important, the personal Post-it request should offer greater influence.

Study 3 further examined the possibility that a Post-it note solicitation is likely to be viewed as a request for a personal favor, and that it therefore elicits not only a greater likelihood of compliance but also higher quality responses and more timely return of the materials.

The first three studies involved a request that was relatively routine and required minimal involvement. However, the question remained as to what impact a more effortful task might have on compliance and if the increased involvement of the request might be mediated by a more personalized appeal—to include the recipients name and signature of the sender on the Post-it. Study 4 investigated this question. We expected that a more personalized Post-it request would result in higher return rates when participants were asked to comply with a more onerous task, as it would be viewed as an individualized personal appeal that compels a polite normative response. When compliance was not effortful, however, we expected that the personalization of the Post-it would not be necessary to induce compliance.

STUDY 1

Methods

Participants. One hundred fifty full-time faculty members at a major educational university were randomly selected to complete a survey designed to assess certain aspects of the university climate. The names of the faculty members were obtained from official university records. Participants were randomly chosen to receive a request to complete a survey that was accompanied by either (a) a handwritten Post-it note requesting completion of the survey (Post-it conditions), (b) a similar handwritten message on the cover letter (written message conditions), or (c) the cover letter and survey form alone (control conditions).

Materials. The materials consisted of an actual university-endorsed 5-page survey designed to assess faculty perceptions of campus climate. Therefore, this procedure realistically mimicked the typical materials and requests that are often received from the university administration. The instrument itself included a cover page of instructions and asked a series of questions regarding the opinions of the faculty on issues such as quality of instruction, campus diversity, campus facilities, support programs, university reputation, and so forth. In keeping with the framework of the existing survey, there was no attempt to distinguish faculty by rank, tenure, or other such characteristics, and there was no request for any

direct personal information; therefore all responses were completely anonymous.

All packets contained identical survey materials. However, those in the *Post-it note* condition had a standard yellow 2 7/8-in. square Post-it note with the handwritten request, "Please take a few minutes to complete this for us. Thank you!" affixed to the upper right-hand corner of the cover page. This phrase was taken directly from the instruction page of the existing survey packet; thus, the Post-it merely highlighted the information that was already available. In the *written cover* message condition, the 50 survey packets were identical, except they had no Post-it; however the same handwritten message was provided in the upper right-hand corner of the cover letter. Every effort was made to ensure that the handwriting was identical on all items. The 50 *no-message control* packets contained only the survey and cover letter. The packets were distinguished by the placement of an inconspicuous mark on the back of the packets.

Design and procedure. Fifty university professors were randomly selected to receive the packets with the handwritten Post-it request affixed, 50 received the packets with the written request on the cover sheet, and 50 others received the no-message control packets. All groups received the identical university climate survey as well as the associated instructions for completion and return. Consistent with the usual practice and to enhance experimental realism, all surveys were sent through interoffice mail. The return deadline was identified as 2 weeks from the mailing date, and each packet contained an addressed envelope for ease of return. There were no university scheduled activities or breaks that interfered with this time line.

Results

The results support our original hypothesis. The participants who received the packets with the affixed Post-it note returned their surveys significantly more than those who received the same survey without the sticky note. Thirty-eight of the 50 participants in the Post-it group (76%) returned the survey, as compared to 24 of the 50 participants (48%) in the written-only group and 18 of the 50 participants (36%) in the no-message control group, $\chi^2(2) = 16.93$, $p < .01$. The proportion of responses in the Post-it note condition differed significantly from the proportion in the other two conditions ($p < .01$ in each case), which did not differ from each other ($p > .10$).

Discussion

The ostensibly insignificant manipulation of a simple Post-it note seemed to have a considerable impact on the actual behavior of completing and returning a survey packet. Those individuals who received a packet with the Post-it note affixed, returned their packets in significantly greater numbers

than those in either of the other two conditions. Those who received the packets with the same handwritten message as was on the Post-it packets did not return significantly more packets than the no-message controls. This suggests that the Post-it note was important in directing attention to the packet *and* the request. Clearly, the Post-it note itself was essential. If the attention-gaining effects of the yellow Post-it were dispensable, we would have expected to find similar return rates in both the cover message and Post-it groups; but that was not the case. Recall that both groups received a packet that used the same handwritten request—which was taken directly from the instructions page—however, only the Post-it group returned their packets in significantly greater numbers. These results suggest that the Post-it note increases attention to the request independent of the general request.

Although it seems clear that the Post-it request elicited greater compliance, it is less clear as to whether the attention-gaining nature of the Post-it *alone* is sufficient to account for this result, or whether the Post-it attracted greater attention to the message that was written on the note. It may be that simply receiving a survey with a Post-it "alert" (absent the written request) affixed may have caused the survey packet to stand out from other incoming mail. Marketers have long recognized that novel stimuli frequently attract attention to the message being conveyed (Solomon, 2004). Therefore, the attention-compelling contrast of the Post-it material with that of other incoming items may have been sufficient to increase attention to the survey, to the request, or to both (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2004). Study 2 examines this influence by contrasting the use of a blank "alert" Post-it versus a Post-it containing a written request.

STUDY 2

Method

Participants. One hundred five participants were randomly selected from several large graduate programs at a major urban university and were assigned to one of three groups: Post-it Message, blank Post-it, and no Post-it control.

Materials. The materials were identical to those used in Study 1, and consisted of a 5-page, university-endorsed survey designed to assess perceptions of campus climate (see Study 1 for more detail). Participants in the *Post-it message* condition received a packet with the same Post-it message identified in Study 1, those in the *blank Post-it* condition received a packet that had only a blank, "alert" Post-it affixed without any writing or request, and those in the *no Post-it* control condition received the survey packet without any writing or sticky note affixed.

Design and procedure. Thirty-five participants were randomly assigned to each of the three groups. All groups

received the identical university climate survey through interoffice mail with the only distinction being the presence or absence of the Post-it as described previously. The return deadline was identified as 2 weeks from the mailing date, and each packet contained an addressed envelope for ease of return.

Results

Participants who received the packets with the Post-it request returned significantly more surveys ($n = 24, 69\%$) than those in either the blank Post-it (43%), $\chi^2(1, N = 15) = 4.69, p < .05$, or the no Post-it control (34%), $\chi^2(1, N = 12) = 8.23, p < .01$. There was no significant difference between the blank Post-it and the no Post-it groups.

Discussion

The results confirm the potent influence that a Post-it note request can have on compliance. Although the addition of a blank "alert" Post-it slightly increased the return rate relative to control conditions, this increase was not statistically significant. When a request was included on the Post-it, however, the return rate was significantly greater than it was in both the control and blank Post-it conditions. In combination with the results of Study 1, this suggests that the Post-it note was a necessary but not sufficient requirement to obtain this effect. To realize the greater influence, the Post-it note must also include a request. This would seem to argue against an explanation that the salience or attention-gaining effect of the Post-it alone provides the greatest influence.

Recall that in Study 1, the same handwritten request on the cover sheet did not result in significantly more returns than the no message control. This finding is consistent with the notion that affixing a Post-it, in combination with the message itself, is viewed as personal request or favor. That is, persons in the Post-it request condition may have attributed the addition of the handwritten note as a *personal* request; distinct from the long procession of indistinguishable mailings that faculty often receive. If someone has taken the effort to affix a Post-it note with a handwritten request to complete a survey form, from a social-reciprocity perspective, the least one can do is comply.

Study 3 involves a similar approach with the addition of a follow-up questionnaire, as well as an assessment of survey response quality and promptness of return. First, we examined the quantity of information provided in the open-ended questionnaire responses and the promptness with which the questionnaires are returned. If the Post-it note elicits a greater attention to the survey itself as a result of the polite normative response to a perceived favor, this might be reflected in the quality of the responses and the promptness of the returns to be affected.

STUDY 3

Method

Participants. One hundred randomly selected faculty members of two major urban universities participated in this study. The names of the faculty members were acquired from official university records. Fifty members randomly received the Post-it note packet and an equal number randomly received the control packet.

Materials. The materials consisted of a modified version of the faculty questionnaire used in Study 1. This version solicited the same information as the earlier one, but requested open-ended qualitative responses to five of the survey questions (e.g., "Can you provide examples?" or "Do you have additional comments?"), resulting in a 6-page packet. All questionnaires were labeled with the name and department of the recipient to facilitate the follow-up procedure. Respondents were assured that all information would remain confidential. As in Study 1, the 50 questionnaires used in the Post-it condition were affixed with a standard 2 7/8-in. square Post-it note with the handwritten message, "Please take a few minutes to complete this for us. Thank you!" The other 50 control group packets did not have the affixed Post-it note request.

Design and procedure. Both groups of 50 university professors received the identical university climate survey (as well as the associated instructions for completion and return) However, the 50 participants in the Post-it group received the packet that had the sticky note with the handwritten request affixed. Consistent with the usual practice and to enhance realism, all surveys were sent through interoffice mail. The return deadline was identified as 2 weeks from the mailing date and each packet contained an addressed envelope for ease of return.

All participants who returned a questionnaire were provided with the 1-page return-addressed follow-up survey. This survey was placed in the interdepartmental mail immediately on receipt of the original questionnaire. The follow-up letter thanked them for their recent participation and solicited their assistance in making the survey procedure more efficient and productive in the future. In this context, participants were asked to indicate any reasons they considered when deciding to complete and return this survey. Font style, appearance, format, and importance of the information being solicited were all listed as possible examples. Pre-testing revealed that this prompting was necessary to generate a sufficient number of replies. The format was open-ended to allow for the greatest latitude of responses. The follow-up procedure did not collect any identifying information. This is similar to the procedure offered by Garner (2005) in which participants were asked to identify any char-

acteristic regarding a recent questionnaire that influenced them to complete and return the form.

Finally, the research team recorded the number of days that it took each respondent to return his or her packet and developed a procedure to assess the quality of the replies. The promptness of the return and the quantity of responses in the open-ended sections of the questionnaire were used as a proxy for the level of attention given to the instrument. A coding scheme was created to consider the amount of comment provided in these sections. Scores were based on the combined number of words included in all such sections divided by the total number of sections.

Results

Consistent with the previous experiments, the participants in the Post-it condition returned their survey packets significantly more than the control group. Of the 50 participants in the Post-it group, 32 (64%) returned the survey, whereas 21 of the 50 participants in the control group (42%) returned their packets $\chi^2(1) = 4.85, p < .05$.

Promptness of return. Participants returned their surveys significantly sooner in the Post-it note condition ($M = 4.18$ days) than in the control condition ($M = 5.52$ days), $F(1, 51) = 10.12, p < .01$.

Attention to survey. The participants in the Post-it conditions provided significantly more comments in the open-ended section of the modified survey. Of the 32 individuals in the Post-it condition, 18 (56%) offered additional information in these sections, whereas of the 21 individuals in the control condition, 9 (43%) provided additional comment, $\chi^2(1) = 4.86, p < .05$. The average number of words used in the five open-ended sections was greater in the Post-it condition ($M = 7.62$) than in the control condition ($M = 3.86$), $F(1, 51) = 4.16, p < .05$.

Follow-up survey. The follow-up procedure revealed no significant variation among participants in the responses provided. Analysis of the follow-up survey, which was returned by 19 (59%) of the 32 participants in the Post-it condition, revealed that none of the participants who returned their surveys indicated that the presence of a Post-it note was a reason for their response. Most comments fell into broad categories that addressed the survey length, ease of response, professional appearance, and desire to help.

Discussion

Similar to the findings in Studies 1 and 2, significantly more participants who received the questionnaire with the Post-it note affixed returned their surveys as compared to those who received the packet without the sticky note. Moreover, participants who received Post-it notes returned their surveys more

promptly, and provided significantly more information in the open-ended sections, than did control participants. This suggests that the Post-it request created a greater consideration of the survey. This is consistent with the notion that the Post-it conveyed a personal request—eliciting a reciprocal response and, as the result of this personalization, the recipient was conscientiously attending to the materials.

However, none of the participants who returned the follow-up survey indicated that the presence of a Post-it note was involved in their decision to complete and return the materials. The failure of participants to mention the Post-it as a basis for their decision must be evaluated with caution, due to the complexities of human memory and our penchant for cognitive economizing. Even though the follow-up survey was sent immediately on the participants' return of their questionnaires, there could have been a considerable period between completion and return. Further, this procedure did not specifically ask participants about the presence of a Post-it—something that is addressed in Study 4.

Thus, the presence of the Post-it note clearly impacts the decision to comply with the request; however, it was not reported as an overt consideration. These findings are consistent with the increasing body of literature that suggests people frequently rely on cognitive shortcuts in decision making (Chaiken, 1980; Chaiken & Trope, 1999). However, they may later omit this as a conscious explanation for their behavior. That is, they may consider only the more proximal issue of why they completed the survey, not what may have initially directed them to consider the request (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2004). The follow-up procedure did reveal that one reason offered for completing the survey materials was the desire to help. Again, this is consistent with the notion that the request was viewed as a favor engaging our social norms to comply.

STUDY 4

In each of the preceding studies in which the Post-it note condition elicited a greater behavioral response, the request was relatively routine and required minimal involvement on the part of the participant. Less clear, however, is the point at which the demands of the request are likely to exceed the willingness of an individual to help. In other words, if the task is relatively easy, individuals might simply comply mindlessly (Langer, 1989); however a more effortful request may be dismissed. Further, the attention gained by the Post-it may lead the individual to scrutinize the request itself and the materials more carefully. As a result, only those requests deemed to be reasonable will benefit from the effects of the Post-it request (Langer et al., 1978).

In addition, one might consider the effect of a more personalized appeal. The previous studies employed a rather nondescript handwritten Post-it note that merely asked the participants to complete the attached survey. However, what

might occur if the request was more personalized to include the recipients name or a personal signature from the sender? In previous research (Garner, 2005) we found that greater behavioral compliance could be realized by employing a personalization strategy to the request. Study 4 examines both the level of task involvement and the influence of a more personalized Post-it appeal on rates of compliance.

Method

Participants. One hundred eighty college graduate students from various departments at two large urban universities participated in this experiment. Participants were randomly divided into six groups as addressed in the following.

Materials. Two surveys were created that purported to measure issues related to campus life, campus climate, and instructional issues; each was based on actual survey instruments. One survey was a relatively short 5-page (excluding the instructions page) questionnaire similar to that used in the previous studies. The other survey had a similar focus but was much more detailed, requiring more open-ended responses, asking 150 questions, and was 24 pages in length.

Design and procedure. The experimental design resulted in 30 participants being randomly assigned to one of six groups. Half of the participants ($n=90$) received the short form with the remaining half receiving the long survey. Within each of these two groups, participants received either a packet with the standard handwritten Post-it request that was similar to those used in previous studies ("Please take a few minutes to complete this for us"; $n=60$), a packet with the more personalized Post-it request ($n=60$) that included the name of the recipient, along with the standard message identified previously, as well as concluding with a "Thank you!" and the initials "RG" (this was designed to heighten the personal nature of the request); or a control packet with no Post-it ($n=60$). All materials were sent via university interdepartmental mail to mimic a realistic procedure and situation.

The survey packets were coded for later identification and a phone follow-up procedure was employed for those participants in either Post-it condition who returned the packet. The scripted procedure first thanked the participants for completing the survey and, similar to Study 3, asked them for any factors that contributed to their decision to complete the packet. After providing for an open-ended free response, participants were asked about specific issues including format, appearance, length, and, more important, the presence of the Post-it request.

Results

The results for each of the groups can be seen in Table 1. Not surprisingly, participants who received the short version of the form returned significantly more surveys than those who

TABLE 1
Survey Return Rates as a Function of Survey Length and Request Type: Study 4

Survey Type	Standard Post-It®	Personalized Post-It®	Control	Totals
Long version	12 (40%) _a	20 (67%) _b	4 (13%) _c	36
Short or regular	21 (70%) _b	23 (77%) _b	10 (33%) _{a,c}	54

Note. Cells with unlike subscripts differ significantly at $p < .05$.

received the onerous 24-page form, $\chi^2(1) = 7.20, p < .01$. However, there were significant overall differences in return rates by condition, $\chi^2(2) = 28.93, p < .001$.

Standard survey form. Return rates among those receiving the more reasonable request to complete the 5-page survey were comparable to the similar Post-it request conditions in previous studies. In fact, there were no significant return differences between the standard Post-it group and the personalized group. As might be expected, however, there were significant differences between both of these groups as compared to the control. This suggests that for a reasonable task, the Post-it request is not greatly enhanced by additional personalization.

Long survey form. Perhaps more interesting are the results of those who received the exceedingly long and onerous survey. As Table 1 shows, all between-group differences were significant in this condition. That is, individuals were more likely to return surveys if they had received a personalized Post-it note (67%) than if they had received a standard note (40%), and were more likely to return the questionnaire in the latter condition than in control conditions (14%).

As Table 1 also indicates, the response rate of participants who received the standard Post-it depended on form length, whereas the response rate of participants who received a personalized note did not. This suggests that the influence of the Post-it note per se may depend on the difficulty of complying with the request. That is, a standardized Post-it note request may be sufficient to stimulate compliance when the appeal is reasonable and relatively easily accommodated. However, its influence is diminished when the task requested is onerous. If the Post-it is personalized, the effect is bolstered and the strong societal norms of reciprocity seem to elicit behavior that may have been otherwise dismissed.

There were no significant differences in control group return rates regardless of survey length. The returns for the short form were comparable to this condition in the other studies (33%).

Follow-Up Procedure

Of the 76 individuals who returned a survey that included a Post-it request, 37 (49%) were available for the phone follow-up procedure and were relatively evenly distributed by condition. Following an established protocol, participants

were asked a series of open-ended questions, similar to Study 3, purported to address what factors may have caused them to complete this survey and how the survey might be improved in the future to increase return rates. This was followed by a secondary series of specific questions that were scripted. In this latter procedure participants were asked specifically if they recalled the presence of a Post-it note and, if so, was that an important consideration in their decision to complete the questionnaire. Of the 37 people that were available for contact in the follow-up interview, only 3 provided any comment regarding the presence of a Post-it note in the open-ended portion. When they were specifically prompted in the second segment of the follow-up procedure as to whether or not they noticed the presence of any attachment or Post-it-type note, 23 participants (62%) indicated that they recalled a Post-it note, but only 12 of these individuals indicated that the Post-it was an important factor in their decision to return the survey form. Furthermore, 10 of these individuals were among those who had received the long version. Thus, the Post-it message was more strongly considered when the task was more burdensome.

Collectively, these results suggest that the Post-it generally tends to operate at a somewhat subtle level. When the task is more demanding, however, the personalized Post-it appeal may call greater attention to the personal nature of the request and figures more prominently in a decision to complete the task.

Discussion

Study 4 demonstrates that increasing the task difficulty impacted the Post-it note effect. When the survey was similar to that employed in previous experiments, involving a relatively short 5-page survey, the return rates were comparable to those previously found in other studies, and the personalization of the Post-it message did not significantly increase the return rate. When the task was more time consuming, however, the personalization of the Post-it message became an important factor. Among those who received the lengthy survey packet, participants who received the "standard" Post-it request used in the preceding experiments returned significantly fewer survey packets than those receiving the short form. However, by adding a more personalized touch and including the recipients name and an initial-type signature ("Thank you! RG") to the Post-it message, the return rate was increased to the equivalent of those receiving the short form.

It is interesting to note that Langer et al. (1978) found that calling attention to a request by adding a signature block ("Sincerely, John Lewis") to a memo that asked participants to forward a paper to another room resulted in a decrease in compliance, presumably because adding the signature was viewed as "unusual." As a result, the receiving secretaries more carefully attended to the note and determined that it was a silly request. (According to Langer, 1989, 90% of those receiving the request without the signature "mindlessly"

complied, whereas only 60% of those in the signature group complied.)

In this study we find a different outcome. The greater personalization of the Post-it request resulted in *increased* compliance, restoring the return rate to that of previous experiments that were not as personal. Interestingly, we believe the same general mechanism of increasing attention to the request created this result. Unlike the Langer et al. (1978) study where the addition of a signature was reported to be "highly unusual," the greater personalization of the Post-it request increased the participants' scrutiny of both the materials and the request. The individualization and signature block added to the Post-it was viewed as a personal request for a favor and elicited a normative reciprocal response.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The four studies reported in this article demonstrate that affixing a seemingly insignificant Post-it note request to a survey packet can significantly increase return rates. The Post-it itself, however, was necessary but not sufficient to produce this increase. When the same message found on the Post-it request was written on the cover page of the survey packet, it had no effect on return rate relative to no-message control conditions. The Post-it message can be viewed by the recipient as a personal appeal or request for a favor, conjuring strong societal norms of polite, reciprocal compliance, resulting in not only higher return rates but also qualitatively enhanced responses and a more prompt completion of the task. Further, as the task became demanding, personalization of the Post-it request was required to maintain the high response rate that was obtained when the task was less aversive. Even here, however, the Post-it note produced a higher response rate than was obtained in control conditions.

This effect on overt behavioral action is important. Participants who returned the surveys engaged in a sequence of behaviors that began at the time they received the mailed packet, continued as they assessed their willingness to complete the questionnaire, and ultimately required them to respond to several pages of questions and return the materials by mail. The fact that those in the Post-it note condition did so in significantly greater numbers is noteworthy.

In this series of studies, the task was one that was relatively familiar and common to the receiving participants. Completing various surveys is a familiar occurrence for faculty, staff, and students in a university setting. Future researchers may wish to vary the task and recipient settings to further examine this Post-it note effect. When the task is more psychologically challenging or physically demanding, the influence of the Post-it request may be diminished.

Conclusion and Implications

The socially ingrained concept of reciprocity and its powerful impact on behavior can be realized in something as seem-

ingly trivial as a Post-it note request. Cultural norms suggest that if an individual asks for a favor or does one a favor, a favor in return is due (Gouldner, 1960). This can occur despite the fact that we may never have requested the favor in the first place. The predisposition to help when asked can be powerful, even in circumstances that are not always obvious. Interestingly, such favors or requests may actually be intentional persuasive tactics that may only be revealed after the pressure of the reciprocity norm has been activated.

Influence tactics and the implications of seemingly insignificant manipulations of social situations and circumstances that might likely affect our attitudes and behavior are important areas of study. The potentially insidious way in which behavior may be directed without arousing conscious consideration can have important implications in consumer research (Lewis & Bridger, 2000). The influence of Post-it notes in this study could be viewed as benign, as it increases the amount of information administrators and others might have to make decisions (e.g., more returned surveys). The subtlety of the manipulation can be a concern, however, if less scrupulous influence brokers attempt to use such techniques and tactics to sway consumers and others into actions they might otherwise ignore. These findings suggest that the use of something as seemingly insignificant as a Post-it can indeed possess the potential for eliciting a sticky influence.

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