

Chapter 2

Getting Your Foot in the Door for Food Safety

If I told you that there was a simple behavioral science technique that, if applied strategically, could significantly enhance your ability to influence others to comply with your requests, would you be interested?

Whether it's trying to influence key leaders in the organization to be more supportive of food safety or getting front-line employees to comply with certain requests, such as washing their hands or taking food temperatures – *food safety equals behavior*. As I have stated before, if you think you are going to achieve behavior change by solely focusing on conducting audits and training, I can guarantee you, you will not succeed. Remember, human behavior is more complex than this. You will need more than audits, training, and a reliance on the food sciences to be successful.

According to best-selling author and psychologist Dr. Robert Cialdini (1993), people want to behave in a way that is consistent with their values, beliefs, and/or commitments. In other words, once a person has made a choice or taken a position on a matter, they will want to behave in a manner that's consistent with that commitment. And if a person has stated their beliefs publically, or if they have made a verbal (or better yet a written) commitment to an idea or goal, their behaviors are much more likely to be consistent with their stated beliefs or commitments.

What causes this behavior? According to behavioral scientists, in general, people do not want to be known as liars or wishy-washy. Instead, they prefer to be known as consistent, trustworthy, and true to themselves. Inconsistency is a socially undesirable trait.

Let me provide a couple of studies that illustrate just how powerful this principle can be in influencing others' behavior.

Decreasing Restaurant Reservation Cancellations and No-Shows

A Chicago restaurant owner was having trouble with “no shows.” People would make dinner reservations, but fail to appear for dinner. Additionally, they would not call to cancel their reservations. At this restaurant, it was common for the host or hostess to take the reservation by phone and then say, “*please call if you change your plans.*” For months, the no-show rate at this restaurant was approximately 30 %.

As part of a behavioral science study, researchers thought that if they were able to get callers to make a commitment, the “no-show” rate might drop. Accordingly, they conducted a study, whereby, they instructed the receptionists to stop saying, “*Please call us if you change your plans,*” and start saying, “*Will you please call us if you change your plans?*” Furthermore, the receptionist was instructed to intentionally pause and wait for the caller to respond. Simply put, the receptionist was asked to make two small changes that required little to no effort and certainly no new costs. First, they modified what they said to callers by adding two small words to the beginning of the script – *will you*. Second, instead of ending the script with a period, they ended with a question mark, which made callers make a commitment – either yes or no.

What do you think happened by simply adding two words to the script and ending with a question mark? Amazingly, by making these simple and almost effortless changes, the no-show rate at this restaurant dropped a whopping 20 % points from 30 % to 10 %.

As yet another powerful example of how people, in general, desire to be consistent with previous commitments they have made, let me share a study that illustrates what behavioral scientists call the “foot-in-the-door technique” to getting others to say yes to subsequent requests.

Initial Safe Driver Commitment Influences Future Behavior

Freedman and Fraser (1966) wanted to test their assumption that once people committed to a smaller request, they are much more likely to comply with a larger, related request. To do so, they conducted a series of creative experiments involving people who lived in an affluent neighborhood in California. Residents in the neighborhood were randomly divided into two groups.

In Group 1, an enterprising research student posing as a volunteer worker went door-to-door in the neighborhood asking the residents a preposterous question. They asked the homeowners if they would be willing to install a public-service billboard on their front lawn. To get an idea of the sign’s design, they would show the homeowners a photo of a house that was largely blocked by a poorly lettered sign that read, DRIVE CAREFULLY. As you can imagine, the vast majority of home owners (83 %) refused to participate.

For Group 2, a research student posing as a volunteer worker once again went door-to-door asking homeowners to participate in a public-service promotion. However, this time, they asked homeowners a much simpler request. They asked if they would be willing to put up a small “3×3” sticker that read “*Be a safe driver*” in one of their front windows. Based on this much smaller request, most did. Three weeks later, the researchers sent back another student to these same homes with a different request. This time they asked homeowners if they would be willing to place a large public service billboard on their lawns. To give an idea of just how the sign would look, the student once again showed a photograph depicting an attractive house that was almost completely obscured from view by the large sign reading **DRIVE CAREFULLY**.

You might think that a majority, as in group 1, would not want such an eye-sore on their lawn. However, an astonishing 76 % of those who had put up the sticker agreed to have the huge sign placed on their lawns! In other words, compliance with this request jumped from 17 % in group 1 to a whopping 76 % in group 2.

Freedman and Fraser hypothesized that based on the principle of consistency, putting up the initial sticker (a foot-in-the-door) appears to have implanted the idea among homeowners to think of themselves as people who were active campaigners for public good and now – to be consistent – they eagerly complied to preserve that self image.

What Does This Mean for Food Safety?

The implications from this study are clear and amazing. By understanding and utilizing the principles of consistency and commitment, food safety professionals might be able to provoke a stronger response in those they are trying to influence and, ultimately, get them to comply more frequently with desired behaviors or bigger requests.

How might a food safety professional use this principle to enhance food safety? While I am sure you can think of many ways you might put this principle into practice, here is one good example.

In general, when front-line employees are trained in food safety, they are asked to sign a roster to prove that they have attended the training or click a completion button on a computer based learning (CBL) module. Why do compliance professionals do this? Usually, it’s to ensure there is a record that can be used as proof that the organization has met its regulatory requirement that all of its food handlers are trained. However, by knowing about the principle of consistency, how might food safety professionals approach this differently? What if employees were asked at the end of such training to make a written (or electronic) *commitment* stating that they would adhere to the principles they learned in the training, do you think the class would be more effective at influencing their future behaviors? I do. And the research by Freedman and Fraser suggests it would too.

Remember, most people want to live up to their commitments, especially if it's in writing. By asking employees to commit to practicing the food safety tips they have learned, rather than just signing that they have completed the course, we are much more likely to pressure them to be consistent with the food safety principles they have just learned.

In closing, think about the principles of consistency and commitment and how they might be used to improve food safety. And remember, by getting your foot-in-the-door for food safety with a small initial request, you might just be opening up the door to influence desired food safety behaviors in a much greater way.

Food Safety = Behavior
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Compliance

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