

Using Psychology to Get Commitment Tip Sheet

Use this tip sheet to help you strategize how to influence others and build buy-in. The concept of each psychological behavior is explained and suggestions are offered on how to use it to influence leaders and volunteers.

Social Proof

Concept

People are highly motivated to conform to social norms and will model their behavior, often subconsciously, on the behavior of others even when it may be wrong. Testimonials, therefore, and other proof that shows the crowd supports you will beget even more supporters.

At the same time, people are driven to define themselves as unique. We are more focused on the costs and benefits of deviating from the norm, rather than conforming to it. To work with this behavior, frame all messages around what happens when the norm is transgressed (either positively or negatively) to support the direction you want people to act versus calling attention to ways people are not conforming (in other words, focus on highlighting those who work with you, not against you).

In Practice

To convince volunteers ...

- Use testimonials from current volunteers, to show that regular people enthusiastically support your organization.
- Use photos of real people to boost trustworthiness

To convince organizational leaders ...

- Share case studies of front-runners in the sector who have resourced volunteer programs in innovative & successful ways.
- If an executive director believes that the volunteer program has been actively supported by staff (the norm), then the messaging should focus on the negative traits of staff who are unsupportive.

Congruency

Concept

When people make a specific commitment, versus a general one, they are more likely to follow through. When they do not conform, in their own mind, with what they perceive to be their previous behavior, an uncomfortable cognitive dissonance occurs (Have you ever stood between someone and their morning Starbucks coffee run? Cognitive dissonance in action.)

People are also more apt to follow through when cues are in place to reinforce the behaviors related to the initial commitment, and are more likely to be consistent with actions they have taken before.

In Practice

To convince volunteers ...

- Use repeated messages, consistent formatting and style in volunteer documents so volunteers aren't delayed by cognitive dissonance.
- If volunteers aren't able to commit fully at first, ask them to help out in a small way, and then build from there. They will be more likely to continue with you than find another place to volunteer.

To convince organizational leaders ...

- Prime leaders with "pro-volunteer" + "success" messaging.
- If you want leaders to approve a future request, start small & reinforce. For example, ask them to present at a volunteer appreciation event (specific commitment). Send them an internal calendar invite (trigger), then continue to send invites to future events (for continued involvement).

Authority & Similarity

Concept

People's specific internal counterarguments to calls to action (or meta language) can be devastating to a message. However, people often suspend their critical thinking and defer to those they perceive as authority figures, especially when they are unsure of themselves.

People are also influenced more strongly by those they perceive to be part of their "in group." It doesn't take long to become part of an "in-group." If someone discovers that they have something genuinely in common with another person, they are on their way. The more unique the similarity, the stronger the bond (for example, "Hey, we both like rocky road ice cream!" knits a weaker bond than "Hey, we both studied under the same judo sensei in San Francisco and both have a second degree black belt!")

In Practice

To convince volunteers ...

- Engage in "small talk" during volunteer interviews to uncover similarities and reinforce a connection to the organization.
- Share a new volunteer's previous work experience and expertise when introducing them to your current volunteer team to encourage better acceptance and integration.
- Use "we" and "us" versus "you" and "them."

To convince organizational leaders ...

- Get buy-in from respected influencers before your pitch to leadership and mention who is already on board when you make your case.
- Research similarities between yourself and leaders and mention during before-meeting chit chat.
- Mimic body language during meetings with leaders.

The Paradox of Choice

The autonomy and freedom to choose is critical to our emotional well-being as humans; however, too much choice can sometimes be too much of a good thing. In some cases, when we have too many items to choose from, our brains suffer from cognitive overload, thus leading to selection paralysis. Rather than studying the options, we walk away frustrated (on an subconscious or fully conscious level).

In addition, the more choices available to us, the higher the expectation that what we choose will meet our needs precisely. In other words, the more choice, the more difficult it is to be satisfied. In addition, people blame themselves for not making the right choice, if they perceive, after the fact that another option was better (Ever had buyers remorse?).

In Practice

To convince volunteers ...

- Ideally, offer three options for volunteer opportunities, but no more than five to each volunteer (unless they have a specific request). Add more options only after they have turned down the first three to five.
- If you need to evaluate a number of project options with your volunteer team, break them down into categories to minimize cognitive overload.

To convince organizational leaders ...

- When requesting approval for a project or initiative, offer three solutions to the problem, and present the pros and cons of each as well as why you suggest the ideal option. Then, let them decide.
- Help leaders understand that too much choice, in any part of the organization, whether it be retirement plans or volunteer roles, or appreciation gift options, may be too much of a good thing. If people are having a hard time choosing, or are not participating, you know that it's likely the case.