Of course, people don’t always mindlessly give in to a request. Consider a panhandler. Many people walk by panhandlers without giving them any change because they automatically assume the request isn’t legitimate. In order to be effective, a panhandler needs to break through this mindlessness. Santos, Leve, and Pratkanis (1994) conducted a field study showing how such a breakthrough can be achieved. The participants were 289 pedestrians strolling on a wharf in Santa Cruz, California. In each case, they were approached by a female panhandler who asked them for money. There were four experimental conditions. In two conditions, the panhandler made standard requests (“Can you spare any change?” or “Can you spare a quarter?”); in the other two conditions, the requests were unusual (“Can you spare 17 cents?” or “Can you spare 37 cents?”). Only 23 percent of the passersby gave money when standard requests were used, but 37 percent did so when nonstandard requests were used. Santos and colleagues argued that the unusual request interrupted the just-walk-onby-a-panhandler script, leading people to pay more attention to the request and increasing their compliance.

Other studies provide additional evidence that subtle changes in wording can have important effects on compliance. One study found that people were more apt to give to a charity when the experimenter added “Even a penny will help” (Cialdini & Schroeder, 1976) and another found that adding the question “Can we count on you?” increased compliance with a request to give blood (Lipsitz, Kallmeyer, Ferguson, & Abas, 1989).

2. Liking and Compliance

“Hey, Jonathon,” the caller began in a friendly, effusive tone. “It’s Mark O’Brien. How ya doing?” I was doing fine, but I was also certain I didn’t know anyone named Mark O’Brien, especially someone who would speak to me as if he and I were best friends. “Fine,” I replied. “But I don’t know anyone named Mark O’Brien. Why are you calling?” As I suspected, Mark and I had never met. Instead, he was with a long-distance telephone company and wanted me to switch my policy. His affability and friendliness were nothing but an insincere marketing ploy.

Are such ploys effective? You bet they are. Tupperware parties have proved enormously successful, because people are more likely to buy a product from someone...