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**COMMITMENT ON THE INTERNET :  
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK, METHODOLOGICAL  
ISSUES AND RESEARCH AVENUES**

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# Commitment on the Internet : Theoretical framework, methodological issues and research avenues

## Summary

This article wonders to what extent the commitment theory developed by French socio-psychologists,oule and Beauvois, is relevant to understand and influence online consumer behavior.

In a first part, the main principles of the theory are first displayed : "only behaviors commit". Then, the main techniques directly derived from the commitment theory i.e. priming (low-ball), lure and foot-in-the-door techniques are described as well as the conditions that may foster the efficiency of previously described influential techniques : feeling of freedom, behavior cost and repetition, the fact that the act is irrevocable and public.

In a second part, some Websites are scrutinized. This suggests that the techniques are used online and that they could possibly be efficient in a merchant computer-mediated environment (even though they have been developed and tested in a social face-to-face experimental field). Then, fostering conditions are considered within a Web framework : it appears that feeling of freedom is increased and that one can, through Website design and content, turn behaviors into irrevocable, public, costly and repetitive ones.

In a third part, the article highlights some theoretical and methodological issues : can the main principles of the psycho-sociological theory developed in the framework of a social face-to-face interaction be generalized to a computer-mediated environment? What is the ideal combination of requests (type and delay between two requests) that lead to preparatory and desired acts? To what extent does the requester's identity and the experimental design impact the techniques efficiency? Last, the article suggests research avenues and attempts to warn researchers about the temptation to "manipulate" customers since they are unaware of the power of the techniques.

## Key-words

Commitment, Internet, low-ball, lure, foot-in-the-door, online consumer behavior



## Introduction

Today in a highly competitive environment it is essential to acquire new consumers and develop their loyalty. This issue is even more critical for websites since comparisons (products, services, prices, delivery, etc.) and shift from one company to another one are made easier (i.e. one-click-away). To reach these two objectives, companies rely on personalization, adapted offerings and communication, renewed interaction in order to give the consumer a feeling of belonging, in other words to commit him.

In psychology, the word 'commitment' refers to two different concepts. On the one hand, some psychologists assume that it is the individual who commits her/himself, from her/his own will, according to her/his own representations, attitudes, motivations, etc. Commitment is said to be 'internal' as it only depends on each human being the specificity. Note that this perspective echoes the common sense. As a matter of fact, in everyday language, 'being committed' means 'being implied.' On the other hand, social psychologists maintain that what commits somebody are her/his behaviors and that commitment varies according to the situation that yields these acts. In other words, commitment is 'external'.

In the remaining of the article, we rely upon this second approach. First we will explain the basics of the commitment theory. Second, we will exemplify it in three domains : psychosocial research, business practices and Internet. Third, we will consider some theoretical and methodological issues raised by the application of the theory to the Internet. And finally, we will suggest some avenues of research.

## 2. Main techniques and effects

### 1. Commitment theory

#### 1.1. Main concepts and underlying hypotheses

The psychosocial commitment theory goes back to Kiesler (1971) who defined commitment as a binding of the individual to behavioral acts. This definition teaches us that only behavioral acts commit. Also note that behaviors commit to several levels. In other words, and to quote Beauvois and Joule (1981), "*the commitment variable is assumed to be continuous (rather than all or nothing), the subject can be more or less be committed in its behavior*". Recently, these authors (1998) have suggested a more explicit and more operational definition according to which "*commitment corresponds, in a given situation, to the conditions under which the carrying out of an act can only be*



attributable to whom carried it out". This definition of commitment attracts attention on the conditions under which the act is carried out. Indeed, the same act carried out under different conditions does not produce the same commitment effects.

Commitment in a behavior yields two kinds of effects: cognitive effects (on the attitudes) and behavioral effects. These effects are different according to whether it is about commitment in a pro-attitudinal act (in accordance with the attitudes of whom carries it out) or in a counter-attitudinal act (opposed to the attitudes of whom carries it out). For example, urging somebody to read a text in front of an audience praising the liberalization of soft drugs policies will not have the same effects according to whether the person is in favor or against this cause. These effects are summarized in table1.

**Table 1 – Pro- and counter-attitudinal acts and their effects**

	Cognitive effects	Behavioral effects
Pro-attitudinal act	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- attitude strengthening</li> <li>- Attitude more resistant to influence attempts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- behavior stabilization</li> <li>- additional act generalization going in the same direction</li> </ul>
Counter-attitudinal act	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Initial attitude adjusted with the behavior carried out (rationalization)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Carrying out of more costly new acts</li> </ul>

### 1.2. Main techniques and effects

Mainly three techniques can be derived from the ‘external’ commitment : low-ball, lure and foot-in-the-door.

#### 1.2.1 The low-ball technique

This technique relies on one of the behavioral effects of commitment i.e. behavior stabilization. It consists in leading somebody to produce a behavior, either by dissimulating some of its disadvantages, or by displaying fictitious advantages. When s/he becomes aware of the true cost of her/his behavior, s/he tends not to reconsider her decision.

This effect was exhibited experimentally by Cialdini, Basset, Cacioppo and Miller (1978). They asked students whether they agreed to come and participate in an experiment. They did not mention the



moment of the day when students should come to the laboratory. Once they had made their decision, students were informed that they should be present at 7 A.M. Then they were asked if, under these new conditions, they still volunteered to participate in the experiment. Through this technique, the researchers involved almost twice more students to come to the laboratory at 7 A.M. than when they delivered the whole information in one time.

Low-ball is empirically used in advertising for many product categories. Let us take the example of car industry. Some car advertisements in newspapers are designed as follows: a visual part shows a vehicle corresponding to the top-of-the-range for the advertised model; below are the characteristics of this vehicle and a claim "*From X Euros*". But this price corresponds to the bottom-of-the-range model. This kind of advertisements function in the same way as low-ball. Indeed, it suggests to those who are interested in the vehicle advertised to go to a dealer. But they do not know the real cost of the car displayed in the advertisement. The person, indeed 'manipulated', will undoubtedly tend to agree to pay more than the price displayed in the advertisement in order to acquire a more sophisticated car than the entry of range one.

### 1.2.2 The lure technique

This technique relies upon two of the behavioral effects of commitment: 1) additional acts generalization going in the same direction, and 2) carrying out of more costly new acts. The lure consists in leading somebody to decide to produce a behavior being attractive to her/him. Once s/he has made her/his decision, s/he is told that, in fact, it is not possible to comply with this behavior. At the same time, s/he is suggested one or several less attractive behaviors. In fact, the person will tend to stand on her/his first line of action and to agree to perform one of the acts suggested as a substitute.

An experiment conducted by Joule, Guilloux and Weber (1989) has exhibited this effect. They have proposed students to participate in a very interesting and well-paid experiment. On their arrival, subjects were told that the experiment had been cancelled. When the students were about to leave the place, another person have asked them whether they agreed to take part voluntarily in another experiment definitely less interesting. Through this technique, Joule, Guilloux and Weber have involved almost twice more students to participate in the uninteresting experiment than when they have proposed it from the start.

In the commercial field, the lure technique is exemplified by credit offering at a very good rate, credit which unfortunately cannot be granted for various reasons; or by sales particularly attractive ... but only for extreme sizes.



Also some mail order selling companies recourse to the lure. On their catalogues, some items can be ordered with very large price reductions. It is not unusual that teleoperators advise the customers who wish to place such an order of extremely long delivery periods. Subsequently, they propose an equivalent article on which the reduction does not apply and for which delivery time waiting is tremendously shortened (it is not rare, in this case, to drop from 5 weeks to 48h!). Very often, customers who have decided to carry out a purchasing act for a reduce-priced product before putting their call, are thus led to choose a substitute product, definitely more expensive than the one they had beforehand decided to buy. This practice undoubtedly refers to the lure.

### 1.2.3 The foot-in-the-door technique

This technique relies upon the two same behavioral effects of commitment as the lure. The foot-in-the-door technique consists in leading a person to carry out a first non costly act. Once this first act is performed, the person is prone to agree to carry out a second act that is more costly and that goes in the same direction, and which would not have been carried out spontaneously.

Freedman and Fraser (1966) have demonstrated this technique efficiency. The two researchers have succeeded in leading 76% of a group of Palo Alto inhabitants to agree to place a huge billboard dealing with road safety in their front garden. They had only asked the subjects, two weeks before, to affix a small sticker on their window or on their car. The sticker simply mentioned something like "*Be a safe driver*". This percentage is to be compared with the 16,7% of persons who have favorably answered to the direct request for acceptance of the billboard putting-in.

The foot-in-the-door technique is widespread in the commercial field: particularly in systematic canvassing, sample distribution or publishing. More and more magazines, offer for an extremely reduced-price a short-time subscription. The first act does not cost much (psychologically and monetarily speaking) but it commits since it is necessary to voluntarily act not to have to pay for a subsequent 'regular' subscription. Also to illustrate further our matter, let us quote the case of a company that used to sell water distributors and coffee machines to companies. To prospect new customers, salespersons of this company were instructed to follow a 3-step procedure. First, on the phone, they had nothing else to do than get an appointment with the person in charge of the purchases for the company. Second, during the first part of the meeting, the salesman had to drive the buyer to answer a long questionnaire supposed to allow the prospected company to assess its water and coffee needs. One ending question of the questionnaire was: "Do you think that our solutions fit to your company needs?". Obviously, the 'solutions' suggested were those corresponding to the needs highlighted through the questionnaire. It was then difficult for the prospected client to answer



negatively. Thus the buyer was driven to pronounce a “yes” which produces commitment. Last, it just remained to the salesman to propose to sign a contract.

### **1.3. Factors likely to foster commitment**

The three techniques previously described share a 2-steps procedure. First, one (or several) act(s) is/are elicited thanks to a first request. Subsequently, the request corresponding to the act truly awaited for is formulated. To be efficient these techniques require that the first act yields commitment. We have seen above that only acts commit, to different levels. Thus, commitment is hypothesized to vary as a function of several cognitive and behavioral conditions (Kiesler and Sakumura, 1966; Kiesler, 1971). Specifically, commitment increasing should be correlated to:

- **How many acts are performed by the subject.** The same behavior when repeated several times produces stronger commitment than a behavior carried out only once. Note that acts can be different as long as they have the same significance. For example, to sign a petition against soft drugs decriminalization and to affix a sticker on which it is written “Stop drugs” are two different acts but with the same significance. However they probably do not commit at the same level.
- **How important acts are for the subject.** A behavior produces more commitment if it is important for whom carries it out, because it enables her/him to gain advantages for example.
- **How explicit the act is.** A behavior produces more commitment if it is carried out in public and is not ambiguous, i.e. if its significance is clear for the person who produced it and also for who observes it.
- **How irrevocable the act.** An act that prevents from going back to the previous state, that offers no possibilities to retract maximizes commitment.
- **The degree of volition perceived by the subject in performing the act.** To explain this point, Kiesler and Sakumura (1966) underline that volition can also be increased by :

*An increased degree of perceived choice*

*A decreased external pressure exerted upon the subject to perform the act*

Volition is very important because it enables somebody to perceive the bond between her/him and her/his act. Thus it prevents her/him from explaining her/his behavior by an external cause. Moreover this variable is easy to manipulate. The mere semantic evocation of freedom is sufficient to induce a feeling of free choice. As some authors say (Joule and Beauvois, 1998, for example) a mere sentence like “*You are free to...*” or “*You have the choice to...*” is here enough. Besides, to decrease the external pressure, - one has to discard promises of reward or threats of punishment.

Joule and Beauvois (1998) have suggested additional factors likely to reinforce individual commitment in an act:

- highlighting the consequences of the act for the subject
- selecting a high-cost act (in time, in energy or in money). The remaining difficulty is to determine the maximum acceptable cost
- putting forward an internal explanation i.e. showing to the subject that the act he has just carried out corresponds to his very nature, that he did not carry it out for an external reason (a reward for example).

When these conditions are cumulated at the time an act is to be produced, commitment is optimal. Nevertheless, a more restricted use of these conditions makes it possible to obtain truly satisfactory commitment effects through the three techniques previously described.

## **2. Commitment theory and the Internet**

If one has a close look at existing websites, s/he will notice that some use currently the techniques described above to foster 'external' commitment, probably without knowing the theory. This practice is described in the following section.

### **2.1 Examples of websites using commitment techniques**

#### **2.1.1 The low-ball on the Internet**

Remember that the low-ball technique consists in leading somebody to produce a behavior, either by dissimulating some of its disadvantages, or by displaying fictitious advantages. However when s/he becomes aware of the true cost of her behavior, s/he tends not to reconsider her/his decision.

*Example: The Economist's website ([www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com))*

On the homepage, it is possible to access lots of news, for free. It gives the feeling that access to the whole website is also free. If somebody wants to research the archives, s/he has to enter the research subject by typing key-words in a short form. The following page displays the request results. The articles titles and their 10 first lines are presented. To select one of them, one has to click on the corresponding link. The following page indicates that reading the whole article implies paying \$2.95.



### 2.1.2 The lure on the Internet

Remember that the lure technique consists in leading somebody to decide to produce a behavior being attractive to her/him. Once s/he has made her/his decision, s/he is told that, in fact, it is not possible to comply with this behavior. At the same time, s/he is suggested one or several less attractive acts. In fact, s/he will tend to stand on her/his first line of action and to agree to perform one of the acts suggested as a substitute. We now turn to two examples of potential lures on the Internet.

#### *Example 1: the Amazon's website (www.amazon.com)*

Imagine that on this website somebody looks for ordering the book "*Communication and Persuasion*", written in 1953 by Hovland, Janis and Kelley. S/he doesn't know that the book is out of print. S/he fills in a short form with the title of the wished book. In the results page, the looked for book does not appear but there are many alternative books dealing with a similar topic (persuasion, influence, attitude change, etc.).

This example doesn't describe a regular kind of lure. Indeed, it is not what appeared on the website that has led the Web-user to decide to order the book. S/he has made her/his decision by her/himself. Nevertheless, going into a search may probably be regarded as a kind of preparatory act, producer of commitment. And while the Web-user acknowledges that it will not be possible to achieve the purchase decided initially, he is faced with several potentially replacing books. We can consider that the likelihood that the Web-user orders one of these books is greater than if they had been proposed to her/him independently from her/his research.

#### *Example 2: the Philip G. Zimbardo's website (www.zimbardo.com), Professor of Psychology at Stanford University*

On this website, it is possible, in the same page, either to view for free a slideshow presenting a famous experiment carried out by Zimbardo (the prison experiment) or to order the videotape of the experiment. It appeared once that the link pointing at the slideshow's page was temporarily nonfunctional (probably unintentionally). Activating the link generated an error message. Thus, there remained the possibility to order the expensive (about 100\$) videotape. This substitution behavior was much more costly than the one consisting in viewing a slideshow for free. Even though this example we hope results from an unforeseeable event, it exemplifies one of the different possible kind of lure on the Internet.



### 2.1.3 The foot-in-the-door on the Internet

Remember that the foot-in-the-door technique consists in leading a person to carry out a first non costly act. Once this first act is performed, the person is prone to agree to carry out a second act that is more costly and that goes in the same direction, and which would not have been carried out spontaneously.

*Example: an IQ test on 3f68.com (www.3f68.com/3f68/iqtest/)*

This webpage proposes an IQ (Intellectual Quotient) test. A link "*I want to know more*" drives to the following page where the progress of the test is briefly explained: it takes 35 minutes, the use of a calculator is not permitted, etc. Testimonies of persons who took the test are also displayed. "*I want to take the test*". The following page explains how to purchase the test: it costs 2 dollars. It is possible to pay for this service either by buying a 'ticket'" (an access number in fact) by phone or by credit card directly on the Web. After ticket validation, it is requested to complete a short form (first name and E-mail address) so as to provide information necessary to personalize the comments and analysis that will appear at the end of the test. "*Start the IQ test!*". Following are the 50 questions of the test. When the test is over, a result page appears with the candidate's IQ level. On the same page, a personalized analysis is offered for \$6.99. To click on the link "*I want to buy my personalized analysis*" is enough. Meanwhile, an e-mail including the same offer is sent to this person.

This is clearly an attempt to implement the foot-in-the-door technique. A first non-costly request (\$2) is proposed, and after acceptance, a second act, more costly (\$6.99) is suggested. This suggests that the use of this technique involves more people to pay \$2 + \$6.99 for an IQ test plus a personalized analysis than if a global offer (test and analyses) had been displayed from the start.

## 2.2 Factors likely to foster commitment on the Internet

We have seen above which are the main variables likely to yield commitment at the time of a preparatory act. We now turn to the investigation of some of the forms they can take on the Internet.

- **The number of acts performed by the subject.** The IQ test, on 3f68.com, provides us with a good example. Indeed, the Web-user has to click 3 times and to fill in a form before the test starts. These clicks can be considered as many small preparatory acts which, when repeated several times, increase commitment. This questions the general feature of the "3-clicks rule". This rule states that a Web-user must reach the object that justifies her/his navigation on the Internet into three mouse-clicks (or less). The commitment theory suggests that on the contrary, in specific cases, it might be judicious to artificially increase the number of mouse-clicks separating the Web-user from the object which s/he wants to reach.



• **The explicitness of the act.** It does not seem to be possible to manipulate this variable on the Internet given that the Web-user is alone in front of her/his computer. Nevertheless, it may be possible to imagine having her/him participate in a forum, without using pseudonym and discuss about a product/service or brand for example. To illustrate this matter, some websites offer customers to exhibit their opinions on the products they have purchased. The question is to determine the extent to which this preparatory act could be exploited in a second step. To encourage participation, some websites (Amazon for example) claim that first-received comments on an item are eligible to gift rewarding. The above explained effect of external pressure decreasing, leads us to doubt about the relevance of gifts promise to induce comments and subsequently commitment.

• **The degree of act irrevocability.** For example, on some websites, navigation takes place in a window where each validated action prevents from going back. Indeed, the menus bar and the browser buttons are masked. This might be a favorable condition to commitment.

• **The degree of perceived choice.** We know now that the mere fact of claiming the subjects freedom makes it possible to obtain the required effects. This can easily be included in a webpage close to the proposal to realize what is conceived to become a preparatory act. Moreover, navigating on the Internet entails a greater feeling of freedom than a face-to-face or phone interaction (Hoffman and Novak, 1996; Hammond, Mc William and Diaz, 1998). Indeed, the requester is not physically embodied and it is easier not to answer to her/his request. Guéguen, Le Gouvello, Pascual, Morineau and Jacob (2002) have demonstrated this kind of effect. Web users have received a message encouraging them to devote 5 minutes to visit a website dedicated to the children victims of wars. Below the message, one could either read *"Click here"* or *"You are free to click here"*. 65,3% of the subjects from the first condition visited the website compared to 82% of those who were said to be free.

• **Putting forward an internal explanation.** Let us explain the effects through an example. In the case of the IQ test, on *3f68.com*, after the Web-user has clicked on the link *"I want to know more"*, a research wishing to validate an 'internal' explanation of this act, have appear a sentence similar to *"You have clicked on this link what means that you are somebody who is interested for better knowing his intelligence"*.

• **Conclusion.** We can conclude that the effects still exist on the Internet.

### 3. Avenues of research

The previous examples suggest that implementing techniques (low-ball, lure and foot-in-the-door) relying on the 'external' commitment theory may be an efficient lever for fostering 'positive' behaviors (i.e. purchasing on a given website or being loyal to it). Yet, it remains unclear how it really 'works'



and how the effects can be appraised. These theoretical and methodological issues are now investigated.

### **3.1. Generalization of the theory to the Internet**

The external commitment theory has been developed and tested in the domain of psycho-sociology. This implies two main differences with the Internet context studied here, which questions the generalization of the theory and its effects on the Internet.

#### **3.1.1 Nature of the request**

Almost all the investigated topics belong to the social domain. For example, in addition to those presented above, let us quote the diligence exhibited by some long-lasting unemployed persons in attending a training period, the willingness of an hospital staff members to reduce their power consumption (Joule and Beauvois, 1998) or humanitarian cause donation (Guéguen, Jacob and Legohérel, forthcoming). These topics are remote from the commercial objectives assigned to commitment techniques in the context of the Internet. Then the question is : To what extent the techniques will yield effects? Guéguen (2002) states that the foot-in-the-door technique positively influences individual behaviors whether the request is pro-social or commercial but that effects sizes are more important in case of pro-social requests. He derives his conclusion from a meta-analysis by Dillard, Hunter, and Burgoon (1984) and also from an experiment by Dillard and Hale (1992). Going back to online consumers, we may assume that foot-in-the-door techniques will be more efficient in case of social marketing.

#### **3.1.2 Conditions in which requests take place**

In general, subjects in psychosocial studies have been 'manipulated' through face-to-face interaction. Thus, the personality of the researcher, her/his ability to capture attention might have been part of the subjects responses. Do the effects of the commitment techniques remain in case of an implementation on the Internet since the interaction becomes mediated by a computer? Or are they dramatically reduced? For two reasons, we can assume that the effects still exist on the Internet.

First, on the Internet, people produce a lot of different behaviors. From the more simple behavior (e.g. to click on a hypertext link) to more sophisticated behaviors (e.g. to fill in a long form or to give its credit card number for example). So, many of these behaviors could generate commitment. As a matter of fact, the psychosocial theory assumes that only behavioral acts commit.



Second, Guéguen, Jacob and Legohérel (forthcoming) have experimentally shown this effect: a student was solicited by another student he didn't know (in fact a researcher who said to be a student) to answer an e-mail questionnaire. This is the desired task and also the second request. Among the solicited students those who had previously (15 minutes before) accepted to help the same soliciting student to convert a file from Word to RTF format (first non costly task) were more likely to comply with the costly request. Let us just add that each interaction took place by e-mail. Precisely 72,5% of the treatment group subjects have completed the questionnaire compared to the 45% of the control group subjects.

In brief, it seems to be justified, not to say interesting, to extent the domain of the theory to marketing requests through a mediated interaction.

### **3.2. Additional theoretical issues derived from the theory**

Beyond the issue of commitment theory generalization to the Internet, more fundamental questions directly linked to the theory *per se* deserve investigation.

#### **3.2.1. Optimal combination of techniques**

On the Internet, many tools are available to reach the potential Internet users: web, e-mail, news groups, forums, chats, instant messaging. They differ on many criterion among which penetration rate, users profile, (a)synchronicity. Web and e-mail are commonly used while chats or forums are mostly visited by the youngests (Journal du Net). Some, as web, e-mail, news groups or forums are asynchronous i.e. message formulation and receipt are separated by a moment. Others, as chats for example, are synchronous. They are likely to foster interaction and reactivity i.e. to produce an act.

Given the above described differences, we may wonder whether the same tools or different tools for both requests should be used. Are some tools more efficient to elicit a first non costly behavior? What should be the ideal (if any) combination? All that we know to date is that Guéguen, Jacob and Legohérel (forthcoming) have successfully combined e-mail with website: an e-mail was inviting the subject to go visit to a website dedicated to war victim children by clicking on a link. The navigation was guided thanks to hyperlinks. Some students (in the control group) were directed to a website which included a link that was inviting them to donate. Other subjects (in the experimental group) were directed to another website where a link was inviting them to sign a petition against antipersonnel mines. Once they had filled in the petition form, subjects were guided to the donation webpage. Results indicate that experimental group subjects were significantly more numerous than those in the control

group to activate the donation page. Note that the technique used for the experimental group seems to be a two-feet-in-the-door procedure (Goldman, Creason, and McCall, 1981). Indeed, two preparatory acts are required before donation : 1) visit the website and 2) sign a petition.

### **3.2.2 Cognitive and affective antecedents and effects**

The psycho-social commitment theory focuses on behavior elicitation and its consequences on attitude. It predicts attitude strengthening in case of pro-attitudinal task and initial attitude adjustment with the behavior carried out (rationalization) in case of counter-attitudinal task (see table 1). Moreover, the theory remains silent about what causes initial motivation to commit i.e. what is the underlying process that drives somebody to positively answer to the first non-costly request ? Does it depend on the request or on individual characteristics? To date these questions remain unanswered. But they deserve a huge attention as it the starting point of the influential process. From a theoretical point of view, it is a key factor to understand and it is critical variable to « master » from a managerial perspective.

The next question is: How to appraise the effects of the techniques? In other words, which data collecting methodology is best suited? Which variables should be measured in order to have a valid appraisal of the influential effect of the techniques?

## **3.3. Methodological issues**

### **3.3.1 Experimental designs**

Former experiments mainly conducted in the field of social sciences have used factorial designs. One group is 'manipulated' through one or more of the techniques described previously while another group (the control group) is submitted to no treatment i.e. is directly asked to perform the task. Then attitudinal and/or behavioral responses of each group are compared. If the difference is statistically significant then the efficiency of the treatment is assessed.

The studies quoted along this article exemplify that experimental designs are powerful at exhibiting influential effects. Yet, two 'technical' issues remain unclear as part of an implementation on the Internet: 1) the delay between the two (or more) requests and 2) the identity of the person who asks for tasks completion.



### 3.3.2 Delay between the two requests

Social sciences experiments have questioned the impact of delay between the two requests on the foot-in-the-door efficiency. A meta-analysis of 69 published experiments by Dillard, Hunter, and Burgoon (1984) have exhibited no correlation between effect sizes and delay. Moreover these results are challenged by other researches. For example, Chartrand, Pinckert, and Burger (1999) have experimentally shown that, in some cases, to be efficient the foot-in-the-door technique implies a certain delay between the two requests not to give the subject the feeling that her/his freedom, volition is reduced. Also Joule and Beauvois (2002) have recommended a certain delay between the two requests: they state that the optimal delay is around 7 to 10 days.

The issue of delay between the two requests is particularly critical on the Internet as time perception and expectancies regarding time are modified (Hoffman and Novak, 1996) : Web users want quick information search and product delivery. They ask for easy and fast interaction with companies, etc. Thus, optimal delays probably need to be re-assessed on the Internet. Intuitively, they should be shortened. But to what extent? This issue deserves attention. To date, to our knowledge, the only contribution to evidence building is due to Guéguen, Jacob and Legohérrel (forthcoming): the delay between the two requests has been shortened to 15 to 20 minutes. Remember that the experiment sample was made up of students and that thus this can not be generalized to commercial issues on the Internet.

### 3.3.3 Requester identity

Social sciences researchers have investigated the impact of having the same person compared to another person formulating the second request. For foot-in-the-door technique, results are mitigated : Chartrand, Pinckert, and Burger (1999) have highlighted that, in case the delay between the two requests is extremely short, the influential technique is efficient only if the two interviewers are different. Others have exhibited effects with the same, or different interviewers (for example, Freedman and Fraser, 1966). Regarding low-ball technique, no effects have been exhibited if the second request is formulated by a second researcher (Burger and Petty, 1981).

To summarize, usually it seems to be more efficient, whatever the technique, to have the same interviewer formulate both requests. On the Internet, where the request is 'depersonalized' since the interaction is mediated by a computer, the question is 'How to have the subject clearly identify the requester?'. This might be easier in case of person-to-person interaction (see Guéguen, Jacob and Legohérrel (forthcoming) experiment on students) than in case of company-to-person interaction.



### 3.3.4 Manipulation efficiency

Psycho-social experimental designs have measured commitment only after treatment (i.e. influential technique implementation) and compared the results to the control group. This questions the efficiency of the manipulation. Indeed, how to be sure that the measure results only from manipulation? A random sampling can not guarantee that the samples are equivalent regarding former attitude and willingness to commit. To ascertain experimental manipulation effects, a measure should have been assessed before the treatment (Perdue and Summers, 1986). But then, how to make sure that this measure beforehand will not influence commitment as the subject might be more sensitive, feel more involved in the topic...? Remember that the 'external' commitment theory assumes that acts commit and that even an act as simple as expressing an attitude can lead to commitment (Beauvois and Joule, 1981).

To overcome the above mentioned pitfalls, we suggest a two-step experimental design. Imagine recurrent and heavy traffic website. During the pre-experimental phase, over a three-month period, each connection to the website generates a cookie consisting of a number (1 to n, following an incremental function). During the experimental phase, individuals are assigned to a group depending on whether their cookie number is even or odd. Given the heavy traffic and according to the law of large numbers, one may consider that subjects are randomly assigned to the group and that commitment probability is equal in both groups.

### Conclusion

Extending the 'external' commitment theory to the Internet seems to be a promising field for future theoretical and empirical researches. Almost everything remains to be done. Direct managerial implications are obvious: influential techniques such as low-ball, lure or foot-in-the-door are probably very powerful at committing Web-users i.e. at eliciting behaviors likely to be a first step to loyalty, purchase, donation, etc.

However, marketing researchers should think carefully about their work ethics. As a matter of fact, the influential techniques derived from commitment theory are truly pernicious to the extent that they lead consumers to persuade themselves that the acts they carry out result only for their own volition. They are not aware of the influential goal of the website (contrary to advertising that clearly exhibits persuasion objectives). Moreover, they can hardly resist techniques effects.



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