

# Low ball technique in psychology



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## Introduction

You walk into a car dealership and find the perfect car to impress your friends with. A salesperson tells you it's going to cost \$5,000. You agree to buy it right then and there because after all, the textbooks for your psychology courses cost about the same. However, after you commit to buying the car, the salesperson points out that adding a stereo, air conditioner and floor mat will cost an extra \$800. Since you already committed yourself to buying the car, you agree. You drive out in your brand new car feeling like a boss, not knowing that you just got low-balled. The low-ball technique is used to gain compliance as a person is led to accept performing a target behaviour without knowing the real cost of the request (Joule, 1987). The low-ball technique is used in many real life settings, such as by sales-people in car dealerships (Glendinning, 2000) and for events like charities (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011). Furthermore, the technique is person committed, not task committed. When you agree to buy that new car from the car salesman, you commit to him, not the task. In other words, it is due to the obligation to the requester rather than a commitment to the target behaviour (Burger & Petty, 1981). You may think you are immune to it but you are not. In fact, both women and men comply with the low-ball technique in similar ways.

## Why the Low-Ball Technique Works

This success of this technique works on the principle of commitment (Kiesler, 1971). Commitment has been given because the person says "yes" or agrees to an initial request. When the request changes or becomes

unreasonable, the person will (to a degree) find it difficult to say “ no” because of having originally committed themselves. A study by Guéguen (2002) aimed to prove this concept. In this study, randomly selected participants, who were passersby exiting a hospital in France, were asked to keep a dog on a leash until a male confederate came back from a hospital visit. In the control condition, the confederate stated the time would be gone for (30 minutes) whereas in the low-ball condition, he stated the time AFTER the subject had agreed to keeping the dog. The results were statistically significant as more people accepted the request in the experimental condition than in the control condition. The results explain that once the subject has decided to help the confederate, the subject sticks to that decision even if the terms to help become more costly. Once the participants in the low-ball condition agreed to keep the dog on a leash, they stuck to their decision even after the confederate told them that he would be gone for 30 minutes. The low rate of refusal, observed after the real cost has been stated, reinforces the persistence of an initial decision. This experiment showed that the low-ball technique is not only effective on verbal behaviour but actual behaviour as well. Further evidence showing that the low-ball technique works and is not just a sales myth is apparent in a study led by researchers Cialdini, Bassett, Cacioppo and Miller (1978). In this experiment, students were asked to participate in an experiment about thinking processes. In the control condition, subjects were informed that the experiment starts at 7: 00 a. m. before being asked if they agree to participate, whereas students in the experimental condition were asked to participate before being informed that the experiment starts at 7: 00 a. m. The results showed that more students in the low-ball condition (first

agreeing to participate and then being informed about the time) made an appointment as compared to the control condition. More importantly, more of the students in the low-ball condition actually came to the appointed time as compared to the control condition subjects. This is important as it shows that the low-ball technique produces behavioural compliance in addition to verbal compliance.

Through such studies, it is evident that the low-ball technique is effective and produces not just verbal compliance but also behaviour compliance. However, in these studies, the tasks were all fairly simple and not out of the norm. Would you say that the low-ball technique would work even on deviant requests? The answer to that is yes! A recent study published by Guéguen and Pascual (2014) aimed to prove this. In this study, a request was made to subjects. After the subjects agreed, they were informed that the request referred to deviant behaviours. Basically, subjects were asked for a lighter and after agreement on the subject's part, the confederate took out a large joint of cannabis. The results in the study were significant because subjects maintained their decision even when the request became clearly more deviant. A second experiment was carried out in which compliance with different levels of deviant behaviours was examined. Results showed that overall compliance decreased as the request became more problematic. However, results also showed that at each level, the low-ball condition increased compliance with the final request. The participants in the low-ball condition were more likely to agree to the final (most deviant) request than the participants in the control condition. These experiments show that the low-ball technique is still effective even when the behaviours requested were

deviant or illegal. In these two experiments, the high level of compliance associated with low-balling seems to show that the pressure to comply is high and that makes the decision to refuse more difficult. Individuals who are committed to an initial behaviour will then attempt to act in line with their initial decision, even if the behaviour request appears less rewarding or more problematic.

What is required for it to work?

Pretend you ask your friend to babysit your little brother for a few hours so that you can go out and party. After they agree, tell them that you are actually going to go sleep over at a friend's house and that it will take more than a few hours, so they'll have to stay the night. They will agree to stay the whole night and you'll finally get to go out (after all the studying you did whilst watching bad movies on Netflix). This may seem simple enough but there are a few rules you have to follow to ensure that the low-ball technique works:

1. *The first decision should be made with a high degree of choice*

An experiment was conducted by Cialdini, Cacioppo, Bassett, & Miller (1978) to determine whether the degree of volition (high vs. low) affected compliance in the low-ball condition. Students enrolled in an introductory psychology course were asked to participate in an experiment for one hour of credit. The participants read descriptions of two tests: the California F scale and the National involvement scale. In the low-ball condition, students were informed that the National Involvement scale would be worth two hours of credit. In the high violation condition, they were given the choice between

the two tests. In the low violation condition, students were assigned to take one of the two tests (which was always the National Involvement test). The results showed that the low-ball technique is more effective when the initial decision is made with free choice (high volition condition). A possible reason for this is that when a person freely chooses to perform an action, he/she feels responsible for it (Kiesler, 1971). Also, individuals are less likely to change a decision when they are committed to it in order to prevent negative self-perceptions (e. g., impulsiveness, a lack of intelligence or incompetent decision-making, etc.).

### *2. Allowing people to respond*

An experiment was conducted by Burger and Cornelius (2003) to determine whether having the ability to respond has an effect on compliance. In this study, students living on-campus were asked to donate to a scholarship fund over the phone. Subjects in the low-ball condition were asked whether they wanted to donate \$5 for a free coupon at Jamba Juice. If the subjects accepted, the experimenter told them that they had run out of coupons then asked whether they would still like to donate. Participants in the interrupt condition heard the same request but the experimenter did not pause after asking the first time if the participant wanted to donate. Rather, the experimenter immediately told the participant that there were no more coupons. In the control condition, participants were asked to donate \$5 to the fund without any mention of coupons. The results showed that participants in the low-ball condition were more likely to agree to the target request than participants in either the interrupt condition or the control condition. For the low ball technique to work, people have to be able to

respond to the initial request before hearing the final cost. In fact, when people were prevented from replying, it actually led to a decrease in compliance as compared to the control group.

### *3. Kindly explaining why the initial request was changed*

Maj's study (as cited in Gamian-Wilk, 2007) aimed to determine whether polite behaviour has an effect on compliance in the low-ball technique. Students in the first and second years at the Advanced School of Social Psychology were offered to buy books. The results showed that for the technique to work, you must politely explain why the initial proposal was changed. Polite behaviour exerts significant influence on the process of decision-making as it decreases the number of withdrawals from the initial decision.

### Foot-in-the-door technique vs. the low-ball technique

Similar to the low-ball technique, the foot-in-the-door technique is another way to gain compliance. Both of these techniques have the subjects perform a target behaviour by having them accept to an initial request. However, in the low-ball technique, there is only one behaviour the subjects have to perform (the initial and final requests are related to the target behaviour) whereas in the foot-in-the-door technique, the subjects have to perform two behaviours (the initial and final request related to different behaviours). A study by Joule regarding tobacco deprivation was conducted to determine which technique is more effective. In the study, subjects were asked to abstain from smoking for 18 hours. In one condition, the low-ball technique was used to gain compliance whereas in the other condition, the foot-in-the-

door technique was used. Results clearly favored the low-ball technique because of its higher degree of cognitive commitment to the target behaviour which results in more compliance. In the foot-in-the-door technique, the initial request and the final request pertain to different behaviours, so the participant is not as committed.