



THE SURPRISING PERSUASIVENESS OF A STICKY NOTE



Imagine that you really need to convince someone to do something, such as following through on a task. You might be surprised to learn that one of the best ways to get someone to comply with your request is through a tiny nuance that adds a personal touch—attaching a sticky note.

A brilliant set of experiments by Randy Garner at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville found that a) adding a personal touch, and b) making someone feel like you're asking a favour of them (and not just anyone) can bring about impressive results when done in tandem.

The goal of Garner's experiments was to see what was necessary to generate compliance in completing surveys—which are often quite lengthy and tedious—by fellow professors at the university, using only interoffice mail as the conduit of communication. The wild card factor in these experiments was the use of sticky notes. In one experiment, he sent surveys to three separate groups of 50 professors (150 professor's total). Three groups received three different requests, as follows:

Group 1 received a survey with a sticky note attached asking for the return of the completed survey.

Group 2 received a survey with the same handwritten message on the cover letter instead of an attached sticky note.

Group 3 received a survey with a cover letter, but no handwritten message.

What happened?

Group 3: 36% of the professors returned the survey.

Group 2: 48% of the professors returned the survey.

Group 1: 76% of the professors returned the survey.

Generalizing this experiment in other contexts simply requires understanding *why* the sticky note worked so well. It represents many powerful behavioral triggers all in one little object:

1. It doesn't match the environment—the sticky note takes up space and looks a bit cluttered. The brain, therefore, wants it gone.
2. It gets attention first because of #1. It's difficult to ignore.
3. It's personalized. (That's the difference between Group 2 and Group 3 in the experiment.)



4. Ultimately, the sticky note represents *one person* communicating with *another important person*—almost as if it is a favor or special request, which makes the recipient feel important.

Garner couldn't help but explore the sticky note factor further. He decided to do a second experiment where he sent a group of professors a *blank* sticky note attached to one of the surveys. Here's what happened:

Group 1 received a survey with a personalized sticky note message.

Group 2 received a survey with a *blank* sticky note attached.

Group 3 received a survey with no sticky note.

What happened in the second study?

Group 3: 34% returned the survey with no sticky note (similar to the first experiment).

Group 2: 43% returned the survey with the blank sticky note.

Group 1: 69% returned the survey with the personalized sticky note (similar to the first experiment).

The real magic, it seems, is not the sticky note itself, but the sense of connection, meaning, and identity that the sticky note represents. The person sending the survey is *personally* asking *me* in a special way (not just writing it on the survey) to help him or her out.

But there's more to compliance than just the result. There's also the speed of compliance and the quality of the effort. Garner experimented to see how quickly people would return a follow-up survey if there was a sticky note attached and also measured how much information the person being surveyed returned if there was a sticky note attached vs. the group that received no sticky note. Here's what he found:

Group 1 (with sticky note) returned their self-addressed stamped envelopes (SASEs) and surveys within an average of about 4 days.

Group 2 (no sticky note) returned their SASEs and surveys in an average of about 5 1/2 days.

But the most notable difference is that Group 1 also sent significantly more comments and answered other open-ended questions with more words than Group 2 did.

Further experiments revealed that if a task is easy to perform or comply with, a simple sticky note request needs no further personalization. But, when the task is more involved, a more highly personalized sticky note was significantly more effective than a simple standard sticky note request. What makes it truly personal? Writing a brief message is effective, but adding the person's first name at the top and your initials at the bottom causes significantly greater compliance.

I've used this personalization theory with business people around the world to great success. For example, a mortgage broker I worked with tested this approach in mailings, ef-



fectively doubling the number of phone calls from people pursuing a loan with the broker. And it's not just effective at the office or with clients—the people you live with are going to respond to the sticky note model as well. (Try sticking one on the bathroom mirror and see what happens.)

Recently, the personalized sticky note has been put into digital form for use in email, to mixed results. It's most effective in email when the two people have met, or know each other. It had only had modest effect in sales letters designed to make an immediate sale, when the reader didn't know the author of the sales letter. Using the notes in sales letters designed for current clients and customers needs further testing.

The next time you need colleagues to comply with a request, or the next time you're giving a potential client a portfolio to review, try leaving a sticky note. A small personal touch will go a long way toward getting the results you want.

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