

# The SMALL BIG

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SMALL changes  
that spark BIG influence

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# Introduction

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**B**ritney Spears hit the headlines for hers. So did the actors Gérard Depardieu and Lindsay Lohan. But celebrity no-shows aren't just limited to court appearances (or, more accurately, nonappearances). Some celebrities even let down their own fans. The British rock band Oasis earned a reputation for being somewhat less than reliable when it came to show time, and the US country-and-western singer George Jones failed to show up to his concerts on such a regular basis that, for years, he was known to fans as "No-Show Jones."

Unlike these headline grabbers, the no-shows in everyday life don't get much attention. A diner fails to honor a restaurant booking; a citizen misses jury service; a meeting slips the mind of a busy executive; a friend forgets to meet for coffee; or a patient fails to show up for a medical appointment.

Viewed in isolation, these missed appointments don't seem that costly. But every year millions of business meetings, hairdresser appointments, restaurant reservations, sales presentations, and student tutorials are missed. And, when scaled up, these small lapses can have an enormous financial impact.

Take someone who fails to show up for a medical appointment. At first glance it's no big deal. One could easily imagine a busy, overloaded physician viewing a patient no-show as a rare opportunity to catch up on paperwork, make a few calls, or take a short break. But when such incidents become regular occurrences, the cumulative impact of inefficiency, lost income, and sunken costs can be huge. In the United Kingdom no-shows

are estimated to cost the National Health Service some £800 million every year; in the United States, some healthcare economists estimate that no-shows create billions of dollars in losses.

In the hospitality industry, when patrons fail to show up for their reservations, restaurants can experience a decline in revenues, dwindling profits, and, if the no-show numbers go uncorrected, even closure.

Other businesses suffer when costly meetings need to be rescheduled because an individual crucial to the decision-making process fails to arrive, or because potential clients who accepted an invitation to a sales presentation, trade show, or convention turn out to be no-shows.

So what can be done?

Fortunately when it comes to persuading people to keep their appointments and, more generally, to live up to their commitments, small changes can have a big impact. In a recent study that we carried out in health centers, we implemented two small changes that resulted in a significant reduction in no-shows. Both changes were costless to implement, but their financial impact could be huge, potentially enabling the healthcare providers concerned to save tens of millions of dollars every year.

We will describe what those two small changes were in one of the chapters that follows (chapter 8 if you can't wait), but it is important to recognize that persuading someone to keep an appointment is just a single example of an influence challenge. There are hundreds of things we need to persuade others to do in lots of different situations and environments.

Regardless of who we need to persuade, what we will consistently reveal throughout this book is a simple truth: *When it comes to influencing the behaviors of others, it is often the smallest changes in approach that make the biggest differences.*

This is a book about how to influence and persuade others in effective and ethical ways. It offers usable information about



lots of small but key changes (more than 50 in fact) that you can employ immediately. Importantly, within the chapters that follow, we won't rely on hunches or guesses to identify which particular changes might bring about significantly transformed responses. Instead we will offer evidence based on a large body of persuasion science to show you precisely which small changes can bring about big effects across a wide range of situations.

Over thirty years ago one of us (Robert Cialdini) published *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*. That book described the six universal principles of persuasion, identified from a review of the available scientific evidence at the time and from Cialdini's own comprehensive three-year field study. Since then, researchers have confirmed these six principles and practitioners in all sorts of fields continue to put them to use. They are *reciprocity* (people feel obligated to return favors performed for them), *authority* (people look to experts to show them the way), *scarcity* (the less available the resource, the more people want it), *liking* (the more that people like others, the more they want to say yes to them), *consistency* (people want to act consistently with their commitments and values), and *social proof* (people look to what others do in order to guide their own behavior).

In our follow-up book, *Yes! 50 Secrets from the Science of Persuasion*, we offered updated and specific advice about how to employ these principles as well as numerous other strategies informed by persuasion science.

But science rarely stops to take a breath.

Over the last few years, more and more research from fields such as neuroscience, cognitive psychology, social psychology, and behavioral economics has helped to uncover an even greater understanding of how influence, persuasion, and behavior change happens. In this new book, we'll review more than 50 of these new insights and ideas with the majority drawn from research conducted over the last few years.

We have purposely written these insights as short chapters; each should take, on average, no longer than ten minutes or so to read. That will be enough time to allow you to understand the psychological mechanism at play that we, and many other researchers, have confirmed through scientific studies. We'll then quickly move to how you can practically apply the idea or insight across a range of contexts—in business and workplace settings with colleagues, clients, and coworkers; at home with your friends and neighbors; and in a host of other common interactions you may encounter. We will also discuss how to apply these ideas in many common situations, such as face-to-face interactions, group meetings, telephone conversations, email exchanges, and online or social media networks.

In addition to mining insights from the latest persuasion science there is something else new about the material in this book—its focus on the theme of small changes that lead to big effects. For the first time, we'll be considering how to influence and persuade others (in entirely ethical ways) by considering only the smallest changes that are likely to lead to the biggest effects.

We call this type of change a SMALL BIG.

We think that this focus on scientifically informed, small yet high-impact changes is critically important because the approach that people typically use to persuade others is becoming increasingly ineffective.

Most people believe that when making decisions they consider all the available information at their disposal and come to an informed decision about the right course of action. No surprise then, that they believe the same must be true for others, and that the best way to persuade people is to provide them with all the available information and a rationale for why they should pay attention to it.

For example, a medical doctor, on diagnosing one of her patients with a long-term illness which, although not trivial,

is eminently treatable, may present that patient with information about what has caused the condition, its etiology, and the prognosis before suggesting a number of steps to manage the condition, such as making dietary changes and taking prescribed medicines at the right time and dosage. An IT director who is becoming increasingly frustrated by the growing number of employees downloading unauthorized software onto company computers might send out a communication to his employees describing, at length, the potential implications of their actions and the reasons why they are considered infringements of company policy.

It's not just physicians and IT directors who attempt to inform people into a desirable change. We all do it. Want to persuade that new client that your product is more effective than your competitors' and therefore warrants that 20 percent price premium? Then provide a body of additional information and rebuttals that support your claims. Want to convince your team that your latest change program is different from the dozen or so you have rolled out in the past? Then provide lots of reasons and show them how everyone will benefit this time around. Want to persuade your clients to sign up to your company's stock market investment plan? Then carefully walk them through a highly technical analysis of your company's investment history, ensuring that you highlight the most impressive results. Want to get your kids to do their homework and go to bed on time? Then tell them about studies showing how doing homework increases their chances of getting into an Ivy League school, and maybe follow up with some research results on the beneficial effects of sleep.

Yet the latest persuasion science research reveals an often overlooked insight that goes a long way to explaining why strategies that simply attempt to inform people into making a change carry a high likelihood of failure.

In short, it is not information per se that leads people to make decisions, but the context in which that information is presented. We are living in the single most information-overloaded, stimulation-saturated environment that has ever existed. People just don't have the capacity to fully consider every piece of information in their time-scarce, attention-challenged, busy lives. Successful influence is increasingly governed by context rather than cognition and by the psychological environment in which such information is presented. As a result, anyone can significantly increase their ability to influence and persuade others by not only attempting to inform or educate people into change, but also by simply making small shifts in their approach to link their message to deeply felt human motivations. A small change in the setting, framing, timing, or context of *how information is conveyed* can dramatically alter *how it is received and acted upon*.

As behavioral scientists who study both the theory and practice of influence and persuasion, we are constantly fascinated by not only how breathtakingly slight the changes to a communicator's message can be that spawn enormous effects, but also how rarely those changes require large investments in time, effort, or money. Throughout this book we will be careful to pinpoint which small changes to make and how to employ them strategically and ethically so that you can produce BIG differences in your ability to influence others without resorting to costly financial levers (incentives, discounts, rebates, penalties, etc.) or using up valuable time and resources.

We will also point to a number of mysteries and pose a series of questions that can be explained by a better understanding of persuasion science. For example:

- What small alteration can you make to an email that could make your business partners easier to negotiate with?

- What can hurricanes, 99-cent price endings, and frozen yogurt teach you about small changes that can lead to effective persuasion?
- What small changes in approach can help you to host more productive meetings?
- And what small, costless shift in language can motivate others (and yourself for that matter) to complete a goal such as achieving a sales target, losing weight, taking up a new hobby, or getting your kids to complete their homework?

It is perhaps easy, in today's fast-paced, data-rich world, where information updates are immediately available at the click of a button or the swipe of a screen, to dismiss the importance of small changes in the context of that information. But to do so would be a mistake.

While there can be no doubt that new technologies and instantly accessible information have brought us wonderful benefits, the cognitive hardware that we use to process that information has remained largely unchanged for centuries. Ironically, as the amount of information we have at our disposal to make better decisions increases, the less likely we are to use all of that information when we do have to decide. People today are just as likely to be influenced by small changes in communication context as were our ancestors from hundreds or thousands of years ago.

When it comes to influencing and persuading others in ethical and effective ways, *small is very much the new big*. As you will begin to see in the pages ahead, by simply incorporating small, scientifically informed changes into a persuasive appeal, the impact can be great.

So let's begin our journey into this new science of persuasion by showing how small changes in the wording of a letter

persuaded thousands of citizens to take action and pay the taxes they owed, earning the relevant government office hundreds of millions of pounds in additional revenues. Then, let's consider the implications for your own persuasive efforts.

Steve J. Martin  
Noah J. Goldstein  
Robert B. Cialdini

## CHAPTER 1

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# What SMALL BIG can persuade people to pay their taxes on time?

Like tax collectors in a lot of countries, officials in Britain's Her Majesty's Revenue & Customs (HMRC) had a problem: Too many citizens weren't submitting their tax returns and paying what they owed on time.

For many years officials at HMRC had created a variety of letters and communications targeted at late-payers. The majority of these approaches focused on the various consequences that late-payers would face if they failed to respond and pay on time: interest charges, late fees, and legal action. For some folks these traditional approaches worked well, but for many others they did not. So in early 2009, in consultation with our company INFLUENCE AT WORK, HMRC decided to try an alternative approach informed by persuasion science. All it involved was one small change: a single sentence added to their standard letter.

This small change was remarkable not only for its simplicity, but also for the huge difference it made in response rates. The new letters led to the collection of £560 million of the £650 million debt that was the focus of the pilot studies, representing a clearance rate of 86 percent. To put this into perspective, the previous year HMRC had collected £290 million of a possible £510 million—a clearance rate of just 57 percent.