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# Invoking Social Norms

## A Social Psychology Perspective on Improving Hotels' Linen-Reuse Programs

by NOAH J. GOLDSTEIN, VLADAS GRISKEVICIUS, and ROBERT B. CIALDINI

Social psychology theory can be applied to such mundane purposes as encouraging guests to reuse their washroom towels. In contrast to the appeals now in use to persuade guests to reuse their towels, research found that applying the norm of reciprocity and the descriptive norm for proenvironmental action improved guests' participation in one hotel's towel-reuse program. The implication is that such research can also be applied to other areas of hotel operation to benefit businesses, consumers, and the environment.

**Keywords:** social psychology; towel reuse; green hotel management; social norms

**F**or many reasons, hotel operators would like to encourage their guests to participate in programs for reusing their washroom towels. Not only do these programs benefit the environment, but they

reduce laundry expenses. Beyond the direct savings, a growing segment of consumers rewards businesses that attend to environmental issues through their business practices (Carlson, Grove, and Kangun 1993; Menon and Menon 1997).

To enlist guests' participation, hotels typically place an information card in their washrooms using one appeal or another to encourage the guests to reuse their towels. Our purpose in this article is to explain the psychology underlying the invitation for guests to reuse their bath linens and delineate an approach to improve guests' participation. Looking at the dozens of cards that we have collected from a diverse assortment of hotels, we found that the most common plea focuses on basic environmental protection (Cialdini and Goldstein 2002). Specifically, guests are usually informed that reusing their towels will conserve natural resources and

help save the environment from further adulteration and depletion. Two other common appeals invoke guests' sense of social responsibility to future generations or inform guests of the substantial potential savings to the hotel.

We also note a type of message that seems to be used with increasing frequency, based on the concept of cooperation through incentives. In such messages, guests are told that by reusing their towels they will become cooperating partners with the hotel in furthering its conservation efforts. To encourage cooperation in such cases, guests are told that if they reuse their towels, the hotel will donate some percentage of those savings to environmental causes.

### An Initial Test of Traditional Appeals

As psychology researchers who study social influence, we were naturally interested in how well each of these appeals motivates guests to participate in towel-reuse programs. After assessing the psychology underlying each of the existing appeals, we will explain our test of a modified approach that seems to be more effective than the existing appeals. To accomplish this, we worked with the management at a Phoenix-area hotel to test four signs of our own device (Goldstein, Cialdini, and Griskevicius 2007). The four messages were chosen to reflect the purest forms of the four types of appeal that we have observed, namely, environmental protection, social responsibility, environmental cooperation, and benefits to the hotel. All of the signs were otherwise identical in two respects. On the front, the cards informed guests that they could participate in the program by placing their used towels on the washroom towel rack or shower curtain rod. On the back, they provided information regarding the extent to which the environment would benefit and energy would be

conserved if most guests participated in the program.

They differed in their persuasive appeals, although the formats were identical. Each of the four signs communicated its message using a short headline in boldface and capital letters; additional text was located underneath that further explained the appeal, as follows.

1. *Environmental protection* appeal: "HELP SAVE THE ENVIRONMENT. You can show your respect for nature and help save the environment by reusing your towels during your stay."
2. *Social responsibility for future generations* appeal: "HELP SAVE RESOURCES FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS. Future generations deserve our concern. Please do your part to protect the environment and conserve dwindling resources for future generations to enjoy. You can help preserve these precious resources for all of us by reusing your towels during your stay."
3. *Environmental cooperation* appeal: "PARTNER WITH US TO HELP SAVE THE ENVIRONMENT. In exchange for your participation in this program, we at the hotel will donate a percentage of the energy savings to a nonprofit environmental protection organization. The environment deserves our combined efforts. You can join us by reusing your towels during your stay."
4. *Benefit to the hotel* appeal: "HELP THE HOTEL SAVE ENERGY. The hotel management is concerned about the rising expense to the hotel of energy, labor, and other resources. You can help the hotel save energy by reusing your towels during your stay."

Room attendants were trained to record whether guests participated in the program on the first day that the attendant serviced that room. In sum, the data revealed that the two environmental appeals and the social responsibility appeal elicited approximately the same degree of participation, averaging about 30 percent. In contrast, the appeal based on benefit to the hotel drew a participation rate of less than 16 percent. We were not surprised that the approach of arguing for

the hotel's own interest was the least successful appeal. In addition, the difference in participation rates between that appeal and the other three was encouraging in that it informed us that guests were in fact reading our signs.

### The Norm of Reciprocation

The finding that jumped out at us is that the cooperation-based appeal, in which the hotel asked guests to become cooperating partners with the hotel in furthering conservation efforts via an incentive system, fared no better at eliciting towel reuse than did either the standard environmental appeal or the social-responsibility appeal (around 30 percent). We could think of two reasons that this environmental-partnership approach should be the most effective strategy. First, as a general principle, cooperating with another individual or entity toward the achievement of a common goal is inherently more motivating than attempting to achieve that goal on one's own (Stanne, Johnson, and Johnson 1993). Second, this cooperation appeal closely mirrors a typical cause-related marketing appeal, in which a company promises to contribute to a designated cause when the consumer takes a designated action. Such marketing strategies are generally considered effective (Varadarajan and Menon 1988).

Despite the reasons that stand in support of this type of appeal, we saw an opportunity to enhance its persuasive power. What is missing in the environmental partnership appeal as we found it is the concept of social obligation. As they stand, the cards speak of an obligation on the part of a consumer to cooperate with the hotel, which is offering the consumer something only on the condition that the consumer initiates the cooperative effort. Contrast this with the norm of reciprocation. Nearly all societies are founded on a powerful sense of social obligation that is

embodied in the norm of reciprocation, in which a person is expected to cooperate with individuals who do something for that person first and then later ask for a favor in return (Cialdini 2001; Gouldner 1960; Regan 1971).

The norm of reciprocity not only presides over relationships between individuals, it also governs relationships and exchanges between consumers and businesses. For example, consumers are motivated to reward companies that they perceive to have put a great deal of effort into their product, even when the consumers themselves do not directly benefit from that effort (Morales 2005). Moreover, the norm of reciprocity is one element that is crucial to the development and maintenance of relationships (Cialdini and Goldstein 2004), including exchanges between consumers and firms (Aggarwal 2004).

This analysis suggests that a more effective way to invoke an environmental partnership would be to reverse the action sequence. That is, the hotel should give the donation first and then ask guests to cooperate in this effort by reusing their towels. To test this hypothesis, we conducted a second study, as follows. In addition to testing once again the cards with the environmental-protection appeal and the environmental-partnership appeal (the one that states that the hotel would make a donation contingent on the guests' participation in the linen-reuse program), we tested a third card containing a revised appeal, which stated that the hotel has already donated to an environmental protection organization on behalf of the hotel's guests and asked guests to reciprocate this gesture by reusing the towels.

This card, invoking the *norm of reciprocation*, appeared as follows: "WE'RE DOING OUR PART FOR THE ENVIRONMENT. CAN WE COUNT ON YOU? Because we are committed to preserving the

environment, we have made a financial contribution to a nonprofit environmental protection organization on behalf of the hotel and its guests. If you would like to help us in recovering the expense, while conserving natural resources, please reuse your towels during your stay.”

With a participation rate of 45.2 percent, the reciprocation-norm card was far more effective at encouraging linen reuse than was the environmental-cooperation card (30.7 percent participation in this trial). This finding was particularly interesting given the overall similarity of these appeals’ content. Although both of these messages informed the guests that the hotel was donating money to an environmental protection organization, the key difference is found in the reciprocation-norm concept, in which guests are informed that the hotel had initiated the joint effort. The results indicate that making the donation prior to and regardless of guests’ participation elicited greater towel reuse than did making the donation contingent on guests’ participation.

### Descriptive Norms

Next, we wanted to test another type of norm, the descriptive norm, which, like the reciprocity norm, we have never observed being used in any hotel’s linen-reuse appeal. A descriptive norm refers to the action that is most commonly performed in a given situation. This type of norm motivates behavior by informing individuals of what is likely to be effective or adaptive conduct in that situation. Information or observation of how others behave in a given situation becomes an especially powerful guiding factor in novel or ambiguous situations (Festinger 1954). Much research has shown that the behavior of others in the social environment shapes individuals’ interpretations of and responses to the situation (Milgram, Bickman, and Berkowitz 1969; Sharif 1936). When individuals perceive sufficient social

support for a particular behavior, they tend to follow the lead of others because, according to this theory, a decision-making shortcut of this type saves them time and cognitive effort while providing an outcome that has a high probability of being effective.

Given the volume of research that supports the supposition that descriptive norms should increase participation in the towel-reuse program compared to standard appeals, we added a card with a fourth message to our second study. Based on information from the supplier of the linen-reuse cards, we could state that nearly three-quarters of hotel guests participate in such programs at least once during their stay. Consequently, our fourth test card applied the descriptive norm, as follows: “JOIN YOUR FELLOW GUESTS IN HELPING TO SAVE THE ENVIRONMENT. Almost 75% of guests who are asked to participate in our new resource savings program do help by using their towels more than once. You can join your fellow guests in this program to help save the environment by reusing your towels during your stay.”

We found the linen-reuse rates were substantially higher in the descriptive norm condition (44.1 percent) than in the environmental-protection condition (which in this second test achieved participation of 35.1 percent) and on par with the reciprocation-norm approach. Perceptive readers will note that the 44 percent participation rate is far lower than the vendor’s figure of 75 percent. If that figure is not inflated, our explanation for this is that the 75 percent figure includes guests who reused linen at least once during their stay, but our figures record only the guests’ behavior on the first eligible day (that is, the first time the room attendant entered the room). Moreover, our standard of compliance was undoubtedly more conservative than that of our source, as we counted only those guests who actually hung their linens on the towel racks or shower

curtain rod. Towels hung on doorknobs or hooks were not counted, an approach that we believe understates the level of intended linen reuse.

In summary, the two messages that we tested in the second hotel study were far more effective than the most common appeals that we have observed in use. Even so, we have never seen these two appeals in hotels.

### Whose Descriptive Norms Do Individuals Follow?

Our discussion of descriptive norms has so far begged a central question that remains to be addressed: whose norms are individuals most likely to follow? Our answer comes from a close examination of Leon Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory, which proposes that when making decisions under uncertainty, individuals tend to follow the norms of others who seem similar to them. That is, individuals look to others who not only share similar characteristics with them, but also who share or have shared the environment or circumstances in which the decision must be made.

Based on this theory we tested an augmented version of the descriptive-norm card. In our second study the card informed guests that similar others—that is, the majority of other guests who had previously stayed at the hotel—had reused their towels at least once during their stay. In our next test, we decided to take perceived similarity one step further by using a card in some rooms that communicated the descriptive norm specifically for the guests who had previously occupied the guests' very room. Thus, in addition to the standard environmental-protection appeal and the general descriptive-norm appeal used in the prior study, participants in this third condition read the following specific descriptive-norm appeal on their washroom cards: "75% of the guests who stayed in this room (#xxx) participated

in our new resource savings program by using their towels more than once. You can join your fellow guests in this program to help save the environment by reusing your towels during your stay."

Consistent with the previous study, the general descriptive-norm approach using the hotel's previous guests as the reference group yielded a higher towel reuse rate (44.0 percent) than did the standard environmental-protection appeal (which achieved 37.2 percent this time around). More interesting, however, was the finding that the specific descriptive-norm condition, the one that invoked the rooms' previous occupants, produced an even higher towel reuse rate (49.3 percent) than did the general descriptive-norm message. Although this increase is not dramatic, we see this as a nearly costless 10 percent increase in savings.

At first blush, there is no rational reason to believe that the behavior of those previously occupying one's room are any more valid than the behavior of those previously occupying the room next door. However, the social psychology literature suggests that sharing commonalities with another individual, even seemingly irrelevant characteristics, has been found in most cases to increase one's affinity toward that other person. For example, sharing the same birthday, fingerprint type, or physical space with another person has been found to induce surprisingly powerful feelings of affiliation between individuals (Burger et al. 2004, 2001). Following that logic, the room-based normative messages conveyed the behavior of a group of individuals who had been in the exact same environment (i.e., that specific room) in which those participants were staying. In addition, as just discussed, it is generally most adaptive for one to follow the behavioral norms associated with the particular environment, situation, or circumstances that most closely match one's own. Although the result here is favorable,



namely, encouraging guests to reuse their linens, the consequences of people using such a mental shortcut can sometimes lead to judgments, decisions, and behavior that do not seem entirely logical. In any event, the findings from this research suggest that persuasive appeals or information campaigns should ensure that the norms of the reference group are as similar as possible to the intended audience's circumstances.

## Conclusion

The hotel studies we conducted demonstrated the value of applying theory-based research to hotel operation. We have yet to see hotel operators apply the novel normative linen-reuse appeals that we tested. However, those theory-based approaches fared better at spurring participation in the hotel's linen-reuse program than did the messages most commonly in use. Moreover, the studies validate the motivational power of norms. Although these studies were conducted at just two Arizona hotels, we have no reason to believe that our conclusions would not apply throughout the industry. Beyond that, we see this study of how to encourage guests to participate in linen-reuse programs as just one example of how studies based on social psychology theory can be valuable in many areas of hotel operation.

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