

# “If You Can’t Dazzle Them with Brilliance, Baffle Them with Nonsense”<sup>1</sup>: Extending the Impact of the Disrupt-Then-Reframe Technique of Social Influence

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Three experiments extended earlier findings on the impact of the Disrupt-Then-Reframe (DTR) technique on compliance. This technique is comprised of a subtle, odd element in a typical scripted request, the “disruption,” followed by a persuasive phrase, the “reframing.” Based on the thought-disruption hypothesis (Petty & Wegener, 1999), we argue that its impact is generalizable across situations and that disrupting a conventional sales script not only increases the impact of the new reframing, but also increases susceptibility to influence resulting from other (congruence-based) persuasion techniques embedded in the influence setting. Three experiments provided support for our expectations. Specifically, the DTR technique reduced the extent of counter-argumentation to a sales script and boosted the impact of two other persuasion techniques: the continued questions procedure and message–goal congruence. The theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed.

Imagine that the doorbell rings, and that upon answering the door, a neighborhood schoolboy starts a pitch to persuade you to buy postcards for a local charity club. His influence attempt proceeds as expected until he oddly states the price in pennies before giving his punch-line. Would you comply? According to Davis and Knowles (1999), the chances you would are considerably greater than they would be if the price had been stated only in dollars. Davis and Knowles recently identified and tested a rather subtle social influence tactic, which they termed the *Disrupt-Then-Reframe* (DTR) technique. This technique is characterized by a small “twist,” or odd element, in a typical scripted request, the “disruption” (e.g., “they’re 200 pennies, ... that’s \$2”), followed by a persuasive phrase that concludes the script, the “reframing” (e.g., “it’s a really good deal”). Thus formulated, a request is posited to be more than 1.5 times as “powerful” in gaining compliance

than its conventionally stated counterpart (Davis & Knowles, 1999; Knowles, Butler, & Linn, 2001).

Notwithstanding its persuasive potential, research on this technique is still in its infancy. To our knowledge, no research apart from the two publications by the original authors has examined the generalizability of the phenomenon or the factors that mediate or moderate it. Hence, there is a clear need for further study. Our research extended the original research by examining the processes underlying the effectiveness of the DTR technique and its generalizability across various types of compliance behaviors and across differing types of persuasion settings. More specifically, we focused on the question of *how* the DTR technique “works,” whether it works in gaining compliance for both commercial and nonprofit purposes, and whether it can function as a “booster” of additional persuasion techniques that are present in the influence situation.

In the following section, we briefly review the limited empirical evidence on the DTR procedure and the theoretical assumptions underlying it. Next, we discuss related theory and research in the fields of compliance and persuasion that is relevant to the object under study. Finally, we report three studies that test the generalizability of the DTR construct and its implications for the persuasiveness of several other influence techniques.

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<sup>1</sup>The title of this article is a well-known sales representative’s adage, adapted from Kardes (2002).

## RESEARCH ON THE DTR TECHNIQUE

In a series of four studies, Davis and Knowles (1999) demonstrated that disrupting a sales script, followed by a reframing, significantly enhanced purchase rates. In all studies, sets of note cards were sold door-to-door by confederates who claimed to be associated with a nonprofit organization for disabled children and adults, the "Richardson Center." Each study followed the same scenario. The note cards were presented and it was said they had been made by clients of the center. After a general introduction of the sales person, the Richardson Center, and the note cards, the prospective buyer was asked whether he or she wanted to know the price. Then, in some conditions, a disrupting phrase was inserted. This phrase consisted of a small but unexpected element, stating the price in pennies rather than dollars. After presenting this odd element, the confederate paused for 2 sec before stating the price in dollars and the reframing. The DTR condition would thus read: "This package of cards sells for 300 pennies. ... That's \$3. It's a bargain!" The original studies found purchasing rates to be more than 1.5 times and in several instances twice as high in DTR as opposed to control conditions.

Davis and Knowles (1999) provided evidence that both the disruption and the reframing were necessary conditions to increase compliance. The DTR technique was tested against various control conditions, such as price only ("They're \$3"), reframe then disrupt ("It's a bargain. ... They're 300 pennies. That's \$3"), and reframe only ("They're \$3. It's a bargain"). In all these instances, DTR conditions yielded significantly higher purchase rates than any of these control conditions. In addition, the DTR technique was tested against a disruption-only control condition ("They're 300 pennies. ... That's \$3"). Hence, the original research included a systematic comparison between the full social influence technique (the DTR script: "They're 300 pennies. ... That's \$3. It's a bargain!") and a control script that was identical except that the concluding persuasive phrase ("It's a bargain") was omitted (hence, the disruption-only condition stated: "They're 300 pennies. ... That's \$3"). Again, compliance rates proved significantly higher in the DTR condition than in the disruption-only condition.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The attentive reader might note that in the original research (Davis & Knowles, 1999), there is some overlap in the conceptualizations of the various control conditions with regard to information about the price. Most notably, the reframe-only ("They're \$3. It's a bargain.") and the disruption-only ("They're 300 pennies. ... That's \$3.") conditions are not mutually exclusive in that the price in dollars is present in both conditions. A strict disruption-only condition would have to state the price in pennies but not in dollars. This stricter version of the disruption condition has not been run yet. In our studies, all conditions closely mirror the ones as defined by Davis and Knowles (1999) for reasons of generalization (although we have relabeled the equivocal "reframe-only" control condition into a "no-disruption" control condition).

## Original Theoretical Accounts

Ericksonian confusion techniques (Erickson, 1964) and especially action identification theory (Vallacher & Wegner, 1985, 1987) have been suggested to explain the phenomenon (Davis & Knowles, 1999; Knowles et al., 2001). Erickson, pioneer in the field of clinical hypnosis, used unexpected elements in his interaction with clients to reduce resistance to foster hypnosis. He proposed that his techniques engaged the mind of the client, thus diverting it from maintaining resistance in order to the hypnotic attempt. He found that confusion increased compliance with any of the hypnotic suggestions that immediately followed.

On a more theoretical level, Davis and Knowles (1999) used action identification theory to explain the DTR effect. The theory proposes that individuals always have available some conception of what they're doing. These conceptions can be defined at different hierarchical levels, ranging from low-level characterizations that pertain to specific details of the behavior to high-level qualifications that include the goals and broader implications of the actions. For instance, the behavior of our schoolboy in the opening example can either be defined in terms of what he is actually saying or at a higher level in terms of his motives and goals for selling the postcards. Action identification theory predicts that a disruption in the sales-script shifts the recipient's focus from the higher level meanings ascribed to the schoolboy's behavior, and indeed the meaning of the entire dyadic encounter, to a more concrete lower level focus. This attention to the details of the action brought about by the disruption would then make the recipient susceptible to influence presented by the reframe (the punch-line of the sales script). As an example, Davis and Knowles (1999) referred to research by Wegner, Vallacher, Macomber, Wood, and Arps (1984) in which individuals were set off-balance because they were instructed to drink coffee from a cup with lead in its base, whereas the control participants drank coffee from a normal cup. Those who drank from the heavy cup were more susceptible to social influence attempts than those who drank from the normal cup. In this article, we present a more comprehensive theoretical framework to understand the DTR effect that will yield additional hypotheses not necessarily following from Ericksonian confusion principles or action identification theory.

## THEORY AND RESEARCH ON RELATED COMPLIANCE TECHNIQUES

The DTR procedure can be considered a variation of the so-called Pique Technique (Santos, Leve & Pratkanis, 1994). In the Pique Technique, a request is made in an unusual way, which is assumed to foster compliance. For instance, Santos et al. (1994) had a confederate panhandler approach passersby asking for money, either conventionally (e.g., "can you spare

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