

Five Magic Words for Persuasion

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I've got five words for you that will double charitable contributions people give you. That's five, f-i-v-e, 5, cinco palabras, that will double, times 2 it. Magic words, baby. And I know them.

Nope, nothing about sex, drugs, money, fame, fortune, or film at 11. Not even close. You aren't even close with your guesses.

You know what? I like you. You interest me. I'm gonna tell you for nothing. Those Five Magic Words. That will double the success rate. You're a good kid and I want to help.

Robert Cialdini devised these ingenious Magic Words over 30 years ago. While going door-to-door to solicit charitable contributions for the American Cancer Society at 84 households, experimenters either made a simple request, "Would you please contribute to ASC?," or made the request plus the Magic Words. Thus, half the households, 42, got the Normal Request while the other half, 42, got the Normal Request plus Magic Words.

Got that? Either, "please contribute" or "please contribute and Magic Words." A five word addition to a simple request for a charitable contribution.

And what happened?

When hearing the Normal Request, 28% of the people gave some money. When hearing that Request plus the five Magic Words, 50% of the people gave some money. In total the Normal Request earned \$18.55 in contributions while the Magic Words earned \$30.34. Interestingly when a person made a contribution, they averaged about \$1.50 regardless of whether hearing the Normal or the Magic Words request. That's nearly a 100% increase in both the number of people who contribute and the amount of money. With five Magic Words.

Cialdini replicated the effect in another study that tested other Magic Words, but nothing worked better than the original five Magic Words. And, 30 years later, a team of researchers working in Poland found the same effect for the same five Magic Words, although in Polish, not English.



Now here's a wrinkle. Both the American and Polish tests occurred face-to-face with people actually talking to each other in real time. A few years ago, another American team tested the Magic Words, but used printed signs next to collection bottles in stores for a worthy cause. Instead of speaking the Magic Words, they just wrote them. Guess what? The magic went away. No effect.

So, we know that there are five Magic Words for increasing charitable contributions, that these words work in America and Poland, and that they work when you speak them, but not when you write them.

Now. Here are the MAGIC WORDS: "We're asking for your help. Would you please contribute? **EVEN A PENNY WILL HELP.**"

How does this work?

The five Magic Words function as persuasion cues with low WATT processors. Realize that all those nice folks standing at the door, listening a prosocial appeal, are not thinking carefully and effortfully at what you say. They are distracted, perhaps even mildly annoyed. Then they get cued up in a most simple way - Even A Penny Will Help. So easy. Just give the nice person a penny, then go back to watching TV, and you've done a good deed!

This is called peripheral route persuasion and as long as you deliver the cue so that the receivers can easily and immediately act upon it, you will get the change you desire. But, remember, the five Magic Words only work when:

1. You make a prosocial or charitable request.
2. You say the Magic Words in person as you are talking.
3. You make sure they can act on your request immediately.

The Magic Words will NOT work if you make a selfish, profit-oriented request, if you write them on a sign, or if you make the request, but the target cannot quickly or easily act on it.

Sometimes, persuasion really is that simple. But, there's never any magic to it. You can change the five words here to anything else that means, "give something even if it's small" AND a specific, concrete comparison like a "penny." The "magic" here is not found in the exact words, but rather in the plea for small help and a particular example of "small."

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