

If It's Broken, Fix It: The Effectiveness of Moral Reminders Depends on Prior Behavior







Assaf Segel¹, Andrea Pittarello², Thekla Schmidt³, & Ruth Mayo¹

¹The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, ²Virginia Tech, ³WHU – Otto Beisheim School of Management
contact: assaf.segel@mail.huji.ac.il

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What type of moral reminders work and for whom?

- To date, there is inconclusive evidence on whether moral reminders work.
- We test three factors that may reconcile prior work: The way they are phrased, the number of people hurt by immoral behaviors, and people's behavior prior to the reminder.
- We do so in a field study setting measuring honesty and in online studies measuring reciprocity.
- We find that the main factor which determines whether reminders work is people's prior behavior: Reminders have a positive effect only on those who were not doing the right thing to begin with.

	Study 1 – Field Study (Dishonesty) Employees paid for snacks, using an honor system	Study 2 – Trust Game (Reciprocity) Focusing on the amount of money returned by the receiver	Study 3 – Trust Game (Reciprocity) Identical to Study 2, with two rounds								
METHODS	<p>Phrasing of reminder</p> <table border="1"> <tr> <th>Affirmative</th> <th>Negated</th> </tr> <tr> <td>Please pay/ return</td> <td>Please do not forget to pay/ return</td> </tr> </table>	Affirmative	Negated	Please pay/ return	Please do not forget to pay/ return	<p>Number of individuals harmed by immoral behavior</p> <table border="1"> <tr> <th>Single</th> <th>Group</th> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	Single	Group			<p>Round 1: No reminder Round 2: Identical reminders, no pictures</p>
	Affirmative	Negated									
Please pay/ return	Please do not forget to pay/ return										
Single	Group										
											
RESULTS	<p>Dependent variable</p> <p>Payment percentage after the intervention minus Payment percentage prior to the intervention</p> <p>- No effect for phrasing or number of individuals hurt. - Any reminder increased honesty compared to no reminder, but only among those who complied less to begin with.</p>	<p>Dependent variable</p> <p>Amount returned</p> <p>- No effect for the number of individuals hurt. - Any reminder increased reciprocity compared to no reminder, especially when phrased affirmatively.</p>	<p>Dependent variable</p> <p>Amount returned in round 2 minus Amount returned in round 1</p> <p>- Reminders (in round 2) increased reciprocity, but only among those who had paid less (in round 1).</p>								

CONCLUSION

- We found some evidence that affirmative phrasings seem to be better than negated ones, and no effect for the number of people affected by the behavior.
- However, we consistently show that any reminder increases moral behavior, but only for people who are less compliant to begin with.
- Thus, we conclude that before deploying any interventions the most critical factor to consider is people's prior behavior.

