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How to Build Trust with Food.

In an earlier *Psychology Today* article, Stybel & Peabody (2017) explored the use of the Swedish Fika as a way of improving cross-functional communication within organizations. Successful Fikas are framed around the physical act of sharing food.

Fikas help transform work colleagues into chums, thereby creating new informal channels of communications between separate business functions.

In this article, we will extend the food-as-communications-tool theme.

We will explore University of Chicago research conducted by psychologists Kaitlin Woolley and Ayelet Fishback (2015). We then will discuss how leaders can use the research results.

Similar Food Consumption Speeds Negotiation Outcome

University undergraduates were put into roles of union leaders or management and given a union-management bargaining dilemma. Success was measured by the fewest negotiation rounds to come to an agreement. 124 undergraduate pairs (male and female) who did not know each other were studied.

Each pair was in one of three food conditions during the exercise. In one condition both sides were given sweets (Kit Kat and tootsie rolls). In a second condition, both students were given salty treats (pretzels, potato chips). In the third condition, one student was given sweets while the other student was given salty food.

The stated experimental manipulation was the impact of sweets or salty food on decisions. The real objective was the impact of eating similar versus different food when conducting negotiations.

Pairs that ate the same food went into fewer strike days (3.63days SD=4.05) than the pairs that ate different food (7.33 days SD=6.69). This difference was significant at the .01 level.

The outcome was not influenced by the food condition. But when pairs consumed the same foods, agreement was reached faster.

Food and Trust

In a second study, Wooley and Fishback worked with 96 male and female students. Some students were asked to read product descriptions about SC Johnson Shout Hair Spray and some were asked to read product descriptions about HP Agile Manager Software. After reading each product descriptions, students watched a one-minute video clip of an actor giving a product testimonial in favor of what they had just read.

In one experimental condition, student evaluators were provided KitKats and other sweets. The actor on the video could be seen consuming the same sweets the viewers were eating. In another experimental condition, students were provided KitKats and other sweets. But the same actor was not eating anything.

After watching the video testimonial, students were asked to rate their level of trust in the validity of the information presented by the actor on a 0-6 Likert scale.

Viewers trusted the product testimonial significantly more under conditions when the person giving the testimonial was seen eating the same food the viewers were consuming. This difference was significant at the .01 level.

Implications

The use of mimicking another person's food preferences is a technique that has an honored research history.

Jacob et al (2011) showed that customer trust and compliance with a salesperson's recommendations increases when salespeople mimic their customers' posture and words.

Perceived trust can be enhanced by mimicking food choice and body posture.

We doubt that the same food as another party results in the other thinking, "This person is trying to manipulate me by eating the same food I am eating."

It probably is perceived as a vaguely pleasant perception that "there is something about this person I like."

Going for a Business Meal

The tradition is that the one who pays the check invites asks guests to order first. This technique gives the host advance notice about the food preferences of the guest.

"I'll have what she's having" is the "right" thing to say if the goal is to increase trust.

Suppose, however, you are the guest seeking to gain the host's trust. An example might be a job candidate invited out to lunch by a potential boss, a boss invites a subordinate to meet for breakfast, or a client invites the professional to discuss the project.

Under these circumstances, it is entirely appropriate to ask the host, "What are you having?"

If the host says, "I will have the spinach salad," you can respond with, "That sounds good. I'll have one as well."

Managing Food Outside Restaurants

At business or industry trade shows, it is common for display booths to have a bowl of candy laid out as a sweet way to lure passing delegates. Consider this alternative: a bowl of grapes.

Grapes have the same eye-catching quality as candy without the negative calories. If delegates begin nibbling on the grapes, the company representative could begin eating some grapes out of the same bowl.

Do you have a desk in your office or cubicle? Display a plate of grapes.

When people come to visit, offer them some grapes. As they consume the grapes, you consume some as well.

Grapes will usually stay attractive for five days: you can make a habit of buying grapes on Sunday and bringing them to work on Monday. During the evening, the grapes can be stored in the office refrigerator.

When on client visits or sales calls, we carry sugarless peppermint candy and offer it. If the person we are with accepts a candy, then we also pop a candy in our mouths. If they do not, we do not consume the candy.

Using Food in Online Meetings

It is not uncommon to have online socials with team members. Everybody brings their drink of choice. The problem is that everybody is drinking something different. And you do not want to force an employee to drink alcoholic beverages.

Consider having a online food service send a food that everyone can enjoy at the same time but they are all eating the same thing. An example might be an assortment of cheeses and crackers. Other foods to consider might be pretzels, pies, teas, or coffees.

It really does not matter what the food is. The important thing is that all participants can enjoy it together.

The Authenticity Paradox Revisited

In an earlier *Psychology Today* article, we spoke about the "Authenticity Paradox:" people want to work with colleagues, superiors, and suppliers they perceive as authentic. But sometimes authenticity must be manufactured. (Stybel Peabody, 2017).

The techniques we discussed in that article comply with the dictionary definition of 'manipulation:' to handle or control in a skillful manner.

There is a second definition:

"To control or influence a person unfairly or unscrupulously."

The techniques we discuss in this article are consistent with the first definition.



Source: Pixabay/monika 1607/439 images

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