

Cognitive Dissonance

A tendency to seek consistency among attitudes, thoughts, and beliefs.

People strive to have consistency among their attitudes, thoughts, and beliefs. Cognitive dissonance is the state of mental discomfort that occurs when a person's attitudes, thoughts, or beliefs (i.e., cognitions) conflict. If two cognitions agree with one another, there is *consonance*, and a state of comfort results. If two cognitions disagree with one another, there is *dissonance*, and a state of discomfort results.¹

People alleviate cognitive dissonance in one of three ways: by reducing the importance of dissonant cognitions, adding consonant cognitions, or removing or changing dissonant cognitions. For example, advertising campaigns that urge people to *show how much you care* by buying diamonds seek to create cognitive dissonance in consumers—i.e., dissonance between the love that people have for others, and the pressure to prove that love by buying diamonds. In order to alleviate the dissonance, people can reduce the importance of the dissonant cognition (e.g., a diamond is, after all, just a bunch of pressed carbon), add consonant cognitions (e.g., recognize that the advertising campaign is trying to manipulate them using cognitive dissonance), or remove or change dissonant cognitions (e.g., show how much you care by doing something else or, of course, buying the diamonds).

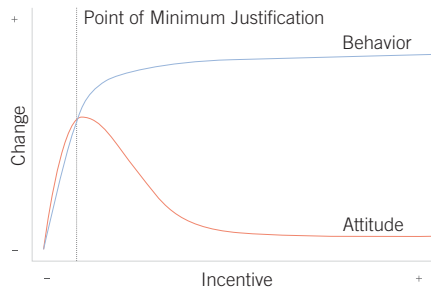
When a situation involves incentives, it is interesting to note that incentives of different sizes yield different results. When incentives for an unpleasant task are small, people reduce dissonance by changing the dissonant cognition (e.g., “it is okay to perform this task because I like it”). When incentives for an unpleasant task are large, people reduce dissonance by adding a consonant cognition (e.g., “it is okay to perform this task because I am paid well”). When incentives are small, people are inclined to change the way they feel about what they are doing to alleviate dissonance. When incentives increase, people retain their original beliefs and alleviate dissonance by justifying their participation with their compensation. A small incentive is usually required to get a person to consider an unpleasant thought or engage in an unpleasant activity. Any incentive beyond this small incentive reduces, not increases, the probability of changing attitudes and beliefs—this critical point is known as *the point of minimum justification*.²

Consider cognitive dissonance in the design of advertising and marketing campaigns, or any other context where influence and persuasion is key. Use consonant and dissonant information when attempting to change beliefs. Engage people to invest their time, attention, and participation to create dissonant cognitions, and then provide simple and immediate mechanisms to alleviate the dissonance. When using compensation to reinforce change, use the minimal compensation possible to achieve change.

See also Consistency, Cost-Benefit, and Hierarchy of Needs.

¹ The seminal work on cognitive dissonance is *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* by Leon Festinger, Row, Perterson & Company, 1957. A comprehensive review of the theory is *Cognitive Dissonance: Progress on a Pivotal Theory in Social Psychology* edited by Eddie Harmon-Jones and Judson Mills, American Psychological Association, 1999.

² See, for example, “Cognitive Consequences of Forced Compliance” by Leon Festinger and James Carlsmith, *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 1959, vol. 58, p. 203–210.



The *point of minimum justification* represents the optimal level of incentive required to change behavior and attitude. Incentives exceeding this level will continue to change behavior, but will fail to change attitude.



Perhaps the most successful use of cognitive dissonance in the history of advertising is the AOL free-hours campaign delivered on CD-ROM. The incentive to try AOL is provided in the form of a free trial period. People who try the service go through a set-up process, where they define unique e-mail addresses, screen names, and passwords, investing time and energy to get it all to work. The greater the time and energy invested during this trial period, the greater the cognitive dissonance at the time of expiration. Since the compensation to engage in this activity was minimal, the way most people alleviate the dissonance is to have positive feelings about the service—which leads to paid subscriptions.