

Getting Commitment: Start Small, and Build

By [LawVision](#) on July 16, 2015

Psychologists interviewing POWs after the Korean War discovered that U.S. prisoners held in Chinese camps were much more likely than their counterparts in North Korean camps to inform on one another. Prisoners from Chinese camps also had fewer successful escapes and held more tolerant beliefs about the Chinese than soldiers had about captors from other major conflicts like the Japanese and Germans.

War-time psychologists were flummoxed. What was it about the Chinese approach that made such a difference?

The answer, they discovered, according to Robert Cialdini, Arizona State University professor of psychology and author of the best-selling book [Influence](#), is very simple: they knew how to start small and build.

Prisoners in the Chinese camps were treated humanely and not beaten. They were asked to make very small statements so mildly anti-American or pro-communist that they seemed inconsequential—simple statements like “The United States is not perfect” or “In a communist country, employment is not a problem.” The interrogators knew that a very small public admission would create a commitment to a principle. However small that admission, the prisoners, like most people, would find it very difficult to be inconsistent with previous admissions or statements. For example, if you’ve just agreed to the simple and logical conclusion that the United States is not perfect, you might be willing to give some examples of those imperfections. If you can do that, you might be willing to write out a list of those imperfections. If you can write out the list, it wouldn’t be too inconsistent to sign the list or share it in a discussion group, especially if it meant an extra cup of rice that week.

The Chinese might then ask you to enter an essay writing contest. The reward for the contest might be small, but all you had to do was write an essay containing the ideas you had already agreed to as fact. Cialdini writes, “Aware that he had written the essay without any strong threats or coercion, many times a man would change his image of himself to be consistent with the deed.” Such compliance would often lead to later collaboration with interrogators due to the subject’s inherent need to remain consistent with past declarations and deeds. Eventually, the majority of prisoners in the Chinese-run camps collaborated with their captors at some level.

I am not a communist; nor am I an expert on propaganda tactics with prisoners of war. Certainly, I do not suggest that we need to be deceptive to build clientele at our firms. But I do think there is something to learn and apply from the Chinese approach. Really, it just supports what we already know intuitively—that obtaining a small commitment is a good thing throughout the decision-making process. Big decisions, like which law firm to hire, rarely come quickly. They usually come after trust is built, relationships are forged, and small commitments are made. Those smaller commitments are followed by larger commitments once trust is established.

Obtaining small commitments early on in the business development process is important for several reasons:

1. **Commitment pattern** — It creates a pattern between you and your prospect. The potential buyer of legal services knows that you are interested in serving them.
2. **A natural desire for consistency creates more opportunities for larger commitment** —Commitments move the

buyer from feeling like a prospect to feeling like a client. “May I send you a summary of that case?” or “Can we review together the template we’ve developed for that type of deal?” is an invitation for a small commitment. That commitment, as the Chinese experts discovered, is an invitation for a very small public admission that your prospect works with your firm.

3. **Commitment is a Trojan horse** — Once a small commitment is made, you get a chance to prove how great the client experience will be with your firm. Your responsiveness, the quality of the advice, the communication, billing, etc. are all on the line. This is your foot in the door and chance to shine. Jeff Kindler, former CEO of Pfizer corporation and former general counsel for McDonald’s, says it best:

“Some firms worry about giving themselves away for nothing. Others know that the samplers sell the loaf...”

4. **Commitment Establishes Relationships** — Obtaining a commitment is a form of establishing a relationship. Relationships are built on trust, and one-way trust is built by one or both parties making and keeping promises to one another.

As you approach new prospects, ask yourself how you can strengthen your relationship by asking for a small commitment that allows you to show your capabilities and your commitment to client service.