

Presidential Column: Opting Out

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I have a 10-year-old son, who knows other 10-year-old kids, so over the years my family has bought its share of beef sticks from the Boy Scouts, wrapping paper from the Madison Youth Choir, light bulbs from the Sun Rise Ridge Soccer team, and of course my all-time favorite: Thin Mint cookies from the Girl Scouts.

Our contribution to the livelihood of these fine organizations used to be solicited in the following way: The fundraising youth would show up at our front door, with his or her parent in tow, usually on a Saturday morning, but always at a respectable hour (even for my nocturnal family). I'd answer the door and call out for my son to join me in the tradition; we'd listen as the youth pitched his or her sale; we'd all chat for a bit — the parents marveling at how much the young tykes had grown; the kids catching up on school or other activities — and then I'd head off to grab my checkbook.

A couple of years ago, the door-to-door solicitations morphed into phone calls. Last year, they morphed further into personalized email messages. This morning I received a form email message containing two Web links: Clicking on one indicated that I was willing to support one of my son's friend's junior gymnastics team by purchasing incredibly over-priced popcorn; clicking on the other indicated that I wasn't.

I've been in psychological science long enough to remember editors who solicited reviewers for submitted manuscripts by making phone calls (and perhaps if I were older I'd remember door-to-door solicitations). The days of phone solicitation, complicated by busy teaching, committee, and travel schedules, gave way to postal mail solicitation and a chunky (depending on which journal, really chunky) manila envelope would show up in your faculty mailbox. Remember these? They were pigeonhole-type structures, usually arranged alphabetically, which I hear in some departments were arranged further by rank. Often they were bordered by a tall urn of stale coffee and three relics: a stapler, a paper cutter, and a mimeograph machine (which was, if you were lucky, located near a sink for washing off all that purple mimeo ink).

When I edited the journal *Memory & Cognition* I carried the torch from solicitation of reviewers by postal mail to solicitation of reviewers by email. Although the bulk of my soliciting email message was admittedly boiler plate, I'd always try to include some personal comments, and I followed up with an even more personal message to both those who responded affirmatively and those who didn't respond at all. There was a woman behind the green curtain.

These days, the journals I both edit and review have all gone the way of Web links. With just a click of a mouse, one can indicate one's willingness to contribute four or five hours to the cause. Or not.

Solicitation of reviewers for many agencies' grant applications has gone the same course. I'm expecting solicitation of tenure and promotion reviews to follow suit shortly, as even in my career I've watched its evolution (devolution?) from phone call to manila envelope to email message. Solicitations to join advisory committees and boards of trustees and to participate in external site visits should not be far behind.

Clearly, the Web link (both for community fundraising and for professional contributions) bespeaks efficiency. Just a couple of hours after I clicked on the Web link this morning to indicate my willingness to contribute to the gymnastics team (by purchasing the over-priced popcorn), the

mother of my son's friend emailed to thank me. She marveled at how easy the system had become. I'm sure she appreciates not having to drive neighborhood-to-neighborhood and walk sidewalk-to-sidewalk in the middle of a Wisconsin December.

Similarly, editors, department chairs, deans, and granting agencies must surely appreciate no longer needing to play endless rounds of phone tag or to curse rising postal rates. Web-based solicitations can even tally response data: Who agrees to review? What's her latency? How many requests to this reviewer have been made — and accepted — this year?

But when all that separates us from protecting five hours of our time is rolling our cursor down to the “no” rather than the “yes” link, in contrast to having to say “no” to a real person, or to return a real manila envelope (that most likely has sat on our desk for three of the four weeks allotted for the review), I just wonder: Have we made it too easy to opt out?