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THE POWER OF SAYING NO

THE NEW SCIENCE OF HOW TO SAY NO THAT PUTS YOU IN CHARGE OF YOUR LIFE

Vanessa Patrick, PhD

PRAISE FOR *THE POWER OF SAYING NO*

"If you're tired of agreeing to annoying asks and thankless tasks, read this book. *The Power of Saying No* offers the smartest advice I've ever encountered for declining requests without risking your reputation or your relationships. This essential guide will sharpen your mind and steel your spine to live life on your own terms."

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"*The Power of Saying No* will stay within arm's reach for me. It offers the explanations and the inspirations I need to take charge of my life and career, with concrete tools to make it happen. I was able to put Vanessa Patrick's lessons to work the day I started reading the book and have continued every day since. Read this book. Twice."

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"Saying no is a superpower, and it can be yours when you read Vanessa Patrick's paradigm-shifting book. If you want to learn how to say no so you can say yes to your life, pick up this book and read it."

—Whitney Johnson, *Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* bestselling author of *Smart Growth*

"*The Power of Saying No* is a life-changing book. You can set boundaries without damaging your relationships, and Vanessa Patrick shows you how to do it."

—Jonah Berger, bestselling author of *Contagious* and *The Catalyst*

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For my daughter

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INTRODUCTION

I spent my twenty-fourth birthday in an empty office, staring at a fax machine.

The office, if you can picture it, was a large, rectangular open space designed in white and gray with accents of red. Rookies like me shared tiny cubicles in the bottom left corner. Away from the hustle and bustle, the more senior folks had cubicles of their own that occupied the center. The fax machine also had its own glass enclosure, a place of pride at the top right corner. This was the mid-1990s, and India's economy had only recently opened for business to the world. It was a time when the fax machine was the beating heart of the advertising agency, pumping information with rhythmic regularity to and from our multinational clients.

On that afternoon, our account team had a routine conference call with a client. As the most junior person on the team, it was my responsibility to type out a summary of the meeting—"the minutes"—and fax it to the client, who would send a fax back when they received the minutes. Both the agency and the client lived in a "cover-your-ass" world where everything had to be documented in writing. I wasted no time completing this familiar

task—type the minutes, show them to the boss, fax the minutes, done! After all, I had a birthday party planned for that evening, and my friends and family were invited for the celebration.

I watched the clock eagerly, waiting for 5:00 p.m., ready to dash out to avoid being stuck in Mumbai's notorious rush-hour traffic. I picked up my bag and was about to leave when I sensed the tall, angular frame of my boss leaning over the top of my cubicle as she was apt to do. She was leaving the office herself and had swung by to ask (in a casual voice) whether we had received the faxed receipt of the minutes from the client. I responded that we hadn't yet. She glided away toward the elevator, but then she turned back. I smiled amiably, thinking she was going to say, "Enjoy your evening" or, "Have a great party," but instead she instructed me, "Do not leave until you receive the fax confirming that the client has received the minutes."

I stood there shell-shocked. Tongue-tied. Too powerless to respond.

The hours of the evening slipped away as I waited for the incoming fax. I positioned myself outside the glass room, staring through its walls, watching for the white paper to spew out of the fax machine. Occasionally I walked in to look around just in case I had blinked and missed it. The office began emptying around 7:00 p.m. I will admit that I did consider leaving the office and just going home, but I was terrified about the consequences… Would my boss find out? Could I get fired? What would my friends and family say if I lost my first real job?

I called home a few times that evening. My parents, or one

of my sisters who happened to pick up the phone, informed me which of my guests had arrived, and as the evening drew on, updated me on which guests had eaten dinner, said goodnight, and left with their birthday wishes and apologies (it was a Tuesday). At around 9:30 p.m., the fax finally arrived. I picked it up from the fax machine, placed it on my boss's table, and went home.

Well, that was my turning twenty-four…captured in its entirety with three little words: "Received, with thanks."

My disappointment has since faded, but that day opened my eyes to the (sometimes) harsh reality of working life, and especially to the (often pointless) personal sacrifices one sometimes has to make to get bumped up from a shared cubicle to a solo one. The incident also triggered in me a curiosity about, and a deep desire to understand, the complex and intricate ways in which people think, feel, and act.

As you have likely surmised, in time I moved from that job to another, and then to another, before I finally decided to pursue a PhD at the University of Southern California. I took to academia like a fish takes to water, and now I fully embrace the intellectual life of being a professor at the University of Houston. It's a job I love and firmly believe I was born to do!

My life today is centered around knowledge: I *create* knowledge with my research, I *share* knowledge via my teaching and writing, and I *acquire* knowledge from reading extensively and investing in learning from the experiences of others. My research over the years reflects an unwavering focus on empowerment and

personal agency that goes back to the fateful day when—let's face it—*I was caught completely off guard, stripped of power by a person who forced me to skip my own birthday celebration to do what I will later describe in the book as nothing short of a "bullshit job."*

I am mortified just writing this and reliving that moment. But I resolved on that day to never again let something like that happen to me or to anyone else if I could help it.

It has been a little over a decade since I first coined the term "empowered refusal," together with my then doctoral student and now long-time research collaborator, Henrik Hagtvedt. We used this term in our research articles to represent the superskill of saying no in a way that is persuasive and does not elicit push-back from others. Empowered refusal is a way of saying no that begins with you and reflects your unique identity. In this book, we will delve in great depth into understanding empowered refusal, what makes it an effective way of saying no, and the toolkit of three competencies you will need to develop to communicate an empowered no response. But for now, let me just say that empowered refusal overcomes the inherent difficulty of saying no because it does three things:

- → It reflects your identity and gives voice to your values, priorities, and preferences (your no is about you, not the other person).
- → It conveys conviction and determination (comes across as empowered and confident).

→ It is persuasive and does not invite pushback (so your relationship with the asker is secure and your reputation untarnished).

After those initial research articles were published, I used my "Professor + Educator" platform to share my ideas and research insights about empowered refusal in numerous media outlets, in lunch-and-learn workshops, and at conferences. Intriguingly, something interesting started to happen. Participants in my classes and workshops began asking for more. When I considered these requests from the perspective of a marketer (marketing is, after all, the process of designing and delivering marketplace offerings—products, services, experiences, even books—that create value and meet the needs of the most diverse customer base), I realized in dismay that when people expressed a need for additional resources, I had nothing of value to offer. All I could give them were my research articles (whose results I had just explained) or copies of my PowerPoint deck (pathetic!). Committed to making a difference in the world of people and ideas, and as an avid reader myself, I decided that I had to share more deeply my knowledge of, and passion for, empowered refusal, in the form of a book. This book.

A common thread in the advice that many successful people give to others is to say no to the things that do not matter. Apple's Steve Jobs believed that "focusing is about saying 'no' to things". Oprah has emphasized that "no is a complete sentence." Former

UK Prime Minister Tony Blair opined that "the art of leadership is saying no." And Berkshire Hathaway's Warren Buffett has said, "We need to learn the slow 'yes' and the quick 'no.'" Similarly, best-selling authors from Marshall Goldsmith (make a list of things to stop doing) to Greg McKeown (say yes only to the things that matter) to Ryan Holiday (be ruthless to the things that don't matter) to Matt Haig (learn to say no to things that get in the way of life) and Seth Godin (just saying yes because you can't bear the short-term pain of saying no is not going to help you do the work) underscore the importance of saying no.

Despite this plethora of advice about the need to say no, there is no systematic and proven way that demonstrates *how* to say no in a way that maintains your relationships, secures your reputation, and does not invite pushback from the asker. This is where this book comes in. In this book, I will draw on research (my own and that conducted by others) to provide you with the toolkit of competencies you will need to say no in a way that works. You will be equipped with the ability to decide *what* to say no to and with the superskill of *how* to communicate that no from a place of empowerment.

Let me provide you with a road map of how I have organized this book and what you can expect to take away from each of its three parts.

In Part 1: Saying No Is a Superskill, we will understand why the simple two-letter word *no* is so daunting to so many. We will uncover the reasons why we say yes, even when we want to say no. We will learn that we are socialized to believe that saying no

to others is a surefire way to bust the harmony out of any situation. For some, saying no can be fraught with conflict and anxiety, yet we need to prepare for and navigate the uncomfortable moments immediately following a request. This initial groundwork will lead us to the solution I propose: empowered refusal. You will learn about the science of saying no in a way that does not invite pushback. As the term implies, empowered refusal is a new and proven way of saying no that puts you in control of your own life. Instead of being frazzled and frustrated, you become calm and choosy; the latter is clearly the wiser choice and does wonders for your reputation and relationships.

In Part 2: The A.R.T. of Empowered Refusal, we will delve into the three competencies you will need to master the A.R.T. of empowered refusal. The handy acronym A.R.T. stands for these three competencies:

Awareness
Rules, not Decisions
Totality of Self

In the chapters in Part 2, I will introduce you to the empowered refusal toolkit. Because of the you-centeredness of empowered refusal, a key competency to invest in is increased self-awareness. You will learn strategies to enhance both internal self-awareness (an understanding of your own values, preferences, and beliefs and a vision of what success and happiness looks like to you) and external self-awareness (an understanding of what other people

think about you). You will also learn how to rely on this self-awareness to expertly categorize the requests that come your way to determine how best to respond.

A fundamental building block of empowered refusal is establishing rules for yourself to respond to "asks" that come your way. I call these rules "personal policies." I will show you how to establish personal policies (simple rules we set for ourselves based on our principles, values, and priorities) that reflect our identity. We will find that personal policies highlight the "why" behind our desire to say no and empower us to say no with greater conviction and determination.

Finally, I will make a (hopefully) compelling case that effective empowered refusal is a whole-body activity, and that becoming mindful of the power of our nonverbal cues is a crucial aspect of empowered refusal. One of the insights you will take away is the two-pronged benefits of nonverbal cues in empowered refusal: they can be used to convey empowerment as well as to secure your relationship with the asker.

In Part 3: The Practicalities of Empowered Refusal, we will translate theory to practice. Rather than merely thinking about empowered refusal as a superskill that you would like to develop, we will get down to how empowered refusal works when you practice it in your daily life. We know that practice makes proficient. We are better off also knowing what could come in the way of our success. Occasionally, we will get pushback to our empowered refusal. This is inevitable. However, if we learn to identify the types of pushback we might receive and have

strategies in place about how to respond, we are more likely to effectively manage the pushback.

Throughout the book, you will learn that empowered refusal is not only about saying no to others, but also about saying no to yourself. Taking an empowered stance can have pervasive effects for the whole of your life. You will learn the importance of developing self-talk that guides you to personal and professional mastery. The catchy phrase "it goes the way you say" will be evident in the number of practical situations that come up in daily life that require you to say no to your impulses and yes to your purpose. There are many daily issues we face that we need to conquer in our path to personal and professional mastery—whether to skip the gym (or not), how to develop the confidence to embrace new (and perhaps daunting) opportunities, and how to stop worrying and silence the annoying voice in your head telling you things you don't want to hear. We will conclude with some perspective of how empowered refusal promotes human agency and gives us permission to wholeheartedly pursue what is important and meaningful to us.

Like design principles in art and architecture, the tenets of empowered refusal I will share in this book will not tell you precisely what to do, what to say, or when to say what. Instead, my goal is to provide you with the insight and understanding you need to master the superskill of empowered refusal. With this raw material, you can craft an empowered refusal response that is tailor-made for you to work for the situations that you have to navigate and the people that you will likely encounter in your unique circumstances.

What has been consistently gratifying for me in doing the research that forms the heart of this book, as well as in writing the book itself, is the significant practical importance of empowered refusal for people in all walks of life. There is nearly universal agreement in virtually every group I have spoken to over the past eight years—executives, professors, young professionals, government officials, university administrators—that whatever path you are on—first job, full professor, CEO, university president—the way to get there is not by saying yes to every request, but through the ability to effectively say no to the things that are not aligned with your aspirations. These folks all agree that daily happiness would soar, stress would dissipate, and there would be more time and energy if they knew how to address the common, perplexing, and global problem of saying no. And now, I am happy to share the solution: empowered refusal.

With this book, I hope to offer you a unique, positive, and meaning-filled approach to saying no by providing a framework for empowered refusal, a new purpose-driven mindset, and the toolkit of competencies you will need to convey an effective, authentic, and empowered no. Together, we will develop a plan of action that will empower you to go from wherever you are right now to a place filled with possibility, self-appreciation, and purpose.

PART 1

SAYING NO IS A SUPERSKILL

CHAPTER 1

Why We Say Yes When We Want to Say No

When he opened his eyes that morning, he had no way of knowing that this would be a day he would remember for a long, long time. As the early morning sunlight poured through the bare window of his quarters, he closed his eyes and indulged himself in the fantasy that he was back in England with no other prospect before him that day than reading the newspaper while eating breakfast in a cozy, wood-paneled dining room.

The loud ringing of his telephone jarred him into reality. Here he was, a subdivisional police officer in the remote outpost of Moulmein in lower Burma. A mere cog in the mighty gears of the British Empire. He picked up the receiver, wondering what could possibly be wrong *now*. The grainy voice of a sub-inspector at a cross-town police station was telling him about a runaway elephant creating havoc in the bazaar.

He knew he was not popular in the village. With him as a tangible target, the villagers expressed their anti-British sentiment in

subtle ways. They delighted in tripping him during a soccer game or running over his foot with their bicycle in the crowded bazaar. He understood their resentment and empathized with their predicament. Secretly, he was not feeling too pro-Empire himself, especially after he saw how poorly the local people were treated—stripped of wealth and dignity. He could not bear to see the squalor in which they lived and the poverty they had no choice but to endure. He often longed for the Empire to be toppled, so that he, George Orwell,[1] could return home.

He dressed quickly, recalling with mild familiarity that "musth" was the crazed state—something like heat, for females—that male elephants could get into when their hormones went haywire. He rode a pony to the bazaar where he was met with a large group of villagers who told him that the elephant had disappeared. He soon found out that the elephant had killed a man and damaged a house. On learning this, Orwell decided to send an orderly to fetch an elephant rifle in case he needed to defend himself. He was sure that he would not use it, but if he was in charge, he did need to be prepared. As soon as the villagers saw the elephant rifle, they started loud murmurs that he was going to shoot the elephant. The villagers followed him in droves as he led the way in search of the elephant.

Finally, he spotted it. There was the beast, alone in a field, calmly tearing up bunches of grass with his trunk, beating them against his forelegs to remove the dirt, and shoving them into his mouth. The "musth" seemed to have passed, as the elephant looked serene. In fact, Orwell recalls the animal's actions in the

gentlest terms, as the "preoccupied grandmotherly air that elephants have."

But here he was holding the gun with the villagers expectantly watching his every move. Caught between the placid-looking elephant and the increasingly loud and impatient murmurings of the crowd, Orwell sensed that the villagers wanted the show they had been waiting for. When was he going to ready his rifle and shoot?

Should he say yes and give the villagers what they wanted, or should he say no and let the local *mahout* (the title given to a person who trains and looks after elephants) come and guide the elephant back home?

He feared that any hesitation or uncertainty on his part could lead his already shaky authority to take a dive. He knew that it was not a trivial matter to shoot a working elephant. Elephants were valuable laborers and shooting the creature would be like destroying a prized piece of machinery.

The pressure mounted. It was hard to think clearly about what to do with hundreds of villagers' expectant eyes watching. He lifted his rifle and took aim, justifying to himself what felt like the only choice he had. In his essay he wrote: "A sahib has got to act like a sahib; he has got to appear resolute, to know his own mind and do definite things. To come all that way, rifle in hand, with two thousand people marching at my heels, and then to trail feebly away, having done nothing—no, that was impossible."

When the first shot rang out, it was drowned by the cheering of the crowd. Another two shots followed in quick succession. Orwell had succumbed to the demands of the crowd and said yes when he

wanted to say no, for his own sake and for what he had convinced himself was the sake of the British Empire. In that moment, he felt hopeful that the villagers would finally bury the hatchet.

However, years after the incident, he recalled with lingering regret, that neither his reputation nor his relationship with the villagers improved in the time he spent in Moulmein after the elephant incident. The villagers still "accidentally" knocked him over during a soccer game in the muddy temple courtyard or "inadvertently" ran over his foot with a bicycle in the crowded bazaar. Orwell had betrayed his principles and instincts in saying yes to shooting the elephant—and in doing so made a terribly wrong decision, one that plagued him for the remainder of his life.

We All Sometimes Say Yes When We Want to Say No

Contemporary philosopher Michael E. Bratman observed that "We are not frictionless deliberators." Although today, more than a century after George Orwell shot the elephant in colonial Burma, we are so far removed from the circumstances of Orwell's story and will not be faced with the same decision he had to make, it can sometimes feel like our choices are as momentous as that one. Yes, times have changed, yet the social pressure we experience to abide by the expectations of others can leave us feeling trapped and conflicted in much the same way as Orwell did.

All of us have likely said yes to things we wanted to say no to and succumbed to the expectations of others, simply because we did not know how to refuse. Social psychologists call the tremendous power that others wield over our decisions *social influence*.

It shapes how we respond to situations when we are under social pressure or feel under the scrutiny of others. The simplest evidence of social influence's power is our willingness to conform to what other people want of us. This often means that when we feel on the spot we will agree or say yes even when it makes complete sense to say no. In Orwell's case, even years later, when he recalled the incident, the familiar pit-of-the-stomach sensation was accompanied by an uncomfortable feeling of shame and reproach for his younger self.

To begin, we will unpack the forces that cause us to say yes even when we want to say no. We will recognize that because we are social creatures with a need to belong, our decisions and choices are not frictionless. Indeed, to be human is to bear a heavy evolutionary burden of instinctively valuing cooperation and compliance over individual achievement and volition. Simply put, saying no involves the unpleasant task of downthumbing[2] a request to put yourself and what you want first. This simple two-letter answer can be a source of anxiety and angst. You debate your response because the wrong response could lead you to risk your relationships (*Will they still like me?*) and damage your reputation (*What will they think of me?*).

We Think in People Terms

Anthropologists have found that human societies are founded on the notions of trust and cooperation. In all cultures, human beings naturally formed groups in which individuals cooperated with each other for survival. It makes sense that our ancestors would

live in groups because, simply put, there is immense strength in numbers. It was just easier and safer to protect yourself from dangerous wild animals, hunt for and gather food, rear children, and raise domesticated animals, if you lived together with other human beings who shared the same goals of safety and survival. In fact, in many societies today, the extended family still exists because of the conveniences that family structure affords.

Regardless of where societies evolved across the world, members of the same tribe developed social norms that governed cooperative behavior. Social norms of cooperation, kindness, and politeness continue to undergird modern society.[3] Early in life, children are taught that to be viewed as valuable members of society, they need to get along with others by being accommodating and helpful. To prepare children for a successful life, parents and teachers impart important lessons of kindness, caring, compassion, consideration for others, and thoughtfulness.

Unsurprisingly, society shapes us to belong. Fables and stories from various cultures, both ancient and modern, are used to tell stories of great self-sacrifice and the rewards that befall people who give up their own desires for the sake of others. From the Bible to the *Ramayana*, from *Aesop's Fables* to *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, we learn that valuable members of society sometimes take on unpleasant tasks for the greater good and this confers on them immeasurable rewards.

One of my favorite stories and pertinent to the topic of saying no was narrated by Nelson Mandela in his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*. Mandela writes: "Whereas my father once told

stories of historic battles and heroic Xhosa warriors, my mother would enchant us with Xhosa legends and fables that had come down from numberless generations. These tales stimulated my childish imagination and usually contained some moral lesson. I recall one story my mother told us about a traveler who was approached by an old woman with terrible cataracts on her eyes. The woman asked the traveler for help, and the man averted his eyes. Then another man came along and was approached by the old woman. She asked him to clean her eyes, and even though he found the task unpleasant, he did as she asked. Miraculously, the scales fell from the old woman's eyes and she became young and beautiful. The man married her and became wealthy and prosperous. It is a simple tale, but its message is an enduring one: virtue and generosity will be rewarded in ways that one cannot know."

Storytelling is an ancient art that persuades, informs, and entertains. Although variations of this narrative exist in a variety of cultures, the particular story that Mandela recounts leaves us with the belief that the first traveler who said no by averting his eyes lost out. He lost out on good fortune, a beautiful wife, and a happy life. The second traveler, on the other hand, was bestowed with all these bounties by doing what appeared to be an unpleasant task.

Researchers find that the need to belong is a fundamental human motivation.[4] This need often results in us making decisions in other-people terms as opposed to on our own terms. Psychologist Mark Leary and his colleagues designed a need-to-belong scale that measures how far a person would be willing to go to feel included.[5] When people have a high need to belong,

they become more other-centric. They are more likely to set their own needs aside and comply with what others want. They are more likely to take other people's feelings into consideration because they are concerned about the disappointment, frustration, and inconvenience that their decisions might cause others. They might do things to avoid rejection and negative evaluation by members of their group.

This Māori proverb beautifully captures this idea of what it means to be human and think "in people terms":

He aha te mea nui o te ao
What is the most important thing in the world?
He tangata, he tangata, he tangata
It is the people, it is the people, it is the people

"No": The Harmony Buster

One might imagine that saying no to things we do not want to do, or think we shouldn't do, ought to be easy. After all, it seems logical that if we know what we don't want, we should be able to say, "Sorry, not interested" or "No thank you" or simply "Nope, not for me." However, for most people, saying no is awkward and difficult, mostly because it involves sometimes having to put aside other people's expectations or reject what they want or wish for.

But why is it so painful to say no? Because saying no is a socially dispreferred response. Let's unpack this idea, because it forms the central premise of why we often say yes when we want to say no. Consider the last time someone made a request of you,

invited you to go somewhere, made you an offer, or gave you a suggestion. Most likely they did so fully expecting your agreement and cooperation. They would not have been unreasonable in this expectation, given that there is a fairly robust social norm that suggests that we should adjust our own plans to accommodate others when they ask for it.[6] Often this translates to agreeing to even the most frivolous requests. Hardwired to help and conditioned to be cooperative, we are psychologically poised to say yes even when we want to say no. We intuitively recognize that saying no involves violating a social norm and can result in dire consequences, both in terms of the negative emotions and actions of others and in the bad feelings we have about ourselves.[7] Research finds that rejecting another person causes anxiety[8] and results in the refuser feeling depleted and de-energized.[9] Sometimes saying no can hurt the refuser as much, or perhaps more, than it hurts the refused.

While saying yes is socially approved, saying no is almost always a harmony buster. In fact, refusing someone by saying no has been described by one linguistic researcher as a "face-threatening act that tends to disrupt harmony in relationships."[10] *Whether we like it or not,* we are motivated to maintain long-lasting positive relationships with other human beings. We work hard to maintain social ties and resist their dissolution. We feel anxious at the thought of losing an important relationship and distressed if we caused another person harm. *It is this basic human instinct that sets us up to say yes more readily than to say no to a request.*

If we are honest with ourselves, we would see that our yeses

come faster than our noes more often than we would like. Linguist Nick Enfield finds that this literally occurs in everyday speech: no matter which language is spoken, a no answer to a request will come slower than a yes response.[11] Most of us can think of at least one request in the past month that we did not know how to get out of and at least one thing on our calendar today that we wished we did not have to do.

Society Favors the Asker

So characteristically human is the notion of compliance that an entire subfield of social psychology is dedicated to the study of "influence"—when and how one person gets another person to do their bidding. Even though human beings are wired to be cooperative, the irony is that if you can get others to do what you want them to do, you gain social status, power, and a more advantageous position in the hierarchy of society.[12]

Consequently, researchers have spent decades understanding the effectiveness of different factors of persuasion, such as the power or status of the asker relative to the asked (your boss, for instance) or reciprocity norms (returning a favor), to produce automatic compliance: a willingness to say yes without thinking first.[13] Numerous books have been written about persuasion tactics that get people to do what you want, the assumption being that gaining compliance from others is a hallmark of your own success. Bestselling author Robert Cialdini has popularized influence tactics with catchy names like "foot in the door" and "door in the face" that are tools to get people to do your bidding.

But it turns out you don't have to work too hard to get people to comply with your request, as Cornell social psychologist Vanessa Bohns, who investigates people's response to everyday requests, finds. A key takeaway from her work is that people should ask for what they want, even if they themselves deem the ask outrageous, because the person you ask will likely comply. In her research studies, she has participants ask strangers to do things that were personally intrusive (Can I use your cell phone?), time consuming (Will you fill out a questionnaire?), and sometimes just wrong (Will you deface this library book?), and in all cases she found that a majority of people asked will comply.

A different rendition of Bohns's insight, but from a real-life experience perspective, comes from entrepreneur and speaker Jia Jiang, who after a spate of soul-crushing disappointments set out to conquer his fear of rejection by seeking out rejection every day for 100 days. In his book, *Rejection Proof*, Jiang provides hilarious anecdotes about the ways in which he strove to be rejected. He spent a year going out of his way "boldly seeking out rejection." He knocked on a stranger's door and asked, "Can I use your backyard to kick around a ball?" The answer he got: "Sure!" He asked a flight attendant whether he could make an announcement on the loudspeaker during a flight, and he was handed the microphone.

One of my favorite examples is Jiang's experiment in which he walked into a doughnut shop and asked the cashier, Jackie, to make him a set of doughnuts in the shape of the Olympic symbol. Jackie took this project on with sincerity and zeal. She discussed the different ways in which it would be possible to create the

doughnuts, going as far as to look up the precise design and colors of the Olympic logo to give him what he asked for.[14] Furthermore, she did not even charge him for this extreme request!

What Jia Jiang and Vanessa Bohns both found is that even when people ask for completely crazy things that they would never even expect others to say yes to, they often receive a yes rather than the no the request clearly warranted.

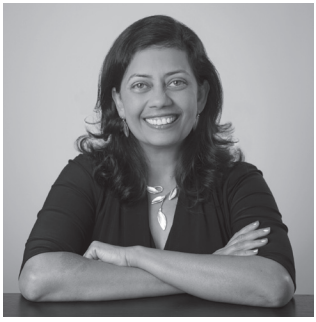
It is apparent that we are already poised to be more compliant than unyielding. Recall that acceptance is always the preferred response, while refusal is dispreferred. This is pretty powerful stuff if you are the person on the asking side of the equation—but not so great if you are on the other side, where a lot of us find ourselves at one point or another. On this side, we are very often stumped. We feel trapped and stuck, and we react accordingly.

The Dual Drivers of Yes: Relationships and Reputation

People relate to each other with both their heart and their head. These correspond to the *feelings* one might have about the other person and *thoughts* that come to mind when we think of the other person. These feelings and thoughts can be either positive or negative. Think about a family member (a parent or a close relative) and examine the feelings this person evokes in you and the thoughts that come to mind when you think of them. Think about someone at work, a colleague or your boss. What thoughts and feelings come to mind about them? What do you think you evoke in people when they think of you?

We all want to be thought of as kind, cheerful, and lovely to be

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dr. Vanessa Patrick is a professor of marketing and the Associate Dean for Research at the Bauer College of Business at the University of Houston. She has a PhD in Business from the University of Southern California and an MBA in marketing and a BS degree in microbiology and biochemistry from Bombay University in India. Patrick has published dozens of research articles in top-tier academic journals in psychology, marketing, and management, and popular accounts of her work have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, NPR, *Los Angeles Times*, *Business Week*, *Fast Company*, *Forbes*, *Huffington Post* and *Washington Post*. In her research, she investigates strategies to achieve personal mastery and inspire everyday excellence in oneself and others and is a pioneer in the study of everyday consumer aesthetics. Patrick lives with her family in Houston, Texas.

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