Persuasive Strategies of a Door-to-Door Salesman

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Introduction

Tri-Smart Solar is an authorized seller of one of the most respected all-in-one solar companies in America, SolarCity, and has been rapidly expanding to keep their title as America’s biggest solar energy company (Spross, 2014). Goldman Sachs, Google, Citi Bank, Honda, U.S. Bank and Bank of America are associate investors of the growing company which reaches funds of four billion dollars (SolarCity, 2015). While SolarCity has major companies supporting its work, they stay focused on their goals which are: saving consumer’s money, a healthier ecosystem, and making a better environment for future generations. This internship is a great opportunity for me to dedicate my talents to a meaningful company while being immersed in the field of communication. The opportunities to grow in this career are great, but so are the difficulties.

Starting an internship as a door-to-door salesman selling the idea and future installation of solar panels for Tri-Smart, I was faced with a barrage of obstacles such as rejection, climate, and frustration. This position provided an opportunity to exercise different types of persuasion techniques in one of the most difficult forms in sales, I was able to directly apply my education to the task that I believe I’m well suited to accomplish.

A knock on the front door often means missionaries, Jehovah Witnesses or door-to-door salesman. While some of these “salesman” are using different types of persuasion for acquiring members, the other door knockers are using the knowledge of persuasion to gain financial wealth.

Research has been conducted for persuasive advertising in television, radio, and internet ads as far back as 1880’s (Honomichl, 1986). The focus in face-to-face persuasion is competing
with the recent technology growth, such as social media platforms in the past couple decades. This provides an opportunity for a personal encounter and persuasion techniques to be reestablished once again, but in a more effective way. The purpose of this project is to explore how salesman (specifically door-to-door) may refocus their efforts to become more effective product pitchmen. This will be accomplished by applying the Elaboration Likelihood Model and the Social Judgment Theory. Ultimately, this internship used persuasion techniques in the field of door-to-door sales.
Literature Review

Elaboration Likelihood Model

According to Petty and Cappioppo (1984) the elaboration likelihood model is a theory that focuses on attitude change. In this theory the framework to organize ideas and understanding how to apply persuasive methods of communication was created with the assistance of Petty and Cappioppo (1984). The elaboration likelihood model views the persuasion process as a cognitive event (Dainton & Zelley, 2005). This means that the model focuses on persuasive messages that use reasoning or motivation (or the lack of it) to acquire the end result (Dainton & Zelley, 2005).

Explained by Petty and Cacioppo (1986), the elaboration likelihood model uses two different methods of influence: centrally routed messages and peripherally routed messages. While there are two options to the same destination, it's important to understand the particular audience before crafting the persuasive message.

The central route was understood by Petty and Cacioppo (1986) as the more complex or elaborated method. These messages are constructed to hold vast amounts of information, evidence supporting ideas, or rational and counter argumentation (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). This progresses towards the logical side of persuasion. These centrally routed messages are more prominent in making a long-term impression for the recipient compared to the peripheral messages (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

There are two methods that Petty and Cacioppo (1986) discuss in order for this process to work on the recipient. The first is that the individual has to be motivated by some force to understand the amounts of information given (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Second, the individual has to be able to cognitively process the message being sent by the persuader (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The receiver must have the motivation to listen and understand the pitchman as the
individual understands the potential to save a vast amount of money making everyday life a little easier. Also, the information cannot be too technical or so filled with jargon that the point of the message is lost in its complexity.

In contrast, the peripheral method of persuasion uses the recipients’ emotional involvement, intertwining it with logical reasoning (Dainton & Zelley, 2005). For example, if a security alarm system salesman noticed that the homeowner has kids that could suggest that this product would increase the safety of his or her family. This appeals directly to the emotional factor of the audience, however, the significant drawback is that this particular approach leads to only a short-term effect in persuasion when used alone.

Cialdini (1993) describes seven different cues that signal the use of a peripheral message: authority, commitment, contrast, liking, reciprocity, scarcity, and social proof. Though all of these types of peripheral messages are important, the following will be discussed as one of the more effective methods in sales.

As Petty and Cacioppo (1986) explain how to determine which route to take, it can also depend on the processing route available which consists of different motivations. The motivation towards new information can conflict or agree with their previous beliefs or ideas. This correlates with where they stand on the latitude of acceptance and rejection which will be discussed later in Social Judgment theory (Sherif & Hovland, 1961). Ability includes the distractions or pressures which may distract from the knowledge needed to inspect the arguments (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Persuasion techniques must take into account the individual’s previous knowledge about the subject along with the current environment in order to change their cognitive stance.
A salesman can use the perception of authority or expertise in the subject to convince the audience to accept the message more willingly (Dainton & Zelley, 2005). Another method, using commitment emphasizes the idea of a person’s devotion to a cause, product, group affiliation and so on (Cialdini, 1994). A possible example of this would be of a solar panel salesman explaining that if the homeowner buys the product, it shows that caring about the environment and the cause that of which it stands. Liking messages are aimed towards a person, place or object (Cialdini, 1993). If the recipient likes the persuader, the recipient will also like the persuaders’ ideas or product. Lastly the idea of peer pressure, also known as “social proof” in this text, is another emotion filled tactic for persuaders (Cialdini, 1993). The idea that “everyone is doing it” is capable of swaying more than teenagers but entire public audiences alike (Dainton & Zelley, 2005). Using the perceptions of authority, expertise, liking, and social proof are all possible directions in gaining a persuasive advantage. Though, the constructed opinions that are acceptable from these techniques may be less likely to reside with the individual over time and prevail counter persuasive moves (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984).

The predictions of how long an opinion will resist over time are different with central and peripheral routes. When the central route of persuasion is applied to persuasion it is suggested that these ideas will be more likely to be preserved through conflicting persuasion ideas and time, making it harder to change (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984). Although when using the peripheral route of persuasion these ideas that were construct are more likely to change over time and affect attitude change (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984). With these theories working together inside the ELM framework it seems it has proven itself to be the most influential method of applying and affecting change.
Social Judgment Theory

Social judgment theory, explained by Sherif and Hovland (1961), provides a framework that studies human judgment and how we perceive situations and perspectives. Knowing how to apply social judgment theory one can find the attitude of a subject that an individual has and can help provide clues on how to persuade the receiver (Dainton & Zelley, 2005). Sherif and Hovland (1961) created this theory to focus on people’s assessment or thoughts about persuasive messages. Exploring the anchors, or the stance, that a person has will assist in making better evaluations for persuasion on a certain subject (Sherif & Hovland, 1961). Pairing up with the persons “anchor” is yet another way of persuasion. Each person has an attitude about a subject that can be put into one of three of the following categories: latitude of acceptance, latitude of rejection, and latitude of non-commitment (Dainton & Zelley, 2005).

The first, latitude of acceptance includes all those ideas that an individual finds agreeable (Sherif & Hovland, 1961). Second, the latitude of rejection, includes ideas that a person finds undesirable (Sherif & Hovland, 1961). Third, the latitude of non-commitment, has ideas that the individual has no opinion over, so the direction of persuasion could go either way (Sherif & Hovland, 1961).

It makes sense that a person’s reaction is dependent on the views about the subject. So according to Dainton and Zelley (2005), the first step in the social judgment process is to find the receivers attitudes’ about the topic. The responses from a person about a topic is a map about how “ego involved” that person is in a particular subject (Dainton & Zelley, 2005). When the individual has a strong ego, or they believe that the topic is significant, typically they will hold a more intense position (O’Keefe, 1990). The more significant the topic is to the person, it is
thought of to be a central link to their sense of self, making them ego-involved (Dainton & Zelley, 2005). If the individual is ego-involved, this can be a considerable advantage for the persuader which allows the persuader to make predictions about the recipient of the message (Dainton & Zelley, 2005).

The links can be simplified into two processes that assist in making a better persuasive message because of the individuals anchor: the contrast effect and the assimilation effect (Sherif & Hovland, 1961). The contrast effect occurs when the message is found further away from the individuals anchor than what it really is. They then subconsciously exaggerate the differences between the message and their actual position (Sherif & Hovland, 1961). The assimilation effect is the opposite, the receiver finds more positive links between their anchor and the message while minimizing the opposing ideas (Dainton & Zelley, 2005).

Listening to individuals as they disclose information not only helps the persuader find the right persuasion method, but such self-disclosure assists the receiver liking the persuader (Tamir & Mitchell, 2012). Self-disclosure acts as an intrinsic reward for the participator, much like food and sex, and increases the amount of trust and liking towards the other individual (Tamir & Mitchell, 2012). Applying this to the sales world, the amount of trust that one gains for persuasive gain is a major advantage. The use of social judgment theory is not the main focus, it does provide useful information alongside the ELM framework.

**Sequential Persuasion & Motivational Appeal Practices**

Gass and Seiter (2004) discuss research showing the effectiveness of certain persuasive techniques even if it is at the expense of the customer. Approaches like: pre-giving, foot-in-the-door, foot-in-the-mouth, door-in-the-face, lowball, bait-and-switch, and emotional roller-coasters are all effective tactics used in sales persuasion.
The persuasiveness application of foot-in-the-door is based off of self-perception and altruism (Gass & Seiter, 2004). When an individual accepts a small request, it begins to define who they are as an altruistic person, which leads them to comply to larger requests (Gass & Seiter, 2004). This tactic is more likely to succeed when it is taken into consideration of the size of initial request, the positive labeling of the individual, and self-concept clarity of being helpful or giving.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, the door-in-the-face tactic asks for an unreasonable request which is followed up by a seemingly much more reasonable request (Gass & Seiter, 2004). This is explained as the effectiveness of the contrast effect, guilt-based emotions, and another that’s mixed with reciprocity (Gass & Seiter, 2004). While the contrast effect shows how much more reasonable the second offer is, the emotions of guilt about denying the first offer builds up. It is hard for some people to say no twice, especially when the second offer is so reasonable.

Lowballing is also an effective tactic by taking advantage of commitment and obligations to previous promises (Gass & Seiter, 2004). When an individual commits to the original deal, even though the deal may change, the person may feel the need to carry out the commitment regardless of the details (Gass & Seiter, 2004). This is similar to the obligation of keeping the deal alive and an opportunity to close. While the deal may have changed, usually to the seller’s advantage, the obligation of carrying out the deal can be too strong for the customer to ignore (Gass & Seiter, 2004).

The last tactic is the emotional roller coaster, controls the use of fear and happiness to be effective (Gass & Seiter, 2004). When an individual is confronted with fear it causes them to find a source of action to fix the problem (Gass & Seiter, 2004). When the problem of fear is
suddenly relieved, they are more open to persuasive messages (Gass & Seiter, 2004). This ultimately creates a fear-then-relief strategy to gain the persuasive advantage.

Motivational Power

The techniques used to tug at the customers heart has been an effective effort and has been described as external inducements (Gass & Seiter, 2004). These external inducements are created to change the person’s feelings, moods or emotions in multiple ways (Gass & Seiter, 2004). With numerous ways of changing an individual’s inner drive to a more susceptible way of persuasion, they can be influenced by intrinsic or extrinsic methods of motivation (Gass & Seiter, 2004). An individual’s intrinsic motivation would be coming from within the individual while the extrinsic motivation is drilled by some outside force (Gass & Seiter, 2004). With the use of emotion persuasive techniques would be applying an extrinsic force such as fear, pity, or guilt.

Fear is a popular motive in door-to-door sales, such as household security alarms. Provoking the thought of someone breaking into a home and causing damage to a family, but that can be prevented by the use of this certain product is an example of fear. As noted earlier, fear is not the only emotion that is relevant.

Guilt is a regularly applied emotion in sales. A specific example of guilt applied in sales is in funeral homes as described by Gass & Seiter (2004). Gentry, Kennedy, Paul, and Hill explored the bargaining practices of prices while loved ones grieve over their loss (1995). Some funeral home directors know that those in the grieving process are an “easy mark” and can use guilt implied persuasion to increase their profits (Gentry, Kennedy, Paul, & Hill, 1995). Guilt
and fear are not the only powerful persuasion motives, as there are more positive emotions that are used in persuasion.

Humor is a massively effective force in persuasion. Advertising itself is made up of about 20 to 50 percent of humoristic qualities (Toncar, 2001). Humor can be found in almost any form of communication today and it can be applied in multiple ways. Humor can be used in to increase credibility, demonstrate social proof, or to engage in self-disparaging actions all to gain a persuasively edge (Gass & Seiter, 2004).

These external inducements are used to increase the needed drive in another individual so that they will act in a certain way. Motivational motives are crossing the bridge between rational and emotional filled tactics in persuasion and have been shown to be extremely persuasive (Gass & Seiter, 2004). Using these techniques, or even a combination of them, can result in a powerful persuasion method.
Justification

Thousands of people have dedicated their summers to door-to-door sales activities. The reviews are mixed. Sadly there are a substantial amount of experiences that fall under disappointment and regret. Regardless of all the stories, this doesn’t affect the predictions from the Bureau of Labor Statistics for 2010 – 2020 estimating that door-to-door sales would decline by 15%. This research sought to discover the principles and actions that can be applied for successful experiences in the area where so many fail to do so. If individuals can take advantage of persuasion theories while exploring them with consistent positive thinking, it can transform a dreaded experience into a meaningful experience and perhaps an opening for a new career.

So in exploring effective methods of persuasion and constructing a possible procedure for adventuring door-to-door salesman, this internship will be conducted. Although the purpose of this experience will be guided by:

Q1: What’s the relationship between the persuasion strategies found in the ELM (central vs peripheral)?

Q2: How does the relationship change the amount of success in set appointments?
The Process

For this capstone internship, I have applied the previous methods of persuasion to my experiences. I recorded techniques that I have found to be most effective in my hours of work. Each experience with potential consumers has been different and provided a different challenge to applying the techniques and methods. Although, supposing that the theories of persuasion in communication prove true, there should be an effective tool in the toolbox for nearly every individual I come across and that proved to be true with homeowners that were willing to discuss the options. To find which tools were most effective, I have recorded each successful set appointment and the techniques used in a note journal. This minimalistic journal described the sale, which route was used (peripheral or central), and any other factors that were used that may have increase the persuasive process.

This influential and interactive research, along with being recorded, was built on the existing methods of the company Tri-Smart. My manager, James Stone, has already begun to define the ideas and possibilities for the internship that fell in stride with existing methods.

Throughout this internship, I have reapplied existing techniques that will be most applicable to modern day sales. In hopes of fueling the spark for human interaction once again in the era of emotionless technology, I have in a small sense of the word “rediscovered” that there is always a small niche for personal interaction that benefits the consumer, myself, and Tri-Smart simultaneously.

The script provided by TriSMART is based on emotional trust building questions and logical, financial saving methods of persuasion. It is to the point and is entirely grounded off of a numbers game. This means that for every 100 homes that are knocked, there is bound to be one
homeowner that says yes. That results in the expected and constant flow of “no’s” to the employee in hopes of finding that one successful set.

Introducing myself and asking the homeowner customer satisfaction questions about their power provider was the lead in the script. This was done to provide the homeowner to talk to me and feel more comfortable with a stranger on their front doorstep. Following the trust building questions was the logical based explanations of why I was there and how TriSMART saves homeowners money on their power bill. At the end of the logical part of the pitch the homeowner has to decide if they want to set an appointment. This is a pitch that attempts to waste neither the homeowner nor my own time and get straight to the setting of an appointment.
Recordings and Results

The set appointments are based on an average of 45+ hours of work in a week for four continuous weeks totaling a minimum of 180 hours of internship hours. The results are extremely varied and were reflective on where my locations main demographic. The two main demographics that had an impact on my work was the age of the homeowner and if they were raising children in the home. While these two demographics do suggestively complement one another, I had much more success when both of these factors were found in the homeowner compared to one individually.

1. Week one resulted in a total of seven set appointments in that area. The demographic was heavily dominated by “snowbirds” as the main demographic in ELM and was at least 70+ years of age. This resulted in a strict income and fixed rates by their power provider on a monthly basis. There was no success in peripheral or emotional lines of persuasion with this demographic, only logical evidence had a chance of them changing their set ways even if it was on a better plan financially. An estimated 15 potential customers, after witnessing their yearly average savings with TriSMART’s plan, declined the opportunity based on logical explanations with an illogical or financial excuse. All seven set appointments were based on an estimate of yearly savings for their home and applying the immediate savings percentage of their fixed monthly rate.

2. The second week of the internship was in an area where the demographic is slightly younger than the snowbirds, averaging 50 – 70 years of age. However, the strict income and fixed rates from the power company was applied in this area as well. This resulted in only five set appointments at the end of the week. There was
a loss of 19 potential customers that felt as though the logic was sound; although the company TriSMART was unheard of and they were weary of scams resulting in a great emotional deterrent. The five set appointments were built similarly to the previous week. Explaining the monthly percentage of estimated savings and at the end of the year.

3. Week three was a mixed population ranging from 30 – 60 years of age concerning the demographic and I produced six set appointments. I found that with the drop in age there was a slight increase in peripheral persuasiveness. Four of the sets were produced by a logical step-by-step process that found its way to the made appointment. The other two sets were made by reputation building, home owners noticing that many other home owners already have solar and have enjoyed its benefits. I lost a potential nine customers that were simply too busy at the moment to schedule an appointment or were already in progress of saving with solar from another company.

4. The fourth week broke through with tremendous success in the area which ended in 31 set appointments. The demographic was filled with younger families, aged 25 – 45 on average. The majority liked the idea of solar energy logically in its entirety already. Following the logically based section of my pitch I constructed my first five sets in the area. The next 26 appointments were made off of a heavily made peripheral course of persuasion towards the home owners. I used the names of all their surrounding neighbors that I was successful in setting appointments for to build confidence and reputation for myself and TriSMART. This led to a domino effect for homeowners in the emotional form of persuasion,
as it highlighted a form of social peer pressure around the blocks of the community. While I still applied the needed logical information to begin my pitch to the homeowners, the interest in what I had was minimal or average at best. Only after combining a small portion of logical savings and the localized peer pressure together did I see a huge increase of set appointments throughout the week.
Discussion

The results showed an obvious connection between the younger demographic and the acceptability on power of peripheral persuasion from the ELM. The goal of this study was to find a connection between the route of persuasion within the ELM and the related success it demonstrated. TriSMART uses a script that is split almost evenly on the use of direct and peripheral persuasion on the homeowner and I found that it was somewhat below average in terms of effectiveness in my own study.

ELM provides options where one can take their persuasive methods and adapt to the situation. Something that I felt lacked when sticking straight to the TriSMART script. Near the end of the month, as many successful salesman have already realized, the script should be used as a guideline for the sale and to gauge which route of persuasion is going to be most effective. The script should not be set in stone as a one size fits all reading that will apply to every homeowner whether it is a numbers game or otherwise.

In the field it slowly became apparent who wanted to learn the facts behind the matter because they simply did not care about their neighbors or anyone else’s activities (older demographic). Meanwhile, the younger demographics attention was retained and refocused when familiar family names were mentioned from around the neighborhood who has already taken the initiative about learning more from TriSMART. This method clearly demonstrates an extrinsic force on the homeowners and how they should behave to fit in with society. As we look back upon the older demographic, they were strictly focused on intrinsic value of what I had to offer. If it didn’t match up to exactly what they were looking for then it was of no use to them, no matter how logically sound the pitch was.
The conclusion of the sales experience is interesting and different than previously expected. I previously believed that if the pitch made sound financial and logical sense to the consumer, then it would be a relatively straightforward sale because of the persuasion strength of the product. While this method did work from time to time, it was by far not the most effective method out of the two routes in ELM. The peripheral method was without a doubt the most effective manner of persuasion between the two. It should be understood that correlation is not causation by any means, there is valuable information as in all studies. The power of peripheral or emotional methods of persuasion shouldn’t be underestimated in all forms of sales in contrast to direct and more logical techniques.
Conclusion

The main limitations of this study are time, location, and demographics. Where there were demonstrated results throughout the duration of the study, it is not sufficient enough to be considered as a primary method of door-to-door persuasion. The use of time in this study was fully taken advantage of, however it lasted only a month. With more time over the course of a year there would be more results to find an average in terms of effective paths of persuasion in the ELM.

As this was not a variable-by-variable controlled study, the numerous variables to be considered are countless. This includes the location along with the duration of the study. The location holds different demographics within itself such as age, homeowners, renters, families, and financial income. With no way to prepare for all these variables within the location it makes it difficult to pinpoint what method of the ELM lead to which successfully made appointments.

The lack of control over age (usually resulting in difference of financial income in this study) within the location made it more difficult to decide why or why not the taken course of persuasion was appropriate. If the older age of the demographic was the same but in a wealthier area then I would expect the results to be drastically different. Since these variables are so random in my study, I find it difficult to justify any extreme significance found throughout its duration.

In future research I would send two different teams to the same location that holds similar financial backgrounds and age. One of these teams would use a script that’s more dependent on peripheral persuasion while the other team focuses on direct and logical savings. These two teams would continue to multiple areas at the same time over the course of a year. This would
assist in funneling down the multiple variables to further understand which method of ELM is more dominant in door-to-door persuasion. I would also like to apply contagion theory in future research, a crowd behavior theory founded by Gustave Le Bon, as it goes further into detail about the effects crowds influence emotional and irrational behavior (Marsden, 1998). The results found in this study show an increase in set appointments with the application of social peer pressure and crowd behavior, so I believe the contagion theory would add substantial results in future studies.

In conclusion, the door-to-door sales business continues on in the world of marketing. There are multiple methods of persuasion in sales that are used, such as: pre-giving, foot-in-the-door, foot-in-the-mouth, door-in-the-face, lowball, and bait-and-switch. However, all of them can be connected to ELM directly or indirectly in order to successfully persuade another.

I believe that this research has opened an area that many door-to-door companies can look into and find potential success. While the numbers game and logical pitches are effective, I believe they have their limits as does every other persuasive method. Combining or adapting two or more different scripts that are available to use as a guideline in door-to-door salesmen would open up another section of homeowners to the ideas presented before them.
References


Appendix A

“Is this (address of house)?
My name is ____ I work for Tri-Smart. We work in conjunction with (regional power company).
If you can point to a neighbor’s house and say "do you know (neighbor’s name)"
We are working on an initiative to help consumers save money on their monthly electric bills.
Are you the home owner?
Great! I will be quick…

1. On a scale from 1-10, how would you rate your overall experience with APS?
2. Is there anything you feel they could do to improve?
3. Are you on the equalizer or advantage pay plan?
4. What is your average electric bill during summer?
5. What are some things that you and your household are currently doing to conserve energy and save money each month? Energy Efficient light bulbs, and etc.

When driving around have you seen the solar panels that are being installed on the roofs of your neighbors’ homes and the government buildings around here?
One of the reasons I am here, and you may already know this, is that APS is required by law, to have a certain amount of renewable energy to be put back onto the grid every year. If they don’t reach their benchmark, then they will be fined by the state.
So, in an effort to not be fined, they have created more of an awareness about Solar Panels.
Tri Smart works a part of this initiative to create more awareness on Solar Panels. What we have found is that most people like the idea of Solar, but they can’t or don’t want to spend 20-40 thousand dollars to put solar panels on their roof.

What TriSmart does is…
1. They come and install panels at no cost,
2. Maintenance them for the life of the panels
3. Insurance etc.

This creates good, clean energy for you home and the community and it is also good for APS, because it puts energy back on the grid…
In exchange for letting us use your roof, average home owner saves anywhere from 5-30% on electricity costs per month.
So my last question is... If the Company were to offer to pay for the installation, equipment, and servicing of the solar panels to help reduce emissions and electricity costs for your home would you be inclined to receive more information?
Great!
I will send your address into a CAD team who takes a Satellite view of your home. From there, they are able to see how many solar panels can go on your roof and exactly how they will lay. Based off of your location, how much sun your home gets, how much energy your home will create, and based off of your APS bill, they will get you exactly how much you will save each month.

What’s your name?
Excellent
Do you guys receive your APS bill online or in the mail?
Get rest of info...phone #, email, and set up the best time, for them. Try and schedule it max 3 days out but always schedule a same day if possible.
Excellent,
Hand them a reminder card.
So ________________, will be here this day at this time. It'll take 30 minutes, and it's purely informational. You will know what is available for your home. We will see if it works for you with the money you can save and if it works for us with the energy the home can produce. Then if it does, great! It’s all free information for you.
## Appendix B

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Doors Knocked (estimate)</th>
<th>Set Appointments</th>
<th>Internship Hours</th>
<th>Geographical Demographic Age</th>
<th>Central vs Peripheral Dominancy</th>
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