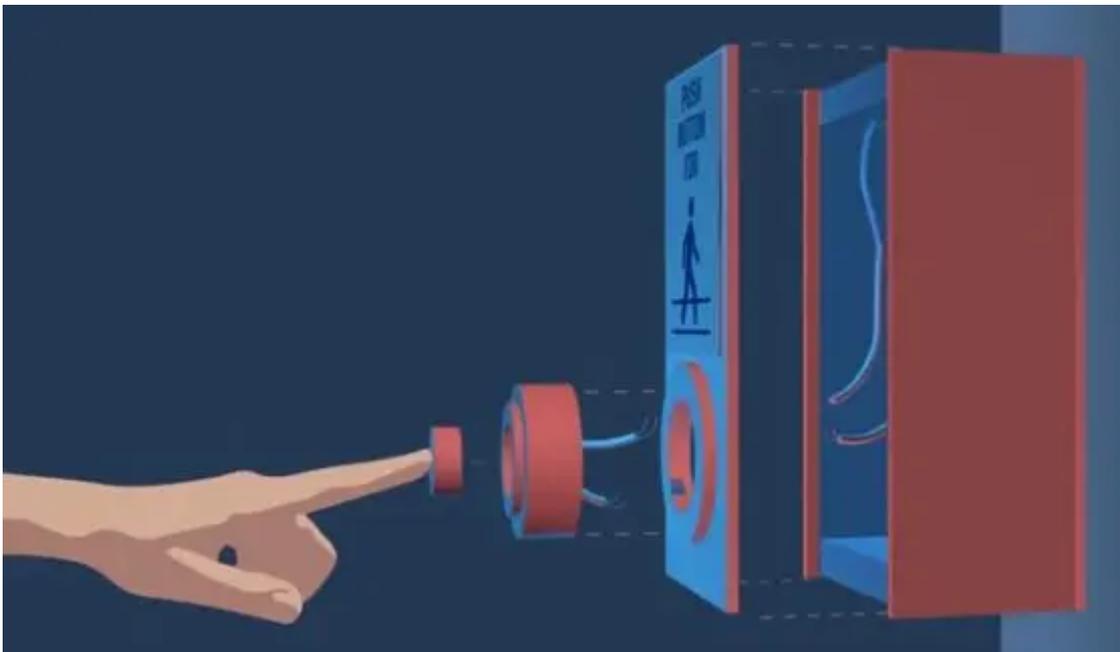


David McRaney / February 10, 2010 / [Articles](#)

## Placebo Buttons

**The Misconception:** All buttons placed around you do your bidding.

**The Truth:** Many public buttons are only there to comfort you.



You press the doorbell button, you hear the doorbell ring. You press the elevator button, it lights up. You press the button on the vending machine, a soft drink comes rattling down the chute.

Your whole life, you've pressed buttons and been rewarded. It's conditioning at its simplest – just like a rat pressing a lever to get a pellet of food.

The thing about buttons, though, is there seems to be some invisible magic taking place between the moment you press them down and when you get the expected result. You can never really be sure you caused the soft drink to appear without opening up the vending machine to see how it works.

Maybe there's a man inside who pulls out the can of soda and puts it in the chute. Maybe there's a camera watching the machine, and someone in a distant control room tells the machine to dispense your pop.

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You just don't know, and that's how conditioning works. As long as you get the result you were looking for after you press the button, it doesn't matter. You will be more likely to press the button in the future (or less likely to stop).

The problem here is that *some* buttons in modern life don't actually do anything at all. The magic between the button press and the result you want is all in your head. You never catch on – because you are not so smart.

According to a 2008 article in the *New Yorker*, close buttons don't close the elevator doors in many elevators built in the United States since the 1990s. In some elevators the button is there for workers and emergency personnel to use, and it only works with a key. The key-only settings isn't always active though, as the blog *Design with Intent* asserts. Each elevator is different. In some, the emergency function requires a long-press of several seconds longer than the average user attempts. The website, *The Straight Dope*, investigated the issue in 1986 by asking elevator companies and elevator repairmen directly. According to their investigation, "The grim truth is that a significant percentage of the close-door buttons in this world...don't do anything at all." The reasons cited were that the button was never wired up, or that it was set to a delay, or was deactivated by the



owner, or it broke long ago and no one ever complained because the doors eventually close whether or not you press the buttons.

If you happen to find yourself pressing a non-functional close-door button, and later the doors close, you'll probably never notice because a little spurt of happiness will cascade through your brain once you see what you believe is a response to your action. Your behavior was just reinforced. You will keep pressing the button in the future.

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Non-functioning mechanisms like this that motivate you to fool yourself are called placebo buttons, and they're everywhere.

Computers and timers now control the lights at many intersections, but at one time little buttons at crosswalks allowed people to trigger the signal change. Those buttons are mostly all disabled now, but the task of replacing or removing all of them was so great most cities just left them up. You still press them though, because the light eventually changes.

In an investigation by ABC news in 2010, only one functioning crosswalk button could be found in Austin, Texas; Gainesville, Fla.; and Syracuse, NY.

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**The city deactivated most of the pedestrian buttons long ago with the emergence of computer-controlled traffic signals, even as an unwitting public continued to push on, according to city Department of Transportation officials. More than 2,500 of the 3,250 walk buttons that still exist function essentially as mechanical placebos, city figures show. Any benefit from them is only imagined.**

**– New York Times, 2004**

In many offices and cubicle farms, the thermostat on the wall isn't connected to anything. Landlords, engineers and HVAC specialists have installed dummy thermostats for decades to keep people from costing companies money by constantly adjusting the temperature. According to a 2003 article in the Wall Street Journal, one HVAC specialist surmised that 90 percent of all office thermostats are fake (others say it's more like 2 percent). Some companies even install noise generators to complete the illusion after you turn the knob.

In a survey conducted in 2003 by the Air-Conditioning, Heating and Refrigeration News, 72 percent of respondents admitted to installing dummy thermostats.

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**“We had an employee that always complained of being hot,” recalls Greg Perakes, an HVACR instructor in Tennessee. “Our solution was to install a pneumatic thermostat. We ran the main air line to it inside of an enclosed I-beam. Then we just attached a short piece of tubing to the branch outlet (terminating inside the I-beam without being attached to any valves, etc.)”**

**The worker “could adjust her own temperature whenever she felt the need,” Perakes says, “thus enabling her to work more and complain less. When she heard the hissing air coming from inside the I-beam, she felt in control. We never heard another word about the situation from her again. Case solved.”**

**– The Air-Conditioning, Heating & Refrigeration News, Mar. 27, 2003**



Placebo buttons are a lot like superstitions, or ancient rituals. You do something in the hopes of an outcome – if you get the outcome, you keep the superstition.

Dancing to bring the rain, sacrificing a goat to get the sun to rise – it turns out these are a lot like pressing the button at the crosswalk over and over again.

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