

NONVERBAL SIGNALS IN STUDENT ROLE-PLAY EVALUATIONS

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Experiential learning including role plays have become the preferred form of educating university students on personal selling with broad agreement from academics and practitioners (Michaels & Marshall, 2002; Moncrief & Shipp, 1994; Parker, Pettijohn, & Luke, 1996). The pedagogical literature regarding sales presentations suggests that while, above all, the sales presentation must be adaptive and responsive to the communication style and needs of the customer, there is a prescriptive form to the presentation (e.g., Lill, 2002). Accordingly, there are five phases in a sales presentation specified in the contestant evaluation sheet from the National Collegiate Sales Competition (Loe & Chonko, 2000): the approach, needs identification, presentation, overcoming objections, and the close. Each of these phases has its own objective, and scoring for each phase rests on two to six items measuring individual attributes or actions important in that phase. In addition, the evaluation form has a section devoted to communication skills and one grading the overall impression of the candidate. The NCSC rating form thus contains seven major dimensions designed to capture most of the sales presentation variance. Each dimension is ascribed a percentage of the total score in line with its suggested contribution to the overall total sales presentation rating. This system is consistent with the academic and pedagogical literature on personal selling as an adaptive, consultative, relationship-building process (Rentz et al., 2002; Spiro & Weitz, 1990).

The National Collegiate Sales Competition is designed to give students exposure to the sales profession and provide students an opportunity to enhance their skills. In many classrooms, students discuss, practice, and learn to evaluate each phase of the adaptive consultative selling model using the NCSC evaluation form from the first of day class onward. In the authors' sales classes, students actively participate in a number of role-play sales performances, practicing each of the individual phases of a sales presentation including introductions, role-play telephone calls, approaches, and at the end of semester, presenting a final integrated sales presentation. All presentations are recorded, reviewed and evaluated by all class members. (e.g., Tanner & Roberts, 1996; Widmier, Loe, & Seldon, 2007).

Nonverbal Communication

Although nonverbal communications are not emphasized on the NCSC scoring form, they may account for a large percentage of the effective communications in a sales encounter. There is

evidence from research in social psychology that nonverbal communications may account for 60-93% of the effective communications in social dyads (Birdwhistell 1955; Mehrabian & Weiner 1967). Studies of nonverbal truth and deception decoding in nonverbal communications have yielded effect sizes ranging from $r = .29$ to $.44$ (Vrij & Baxter 1999). A salesperson's use of appropriate or signals may also be more persuasive since nonverbal behaviors that are consistent with the presentation topic are deemed more credible and trustworthy by consumers (Jones & LeBaron 2002) and consumers are more likely to change attitudes when they judge a message source to be highly credible and trustworthy (e.g. Dholakia & Sternthal 1977; Morgan & Hunt 1994; Swan, Bowers & Richardson 1999).

To examine the influence of nonverbal communication in sales presentations, a new 14 item nonverbal communication multi-dimensional scale was developed and tested in personal selling classrooms. A review of the literature was conducted to uncover aspects of nonverbal communications in the sales presentation, and a preliminary list of the items recommended therein was developed including open body language, posture, eye contact and facial expressions (e.g., Addis 2008; Boe 2008). In addition, thirty-six randomly selected final student role-play presentations were independently reviewed on video by the three authors and coded for the degree to which appropriate nonverbal behaviors were visible using the new nonverbal coding system. Prior to reviewing the video presentations, the three judges discussed appropriate nonverbal coding techniques and conducted a pilot analysis on a student presentation (Lacy & Riffe, 1996). The pilot study produced adequate interrater agreement, ($\kappa > .9$). The ratings by the researchers using the new scale were then compared to the mean evaluations made by the student judges in the class who used the NCSC single nonverbal item. The single measure "appropriate nonverbal communication" from the students' NCSC evaluation form showed adequate interrater reliability when compared with the three instructor judges for the nonverbal measurement scale dimensions of Greeting (NV_G , $\kappa = .688$), Facial Expressions (NV_F , $\kappa = .725$), and Body Posture (NV_B , $\kappa = .705$) as well as the 14-item nonverbal total score (NV_{total} , $\kappa = .761$). These findings provide preliminary support for the convergent validity of these new nonverbal measures.

Results & Discussion

Nonverbal communications were positively related to the approach phase in which the salesperson gains attention and builds rapport ($r = .173$) and negatively related to overcoming objections ($r = -.236$) and closing the sale ($r = -.59$). The positive relationship of nonverbal signals and the approach phase is consistent with prior research delineating the importance of first impressions (Henthorne, LaTour, & Williams, 1989; Naylor, 2007). Nonverbal communication may be negatively related to overcoming objections since both the prospect and observers are awaiting cognitive and

rational responses, such as verbal explanations that deal with expressed objections. In a similar fashion, attempts to close the sale with strong nonverbal behaviors rather than verbal persuasion can backfire and lead to interpersonal tension and feelings of sales pressure. In the closing sales phase, a steady gaze and strong posture while actively listening to the client and verbally reminding the client of the benefits appears to be the best sales approach.

NCSC items and nonverbal communication variances were also examined in the role-play study. Appropriate nonverbal communications item accounts for 49.5% of the shared model covariance. The confidence and enthusiasm explained an additional 19.5% of the model covariance, positively correlating with assessing a user's need ($r = .33$) and negatively correlating with overall nonverbal communications ($r = -.47$). Thus the salesperson must actively engage prospects to uncover the decision process, effectively probe for relevant facts or needs, and gain pre-commitment. However, displays of exuberant self-confidence and over-active engagement tend to overwhelm the prospect and detract from the nonverbal elements supporting the presentation. Taken together, the two nonverbal communication items in the NCSC scoring system help explain a substantial majority (69%) of the scoring system covariance, (i.e., as expected, much of the nonverbal variance is embedded within each step of the sales process).

The literature review clearly suggested communication advantages when verbal and nonverbal communications are synchronized. Appropriate nonverbal communications significantly and positively impact evaluations of sales presentations. Conversely, when these behaviors are lacking or inappropriately delivered, their detriment to evaluations of the presentation exceeds that which might be expected given their weight in the NCSC rating calculations. Support for an increased relationship between appropriate nonverbal behaviors and evaluations of presenters underscores the importance of nonverbal communication and suggests that synchronized verbal and nonverbal delivery is essential to acceptance of the message. This finding thus argues for greater consideration of nonverbal behaviors within the Personal Selling course curricula and student role-play preparation, performance, and evaluation.