

A PEDAGOGY FOR EDUCATING STUDENTS IN THE MANAGEMENT OF FACE-TO-FACE MARKETING RELATIONSHIPS

Jay L. Laughlin, Kansas State University, 108 Calvin Hall,
Manhattan, KS 66506, (913) 532-6008, FAX (913) 532-7024

David Andrus, Kansas State University, 108 Calvin Hall,
Manhattan, KS 66506, (913) 532-6008, FAX (913) 532-7024

ABSTRACT

Employers have identified oral communication skills and interpersonal skills as the most important for marketing graduates. These skills are also found to be lacking among job candidates. This paper presents an innovative teaching method for assisting students in developing these critical skills. Based on relational communication theory, a coding scheme is introduced which allows students the ability to recognize the interpersonal control component of relationship quality. It also provides guidance in selecting communication responses which enhance relationship quality without sacrificing persuasiveness. The four step process includes developing awareness, presentation of theory, application, and development of remedial exercises.

INTRODUCTION

Two skills that are essential in marketing practice are the ability to influence others and the ability to maintain good professional working relationships. In many instances, marketing professionals must be persuasive while retaining a favorable interpersonal relationship with another. For some marketing students these abilities may be innate or the product of socialization or previous training. For most students, however, the skills are largely underdeveloped. Among the most frequent criticisms made by prospective employers about matriculating students is an inability to orally communicate persuasively and effectively [Gaedeke and Tootelian 1989].

This paper presents a classification system that can be used to educate marketing students regarding the effective use of oral communication. Although the classification system is based in the literature from the communication discipline, it is specifically adapted for application to marketing settings. The material can be effectively incorporated in many marketing courses including principles of marketing, personal selling, sales management, business marketing, and marketing channels. To provide a basis for the classification system, a brief review of relational communication theory will be presented. Next, the classification system will be outlined and discussed. Finally, methods for incorporating the classification system in the classroom will be introduced.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since economic exchange is typically the result of information exchange, much of business and marketing practice involves oral communication. As a result, it is essential that students of business be both well-grounded in fundamental theory about communication and competent regarding its practice. Despite recognition of the central role of communication in business, most texts and courses do little theoretical development of communication beyond presentation of the standard communication model and discussion of such concepts as message, medium, noise, and feedback [McCarthy and Perrault 1987].

One communication subfield that is gaining recognition in marketing is the area of relational communication. Pioneered

by anthropologist Gregory Bateson, relational communication is based on the observation that each transfer of information includes both content and an underlying message about the nature of the relationship between the communicators [Littlejohn 1983]. For example, if a salesperson asks a purchasing agent about expected delivery and the purchasing agent instead talks about yesterday's athletic contest, the underlying relational message is that the purchasing agent is dominant with regard to selection of subject.

Three dimensions to relationship are established through communication -- control, trust, and intimacy [Millar and Rogers 1976]. Control is the allocation of power to direct the interaction. Trust is the complement of control. For control to occur, those assuming the submissive role must believe that the other will not exploit the position of dominance. Intimacy can be described as the level of self-identity received by an individual from the interaction. Long-term established business relationships are more intimate because these interactions define more of the individuals' self-identities than interactions between casual acquaintances. Millar and Rogers also note that these components of relationship correspond to the progression of time. Trust is the historical component, control the present component, and intimacy is the future component of relationship.

A number of communication coding schemes have been developed to categorize relational messages along these dimensions [Laughlin 1991]. Most attention has been directed toward the control dimension because it provides the most accessible means for managerial manipulation. An example of such a coding scheme is that provided by Soldow and Thomas [1984]. The classification system presented here was developed for a study of sales interaction [Laughlin 1991]. It is an adaptation of the Soldow and Thomas scheme which itself is based on an earlier work

in communication [Rogers and Farace 1975]. A major criticism of the Soldow and Thomas classification that led to the current system was that the original set failed to provide mutually exclusive categories and was therefore subject to intercoder variation.

REVISED NUMERICAL RELATIONAL CONTROL CODING SYSTEM

The classification scheme is presented in Table 1. It is divided into two categories for classifying the relationship communication efforts of dyad members. Grammatical Form is the selection of a particular type of speech. In any given utterance, an individual may choose from an assortment of grammatical types including assertions and demands. Response Mode is a measure of the correspondence between an individual's utterance and the previous utterance of the other dyad member.

It must be noted that these choices are not the only ones available to the dyad member for manipulating the control aspect of the relationship. Level of politeness, physical proximity, and the sophistication of vocabulary usage are other choices that also can affect the nature of the relationship. These are not studied using the present classification scheme because the dimensions presented can provide an adequate learning experience to sensitize marketing students to appropriate oral communication styles.

TABLE 1

Revised Numerical Relational Control Coding System

<u>Grammatical Form</u>	<u>Response Mode</u>
Demand	† Non-Support †
Closed Question	> Subject Change †
Assertion of Fact	> Subject Modification >
Assertion of Opinion	- Extension -
Open Question	> Acceptance >
Answer	> Support †
Backchannel	‡

Some of the category titles are definitive such as assertions of fact or assertions of opinion. It should be noted, however, that whether the statement is a fact or opinion is of less importance than how the speaker presents it. For example, a marketing manager might say "I think customer satisfaction is low" which would be categorized as an assertion of opinion rather than saying "Customer satisfaction is definitely low" which would be categorized as an assertion of fact. Clearly, the assertion of fact delivers more relationally dominant force than does the opinion because the opinion presentation tends to invite an alternative view from the other.

Demands are statements that require specific action (either physical or mental) on the part of the other. Closed questions are ones in which the questioner retains control of the conversation by providing direction regarding the answer. By expressing or implying the appropriate answer set (yes-no, color, quantity etc.), the questioner retains control of the conversation because once the answer is given, it is again the questioner's turn to speak. Examples of closed questions include: "Which of these designs do you prefer?" and "Are you interested?" Open questions, conversely, are submissive moves in conversation because they transfer direction of the dialogue to the respondent. An example is: "What do you think of the new manager?" Backchannels are simply forfeitures of talking turns. Statements such as yeah, uh-huh, or nodding the head acknowledge previous speaker dominance and encourage them to continue to direct the relationship.

Response mode categories classify the way a statement corresponds to the previous speaker. Changing or modifying the subject or providing non-support (objection or disagreement) are efforts to exert dominance in the relationship. Acceptance of the other's statements or providing support are means for exhibiting submission. Dyad members develop a kind of communicative dance that defines their joint understanding of their

relationship through these processes. By softening disagreement through the use of an open question dyad members can assert themselves in the relationship without offending their partner.

Understanding the role of relational messages in creating the context for marketing exchange is the primary contribution of the relational control coding scheme presented in Table 1. Using similar systems, relationship quality as defined by the ongoing control process has been related to the degree of success in human interaction processes.

As originally identified by Bateson [Littlejohn 1983], two types of relationships that are created by the relational communication process are symmetrical and complementary. In symmetrical relationships, the dyad members compete for either dominance or submission. In other words an assertive communication effort is reciprocated by the other. These communication processes are dysfunctional because they tend to make no progress. Instead the participants unsuccessfully compete for either dominance or submission in the relationship.

In contrast, complementary relationships can be described as ones where only one dyad member tends to assume a role of submission. These too can be dysfunctional relationships if the solutions to a marketing problem lies with the submissive partner and cannot be accessed as a result. Instead, it has been suggested that flexible relationships, that is ones where either party is likely to be dominant and is complemented by a submissive respondent, are those which best facilitate exchange [Gottman 1979]. In other words, it is considered best to have dyad members who are willing to exert dominance and exhibit submissiveness where either of these are most appropriate.

In Table 1, the categories for each coded dimension are accompanied by an arrow which roughly corresponds to the level of

dominance or submission represented by that relational choice. A sample dialogue between a salesperson and buyer is presented in Table 2 with codings to demonstrate the process of evaluating the relationship quality. Following the first four statements, two alternatives for the seller are given. It is important to note that the choice made by each dyad member can significantly affect the nature of the relationship between the communicators.

There is no assessment of Response Mode for the first statement because the previous statement by the buyer is not given. It can be seen by studying the dialogue and its coding that individual communicators can affect the nature of

TABLE 2

Sample Dialogue with Coding

Dialogue	Grammatical Form Coding	Response Coding
Seller: The primary focus of this new program is to improve our delivery performance.	Assertion of Fact (5)	
Buyer: The most important concern for us right now is lowering the price.	Assertion of Fact (5)	Subject Change (5)
Seller: Does this mean that delivery is less important to your company than price?	Closed Question (6)	Subject Modification (4)
Buyer: No. It means that our needs are being met with regard to delivery; so rather than investing more in delivery, we'd rather you invest in creating a lower price.	Answer (2) then Assertion of Fact (5)	Non-Support (6) then Non-Support (6)
Seller (Choice A): You will have to agree that meeting delivery is going to grow in importance in the next decade.	Demand (7)	Subject Modification (4)
Seller (Choice B): We certainly are concerned with understanding and meeting your needs. What is your complete set of needs and how do they fit together?	Assertion of Fact (5) then Open Question (3)	Support (1) then Subject Modification (4)

the relationship through their language choices. The first two statements by each of the dyad members have created a symmetrical-dominant relationship. If the seller chooses option A, the conversation and relationship are likely to continue along that pattern. If instead the seller chooses option B, there exists a greater chance that a complementary relationship can emerge. The complementary relationship may be more productive in moving toward resolution of problems. This is not intended to suggest that relational conflict is not useful. Instead, it is designed to allow marketing students to recognize their ability to manage relationships through communication choices. The next section presents a pedagogy for educating marketing students in relationship management.

PEDAGOGY FOR CLASSROOM APPLICATION

Although it is useful to present the theory of relational communication and to supply anecdotes to demonstrate its aptness, student application of the knowledge is unlikely to occur without repeated classroom exercises. Some students, as a result of socialization or experience have a well-established ability to manage relationship quality effectively. Others require extensive training.

The language and relationship style of the late adolescent and early adult years can be rather caustic. Marketing students are prone to assume a greater degree of familiarity and therefore informality than is warranted in business settings. One important aspect of the classroom/laboratory exercises described here is the increased sensitivity they create on the part of students regarding their contribution to business relationship quality.

Step I - Awareness Exercise

Provide students with the opportunity to simulate a discussion over some important marketing issue. The setting could be a sales interview, but probably the most

useful approach is for two students to simulate a discussion between a buyer and seller over some problem being experienced with the seller's product. Another possibility is a conversation between a sales manager and a sales representative regarding some performance deficiency. Through some means record the dialogue for future reference. Videotape would be the preferred means, but if not available, audiotape or transcription would suffice. Following the interview, participants should complete a short questionnaire designed to measure their satisfaction with the interaction.

Step 2 - Theory Presentation

Present the theoretical material on relational communication. This should include identification of the components of relationship as expounded by Millar and Rogers and presentation of the revised numerical control coding scheme. Examples of how relational control messages affect the nature of the relationship and its outcomes should be given.

Step 3 - Theory Application

Apply the revised relational control coding scheme to the dialogue experienced by the students in Step 1. The dialogue can be categorized as complementary, symmetrical, or flexible. If a number of different dialogues are available, categorize each and examine the correlation between the type of relationship and the satisfaction measured for each of the participants. For courses which include advanced statistical techniques, it is appropriate to incorporate hypothesis development and testing in the exercise.

For individual participants it is also useful to assess their contribution to the relationship generated. Were they too domineering or too submissive for creating flexible relationship control? Were their grammatical form choices and response mode choices appropriate? Are there specific suggestions or exercises that would assist them in improving their

relational communication processes?

Step 4 - Remedial Exercises

This phase involves the development of specific exercises which assist students in developing relational communication skills. Exercises should be customized to the particular needs of students. If, for example, a student lacks assertiveness, exercises requiring the student to develop and practice more dominant communication messages should be employed. These exercises could be videotaped and compared to earlier performances to assess improvement in communication skills.

The most common problem for marketing students is the tendency to respond to others' complaints with rebuttal. This contributes to a pattern of symmetrical-dominance in business relationships and is not helpful for facilitating exchange. A remedial exercise for this problem includes instructor preparation of several sample dialogues with conflict embedded in the conversation. The dialogue presented in Table 2 is an example. Discussion of one or two examples should lead to the decision that accepting the other's complaint as legitimate and important is the best approach to managing the relationship. Since marketing students are frequently criticized for poor writing skills, the exercises should have a written component so that students can improve in this area.

Following this discussion, students should be presented with repeated opportunities to practice the skill of appropriately responding to this type of conflict. After providing a brief background, the student should be presented with the objection statement and required to respond immediately. Corrections should be made at that time so that improper responses do not become habitual. Repeated practice and periodic review are necessary to maintain the communicative skill. Just as professional basketball players begin each practice or pre-game warmup with ball-handling and passing

drills, professional communicators require repeated attention to fundamental skill development and maintenance.

CONCLUSIONS

This article presents an innovative teaching technique that can be used by marketing professors as a classroom exercise to educate their students to communicate more persuasively. This teaching technique is especially appropriate for sales management, industrial marketing, and marketing channels courses. Marketing students are frequently criticized for being unable to orally communicate persuasively and effectively.

A classification system that was adapted from relational communication theory for use in marketing courses was presented. This classification system is useful for assessing two aspects of the ongoing control dimension of marketing communication relationships. Among the three dimensions of relationship -- control, trust, and intimacy, control is the dimension over which relationship members possess the most immediate influence. By selecting appropriate grammatical form and response mode, students can learn to positively affect relationship quality.

In addition to the classification system, a four step process for implementing relational communication education in marketing coursework is presented. This process includes an experiential exercise to develop awareness, presentation of theory, application of the coding system to the recorded exercise, and the development of remedial exercises to improve student relational skills.

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