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Emotional Ability and Nonverbal Communication
Blair Kidwell, PhD, and Jonathan Hasford, PhD

As cognitive beings, we possess a unique ability to recognize and understand non-verbal communication. We have the ability to study and analyze the non-verbal signals of our friends, family and clients, and then use that information to communicate more effectively with each other. The research highlighted in this article involves a study on emotional ability and its connection with nonverbal communication. This research also looks into the influence that emotional ability has on marketing communications and the strengths and weaknesses in reading nonverbal messages. To begin, the four branches of emotional ability are described to provide a foundation for our reader.

Emotional Ability and Nonverbal Information

Emotional ability refers to the ability of an individual to use emotional information to achieve desired outcomes. There are four segments of emotional ability: perceiving, facilitating, understanding, and managing emotions. These four dimensions work together to create a full range of emotional skills.

Perceiving Emotion. Perceiving emotion refers to the ability to accurately identify and distinguish emotions that are present in a situation. This ability allows us to read and recognize the nonverbal signals of others. For example, this skill can help salespeople or other service employees in identifying customer needs. Recent studies have shown that elements such as gender, length of relationships and age can impact the ability to recognize emotions in a situation. This skill may be especially important for real estate agents. Practicing this skill will allow you to more effectively gauge the emotions of the buyer or buyers, and then be able to adapt selling techniques in order to more efficiently meet the exact needs of the buyer.

Facilitating Emotion. Facilitating emotional ability is defined as the ability to appraise emotional information as an input to decision making. The competence to know which emotions are helpful in a given situation is extremely vital. For example, in sales situations customers often experience a spectrum of emotions. If the sellers take this information into account, they can then respond appropriately. This concept can work both ways, however. Buyers can respond to sellers who exhibit emotions that do not pair
well with the feelings of customers to convey to them how they should alter their emotional communications.

Additionally, studies show that positive and negative emotions can cause a completely different range of thoughts. Positive emotions typically summon creative and visual thoughts. Alternatively, negative thoughts conjure concrete thoughts and cognitive information processing. Most importantly, individual variances in aiding emotional ability were linked with frequency of alcohol consumption, abnormal behavior, and adverse social relations. The key takeaway from these findings is that consumers are better able to have a firm grasp on situations if they base their thoughts on available emotions. However, when they misunderstand their feelings, they may make poor choices.

**Understanding Emotion.** Understanding emotion is arguably the most important skill that salespeople must have mastered to be successful in the workplace. This is because this facet allows sales and service employees to understand how emotions will impact interactions with customers. An important aspect of understanding emotions is that there are short- and long-term implications and emotional consequences. For example, short-term pleasurable feelings often are countered by negative long-term emotions.

The concept of *affective misforecasting* is relevant here in that it refers to how consumers often erroneously “understand that nonverbally evoked emotions will evolve, and they fail to project their emotional states into the future” (Patrick, MacInnis, & Park, 2007). This practice can have profound implications on the translating of and responses to nonverbal stimuli. Not only can emotions change over time, but projecting their long-term changes is a difficult task that can lead to unexpected consequences.

**Managing Emotion.** Managing emotion involves regulating internal emotions as well as external emotions to work towards achieving certain goals. By mastering the skill of regulating emotions and utilizing self control, rash reactions and rushed decision-making can be avoided. Additionally, consumers must learn not to dwell on negative emotions in order to avoid making poor decisions in the future.

Real estate agents are often met with negative emotions from consumers with regards to properties, asking prices, or the options that they are being given. Thus, it becomes critical for real estate agents to effectively manage emotions. Real estate agents who are perceived as never being thrown off by negative signals given by their customers, and are always reciprocating with positive emotions or other alternatives are highly skilled at managing emotions.
Communicating Nonverbal Information

There are four areas in which emotional ability can impact nonverbal communication in marketing exchanges: consumer characteristics, salesperson characteristics, the convergence of buyer/seller emotional abilities, and environmental characteristics.

**Consumer Characteristics.** People who see themselves as being on the same social level as others tend to have favorable feelings towards each other. Additionally, nonverbal aspects of individuals such as attitudes, memberships in certain social groups, or physical appearance can also affect a communicator’s effect on others. Even physical characteristics communicate nonverbal information. For example, research shows that consumers are drawn physically to others based on physical characteristics such as hair length, race, or gender. These subtle cues can significantly increase the chance of interaction.

While nonverbal communication is very telling, there is also a correlation with verbal, facial, and postural behavior. Consumers often mimic the verbal, facial, and postural behavior that they come into contact with, therefore stimulating similar emotions within the interacting consumers.

The key distinction in nonverbal communication between consumers is that individuals low in emotional ability tend to rely more on emotional cues and interpret nonverbal emotional information very basically. However, people high in emotional ability consider meanings of emotions more thoughtfully when making decisions. Instead of responding automatically to nonverbal communication, they will instead consider their response before communicating. *Differences in emotional ability moderate the meaning of nonverbal communication that individuals derive from nonverbal information.*

**Salesperson Characteristics and Tactics.** A salesperson with high emotional ability is significantly more likely to influence a customer. However, customers with high emotional ability are less susceptible to influence from others. This is the pivotal reason why developing advanced emotional abilities is so important for salespeople. There are six different influence tactics that can be utilized by salespeople: information exchange, recommendations, requests, threats, promises, and legalistic pleas. In addition to these six tactics, inspirational appeals and ingratiation focus on the verbal and nonverbal components of sales exchanges.

The tactics of inspirational appeals and ingratiation deserve some expansion. An inspirational appeal is a request or proposal that arouses enthusiasm by appealing to a target’s values, ideas, and aspirations. Inspirational appeals also involuntarily appeal to emotions. Salespeople use ingratiation to get customers to like them through flattery and nonverbal impression management.
These tactics can only be helpful if the customer does not perceive them as being manipulative. Thus, the emotional abilities of both parties (salesperson and consumer) should be considered. This relationship is defined as emotional convergence.

**Convergence of Emotional Abilities.** Matching salespeople to customers based on levels of emotional ability is vital to the success of the sale. Salespeople and customers with similar levels of emotional ability experience the same level of emotional experience and are therefore more likely to communicate more sincerely. By having similar emotional ability levels with a customer as a salesperson, the customer feels more comfortable and understood, and consequently, the customer is likely to feel that value was maximized in the exchange.

A high-ability convergence is a situation in which two individuals just seem to “click.” A customer and a salesperson who are aligned with similarly high emotional abilities have a unique ability communicate on the same emotional wavelength. Sometimes it can take time for two individuals to get to know one another and learn to trust each other. However, when high emotional abilities converge, this process can seem to occur in a
matter of seconds. As conversation or communication continues, more connections are found and the bond between the two individuals strengthens. This connectedness between the two individuals with equally high emotional ability also reduces potential conflict. If a customer and a salesperson already feel emotionally connected, they are more likely to resolve any conflicts with civil compromises. Additionally, individuals feel free to openly offer disagreement, because they feel confident that their emotional-ability partner will offer support.

Emotional divergence refers to when two individuals’ emotional abilities do not correlate with each other. For example, a customer may have low emotional ability and a salesperson has high emotional ability, or vice versa. In either case, either the customer will feel that his or her needs are not being met, or he or she will feel the need to be guarded against the persuasive attempts by the salesperson. This disassociation will often increase the chance of conflict or disagreement.

Low convergence, or the interaction of individuals with low emotional abilities, can also occur. In this case, customers and salespeople will have similar experiences to divergent pairs. Confusion and frustration are often the results of the pairing of individuals with low emotional ability due to the fact that neither individual has the capability to understand the other’s emotions.

Convergence is critical for real estate agents to grasp. Significant time and effort should be put towards developing a high emotional ability so that they may be able to understand the emotions and nonverbal cues of their customers. Additionally, they must be able to understand and respond to customers with low emotional ability who may perceive the salesperson as aggressive. If real estate agents are aware of this potential situation, they may be able to read situations more clearly, and identify emotional abilities earlier in the interaction to avoid any type of conflict.

**Environmental Characteristics.** Consumers are influenced by marketing efforts every day. Retail environments are one example of a setting that provides a wealth of nonverbal emotional information that influences the decisions of the customers.

Atmospherics in the retail environment include music, colors, scents, and product displays. Each one of these environmental aspects communicates nonverbal, emotional information to the consumer, which can directly impact decision-making. If the consumer has a favorable reaction to these nonverbal cues, favorable attitudes could result. The study of atmospherics can apply to the real estate industry in how real estate agents prepare homes or properties to be shown. The house is cleaned and is often “staged” in order to send a certain message to the potential buyer. Using staging to send nonverbal emotional cues becomes an important part of listing agents’ strategy in selling a home.
Related to the real estate industry, customers must be aware that many times “consumers’ eyes are bigger than their stomachs,” or in this case, wallets. Often times when customers are touring homes, they become attached to things that are not necessarily for sale (e.g., home furnishings or decorations). Homebuyers need to be aware of this tendency and look past the “frills” to what is really up for sale. Additionally, consumers may be drawn to make quick decisions regarding purchasing a home without fully analyzing their financial situation. Although buying a home can be an exciting time, it is important for consumers to go through the necessary steps with care to ensure financial stability.

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Blair Kidwell received his Ph.D. in marketing from Virginia Tech in May 2004 and holds a B.S. in psychology from Boise State University. He joined the faculty at The Ohio State University in June 2012. Dr. Kidwell's research focuses on the area of consumer decision making, with an emphasis on emotion and emotional intelligence, knowledge calibration, dual-processing models, political ideology, perceptions of control, and the role of emotion ability in marketing exchanges. He has explored these and other topics in the substantive domains of food, health and financial decisions, and consumer disposal practices. Dr. Kidwell's research has appeared in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, the *Journal of Marketing Research*, the *Journal of Marketing*, the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, *Psychology & Marketing*, and the *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*.

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