Setting the Sale Through Persuasive Communication

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Communication, the effective conveying of information, is a critically important buyer-seller activity to achieve successful interpersonal sales performance. It is certainly one of the most important, if not the most important, determinant of a productive business relationship. Healthy communication in sales will not only render improved customer relationships, but it will also enhance day-to-day personal interactions since communicating with others makes up the majority of our time spent with family, friends, and co-workers. Communication is a multi-step cyclical process of senders and receivers, coding and decoding messages to transfer information. During this process, there is a lot of room for misinterpretation and misunderstandings.

Communication skills, both verbal and non-verbal, are powerful enablers to our leading or guiding buyers through productive purchase decision-making. Although sales interactions can be transactional in nature or win-lose oriented, the preferred interpersonal selling process should seek to be more long-term minded and win-win or integrative. Effective communication skills are essential to leading or influencing a buyer to this desired outcome.

Verbal vs. Non-Verbal Communication

Spoken words make up our verbal communication, and this can take place face-to-face or through other media such as a telephone, web-enabled conferences, Facetime, etc. Non-verbal communication is comprised of many forms of transfer, including but not limited to, tone of voice, body language, gestures, eye contact, facial expressions, proximity and touching. There is no doubt that non-verbal communication is a dominant and powerful form of communication.

One of the more popular psychology studies performed by a professor at UCLA, Albert Mehrabian, revealed that verbal communication comprises only 7% of overall communication. The 93% balance is derived from non-verbal communication with 38% representing tonality and 55% body language. The 7-38-55 rule was derived from Mehrabian’s experiments involving the communication of feelings and attitudes.

Effective business communicators are sensitive to the power of non-verbal communication on interactions with others. This is why it is crucial for a seller to understand how to both read and send non-verbal messages. For most productive message transfers, these three parts of
communication need to support each other, i.e., to be congruent. Otherwise, significant confusion, misunderstanding and even frustration can occur between the communicating parties. An example cited by Mehrabian in his work is the following:

Verbal – “I do not have any problem with you!”

Non-verbal – Avoiding eye contact, looks anxious, and has closed body language (such as arms and legs).

His research suggests that the receiver will trust and believe the predominant form of communication, the non-verbal versus the meaning of the words, when the various components are not congruent. Thus, the verbal or words component takes less attention since it comprises only 7% of the receiver’s interpretation in the case of incongruity.

To the salesperson, the goal is to become a highly skilled communicator at three different progressive levels of competence:

- **Level 1**: Actively self-manage your non-verbal messaging and learn to deliver congruent messages to minimize communication disharmony and confusion with buyers. In other words, your non-verbals should be unambiguous in their content.
- **Level 2**: Learn how to become a skilled reader of non-verbal buyer cues to the point that your buyers become an open book. Every gesture or movement is communicating something to you. You must listen with your eyes!
- **Level 3**: Learn how to positively influence your buyer’s buying emotions by promoting pro-buying non-verbal movements during your buyer-seller interactions.

Joe Navarro, a former career FBI agent specializing in non-verbal communications, in his book, *Louder Than Words*, says, “Imagine knowing what others are thinking, feeling, or intending. Imagine being able to powerfully persuade and influence others. Imagine identifying, without being told, points of concern and contention. Imagine being able to enhance how others perceive you, conveying confidence, authority, and empathy. What we’re really talking about here is the capacity to truly understand people. In business, when confidence, empathy, and the ability to know what others are thinking are combined, you gain a superlative edge. However, the nonverbals of success start with your state of mind. You must want to change how others see you and how you see yourself. Wanting to change is crucial, because changing how you are perceived always begins with you.”

**The Comfort/Discomfort Paradigm: The Foundation of Nonverbal Intelligence**

From early in life, we are transmitting information about how we feel. Joe Navarro developed this paradigm in order to teach FBI agents and counterintelligence officers a simple way to...
analyze and assess nonverbal behavior observations. In simple terms, it works like this: when you observe a behavior, ask yourself, “Does it represent comfort or discomfort?” For example, what would you observe in a person who feels defensive and trying to cover their criminal actions or guilty knowledge? We would probably see distancing actions such as leaning away or withdrawing movements, stiff posture, unsmiling lips, and restlessness or tension. These are not good for family, for business and certainly not for any type of early sales setting. On the other hand, comfort behaviors include touching, trust, proximity, and understanding. We may move between these two states hundreds of times in a day.

Below is a sampling of comfort and discomfort behaviors that Navarro outlines in *Louder Than Words*:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signs of Comfort</th>
<th>Signs of Discomfort</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>calmness</td>
<td>anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>confidence</td>
<td>apprehension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>closeness</td>
<td>distancing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>enjoyment</td>
<td>contrariness</td>
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<tr>
<td>friendliness</td>
<td>unfriendliness</td>
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<tr>
<td>openness</td>
<td>occlusion</td>
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<tr>
<td>touching</td>
<td>withdrawal</td>
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<tr>
<td>joy</td>
<td>anger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>patience</td>
<td>impatience</td>
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<tr>
<td>peacefulness</td>
<td>nervousness</td>
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<tr>
<td>relaxation</td>
<td>tension</td>
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<tr>
<td>respect</td>
<td>indifference</td>
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<td>tenderness</td>
<td>sternness</td>
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<tr>
<td>trust</td>
<td>doubt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>warmth</td>
<td>coldness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>responsiveness</td>
<td>hesitation</td>
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Many of our day-to-day behaviors fall into these binary categories.

Navarro posed the obvious question, “Which side of the comfort/discomfort paradigm is most conducive to effective leadership, nurturing business clients, effective selling, and dealing satisfactorily with human resource issues?” At first, it seems clear that we must cultivate comfort responses in our buyers; however, as we progress through a sales interaction, don’t we have to introduce problems/issues/deficiencies and the resulting impacts of each of these? Like the adage, no pain – no change – no change – no gain for anyone. Therefore, it would seem that we should prepare to have an interesting emotional/behavior roller coaster ride with each buyer, i.e., comfort, discomfort, comfort. A salesperson’s ability to recognize the planned and necessary transitions via nonverbal indicators could be critically important to achieving a mutually productive outcome.
Avoid Failing the Sales Duck Test

When first approaching a buyer, anticipate some buyer discomfort in the beginning. We know people don’t want to be sold, but they love to buy, and rarely do they seek to change, which most sales interactions necessitate. As a consequence, most sales interactions are initiated in a state of uncertainty, anxiety and discomfort. Therefore, it is important that we commence a sales interaction with the thought of achieving buyer comfort, and being perceived as a salesperson is not conducive to that end. Like the saying, “If it looks, walks and talks like a duck, then it is probably a duck.” If you look, walk and talk like a salesperson, then, you are probably a salesperson. Most sales stereotypes tend to be fast talkers, a little loud, pushy, and their dress can be ostentatious or incongruent to the sales situation. As we know, first impressions are very powerful in terms of the ultimate buy or don’t buy impact. The initial interaction needs to be well planned to promote a trustworthy and comfortable feeling. Since the introduction and rapport building are critically important to garner that buyer reaction, and the seller needs to plan both a nonverbal and verbal strategy accordingly.

One major deterrent to achieving the desired initial impact is a salesperson’s fear or lack of confidence. Because of human nature, the buyer wants to be the most important person in the initial meeting, and when the salesperson feels anxious and uncertain, the salesperson is prone to spend too much time thinking about him- or herself, and this fails to achieve the desired “comforting” effect for the buyer.

The Role of Active Listening

Two keys to understanding your buyer are active listening and empathy. Wikipedia defines active listening as, “a communication technique used in counseling, training and conflict resolution, which requires the listener to feed back what they hear to the speaker, by way of restating or paraphrasing what they have heard in their own words, to confirm what they heard and moreover, to confirm the understanding of both parties.” Joe Navarro adds, “The Chinese character for ‘listening’ is actually rather complex; it contains the characters for ‘ear,’ ‘eyes,’ ‘heart,’ and ‘undivided attention.’ There’s a huge difference between listening and listening empathetically.”

MindTools.com offers five key active listening techniques to help you ensure that you hear the other person, and that the other person knows you are hearing and listening to what they say:

1. Pay Attention – Give the speaker your undivided attention, and acknowledge the message. Recognize that non-verbal communication also “speaks” loudly.
• Look at the speaker directly.
• Put aside distracting thoughts.
• Don’t mentally prepare a rebuttal!
• Avoid being distracted by environmental factors (e.g., side conversations).
• ‘Listen’ to the [buyer’s] body language.

2. Show That You’re Listening – Use your own body language and gestures to convey your attention.
• Nod occasionally.
• Smile and use other facial expressions.
• Note your posture and make sure it is open and inviting.
• Encourage the speaker to continue with small verbal comments like yes and uh-huh.

3. Provide Feedback – Our personal filters, assumptions, judgments, and beliefs can distort what we hear. As a listener, your role is to understand what is being said. This may require you to reflect what is being said and to ask questions.
• Reflect what has been said by paraphrasing. ‘What I’m hearing is,’ and ‘Sounds like you are saying,’ are great ways to reflect back.
• Ask questions to clarify certain points. ‘What do you mean when you say…’ ‘Is this what you mean?’ [Consider asking open-ended questions as they invite opinions and focus on the sender. Ask closed-ended questions to seek clarification of expansion.]
• Summarize the speaker’s comments periodically. [You can ask summary questions to confirm certain points and to demonstrate your interest.]

4. Defer Judgment – Interrupting is a waste of time. It frustrates the speaker and limits understanding of the message. [Interruptions can create a sense of competitive conversation.]
• Allow the [buyer] to finish each point before asking questions.
• Don’t interrupt with counter arguments.

5. Respond Appropriately – Active listening is a model of respect and understanding [and also an attitude.] You are gaining information and perspective.
• Be candid, open, and honest in your response
• Assert your opinions respectfully.
• Treat the other person in a way that you think he or she would want to be treated.

(Source: Mind Tools 2015, www.mindtools.com/CommSkll/ActiveListening.htm)

Repeat After Me

Joe Navarro says, “Hand in hand with active listening is verbal mirroring, based on the work of renowned psychologist and author Carl Rogers (1902 – 1987). Verbal mirroring is a simple yet remarkably powerful therapeutic technique to quickly establish a connection with someone. I
found it extremely valuable in the FBI to establish empathetic channels of communication. Rogers believed in anchoring any inquiry around the psyche of the person in question, thereby building a more effective therapeutic relationship. He did this by simply listening to what his patients said and then using that information, precisely as stated, to respond to the patient. If his patient said, ‘my home.’

Rogers would mirror the patient by also using the word ‘home,’ not house. Verbal mirroring is a powerful tool in professions such as sales where establishing rapport is so important. Unfortunately, most people are linguistically self-centered and use their own language to anchor a conversation. In order to be maximally effective, you must use the other person’s language; in doing so, you mirror what is in their minds and what is linguistically – even psychologically – comforting. You are at once in synchrony.”

**Nurture-Nurture-Nurture Weighs In**

Joe Navarro further emphasizes a salesperson’s need to be nurturing, “The comfort/discomfort responses wired by nature are refined by nurturing. We see the earliest expression of the comfort/discomfort paradigm in the interaction between mother and baby. Here we learn our first emotional lessons. The mother learns to be attentive to the infant’s nonverbals, and the child learns to trust in the caring response.” He continues, “On a physiological level, nurturing behaviors release a cascade of chemicals including oxytocin, which contributes to social and interpersonal bonding. Research shows that when we have healthy business relationships, where there is mutual respect and appropriate human touch, we trust more and are more willing to part with our money.”

**I See You; You See Me**

Similar to verbal mirroring, matching each other’s physical movements and postures is a powerful interpersonal comfort display. Navarro emphasizes that the physical mirroring between parent and child. The baby smiles, the mother smiles. The baby coos, the mother offers a similar vocal response. The baby makes an expression, and the mother mirrors it back. This is the beginning empathetic communication, valuable for sales interactions.

Navarro continues, “Just as we have a preference for comfort, so we have a preference for synchrony…When a friend receives bad news and looks downtrodden, we respond likewise, demonstrating our empathy by displaying identical behaviors. We find synchrony with strangers as well as with those whom we know.” Quite simply, people feel more comfortable with others when they feel in synchrony with them. Create a comfortable feeling with the buyer by tapping this nonverbal tool of mirroring.

Physical mirroring can also be used as a means of testing your comfort/discomfort status with a buyer during an interaction. For example, Navarro shares how he was waiting in the green room
before appearing on an early-morning TV show: “I struck up a conversation with a fellow guest, a very nice person. We were getting along really well. Because this mirroring concept was on my mind and, admittedly, just to see what would happen, I decided to change our comfort paradigm by changing how I was sitting. We were sitting across from each other with our legs slightly apart, hands in our laps. I suddenly shifted around when someone came into the room and lifted my left leg over my knee so that it appeared to be a barrier, while my feet pointed toward the door. The man suddenly straightened and changed his position to mirror mine. My companion had no conscious awareness of having mirrored me.”

**Summary**

Communication skills are the enablers, and one of the three key skills to becoming a highly successful sales representative. The secret to communication success is three-fold:

1. Become acutely aware of your regular verbal and non-verbal deliveries. Learn to manage their presentation from start to finish interactions for a more productive sales outcome.
2. Become an active, empathetic and nurturing listener to the thoughts and feelings of others, using well-developed questions as your primary means of connecting with others; active listening is an attitude, not simply a communication technique.
3. Become aware of how the comfort/discomfort paradigm plays out in your interactions with others. Employ it to influence buying decisions during sales engagements.

**References**


About the Author

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Chuck Fifield is a Senior Lecturer for Baylor University’s Hankamer School of Business, Marketing Department and serves as the faculty coach to Baylor’s Sales Team. He joined the faculty at Baylor University in 2001, teaching in the Graduate Business School (Operations Management), the Management Department (Negotiations and Conflict Resolution) and the Economics Department (Principles of Macroeconomics). Chuck has taught or guest lectured at other Texas-based Universities in the fields of sales, international business, money and banking and finance/investments. Professor Fifield has conducted sales research and training for several organizations, including most recently State Farm Insurance. Prior to joining Baylor, Chuck was a financial consultant for nearly thirty years to businesses located throughout the U.S. He owned and operated several financial service businesses in the fields of securities, real estate, oil and gas and insurance.