

# THE RELATIVE IMPORTANCE OF VERBAL AND NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION IN A SALES SITUATION: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

KENNETH P. DE MEUSE, *University of Wisconsin - Eau Claire*

ROBERT C. ERFFMEYER, *University of Wisconsin - Eau Claire*

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*The importance of nonverbal communication in sales has been widely acknowledged over the years. However, very little empirical research on the topic has been conducted to date. One reason for the paucity of scientific studies is the inherent methodological obstacles encountered when conducting nonverbal communication research. In the present study, a research paradigm is employed, whereby salespeople with records of different levels of sales productivity are videotaped making an actual sales presentation to a potential client. Verbal and nonverbal communication are assessed using a persuasiveness inventory. Findings suggest that a "discrepancy" between the ratings of the two communication channels, rather than absolute levels of each channel, may reflect performance differences. Implications for the selection of salespeople and the content of sales training programs are explored.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The importance of general communication skills in marketing and, particularly, personal selling is widely accepted. However, much of what has been researched, written, and taught historically has focused solely on skills central to *verbal* communication (Chonko and Enis, 1993; Manning and Reece, 1992). Literature reviews consistently report few studies have empirically investigated the effect *nonverbal* skills have on sales success (see Bonoma and Felder, 1977; DePaulo and DePaulo, 1989; Stewart, Hecker, and Graham, 1987). At the same time, it is acknowledged that up to two-thirds of our communications are nonverbal in nature (Graham, Unruh, and Jennings, 1991).

Participants at the 1992 American Marketing Association's Faculty Consortium on Personal Selling and Sales Management explicitly identified nonverbal communication as an area in need of additional research (Ingram, 1992). Consortium participants also reported that past research has tended to micro-analyze behavior, thus limiting the ability to generalize research findings (Ingram, 1992). The present study is an attempt to address both of these deficiencies by investigating the importance of verbal *and* nonverbal

communication channels simultaneously in a realistic sales situation.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

Much of the early work in the area of nonverbal communication came from the social sciences. The potency of nonverbal communication such as facial expressions, eye contact, gestures, postural movements, vocal intonation, and proxemic behaviors has been empirically demonstrated repeatedly. Numerous researchers have concluded that nonverbal communication plays a significant role in the total communication process between individuals (e.g., Argyle, Salter, Nicholson, Williams, and Burgess, 1970; Birdwhistell, 1970; Mehrabian, 1968, 1971). In general, their findings indicate approximately 65 to 70 percent of the social meaning of a conversation or an interaction is carried by nonverbal channels.

Although the external generalizability of these studies to sales settings might be questionable, it appears the overall consensus among authors in the social sciences is that nonverbal communication has more impact on message interpretation and influence than verbal communication. Unfortunately, research findings have been slow to develop in the sales and personal selling area. Whereas, the importance of *verbal* communication skills as determinants of success in sales has drawn the attention of many trainers and researchers (Buzzotta and Lefton, 1981; Nickels, Everett, and Klien, 1983), research directed toward identifying predictors of

salesperson performance has largely ignored *nonverbal* communication skills (Bagozzi, 1978; Churchill, Ford, Hartley, and Walker, 1985; Comer and Dubinsky, 1985).

The few studies which have explored the impact of nonverbal communication in sales situations have examined individual components of the interaction rather than the entire interaction. For example, Graham (1981) investigated facial expressions in a negotiation situation. DePaulo and DePaulo (1989) found observers were not able to detect deception based on nonverbal cues viewed in a simulated sales presentation. In a recent review of the effect of listening in personal selling, Castleberry and Shepherd (1993) pointed out the importance for salespeople to manage their own nonverbal communication cues.

If the importance of nonverbal communication in a sales setting is so apparent, the question might be posed as to why it has produced so little research findings. Stewart, Hecker, and Graham (1987) offered some insight on the methodological obstacles facing researchers who study nonverbal communication. A sales situation typically involves verbal communication and all aspects of nonverbal communication. A key obstacle deals with the abundance of independent variables and the inability to control the variables without contamination. For example, what if the respondent smiles and nods as in agreement, but looks down. The smile and nod might be taken as positive indicators but the downward glance confounds the meaning of the response. If the research situation is manipulated so as to control the variables, artificiality may occur within the research. When the research is corrected so as to involve naturalistic observation, it then may suffer from an inability to make statements of causality.

### THE PRESENT STUDY

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the relative contribution of verbal and nonverbal communication in a realistic sales situation. Whereas, past nonverbal research has examined only a single component of communication (e.g., facial expression, eye contact, proxemics), this study utilized a holistic approach that explored the entire repertoire of nonverbal and verbal communication behavior simultaneously.

Representative salespeople were selected from a telephone company's upper, middle, and lower productivity levels based on their past sales performance. These individuals were videotaped giving a sales presentation to the same client. Ratings of their verbal and nonverbal

communication were collected. Based on the reported importance of nonverbal communication in the social sciences, the following hypotheses were formulated:

*Hypothesis 1:* The salesperson representative of the top one-third performers (Salesperson A) would have a significantly higher nonverbal persuasiveness rating than verbal persuasiveness rating.

*Hypothesis 2:* The salesperson representative of the bottom one-third performers (Salesperson C) would have a significantly lower nonverbal persuasiveness rating than verbal persuasiveness rating.

*Hypothesis 3:* The salesperson representative of the top one-third performers (Salesperson A) would have a significantly higher nonverbal persuasiveness rating than the salesperson representative of the bottom one-third performers (Salesperson C).

## METHOD

### Salespeople

Three salespeople from a major telephone company were carefully selected for videotaping. All salespeople were classified as account representatives, had a minimum of five years' experience selling communication systems, and were of the same sex (male). Based on the results of a preliminary study which asked participants to evaluate the appearance of each salesperson, it was determined the three salespeople did not significantly differ on physical attractiveness ( $p < .25$ ).

Salesperson A, B, and C were selected from the upper, middle, and lower one-third sales performance categories, respectively. Sales performance was based on a comprehensive goal-setting formula the company used to evaluate its sales force. The formula projects the amount of potential sales in each sales territory and categorizes resultant salesperson performance as good, fair, or poor, accordingly. Thus, sales territory and potential sales also were controlled in the study.

### Sales Presentation Material

Four weeks prior to videotaping, each salesperson was given a case history of a company which was in need of a completely revamped communications system. The case history was constructed from a film the

telephone company used to train salespeople on identifying the needs of a prospective client; the three salespersons in this study had no prior knowledge of the film. The salespersons were instructed to present themselves and their product as though they were "actually selling their product to a real client." They were informed to limit their presentation to the introductory or orientation phase. Sales presentations obviously last longer than this initial period, but they were limited to five minutes to prevent possible boredom for participants in the study. Research reveals the initial few minutes of an one-on-one interaction such as this type are the most critical (Casio, 1982). Videotaping of role plays is a practice frequently used in sales training. Consequently, the sales presentations were considered a realistic glimpse of a sales situation and not unnatural or contrived.

The stimulus material then was modified to explore three major communication conditions: (a) nonverbal communication, (b) verbal communication, and (c) full-channel communication. The nonverbal condition was composed of the following two channels:

**Filtered audio channel.** Participants were presented a tape recording of the soundtrack that had been subjected to an electronic filtering process. Frequencies below 100 Hz. and above 450 Hz., with a 72-decibel per octave attenuation at the upper limit, were electronically removed. The process is used to eliminate the lexical, or semantic, meaning while retaining the vocal and affective communication (e.g., vocal variations in intensity and pitch, vocal segregates such as "uh-huh," hesitations, etc.). The removal of frequencies above 450 Hz. has the greatest effect on consonants which are vital for speech intelligibility. It has less effect on vowel sounds and total voice power. Removing frequencies below 100 Hz. eliminated unwanted background noise (see Strahan and Zytowski, 1976).

**Visual channel.** Participants were presented with the videotape only, without hearing the soundtrack.

The verbal communication condition was comprised of the following two channels:

**Transcript channel.** Participants read a transcript of the soundtrack. All intelligible words were transcribed; no vocal cues (e.g., salesperson now is laughing, he changed pitch level) were transcribed.

**Audio channel.** Participants heard an unfiltered tape recording of the soundtrack.

The third communication condition was titled:

**Full-channel.** In this condition, participants were presented the videotape intact, receiving visual and vocal cues in their natural combination.

### Procedure

One-hundred-and-fifty undergraduate students served as participants in this experiment. An approximately equal number of males and females participated. Fifteen treatment groups were formed, one group for each channel of communication and performance level of salesperson. Treatment groups (consisting of 10 participants per group) then were randomly assigned to the experimental conditions. Thus, each group of participants "viewed" only one salesperson under one channel of communication.

Participants were informed that the study was conducted to assess the persuasiveness of various sales presentations. The participants were told that during the presentation a salesperson was interacting with a client who was interested in buying the product. Each participant was asked to put oneself in the client's position and role play that he or she, likewise, was interested in buying the product. After viewing (hearing or reading) the presentation, each group of participants was asked to rate the persuasiveness of the salesperson. Such a request was considered a reasonable task, since students generally are familiar with this product and its features.

### Dependent Variable: Sales Persuasiveness Index

"Sales persuasiveness" was measured on a nine-point, bipolar rating scale. Research has shown that communicator persuasiveness is associated with an individual's credibility (Hovland, Janis, and Kelley, 1953; Simpson and Kahler, 1980). Three personality characteristics compose communicator credibility: expertise, trustworthiness, and dynamism. Consequently, the first two survey questions dealt directly with communicator credibility: (a) "How knowledgeable was the salesperson of the product he was selling?" and (b) "How trustworthy do you perceive the salesperson to be?" In addition to communicator credibility, many sales manuals and texts stress the importance of a salesperson showing sincere concern and interest for the customer and his or her special problems. Thus, the third question, (c) "Do you believe the salesperson was really interested in you and your specific problems?" measured this aspect. Finally, the participants were directly asked, (d) "If you were in the market, how likely are

you to buy the product from this salesperson?" The four-item scale had an internal reliability (coefficient alpha) of 0.85 ( $p < .001$ ).

For ease of interpretation and clarity, persuasiveness scores in the filtered audio and visual channels were combined to form the "nonverbal condition." Likewise, scores in the transcript and audio channels were combined to form the "verbal condition."

## RESULTS

Mean persuasiveness scores were computed for each of the three communication conditions and are displayed in Table 1. Scores for the *nonverbal* condition revealed that Salesperson A (top performer) had the highest score, while Salesperson C (bottom performer) had the lowest score. On the other hand, Salesperson C had the highest score of the three salespersons for the *verbal* condition. In the full channel condition, Salesperson B had the highest score, followed by Salespersons C and A, respectively.

**TABLE 1**  
**GROUP MEANS OF SALESPERSON**  
**PERSUASIVENESS BY CHANNELS**  
**OF COMMUNICATION**

Channel of Communication	Salesperson		
	A	B	C
Nonverbal	22.55	20.55	18.50
Verbal	22.55	21.45	24.60
Full	22.80	25.50	23.30

An analysis of variance ANOVA conducted on the mean persuasiveness scores revealed the following:

1. Salesperson A's nonverbal persuasiveness score was not significantly greater than his verbal score, as was hypothesized. Rather, his nonverbal and verbal persuasiveness scores were identical ( $M = 22.55$ ).
2. Salesperson C's nonverbal persuasiveness score was significantly less than his verbal score,  $F(1, 135) = 9.27$ ,  $p < .01$ .

3. Salesperson A's nonverbal persuasiveness score was significantly greater than Salesperson C's nonverbal score,  $F(1, 135) = 4.09$ ,  $p < .05$ .

Thus, Hypotheses 2 and 3 were supported, while Hypothesis 1 was not. Additional analyses indicated a participant's sex, age, or race did not moderate the findings (all  $ps > .25$ ).

## DISCUSSION

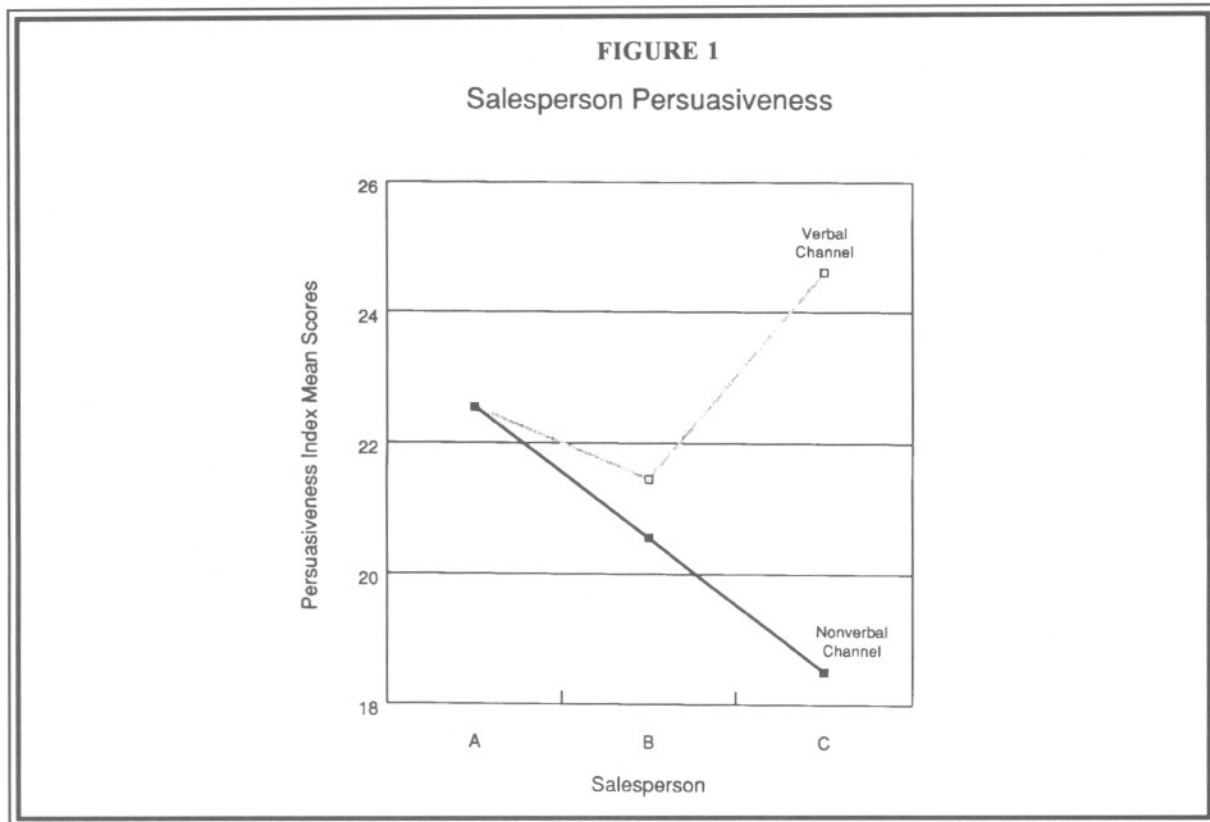
These findings provide strong support for the importance of nonverbal communication in a sales setting. However, the fact that Salesperson A's nonverbal and verbal persuasiveness scores were identical leaves some questions unanswered. Further examination of the differences in the persuasiveness scores reveals some interesting relationships.

The nonverbal and verbal scores of each salesperson are displayed in Figure 1. It is interesting to note that the *discrepancy* between verbal and nonverbal perceived persuasiveness scores increases as one moves from the higher performing salesman to the lower performing salesman. In the case of the highest performing salesman, nonverbal and verbal communication persuasiveness are the same ( $M = 22.55$ ). In contrast, nonverbal and verbal communication persuasiveness for the moderate performing salesperson are disparate ( $M_s = 20.55$  and  $21.45$ , respectively) but not statistically significant. However, the results clearly indicate the gap between the lowest performing salesperson's nonverbal ( $M = 18.50$ ) and verbal ( $M = 24.60$ ) communication persuasiveness is statistically significant at the 0.01 level.

### Discrepancy Model of Communication

It may be that overall persuasiveness is not the correct criterion to use when attempting to differentiate salesperson performance. It may be that the quality of persuasiveness overall is not as critical as the mixture of verbal and nonverbal persuasiveness. One possible explanation is that a balance exists between nonverbal and verbal contributions, and the more discrepancy between systems, the poorer a salesperson's performance is apt to be.

Such a "discrepancy model" of communication could be used to explain these findings. When there is little or no discrepancy between nonverbal and verbal message channels (as in the high performer), communication effectiveness is enhanced and performance increases. When there is a greater degree of discrepancy between the channels (as in the low performer),



communication effectiveness is debilitated and performance decreases. Thus, it would appear unwise to concentrate on one channel and neglect the other. Both systems work in concert, and it is not the quantity of persuasiveness per se which matters in successful salesmanship, but the relative quantity of one to the other. Early work in the area of counseling found that consistent nonverbal and verbal communication enhanced counselor compliance; whereas, inconsistent communication lead to decreased counselor compliance (Graves and Robinson, 1976; Greene, 1977). In addition, Woodall and Folger (1981) speculated that when nonverbal cues are not "in sync" with the rhythmic pattern of speech, individuals may question the honesty and motivation of the speaker.

Although it is tempting to conclude a discrepancy model operates between nonverbal and verbal communication, there are other interpretations of the data. For example, another possibility is that a minimal level of nonverbal communication persuasiveness is required in a social interaction and unless this level is reached sales success is debilitated. Another possibility is that unless a minimal level of *both* nonverbal and verbal communication persuasiveness is achieved, sales performance will be decreased. Yet, another possibility

may be that too much verbal savvy acts as a reactance agent, thereby decreasing performance (e.g., the so-called "sweet talker").

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Future research using this paradigm should utilize more than one "model" salesperson for each performance level condition. The possibility exists that the models used in this exploratory study were not truly representative of the performance conditions they were assigned. In addition, a larger sample of salespeople would permit greater examination of persuasiveness in a full-channel condition. This approach might help explain why the three salesmen's persuasiveness scores in the full-channel condition do not directly correspond to their sales performance. On the other hand it should be noted, a careful review of the performance records of the three salesmen during a five-year period revealed consistent patterns of superior, moderate, and low performance. Future research also could be improved by utilizing both male and female salespeople.

Another area of concern is the dependent measure, "persuasiveness." While the measure used in this study

was psychometrically sound, it is likely that a number of variables affect sales output (e.g., working conditions, sales territories, competitive forces, clients' needs). To control for this issue, salesmen in territories of approximately equivalent potential were used as models. Moreover, each of the three salesmen had at least five years of experience and were employed at the same regional office. Further, it may be that a five-minute "snapshot" of behavior is not an adequate length sample on which to base persuasiveness. Although research suggests such a period is appropriate for making meaningful decisions (Casio, 1982), a longer segment or several mini-segments combined would provide a more comprehensive representation of communication skills. Finally, while student raters may be adequate for exploratory investigations, future research could benefit from the expertise that organizational buyers would contribute.

The practical implications of this study are meaningful. The importance of nonverbal communication in sales training seminars and materials has been minimal to date. The discrepancy model would suggest nonverbal communication is as vital as verbal communication. To concentrate training efforts solely on the verbal skills

of selling, may short change the employee as well as the organization. Research directed toward identifying predictors of salesperson performance has found that most antecedents account for little variance in their performance (Churchill, Ford, Hartley, and Walker, 1985; Comer and Dubinsky, 1985). In addition, it may be that with further refinement nonverbal skills could be used for selection purposes (see De Meuse, 1987). In such a scenario, a videotape of an applicant could be systematically evaluated for nonverbal and verbal communication discrepancy.

In conclusion, a question which addresses the relative importance of verbal and nonverbal communication in a sales setting is *not* the right question to be asking. The data from this exploratory investigation suggest both channels of communication are critical. More specifically, it appears a delicate balance between verbal and nonverbal communication may be operating and sales success is dependent upon maintaining that balance. Additional research is needed to test this relationship under more rigorous methodological conditions and clarify our understanding of the interactive dynamics of verbal and nonverbal communications in sales settings.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Kenneth P. De Meuse** (Ph.D., The University of Tennessee) is Associate Professor of Management at the University of Wisconsin - Eau Claire.

**Robert C. Erffmeyer** (Ph.D., Louisiana State University) is Associate Professor of Marketing at the University of Wisconsin - Eau Claire.