

Study on Increasing Importance of Nonverbal Communication in Retail Industry

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ABSTRACT

There is huge scope for effective application of nonverbal communication in retail industry. But research on nonverbal communication in retail sector is not explored much and hence this study has good scope in researching in this area and further into finding the importance of nonverbal communication of salespersons in retail clothing sector and the perception of the customers. Three retail shops situated at Coimbatore were taken for the study and the sample size was determined based on the footfall of a particular day of the study. It was found that the customers varied in different age groups, income groups, occupational status, income level and gender too. Because of these vast differences in their demographic profile, their perceptions on the nonverbal communication of the salespersons also differed. Also the important traits which the customers are looking for among the salespersons were identified. It was suggested that the owners need to train their salespersons effectively so that they could identify the needs of each customer and try to persuade them through their communication skills especially nonverbal communication and make the sales encounter a successful one.

Keywords: Nonverbal communication, eye contact, facial expression, smile, gestures, posture, physical appearance, sales person, retail.

INTRODUCTION

Nonverbal communication is defined as communicating without words. Nonverbal behavior is a major dimension of human communication. It includes all aspects of communication other than words. It is said that human being communicates 35% through verbal communication and 65% through nonverbal communication. Although there are a number of definitions of nonverbal communication, in its broadest sense it is communication that transcends the bare elements of the written or spoken word.

When verbal and nonverbal communication contradicts, people believe only the actions. It is a real challenging situation in sectors where the sales persons meet the customers directly. Therefore nonverbal communication of the salespersons plays a vital role. Nonverbal communication saves the time of sales staff and sometimes proves more effective than verbal communication.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Some sources propose that nonverbal communication is of considerable importance in the personal selling domain (Jones, Stevens, and Chonko 2005; Manning and Reece 1992; Stewart, Hecker, and Graham 1987). Hence developing nonverbal communication is very essential. This would help people to interact effectively in social and business settings. Especially people in service sectors need to develop this skill to serve their customers and to satisfy them. Retail industries face tough competition worldwide and it is becoming hard to retain the customers. Hence, good nonverbal communication would help salespersons to improve their service quality and to create a good rapport among them. The implicit assumption in the quest for customer satisfaction and service quality is that there is a link between positive evaluation and re-purchase behavior (Zenithal et al., 1996).

It encompasses a number of aspects of body language including facial expression, eye contact, posture, gesture and inter-personal distance (Mehrabian, 1972). Nonverbal communication is in effect a series of cues that are encoded by the sender, either consciously or unconsciously and subsequently decoded by the receiver (Gabbott *et al.*, 2000). Each component of nonverbal behavior affects the interpersonal relationship in a different pattern.

Facial expressions provide observers with sufficient information. The human face is the richest and versatile instrument in serving meaning. It serves as the window in order to display one's emotions and emotional feelings. Emotional expression is more than an observable correlate of internal affective states: it also serves important functions in social comparison and social influence processes (Friedman & Miller, 1991). Human beings are born with an emotional outburst. The baby cries as soon as it comes out of its mother's womb. This is very first, basic and natural emotional expression. Infants are born with the necessary physiological equipment to express emotion (Ekman & Oster, 1979) but there are individual differences in expressing emotions. In adults, the regulation of emotional expression is just as important as expression itself to social interaction. Socialization heavily proscribes the unregulated expression of emotion by adults in society (Friedman & Miller, 1991).

Sales encounters happens face-to-face and hence facial expression of the sales persons might be very much noticed by the customers. Among the facial expressions, eye contact plays a very significant role. The reason is that eye is the most expressive part in the face. It is called the window of the soul. The eye of a person can reveal the true inner self as clear as a crystal. During social interactions eye gaze plays an important role in building relationship between people. The article "Eye contact, facial expressions and the Experience of Time" (Thayer & Schiff, 1975) emphasizes the importance of eye contact in social interactions, which leads to intimacy. Prolonged eye-gaze conveys intense feelings about the other person and improves relationship among the communicators. Nonverbal signals are able to change the judgment of the social encounter. The expression shown in the eyes and the surrounding parts of the eyes reveal whether the person is pleasant and happy about the interaction. If eye contact conveys the intensity of the feelings, the overall facial expressions show the quality and nature of the emotional feelings. So eye contact and facial expression are the important cues in any face-to-face interactions and this rule applies in service encounters as well.

Not only facial expressions convey nonverbal cues but physical features and appearance of the person also conveys important cues during service encounters. This article “Physical Attractiveness in Social Interactions” (Reis, et. al, 1980) reports about the relationship between physical attractiveness and the everyday social interactions. Another, similar study (Reis, et. al, 1982) was conducted by the same authors with final year students. The results reconfirmed the previous study emphasizing that physical attractiveness is very important during social interactions.

“Smile” is one of the common expressions of the facial behavior. In 1862, the French anatomist G.B. Duchene noted that the orbicularis oculi muscle, which surrounds the eye, is recruited in smiles that occur with spontaneously experienced enjoyment but not in smiles that are posed (Duchenne, 1862/1990). Also the difference between the smiles is that enjoyment smiles have distinctive social signals and can be identified in interpersonal situations. Another interesting aspect of smile is that it could be used as back channel responses such as “yeah”, “uh-huh” and head nods during conversations. When used as feedback or as a sign of agreement, it makes the interaction more efficient. Long regarded as a persuasive tool, the infectious smile is transforming a facial expression into a global industry (Womack, 2004), the sales persons should use it in the most effective way.

Apart from smile, other facial expressions like eyebrow and mouth gestures could also be identified as dominant gestures in social interactions. These gestures help to regulate relationships by forecasting the nature of interactions. Human beings possess powerful nonverbal expressive abilities along with verbal messages. These nonverbal cues sent by individuals convey certain meaning. Maintaining eye contact while communicating will increase the credibility. So through the use of continuous eye gaze, a communicator can raise the credibility with the interactor. The overall facial expressions should be given more importance to build credibility. An expression of interest and attention increases the credibility rating among others. Not only eye contact increases credibility but appearance of a person can also assure credibility. Appearance gains importance in building credibility. It is common stereotypic notion that people who are well dressed and hair properly done pose a credible appearance than who are less attractive. „Accuracy in Face Perception: A View from Ecological Psychology“ , (Berry & Finch Wero, 1993), documents that people form strong impression about what they are on the basis of their facial appearance and personality. In this research, individuals were asked to judge the personalities of strangers without having an opportunity to interact with them. So the only clue they can get for assessment is through their physical appearance. In a recent meta-analysis of research assessing links between attractiveness and individual difference measures (Feingold, 1992) found that attractive persons are more popular, more sexually experienced, less lonely, less socially anxious, and have better social skills than less attractive people. Thus the result proved that there is some validity between the appearance and impression.

In social interactions, the changes in body posture and gestures can reveal the truthfulness of the message conveyed. The individual will be distracted and unfocused and show aversion of eye gaze if the message conveyed is a manipulation. Observers exposed to such deceptive messages can read the non-verbal clues clearly. The study “ Explanations for Visual Cue Primacy in Judgments of Honesty and Deceit” (Stiff, et. al, 1989) examines verbal and non-

verbal cues which helps the person interacting to identify whether the words uttered by the other person are true or not.

Nonverbal communication is very important in sales. It can tip salespeople off if the prospect is impatient and skeptical or enthusiastic and interested in the sales presentation. The beauty of nonverbal communication in selling is that the prospect may be revealing information without being aware of it (Fatt, 1998). Service employees' nonverbal behavior remains virtually unexplored despite its importance with respect to the outcome of service encounters. This scarcity of research attention is probably due to researchers' earlier focus on macro issues, such as the antecedents of services quality, the relationship between service quality and business profitability and service recovery efforts (Sundaram and Webster, 2000). Recognition and analysis of nonverbal communication in sales transactions is relatively new (Urbanai, 2005). Pleasing nonverbal cues producing positive affect may encourage customers to associate positive characteristics with service providers, while unpleasant nonverbal cues producing negative affect are likely to cause customers to view service providers in a negative manner (Sundaram and Webster, 2000).

As identified from the past researches that nonverbal communication is very essential for service providers and that this area shows scarcity in research, this study aims at filling the gap in the past research. Moreover since this study aims at finding only the customer's perception of the nonverbal communication of the salespersons, there is much scope for further research in this area to identify its impact as well. Thus this study was an attempt to fill the research gap to identify the customers' perception about the salespersons nonverbal communication and also paves way for further research in this area.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research design adopted for this study was descriptive in nature. The sampling technique used for this study was convenient sampling. Three retail clothing shops at Pune in Maharashtra were considered for the study and the population was the customers who visited the retail clothing sector. 10% of the total foot fall which was 21 from three shops was taken as sample. Thus the sample size was 63 on a particular day when the study was conducted. A well prepared structured questionnaire with closed ended questions with four point scale was used as a tool to collect primary data.

Findings

Majority of the customers perceived the salespersons' body language to be good and average (Table 1) which signifies a good note about the sales person's nonverbal communication.

Table 1: Body Language of Salespersons

Customer opinion on Nonverbal communication of Sales staff	% customers
Bad	2
Average	31
Good	62
Excellent	5

Source: primary data collected from the survey conducted in Pune city during Jan-July 2011

It was found through this study that salespersons appearance played a major role in determining the mood of the customer’s purchase and the customers buying decision also varied according to the approach and attitude of the salesperson. The customers considered friendly, pleasing attitude and smile as the most important traits a salesperson should possess followed by greeting, eye contact, clothing and body posture and they considered voice modulation and gestures to be the least important traits (Table 2).

Table 2: Table showing rank on salespersons nonverbal communication.

Sales persons’ Nonverbal Communication	Mean Rank
Body Posture	5.89
Facial Expressions	6.31
Voice Modulation	6.71
Eye Contact	5.67
Dress of sales person	5.79
Smile	3.85
Gestures	6.75
Greeting style	5.10
Friendly approach	3.50
Appearance	6.43

Source: primary data collected from the survey conducted in Pune city during Jan-July 2011

Customers between the age group of 15 – 35 give more importance to the eye contact trait of the salespersons. The importance given to the salespersons’ body posture varied according to the gender of the customers and women gave more importance to body posture than men. The importance given to the salespersons’ eye contact varied according to the occupation (Table 3) of the customers and it was found that business people and professionals gave more importance to eye contact than others (Table 4).

Table 3: Table showing Salespersons’ Traits by type of nonverbal communication

Test Statistics	Chi-Square	Df	Asymp. Sig.
Body posture	4.383	3	.223
Facial expres	3.704	3	.295
Voice modulation	4.026	3	.259
Clothing	1.377	3	.711
Greeting	.853	3	.837
Friendly pleasing	.690	3	.876
Appearance	1.540	3	.673
Smile	2.419	3	.490
gestures	1.878	3	.598
Eye Contact	6.980	3	.073*

Note: *@10% of significance level

Source: primary data collected from the survey conducted in Pune city during Jan-July 2011

Table 4 : Eye Contact by Occupation

Occupation	Mean rank
Students	12.43
Professional	20.05
Businesss	25.12
Govt servant	9.14
Pvt company servant	11.49

Source: primary data collected from the survey conducted in Pune city during Jan-July 2011

Another interesting finding was that the importance given by the customers to the salespersons' NVC in retail clothing shop did not vary due to the income factor. So, all customers perceived that the NVC of a sales person to be an important factor irrespective of their income level. Married people gave more importance to voice modulation and eye contact and unmarried people gave more importance to smile. It was found that welcome smile, Namaskar (word of greet), greet before and greet after NVC had high significant relationship with other NVC. Customers preferred salespersons to smile at them and greet them before and after with proper eye contact. They also preferred that the salespersons should maintain prolonged eye contact, give response expression, listen to them and be well dressed. All these findings reaffirm the importance of NVC in retail sales.

Managerial Implications

According to the study, since young people between the age group of 15-35 shopped more, the salespersons need to understand the expectations of this group more and concentrate to attract the other age group people as well. Because the buying decision varied according to the approach and attitude of the salesperson, they have to be more friendly, persuasive and convincing towards their customers. Proper training should be given to the salespersons to serve their customers with patience and care. Since customers preferred friendly, pleasing attitude, smile, greeting and eye contact to be the most important NVC, the training programs could concentrate on these areas. Moreover, women, men, married people, unmarried people, students, professionals, business people and others all have their own expectations from the salespersons in a retail clothing sector. Hence, they should be given frequent and effective training programs to develop their nonverbal Communication which would help them to attend and handle customers having different demographic differences and to satisfy their needs.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study offers insight into the perception of customers on the importance of nonverbal communication in sales, particularly in retail clothing sector. It specifically provides information about the important nonverbal traits of salespersons, the most and least preferred nonverbal clues among the salespersons and the relationship between the salespersons NVC in a retail industry. However, the impact of these nonverbal traits on the customers was not covered in this study. This area of study has not been explored much and hence a detailed research in this area would prove beneficial to future researchers.

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