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Georgia Southern University Honors Thesis

Body Language and Sales

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Abstract

This area of research focuses on the link and association between body language and success in professional sales, and whether gestures have any relationship to perceptions of the salesperson's ability and acumen. Utilizing collegiate sales competition videos taken from a university Sales program, the current study investigates and observes the link between nonverbal gestures, body language, and sales performance scores given by professional salespeople and sales recruiters. The results of this study hopes to suggest a relationship between gesture and perceptions of skillfulness within the sales interaction to the buyer or potential client. This, in turn, would have implications for nonverbal sales training.

Introduction and Literature Review

Nonverbal gestures are considered a form of bodily communication that we use both consciously and unconsciously in conversation with other people, and even in conversation with ourselves (Beheshti, 2018). While most conversational body language happens at, or close to actual conscious intent, it is also something that a person can intentionally act on, and train themselves to control in an effective manner. Whether we are aware of it or not, body language can be an important aspect of relaying a message or telling a story beyond what is spoken, especially within the context of a business meeting or work context (Gorman, 2008).

There has been minimal research done on how body language or gesture can affect the outcome of a sale. Most of the research that does exist in this area focuses primarily on what the salesperson can glean from the body language of the buyer, rather than what the salesperson themselves exhibit (Deeter-Schmeiz & Sojka, 2001). However, there has been a large amount of writing and review on the categorization and implications of a variety of gestures from which we can begin to imagine the potential impact on a sales interaction.

Beats. A 'beat' represents any gesture or movement that is made by the speaker which has no particular meaning other than to keep time with or provide physical emphasis simultaneous to the words being spoken (McNeil & Levy, 1993). 'Conversational' gestures like 'beats' may enhance communicative effectiveness of emphasized words, and therefore may enhance the success of a sales interaction (Maricchiolo et al., 2011). Beats have also been described as an 'interactive' form of gesture (Bavelas, Chovil, Lawrie & Wade, 1992) because they are very common in conversational dyads and therefore likely have some social function, or usefulness in maintaining involvement with the speaker. Beats can range anywhere from bouncing with your hands or emphasizing words or phrases.

Adaptors. An ‘adaptor’ involves the unconscious act of touching one’s self or objects (for example when a speaker is seen rubbing the face, touching the hair, wringing the hands, or playing with a pen, papers, or other objects in their vicinity), and is interpreted to give off the impression that the speaker, or salesperson for this matter, is nervous, uncertain or deceptive, and tend to correlate with low persuasiveness (Maricchiolo et al., 2011) which may negatively impact a sales interaction. On the other hand, it has also been found that extraverts tend to self-adapt more often than others while speaking (Neff, Wang, Abbott & Walker, 2010), therefore it is also possible that this form of gesture might be correlated with more positive impressions within the sales dyad.

Illustrators. An ‘Illustrator’ may include several sub-categories of gesture, all of which have in common the intention of illustrating a point being made by the speaker and serving as a secondary narrator (McNeil & Levy, 2003; Maricchiolo et al., 2011). For example, deictics involve pointing at or gesturing towards a thing being spoken about (whether actually there, or metaphorically within space). Deictic gestures are also considered to be ‘interactive’ in nature (Bavelas, Chovil, Lawrie & Wade, 1992) because they are extremely common in conversation dyads and serve to increase interpersonal engagement and involvement with the speaker. Metaphoric gestures stand in for metaphors to help describe what is being said (e.g., drawing a circle with the hand to indicate the shape of what is simultaneously being described as circular, or moving the hands up and down with palms facing upwards while discussing the weighing of options). Another form of illustrator is the emblematic gesture, which is any movement capable of replacing words or concepts entirely, with agreed-upon cultural meaning so clear that it has a verbal equivalent (e.g., the ‘ok’ symbol of forefinger and thumb pressed together, or the ‘peace sign’). While emblematic gestures may require more awareness and intentionality than other forms of illustrative gesture, they have the same sort of impact conversationally of acting as a supportive element to the words being spoken (Ekman & Friesen, 1969). Illustrative forms of gesture are all thought to improve accuracy of understanding and attention towards the speaker, as well as memory for what was discussed, because the function of an illustrative gesture is to disambiguate the content being spoken (Maricchiolo et al., 2011).

Regulators. Posture and gestures/nods of the head and neck can also have an immediate impact on someone’s judgement and view of another person in conversation (Neff, Wang, Abbott & Walker, 2010). Extraverts tend to have more posture shifts in general within a conversation than introverts, therefore moments of leaning in towards the other within a dyadic conversation may be more visually noticeable in this case (Neff, Wang, Abbott & Walker, 2010). For example, head-nodding while listening to a speaker is considered a regulator, and it is associated with enhanced likeability or approachability (Osugi & Kawahara, 2017) because it lets the speaker know that the listener is engaged.

Based on this prior literature regarding forms of gestural body language and its correlates, we propose that, regarding the salesperson's use of gesture:

H1: The use of illustrator gestures within a sales interaction will be associated with enhanced perceptions of sales acumen.

H2: The use of conversational/beat gestures within a sales interaction will be associated with enhanced perceptions of sales acumen.

H3: The use of regulator gestures within a sales interaction will be associated with enhanced perceptions of sales acumen.

H4: The use of adaptor gestures within a sales interaction will be associated with diminished perceptions of sales acumen.

Methodology

Data Source

Data for this study was sourced from the Western States Collegiate Sales Competition, from the years 2016-2018. The WSCSC is a national sales competition for undergraduates within university sales programs. Each student competitor completes a 10-minute roleplay. The competitors pretend, or act, to be a salesperson for a particular company (the event's financial sponsor) interacting with a fake buyer (typically played by a sales recruiter who has partnered with the competition or works for the company sponsoring the event). Students will prepare for the competition and roleplay by learning and understanding the fictional product scenario. The scenarios will carefully list facts about the buyer and their company's needs, while other facts are left up to the student to uncover during the role play.

This data set includes two key items: Firstly, a database of roleplay videos that were scored by groups of six judges at the time of the competition, typically composed of sales recruiters and sales professionals. Secondly, the data set also includes each student's average score given by the judges for their performance in 6 areas (see table below). These scores represent the impressions of the six external professional judges of each student salesperson's performance. The judges are asked to score each student on their skill in selling based on their performance in the roleplay. However, it may also obviously involve subjective impressions about the participant's skill, which could leave a lot of room for body language to have an impact on the results.

Simplified scoring rubric, WSCSC

AREA	DESCRIPTION	% of TOTAL SCORE
Approach	Effectively gains attention & builds rapport	5%
Needs Identification	Obtains a clear understanding of the buyer's needs	25%
Presentation	Persuasively matches product's benefits to buyer's needs	25%
Overcoming Objections	Eliminates buyer's concerns & questions	15%
Close	Asks for the sale	10%
Overall Presentation	Overall impression of performance	20%

These six areas are made up of twenty more specific criterion items that the judges use to score the sales roleplay. These specific areas focus on how exactly the student verbalizes and demonstrates their knowledge of the content, how they uncover needs and the decision process of the buyer throughout the sales role play. Most of these categories are arguably seen in the content of the conversation. Within the 'Overall Presentation' section, a scored item "utilized appropriate nonverbal communication" is the only item within the larger rubric that could be scored as 'body language or gestural,' making up only one fourth of 20% of the total score. In other words, the impact of body language on scores should be 5% of the total score which, objectively, is a very small portion of the competitor's final score.

With the video archive, it is possible to observe and note down certain gestures during the roleplay, and then, further compare if there is indeed a relationship between the competitor's body language and judge's scores given to the competitor. If in fact there exists a relationship between gestural use of a salesperson in conversation with their buyer, and the judges' perception of sales skills, it may be found within this data set.

Video Data

Videos from students that had been judged from 2016 to 2018 were observed within the data set. From the 2017 competition, two separate rounds of role plays were completed, utilizing two separate products. Therefore year 2017 resulted in two distinct competitions and data from both

role plays were included in analysis for a total of four competition sets ($n(2016) = 54$, $n(2017a) = 54$, $n(2017b) = 55$, $n(2018) = 71$). Products sold across the four competitions included marketing analytics software, dental machinery, communications solutions, and a human resources/payroll solution.

The scores for each competitor were combined into a single data set, $n = 234$, and all scores were standardized to a 100-point system for ease of use. The average competitor score was 70.80, with the lowest score being 21.95 and the highest being 93.25. Those videos that scored one standard deviation above (above 84.12; $n = 30$) or below (below 61.47; $n = 30$) the mean were selected for study. Four of those videos falling below one standard deviation from the mean were corrupted files and were therefore removed from analysis, leaving $n = 26$ for those falling below one standard deviation from the mean.

Scoring of Videos for Gestural Content

Scoring of all videos was completed by two judges, both trained to differentiate four different types of gestures: Illustrators (which include metaphoric, dietic, and emblematic gestures), conversational/beat gestures, adaptors, and regulators (which include behaviors such as nodding and distinct forward leans into the speaker). The two judges created a list of the certain types of gestures to study as they began their research. If they found themselves in a disagreement, they would revisit the gesture on the sheet until they landed on an agreement together.

Judge's gesture assessment standard

Illustrator	Gestures with agreed-upon meaning that could substitute for words or ideas, or those used to help physically describe/illustrate a point being made. Examples: describing a spatial relationship (metaphoric or actual), pointing or indicating towards a person or object, counting on the fingers as you verbalize an ordered list.
Conversational/Beat	Gestures meant only to punctuate statements or keep rhythm with speech. These gestures have no meaning or relation to spoken content, but only support the pace of the conversation.
Adaptor	Gestures that involve touching the self or objects without purpose or relation to speech. Examples: touching the face or hair, adjusting clothing, touching papers, pens or objects on the desk without the intention to use them.
Regulator	A bout of nodding, or a notable postural shift towards the buyer as he/she speaks.

The data collection for each video began as the salesperson sat down in their chair in the room with the buyer. Data collection would be conducted from that point until two minutes later, so that each student's data consisted of a two minute time frame from their ten minute roleplay. This method is based on the concept of 'thin slicing' (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992), which is the ability of people to make fairly accurate assessments of others based only on a small window of exposure. Although the two minute time frame would only account for 20% of the total gestures made by the salesperson, this particular sample was selected because A) this first two minutes of the conversation between the salesperson and buyer focuses and requires the least amount of product knowledge from the salesperson and more conversational and rapport building type of conversation (formal introductions, rapport building, setting the meeting agenda) and because B) first impressions are known to be formed very quickly (Willis & Todorov, 2006), have a lasting impact on one's mental image of that person on attributes such as trustworthiness (Willis & Todorov, 2006), and can influence perceptions in a variety of contexts thereafter remaining stable over time (Wood, 2014).

Once completed, scoring for the four gesture types within each sales video were analyzed in relation to the scores given at the competition to each competitor for their performance.

Analysis & Results

In order to determine the relationship between various nonverbal behaviors and scores of salesperson acumen, the resulting gestural scores were compared between high-scoring salespeople and low-scoring salespeople. A MANOVA was run with all four gestural types as dependent variables, with the sales scoring group (high vs. low) as the independent variable. Multivariate tests show a significant relationship at $p = .004$ between scores of sales acumen and gestural patterns ($F(4, 52) = 4.373$, Wilk's $\Lambda = 0.748$, partial $\eta^2 = .252$). The Table below shows means & standard deviations among each gestural type.

Descriptive Statistics

Gesture	Group	Mean	S.D.
Illustrator	Low-score	1.23	1.34
	High-score	4.07	3.21
Beat	Low-score	20.27	9.78
	High-score	23.32	8.95

Adaptor	Low-score	3.27	3.64
	High-score	3.03	2.60
Regulator	Low-score	5.50	2.89
	High-score	4.68	3.39

Between-subjects effects were run with independent t-test, and results show that only illustrator gestures have a significant relationship to the high-scoring sales videos ($p = .000$, $t(55) = -4.197$, partial $\eta^2 = .243$). All other tests were non-significant for beat gestures ($p = .224$), adaptor gestures ($p = .776$), and regulator gestures ($p = .334$). These results confirm H1, while disconfirming H2, H3 and H4 regarding beats ($p = .513$), regulators ($p = .247$) and adaptors ($p = .067$). Even so, this result allows us to clearly differentiate one particular form of gesture, the illustrator, that seems to be most clearly related to the perception of sales acumen.

Discussion

The results of this research suggests that the more illustrative gestures used in a sales interaction were related to higher scores of sales ability. While we predicted that other gesture types might be related to high scores (regulator, beat) or low scores (adaptor), these turned out to be equally present in both high and low scoring roleplays, and showed no relationship to the scores of sales ability. In looking at the means table of gesture rate, it seems clear that all forms of gesture studied were present, though the least common of all were illustrators when it came specifically to low-scoring roleplays. Therefore it may be more an issue of what unsuccessful people are not doing, rather than what successful people are doing.

Why should illustrators matter in this way? As explained in the literature review, illustrators are thought to improve accuracy of understanding and attention towards the speaker, as well as memory for what was discussed, because the function of an illustrative gesture is to disambiguate the content being spoken (Maricchiolo et al., 2011). It can be suggested that the results are reflective of some variation of the Halo Effect. People who are sociable or kind, for example, may also be seen as more likable and intelligent (Cherry, 2019). As with the Halo Effect, in this case we can see that first impressions matter and certain gestures made during that first impression allow us to predict who will be scored well on sales ability.

Limitations and future research

It was surprising that there was no relationship between adaptor gestures and low scores, as the literature on adaptor gestures is clear that this type of movement displays anxiety, uncertainty, and low persuasiveness to an onlooker (Maricchiolo et al., 2011). The failure to find a relationship between adaptor gestures and low scoring videos might be an artifact of the situation. These are judgments of students in a competition setting, therefore the judges may be more forgiving of students and their adaptive gestures as expected for the students to be nervous. Perhaps in real meetings between professional buyers and sellers, this aspect would matter more.

While this study found a significant relationship between illustrator gestures and judgments of sales ability, the study cannot give us information on the direction of that relationship. While it might be true that non-verbals of this type can influence the perception that a salesperson is competent as we hypothesized, it might also be that competent salespeople are also competent with their non-verbals. Future work can tease out this relationship by asking professionals to judge sales competence of video-taped interactions, with experimental manipulation of gesture across condition, while keeping the content of the verbal interaction the same.

While the study gives us interesting results regarding the relationship between several types of gesture and perceived sales ability, it does not tell us what the 'average' performance looks like. Because we looked at only the highest and lowest scoring sales competitors, it is not clear whether the relationship between gesture and perceived ability is a continuum, whether the best sales interactions involve something uniquely positive (illustrator gestures), or whether the worst sales interactions involve something uniquely negative (a lack of illustrator gestures).

Another limitation found was that, with this video data there were certain aspects of body language that we could not study. For example while watching the videos and noting gestures, it was not possible to track eye movement and see if the salesperson was making any sort of eye contact when necessary. It is often a sign of confidence and reliability when someone makes eye contact during conversation. This could possibly be studied in the future.

Finally, the study did not consider or measure other dimensions of gesture, for example gesture duration or gesture amplitude. We noted in viewing the videos that some gestures were very fast and darting, while others were slow and steady. While some gestures were small and involved only a finger or the wrist, others were large and involved the entire arm. These things might be relevant to study due to the existing research on such dimensions, for example it has been found that extraverts tend to gesture with their hands located away from the body, while introverts gesture near to the body (Bavelas, Chovil, Lawrie & Wade, 1992).

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