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GENDER DIFFERENCES IN COMMUNICATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR SALESPEOPLE

By Daniel H. McQuiston and Kathryn A. Morris

As more women enter into the traditionally male-dominated occupations of sales and purchasing, an understanding of gender differences in communication can provide salespeople with added information to increase their effectiveness. This paper begins with a review of the research on gender differences in verbal and non-verbal communication and then applies these findings to the field of sales. The paper concludes with managerial implications and recommendations for how salespeople might account for gendered aspects of their communications and by so doing potentially increase the effectiveness of their sales process.

Introduction

An understanding of gender differences in communication has become increasingly important with the ever-expanding number of women in the workforce and their increased participation in the traditionally male-dominated occupations of sales and purchasing. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that in 2006 women comprised 46% of the total labor force in the United States and 71.9% of women of child-bearing age worked at least part-time outside the home. Specific to the field of sales, 34% of the total female work force was employed in sales and office occupations. In the purchasing function women occupied 41% of the purchasing manager roles (U.S. Department of Labor, *The Wall Street Journal*, 2007).

Issues of gender have attracted increased attention in recent research in the sales and sales management literature. Gender differences have been studied in such areas as sales behavior and job satisfaction (Siguaw and Honeycutt 1995), salesperson mentoring (Fine and Pullins 1998), organizational citizenship behaviors (Piercy, Cravens and Lane 2003) and sales stereotypes (Lane and Crane 2002). However, the important issue of gender differences in communication has attracted little attention. An understanding of these differences takes on increased importance due to the fact that an increasing body of literature is showing that males and females exhibit different behaviors in a variety of areas specifically related to sales. For example,

men and women consider different criteria in purchasing (Goff, Belinger, and Stojack 1994), process information differently (Kempf, Laczniak, and Smith, 2006) and have different decision making styles (Bakewell and Mitchell 2006). While this area of research has garnered some attention in the social sciences (e.g., Hyde 2005, Smith 2007), it has had virtually no examination in the sales arena. While one forward-thinking firm has begun a sales training program on the nuances of communicating to women in the sales environment (*Wall Street Journal* 2007), this approach is the exception rather than the rule.

In this paper we present an overview of the literature on gender differences in communication, paying attention to both verbal and non-verbal communication, review the applicable literature in marketing and the social sciences, and then discuss the managerial implications of these differences for those in the sales arena.

Gender Differences in Communication

Gender differences in communication have received a lot of attention due to the popularity of best-selling books such as *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* (Gray 1992) and *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* (Tannen 1990). However, many of the differences in gender communication advocated by these authors have not been supported by empirical research (Smith 2007, Brannon 2008).

While social science research on gender differences in communication tends to find many similarities (e.g., Hyde 2005), these studies do indicate that there are a number of consistent gender differences in both verbal and non-verbal communication; we argue that these differences may affect the sales process. Before discussing these differences, we will first provide a brief historical analysis which will trace how current gender differences in communication in the modern business environment developed over time.

A Historical Perspective

A look back at how communication patterns were established in the U.S. business environment will provide a better understanding of how current gender differences in communication were established. According to Arnott and Matthai's (1991) historical analysis, a largely agrarian economy existed in the early days of our nation with men and women working side-by-side in an effort to complete the daily chores on the farm. With the coming of the industrial age, however, gender work roles shifted rather rapidly and became much more distinct and defined. Men went off to work in the factories and offices and women, for the most part, stayed home and took care of their husbands and children. In 1900 only about 18% of the female population aged 14 and over were in the work force, half were under the age of 25, and 70% of them were single (MSN Encarta). In the meantime, males dominated this new industrial environment, providing the vast majority of workers and an overwhelming majority of managers. The industrial working environment became a male-dominated one, with men occupying the positions of power in the workplace and in turn developing the communication patterns that became the standard for that environment (Arnott and Matthaei 1991).

In addition to the historical context, linguistic factors and occupational segregation also contribute to gender stereotypes. In the English language male designation is normative (e.g., "everyone has to do *his* job", "Why don't you

guys come over", "I'm a sales*man* for ABC company") and female designation is the exception (e.g., "the *lady* Bulldog basketball team", "she is a *woman* lawyer"; Hyde 2004). Furthermore, Brannon (2008) points out that there is gender segregation in most occupations, meaning that many occupations are so dominated by males or females that they contribute to stereotypes about "male" and "female" occupations.

These stereotypes have been shown to exist in the sales field as well (Russ and McNeilly 2000; Lane and Crane 2002). These stereotypes posit that women sales representatives do not follow the traditional male decision-making style that incorporates assertiveness, toughness, and the need to control and dominate. Rather, these stereotypes depict women as being concerned with the soft and relational aspect of sales (Beetles and Crane 2005).

Thus, the historical context of gender communication would appear to have assigned stereotypical roles to both males and females in the business setting. Individuals entering into a sales context would generally have expectations that males would occupy positions of power and dominance, while females would occupy roles that are more nurturing and supportive. The legacy of these normative roles developed over decades is still present today, and this legacy may subconsciously or even consciously influence modern-day communication patterns.

Gender differences in relationship selling

Recent studies have emphasized a move away from the transaction-based model of sales towards a more relationship-focused model (e.g., Kotler and Keller 2009, Weitz, Castleberry, and Tanner 2009). Much of the research that included examinations of gender has shown that women are more interested in developing and maintaining sales relationships than their male counterparts (Sigauw and Honeycutt 1995, Beetles and Lane 2005) and are better at it (Groysberg 2008). This takes on a degree of importance when viewed in terms of how males and females approach the entire sales relationship. Heaston (2005) found that women,

who tend to be more relational, generally endeavor to first build relationships and then attempt to achieve their goals. Males, on the other hand, tend to be more direct and focus on achieving their goals, building the relationship as the process transpires.

Summary of the Literature

To summarize, sales has historically been a male-dominated occupation with the communication styles of men tending to be more demanding and directive than those of women, who tend to be more nurturing and relational. One would therefore expect that if there are any differences in communication in a sales context, they would occur with the sense that males would assume the stereotypical communication style of using more power and directives while females would assume the stereotypical communication style of being the relational, inclusive partner in the conversation.

Communication in the Field of Selling

It is generally agreed that salespeople need to both be aware of and employ two key types of communication in the sales field – verbal and non-verbal (e.g., Weitz, Castleberry, and Tanner 2009). To be more effective in the sales arena, salespeople must become attuned to the verbal and non-verbal cues they are giving and well as the verbal and non-verbal cues their customers are exhibiting. Salespeople who have an understanding of what these cues might mean in a given setting and who are able to adapt their sales approach to those cues stand a much better chance of having a successful sales encounter (Park and Holloway 2003, Spiro and Weitz 1990). Below, we summarize the research on gender differences in verbal and non-verbal communications and then discuss the implications for salespeople.

Gender Differences in Verbal Communication

In a meta-analysis of 30 empirical studies of verbal differences between males and females, Mulac, Widmann, Widenmann, et al. (1988) identified the linguistic features that men and women prefer to use. Hyde (2004) also studied many of these differences and developed a

number of classifications of these gender differences. Combining the key findings of both of these studies, the key factors that influence gender differences appear to be: tentativeness, intensifiers, interruptions, directives, politeness, quantity, back channels, rising intonation, and talking time. Each will be examined below.

Tentativeness

Tentativeness implies that the speaker lacks the strength of their convictions about the statements and assertions they have made or are about to make. Women are more likely to exhibit tentativeness in their communication patterns by using tag questions, disclaimers, and hedges (Hyde 2005). A tag question occurs when a question is added, or ‘tagged’ onto the end of a statement (e.g., “This product would really be the best solution for your needs, *wouldn't it?*”). Women are also more likely to use disclaimers (phrases such as “*I may be wrong but ...*”) and hedges (“I'm *pretty* sure this would be the best product for you”); whereas men are use more directive statements (“This is the best product for your needs because ...”). While some may interpret this tentativeness as uncertainty, others would see it as an attempt to foster interpersonal communication, to gain additional information, or to build a better understanding with their communication partner.

Intensifiers

Intensifiers are adjectives or adverbs that are used by a speaker to emphasize a particular aspect of their statement or in an attempt to add credibility for that statement. A number of studies have also found that women use intensifier adverbs – words like *very*, *really*, and *vastly* – more than men do (Aries 1996, Mulac 1998). As stated above, women may use intensifiers more than males, perhaps to better express emotion and power (Brannon 2007).

Interruptions

Research has shown that men interrupt women in conversation considerably more than women interrupt men (McMillian et al., 1977, West and Zimmerman 1983, Leaper and Ayers 2007). Earlier researchers have suggested that these

interruptions are an expression of male power or dominance. By interrupting, the interrupter gains control of the conversation and thus gains a position of interpersonal power. Putting this in a gender-specific context, this interpretation suggests that men are expressing dominance over women, which also in turn reinforces the traditional role of a subordinate women (Hyde 2005). However, later researchers have suggested that interruptions can mean more than simply expressing power and dominance. Aries (1996) found that most interruptions tend to be agreements or requests for clarification and have nothing to do with dominance. Also, women often engage in more supportive interrupting, especially when they are in all-female groups (Aries 1996).

Directives, politeness, quantity, and connectors

Men are more likely to use directives in communication (e.g., “Do this now ...”) and specific quantity (e.g., “... and get all ten done by two o'clock”). Women, however, are more likely to use incomplete sentences (e.g., “Let me see ... I think I have to ...”) and indirect statements (e.g., “Have you thought about doing this now?”; Quina, Wingard and Bates, 1987). Women are also more likely to use *politeness* (e.g., “May I have that report this afternoon?”) , while men, as indicated above, are more likely to state *directives* (e.g., “I need the report by the end of the day”; Mulac, Winemann, and Widenmann et al. 1988). Women also use more logical connectors (e.g., “We did additional product testing to enhance the quality of the product and now it’s better”) than men do (e.g., “We did some more testing. The product is now better.”).

Back channels

Women are also more likely to use *back channels*, which are usually expressed in the form of minimal agreements during the course of a conversation (e.g., “un-huh”, “yeah”, “okay”) than men are (Hall et al. 1994). In a study of physicians and their patients, Hall et al. (1994) found that female physicians used backchannels more than male physicians did. However, another interesting finding of this study was that male physicians used backchannels more with

their female patients than with their male patients.

Rising Intonation

Women will often raise the tone of their voice in response to a question, usually at the end of a sentence, perhaps to indicate support or a desire for the other person not to suffer any inconvenience (e.g., Man: “What would you like to eat?”; Woman: “A pizza?”), said with a rising tone in a question-like statement (Hyde 2005). Using such intonation can also contribute to the linguistic tentativeness noted above.

Talking time

Contrary to stereotypes regarding women’s chattiness, men actually talk more than women in business conversations, with these increased talking times being linked to who is perceived as having the power in the communication situation (Kollock, Blumstein, and Schwartz, 1994). Generally speaking, people in positions of higher status will likely talk more. In absence of any clear status indicators, men may presume that they have status over women in the group, and thus speak more often in an attempt to control the tone and direction of the conversation (Leaper and Ayres 2007).

Non-Verbal Communication

The importance of non-verbal communication has been well-documented as academics and practitioners alike increasingly have come to realize the important role it has in the communication process. Non-verbal communication is especially important in sales as the non-verbal cues a customer gives off may indicate agreement, disagreement, confusion, or hostility. Some have even proposed that the *non-verbal* cues a person gives off may even be more important than the *verbal responses* that person gives (Goffman 1959, Arnold 2003).

Non-verbal communications can generally be classified into the following categories:

- Kinesics – the interpretation of body language such as facial expressions, gestures, and movement of any part of the body or the body as a whole.

- Oculistics – the use of eye contact in a communication setting.
- Proxemics – the study of how an individual uses and perceives the interpersonal space around them and between themselves and another individual.

Object language – the physical appearance of the individual, with clothing being the most prevalent, but also including personal grooming, jewelry, and body piercings and markings (Mehrabian 2007).

Each one of these will be considered separately.

Kinesics

The term ‘kinesics’ refers to how people communicate through facial expressions, gestures, posture, and movements – what is called ‘body language’ in the modern-day vernacular. Of the gender differences in kinesics that have been studied, perhaps the most research that has been done has been in the area of *smiling*. One of the more definitive research findings is that women smile more than men in social situations (Hall 1984, 1998). Smiling is considered part of the feminine role and is often considered something a woman ‘should do’ rather than indicating happiness or friendliness. Men tend to smile when happy or amused; women on the other hand will smile even though they may not feel any positive emotions.

A related area to this topic is that smiling is sometimes seen as a status indicator, with dominant people smiling less and subordinates smiling more. Thus, women’s smiling could be interpreted by some to be reflective of perceived subordinate status (Henley 1977). However, other studies contradict this status interpretation. Hall et al. (2001) and Hall and Friedman (1999), for example, found that although women consistently smile more than men, those of lower status in a company do not smile more than those of higher status.

In another related area of kinesics, women will also nod in agreement more than men do (Helweg-Larsen, Cunningham, Carrico, & Pergram, 2004). Hall (1984) points out that men

typically use more gestures while speaking, but will display less emotion through smiling due to ‘socialized rules’ to remain emotionally neutral. Hall (1984) also argues that men are less likely to display facial expressions in an effort to maintain that neutrality.

Oculistics

Establishing and maintaining eye contact has been shown in a large number of studies to initiate and foster trust (Gueguen and Jacob 2002), create favorable evaluations in non-threatening interactions (Knackstedt and Kleinke 1991), as well as to create and display a transparency of understanding in interpersonal transactions (Ucok 2006). In a study of sales call anxiety, Verbeke and Bagozzi (2000) found that lack of eye contact had a negative effect on the performance of the salespeople who participated in their study. Thus, research confirms what salespeople have known for a long time – establishing and maintaining eye contact is important for success in sales.

An area of oculistics that has implications for gender differences in sales communications concerns how individuals of different status levels use eye contact to reflect patterns of perceived social dominance between the two involved parties. Higher status people tend to look at lower status people when they are speaking, and lower status people tend to look at higher status people when they are listening (Hyde 2004). Also, while stereotypical male dominance in the sales field might suggest that women would assume a subordinate role and thus not establish much eye contact, research would indicate otherwise. Dovidio, et al. (1988) coined the term *visual dominance*, which is defined as the ratio of the percentage of the time maintaining eye contact while speaking relative to the percentage of the time maintaining eye contact while listening. In a research study designed to examine visual dominance when women were given the role with higher status, women did indeed make more eye contact than men while speaking and men made more eye contact while listening, supporting the status interpretation of differences in visual dominance (Dovidio et al., 1988).

Proxemics

This term refers to people's use of the personal space around themselves. Interpersonal space is typically divided into four 'zones': Intimate zone (0 – 18"); Personal zone (18" – 4 ft.) ; Social zone (4 ft. – 12 ft.) ; and Public zone (> 12 ft.) (Pease and Pease 2004).

Research findings indicate that in our culture men prefer a greater distance between themselves and others, whereas women are more comfortable with a smaller distance between themselves and others (Hyde 2004). A related study found that women typically have a small interpersonal distance between themselves and others as a result of or in order to express warmth or friendliness (Wittig and Skolnick 1978). In the sales field, conventional wisdom holds that the most effective presentations take place in the personal zone (18" – 4 ft.; Weitz, Castleberry, and Tanner, 2009) although women are more comfortable than men with side-by-side interaction (Kalbfleisch, 1993).

Object language

Object language is defined as the way people present themselves through their outward appearance including clothing, style of dress, personal grooming, and body piercings or markings. A long-standing finding is that individuals who exhibit positive body language (i.e., proper grooming, dressing appropriately to fit the situation) are viewed more positively than those who exhibit object language that could be considered inappropriate for the situation (e.g., Kwon 1994; Solomon and Schopler 1982). In the field of business communication object language has been shown to take on importance when combined with other verbal and non-verbal factors. Past research has shown that a woman who maintains her feminine appearance and combines it with a more decisive, stereotypically masculine communication style is perceived as being more competent than a woman with a more masculine appearance who exhibits the same decisive communication style (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Forsyth, Heiney and Wright, 1997).

Managerial Implications

While men and women use the same grammar, syntax, and vocabulary, there are some subtle yet consistent differences in their verbal and non-verbal communication styles. These differences have implications for business settings in general and sales settings in particular. Because gender is salient in cross-gender sales interactions (e.g., male salesperson and female client or vice versa) gender differences in communication style have the potential to have a stronger impact in these settings. In the following sections we review some of these differences and outline several potential managerial implications of these gender differences in the sales arena.

Establishing Relationships

One key gender difference in the sales process is the overall approach males and females are likely to take when beginning the sales process. Female salespeople are more likely to be relationship-oriented and seek to accomplish their desired goals by building relationships early on in the sales process. Male salespeople, on the other hand, are more likely to be task-oriented and build relationships as they go about completing the sale. Similarly, female clients are more likely to prefer relationship building early in the sales process whereas male clients are more likely to prefer to build relationships as the process unfolds. Thus, conflicts may occur if the salesperson and client utilize gendered communication styles that emphasize different goals. For example, a female salesperson may benefit from understanding that her male customer may not want to spend time up front building the relationship but would rather get to know the salesperson as they work through the sales process. With their greater capacity for empathy, women are more prone to notice this than are their male counterparts and adjust their approach accordingly.

In their interaction with female clients, male salespeople will in all likelihood have to adapt their approach more significantly than will their female counterparts. First, rather than progressing right into the task at hand, a male salesperson would benefit from understanding

that his female client may prefer spending more time early up front getting to know her and building a relationship in order to reach a comfort level that will allow the sales process to continue successfully. Secondly, the male salesperson needs to focus on cooperative, reciprocal, and collaborative conversations and rely less on the directive communications that are typical for males. Their approach should be much more exploratory rather than declarative to take into account the female's tendency to empathize. As females can process more information than males, the male salesperson should not hesitate to provide additional information while at the same time acknowledging that the female client is considering many different options and integrating many goals together.

Verbal communications

Both male and female salespeople would benefit from careful reflection about their own gendered communication styles and how these styles may affect others' perceptions of them and their success in sales situations. For example, women who utilize a very feminine communication style may employ verbal expressions of tentativeness in order to demonstrate interpersonal sensitivity, to solicit information from the conversation partner, or to build interpersonal understanding and agreement. Despite these worthy goals, however, women who have highly feminine communication styles may be perceived very differently than their intent. For instance, women with highly feminine communication styles are at risk for being perceived as indecisive (through the use of tag questions, hedges, and disclaimers), passive (through indirect speech and politeness) and potentially even "ditsy" (due to intensifiers, rising intonation, and connectors). Such women are at particular risk for being perceived negatively by men, who typically do not use a similarly feminine communication style.

Others' perceptions place female salespeople in a unique bind. That is, if they communicate using a highly feminine style, they are at risk for being perceived as incompetent. However, if they instead adopt a highly masculine style, they may

well be *respected*, but probably will not be *liked* by others, including their clients (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Forsyth, Heiney and Wright, 1997). In an effort to be both liked and respected by their clients, female salespeople may wish to monitor the balance of the masculine and feminine aspects of their communication. For example, they may wish to consider balancing feminine characteristics, such as politeness, connectors and back channel expressions with masculine characteristics, such as directness (i.e., limiting their use of tag questions, hedges, disclaimers, and rising intonation). Such a strategy may be particularly wise for female salespersons interacting with male clients. In such cross-gender interactions, for example, the female salesperson may wish to avoid expressions such as, "I think this would be the best product to suit your needs, wouldn't it?" and opt instead for a more direct statement, such as, "Based on what you told me your needs are, product A is really the best product to suit those needs for the following reasons ...".

Men may also benefit from a careful analysis of their own communication styles which tends to focus on asserting dominance. While specific directives may contribute productively to communication efforts in time-sensitive situations, other male communication tendencies such as interruptions, lack of back channel communications, and dominating conversation time may be counterproductive in conversations with their female clients due to the differences in information processing mentioned above. For example, because people in higher status positions tend to talk more, interrupt others more, and indicate back channel agreement less, the more dominant masculine communication styles may suggest a lack of respect for the conversation partner. This may be particularly true when male salespeople are interacting with female clients. Thus, both in general and especially when interacting with female clients, male salespeople may benefit by shortening their talking time, limiting their interruptions, and increasing their back channel agreements. In addition, they could likely benefit from judicious use of the stereotypically feminine strategies such

as tag questions to solicit information or agreement from their female clients.

Non-verbal communications.

Just as male and female salespeople may benefit from analyzing their verbal communication style, they can also profit from a careful examination of their non-verbal communication style. Women, for example, may wish to consider balancing their non-verbal communication style so that they present neither a too feminine nor a too masculine non-verbal persona. For example, women may wish to consider gender differences in smiling and their implications in sales settings. Although women who smile too much may be devalued as being lower in status or incompetent, women who smile too little may be negatively evaluated for failure to live up to their gender role.

Men, on the other hand, should be particularly wary of their use of personal space and eye contact, both of which can be used to establish dominance. For example, although women may be more comfortable with a smaller interpersonal distance than men, male salespeople who invade a female client's personal space may be suggesting that she lacks status in the interaction. Similarly, because men tend to follow patterns of eye contact that indicate dominance (i.e., making eye contact while speaking, but not while listening), men should make a conscious effort to modify their behavior to establish and maintain eye contact while listening to the client. Doing so is more likely to confer status upon and establish trust with that client.

Misunderstandings

Gender differences in non-verbal communication style may contribute to misunderstandings in cross-gender sales situations. For example, because women smile and nod more during conversations than men, and because these actions are not necessarily indicators of agreement, men may misinterpret a women client's smiles and nods as signs of agreement. Similarly, because men are likely to maintain neutral body posture while listening to women, women may misinterpret their lack of body language as a sign that they are bored or

not paying attention. Both men and women in sales settings may benefit from an understanding of these differences, which may prompt either behavior change or reinterpretation of another's behavior.

Directions for Future Research

In the sections above we have summarized the marketing and social science literatures on gender differences in verbal and non-verbal communications and attempted to provide some suggestions for how both male and female salespeople may benefit from their knowledge of these differences. These research findings indicate that there are likely complex interactions involving the gender of the participants. While we have begun to speculate on the implications of these of these differences, clearly much work needs to be done and we hope we have inspired professionals to contemplate and researchers to investigate gendered communication in the sales arena.

The field would benefit from empirical research directly investigating gender differences in communication style in sales interactions. For example, researchers could conduct a series of experiments in which male and female 'salespeople' deliver a sales presentation while following scripts in which various verbal and non-verbal communication factors (e.g., tentativeness, smiling) are manipulated. Male and female participants, serving as 'clients', would then rate the effectiveness of the sales presentations. This type of research would be relatively easy to conduct and would benefit both male and female salespeople in developing communication styles adapted to the sales situation.

Conclusion

Understanding the gender differences in communication style can assist both male and female salespeople to anticipate how others are likely to perceive them based on their gender and communication style. We have summarized these differences and argue that both male and female salespeople could benefit from this knowledge. This may, in turn, allow individual

salespeople to engage in strategic self-presentation by altering their communication style to fit the gender of their client in addition to the nuances of the sales situation. Furthermore, awareness of gender differences in communication style can be effective in avoiding miscommunications between men and women interacting in sales situations. Ultimately, a careful consideration of gender differences in communication style could certainly enhance the chances for a successful sales encounter.

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