Relational Listening and Impression Management in Salesperson-Customer Relationships

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
This paper reports on a qualitative study that investigates how salesperson-customer relationships are affected by the listening behaviors exhibited by salespersons, impression management strategies employed, and the interaction between these. Interpersonal communication between salespersons and customers is recognized as an important part of successful sales interactions (Comer and Drollinger 1999). While communication has two distinct aspects—expressive behaviors (e.g., talking) and recognition behaviors (e.g., listening) (Nichols 1995)—studies of communication behaviors have remained grounded in expressive aspects. Poor listening behavior has been identified as a key component of salesperson failure, costing American businesses billions of dollars (Brownell 1990; Steil, Barker, and Watson 1983). However, listening still remains the least understood component of the communication process (Ramsey and Sohi 1997).

This paper derives its theoretical foundation from seminal work on impression management as well as more narrowly focused work on the role of listening in salesperson-customer interactions. Though marketing scholars have studied impression management in the context of personal selling (cf, Harris and Spiro 1981), this work fails to consider the role of listening among impression management strategies. To fuse these two conceptual bases, we adopt a relational perspective of listening.

From an analytical perspective, impression management may be described as a macro-level term that encompasses micro-level processes (e.g., attention to demeanor, attire, expressive communication, and listening). Studies of service encounters and sales performance traditionally employ quantitative methods, unpacking key components of interactions and failing to capture the role of impression management. We employ a qualitative approach to reconstitute these variables.

Data were collected from 11 informants (customers of realtors) via in-depth, semi-structured interviews, resulting in thick description of issues from informants’ perspectives, and enabling interviewers to probe about listening behaviors, idealized images of realtors, marketing outcome variables, and motivations and explanations for behaviors uncovered.

The results of our study, consistent with Nichols (1995), revealed that listening was clearly identifiable as a unique aspect of communication. Two informants highlighted listening as the key criterion distinguishing good sales performance. The remaining identified listening as a significant component of the salesperson-customer relationship.

All of the components of listening found by Ramsey and Sohi (1997), sensing, evaluating, and responding, appeared in our data. This typology is predicated, in part, on the work of Castleberry and Shepherd (1993, p. 36) who define salesperson listening as “the cognitive process of actively sensing, interpreting, evaluating and responding to the verbal and nonverbal messages of present or potential customers.” By including an affective dimension, we found we were better able to account for our informant’s depictions of listening. Our data revealed six components of listening: cognitive sensing, cognitive evaluating, cognitive responding, affective sensing, affective evaluating, and affective responding.

Cognitive sensing includes aspects of listening related to focusing on one’s audience (e.g., maintenance of eye contact and alertness). Affective sensing refers to a more relational level of understanding. Cognitive evaluations involved salespersons asking direct questions of the customer, while affective evaluations related to the salesperson trying (in the words of one informant) to “see the house through the customer’s eyes.” Cognitive responding related to performing tasks material to the transaction itself (e.g., showing houses appropriate to customer criteria and scheduling appointments convenient to informants). Informants experienced affective responding as attending to underlying needs and desires, requiring increased sensitivity to customers by salespersons. The affective dimension should not be associated with positive impressions; it is the nature of the listening and not the outcome that distinguishes cognitive from affective components.

Findings suggest that listening behaviors contributed to overall impressions created by realtors. Further, the extent to which actual behaviors exhibited by realtors corresponded with idealized expectations held by customers determined customer satisfaction with the salesperson. Intriguingly, our informants demonstrated a readiness to justify behaviors of salespersons in order to bring idealized and actualized behaviors into greater correspondence, ultimately producing a positive perception of the overall service experience.

This study expands our understanding of listening in the context of sales communication. It tests and extends the scales of Ramsey and Sohi (1997), suggesting cognitive and affective dimensions of these. The results build into this existing model the concept of the salesperson’s idealized image, perceived image and the overlap between the two. In this sense, the work also contributes to the literature on impression management. It explicitly links salesperson’s listening behavior to impression management activities, unfolding an unexplored facet of impression management. In highlighting the underlying dynamism in this process of overlap, we argue that customers help salespersons co-construct the overall service space impression though a variety of strategies. When impressions match expectations, customers use strategies such as constructing motives behind a salesperson’s actions and highlighting aspects of salesperson behavior to reinforce the positive experience. When expectations do not match reality, customers utilize strategies aimed at creating an overall positive impression of the full service-space, including assigning meanings to certain salesperson activities, trying to reconcile others, justifying the outcomes, or expressing helplessness.

This paper highlights this mediating role played by impression management. It is this mediation that allows us to understand those situations wherein there is only a partial overlap between the expected images and actual impressions and the process through which customers reconcile these, overlooking incongruent elements to gain a better overall impression.

The context of our study differs significantly from that of Ramsey and Sohi (1997) and plays an important role in the overall findings, shedding light on the distinction between extended service encounters and other commercial sales activity that is more limited in duration. This allowed us to discern differences between realtors and car salespersons, for example, in the extent to which each has the capacity to utilize listening skills to create and maintain impressions. Our study suggests that there exist cognitive and affective dimensions of listening, and that a temporal dimension may moderate these. Many informants noted that listening behaviors exhibited by salespersons, and the overall impressions created,
changed as the relationship evolved. This may make the affective dimensions more pronounced in more relational selling environments and affect the degree of correlation between listening and impression management.

References