Nonverbal Cues-Based First Impressions: What Can Static Images of Salespeople Tell Us About Their Success At Selling?

Rebecca E. Walker, The University of Texas at Austin
Rajagopal Raghunathan, The University of Texas at Austin

EXTENDED ABSTRACT - On average, people rely more on nonverbal cues than on verbal cues in interpersonal exchanges (Burgoon, Buller, and Woodall 1996). The impact of nonverbal cues appears particularly potent in the context of first impressions (Ambady and Rosenthal 1993; Riggio and Friedman 1986). Given the widely accepted belief that first impressions created by a salesperson lay the foundation for all subsequent interactions with a customer (e.g., Jacobs et al. 2001; Macintosh et al. 1992), it is important to assess the generality of this phenomenon in the context of customer-salesperson interactions, that is, whether and to what extent, nonverbal cues influence customers’ first impressions of salespeople. We address three questions pertaining to nonverbal influences on judgments of salespeople: (1) are nonverbal cues-based impressions formed only after lengthy and meaningful interactions with salespeople or can they be formed on the basis of brief or even fleeting interactions (e.g., through exposure to photographs of the salesperson)?, (2) is the impact of nonverbal cues on first impressions independent of the physical attractiveness of the salesperson?, and, finally, (3) do salespeople who create good (vs. bad) first impressions (on the basis of their nonverbal behavior) turn out to be more successful at selling?

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/8884/volumes/v31/NA-31

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
Nonverbal Cues-based First Impressions: What Can Static Images of Salespeople Tell Us About Their Success at Selling?
Rebecca E. Walker, The University of Texas at Austin
Rajagopal Raghunathan, The University of Texas at Austin

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

On average, people rely more on nonverbal cues than on verbal cues in interpersonal exchanges (Burgoon, Buller, and Woodall 1996). The impact of nonverbal cues appears particularly potent in the context of first impressions (Ambady and Rosenthal 1993; Riggio and Friedman 1986). Given the widely accepted belief that first impressions created by a salesperson lay the foundation for all subsequent interactions with a customer (e.g., Jacobs et al. 2001; Macintosh et al. 1992), it is important to assess the generality of this phenomenon in the context of customer-salesperson interactions, that is, whether and to what extent, nonverbal cues influence customers’ first impressions of salespeople. We address three questions pertaining to nonverbal influences on judgments of salespeople: (1) are nonverbal cues-based impressions formed only after lengthy and meaningful interactions with salespeople or can they be formed on the basis of brief or even fleeting interactions (e.g., through exposure to photographs of the salespeople)? (2) is the impact of nonverbal cues on first impressions independent of the physical attractiveness of the salesperson? and, finally, (3) do salespeople who create good (vs. bad) first impressions (on the basis of their nonverbal behavior) turn out to be more successful at selling?

Based on our review of recent relevant research, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1: Nonverbal cues embedded in static images of targets offer sufficient basis for making evaluative judgments about the targets.
H2: The influence of nonverbal cues embedded in static images on target judgments will be independent of physical attractiveness of the target.
H3: Nonverbal cues-based judgments will be significantly correlated with real-world measures of target performance.
H4: The influence of nonverbal cues on judgments takes place outside the awareness of the individual making them.
H5: The valence of initial nonverbal cues-based judgments of salespeople will color judgments of the salespeople’s subsequent behavior.

In this paper, we conduct two experiments to examine these issues. In the first experiment subjects were asked to judge the personality and likelihood of success of salespeople based only on static images of the salesperson. These judgments were then correlated with assets under management (an objective measure of actual sales success). Ratings of target attractiveness were also obtained. Results from this experiment indicate that: (1) exposure to a static image of a salesperson is sufficient to evoke judgments, (2) these judgments are independent of the physical attractiveness of the salesperson, and (3) judgments based on nonverbal cues are accurate in the sense that they are significantly correlated with the real-life success of the salesperson (r for global personality variable=.35, p<.01; r for overall salesperson variable=.31, p<.01).

In the second experiment, subjects were first asked to judge the personality of the highest and lowest rated salespeople from experiment 1. In the second stage, both groups of participants participated in a distracter task (unrelated to this experiment) intended to eliminate short-term memory for the exact target judgments but not to eliminate the valence of the initial impression. In the third stage, participants read a paragraph—adapted from Srull and Wyer (1979) and designed to be ambiguous with respect to the hostility of the target—that detailed the targets’ purported interaction with an acquaintance. It is important to note that both groups of participants read the same paragraph. After reading the paragraph, participants judged the target’s hostility. Consistent with our prediction (hypothesis 5), the target who elicited more favorable nonverbal cues-based judgments was judged as less hostile than the target who elicited less favorable nonverbal cues-based judgments (M=5.97 and 2.58, t(68)=5.08, p<.05).

These results suggest that people interpret a target’s behavior in a manner consistent with initial impressions formed on the basis of the target’s nonverbal cues. Our findings are thus consistent with recent findings (e.g., Ambady and Rosenthal 1993) and also contribute to the literature on nonverbal influences in the following significant ways.

The finding that target judgments can be made on the basis of nonverbal cues embedded in just physical appearance cues (hypothesis 1), in conjunction with the finding that first impressions color subsequent judgments of the target (hypothesis 5), raises the possibility that judgments made on the basis of dynamic nonverbal cues—documented in earlier research (e.g., Ambady and Rosenthal 1993; Dabbs et al. 2001; Gangestad et al. 1992)—may have been driven primarily by nonverbal cues embedded in the physical appearance (vs. kinesic) channel. That is, our results suggest that the very first judgments of targets are made on the basis of the target’s physical appearance and that all subsequent impressions of targets are colored by this initial impression.

A second theoretical contribution of our research stems from establishing the independence of the influence of nonverbal cues from that of physical attractiveness of the target. Results from both experiment 1 of this research indicate that whatever advantages the better looking targets may derive from their looks, these effects are independent of the influence of the nonverbal cues embedded in their physical appearance, as evidenced by the finding that the relationship between personality judgments and real-life success at selling was not mitigated by the addition of physical attractiveness of the target as a covariate.

Our final theoretical contribution is the proposal of a nonconscious halo effect mechanism as an explanation for the accuracy of nonverbal cues-based judgments in this research. In our view (see hypothesis 5) the initial impressions of targets bias subsequent target-judgments, thereby producing a spurious correlation between the two.

Consistent with our hypothesis (hypothesis 4), results from experiment 1 indicate that the influence of nonverbal cues on judgments takes place outside the awareness of the individual making the judgments. Participants were asked to make, on the basis of nonverbal cues, two types of judgments about targets: personality and likelihood of sales success. Since the latter judgment is a higher-order judgment, we should expect to see differences in the predictive validity of these judgments if the process by
which nonverbal cues are used to make judgments is deliberate. Our results indicate, however, that both judgments were equally accurate in predicting the actual success at selling. More direct evidence in support of our hypothesis was obtained in experiment 2, results from which showed that initial impressions formed on the basis of nonverbal cues biased interpretation of the target’s purported subsequent behavior.

References