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Study One determined that buyers are more interested in the task, rather than the social, aspects of the buyer-seller relationship. They prefer sellers who are trustworthy, composed, and task-oriented. Study Two showed that sellers are well aware of buyer's preferences for task related interaction, but they may slightly overestimate the value of social interaction. Four complex communicator style profiles were obtained through cluster analysis. Buyer preferences did not vary across Communicator style profiles, which suggests that adaptive selling advice may be misguided. However, for buyers, the profiles revealed that Apprehensive, Social, or Competitive sellers may need more communication skill training than Cooperative sellers.

Appropriate Relational Messages in Direct Selling Interaction: Should Salespeople Adapt to Buyers' Communicator Style?

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Successful sales people are competent communicators (Williams & Spiro, 1985) who have the knowledge, skill, and motivation to interact effectively and appropriately (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984) in sales situations. Through this repeated, competent interaction, successful direct sales people build ongoing relationships with their customers. Because effective sales skills presuppose knowledge of appropriate interaction, professional salespeople must first understand customers' interaction style preferences. These preferences prescribe some of the most important rules for appropriate behavior within the buyer-seller relationship.

As with other interpersonal contexts, interaction in sales situations involves content and relationship dimensions (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). The content dimension includes the substance of the message and typically is formed using verbal codes. The relationship dimension relays how the verbal codes (words) should be interpreted and typically is formed using nonverbal codes.¹ The exchange of relational messages between the buyer and seller defines the nature of their relationship (Burgoon, Buller, Hale, & deTurck, 1984) and sets the pattern for future buyer-seller interaction.

Most direct salespeople know they must adapt the content of their message to the expertise of the buyer and the task at hand (Weitz, 1978; 1981). The question is, should salespeople adapt their relational messages to individual and situational contingencies, as well? That is, do relationship message preferences vary substantially across individual customers, or are there consistent preferences that constitute interaction rules for most direct sales situations? Study one addresses that

question within the direct advertising sales context. Study two determines if direct advertising salespersons are aware of buyers' preferences for relational messages and if sellers' own communicator style affects their perceptions of buyer preferences. If so, people with certain communicator styles may be particularly adept at employing appropriate relational messages and thereby more effective at building business relationships. The advertising sales context was selected for these projects because it involves a cross-section of businesses and frequent, ongoing, face-to-face buyer-seller interaction.

Study One: Buyer Preferences

Relational Message Preferences

Several relational message themes appear consistently in studies of interpersonal interaction. After extensive review and exploration, Burgoon and Hale (1987) empirically validated a schemata of eight interdependent themes including immediacy (affection), receptivity (trust), similarity (depth), dominance, equality, composure, formality, and task versus social orientation.

The selling literature is replete with studies highlighting the relevance of interpersonal behaviors that can be classified according to this relational message schema. Evidence regarding composure, immediacy and affection, receptivity and trust, and similarity and depth is more conclusive than that regarding dominance, equality, formality, or task orientation.

Composure

Composure indicates the level of poise, comfort, and relaxation shown through physical effects such as little gesturing, comfortable posturing, and very little fidgeting. Leigh (1980) determined that such behaviors are distracting to the buyer and perceived as negative. As such, they have a negative impact on the customer's comprehension, recall, and retention of the sales presentation and will negatively impact the likelihood of a sale (Williams, Spiro, & Fine, 1990).

Immediacy and Affection

Immediacy behaviors are approach moves that enhance closeness to and interaction with others because they reduce psychological distance, physical distance, or both between communicators, increase overall sensory stimulation and arousal, and promote liking and attraction (Mehrabian, 1981). Brown (1990) noted that establishing a likable and attractive image is quite important for sellers. Nonverbal immediacy behaviors are useful in this regard because they display warmth and positive regard in a way that is likely to be felt but not consciously

interpreted by the buyer. Therefore, buyers are not likely to see these subtle moves as self-aggrandizing or ingratiation.

Receptivity and Trust

Building trust and rapport are unequivocally the most important relational themes during the entire sales process, especially for ongoing sales relationships (Hawes, Mast, & Swan, 1989). Swan, Trawick, and Silva (1985) describe trust as a multidimensional construct that, in the sales context, involves competence, customer orientation, being dependable, honest, and likeable. To buyers, the strongest trust builder is dependability, followed by competence, customer orientation, honesty, and likability (Hawes, et al., 1989).

Similarity and Depth

Similarity and depth-superficiality are highly interrelated and both are related to attraction. Similarity refers to the extent to which buyers and sellers signal being alike; whereas, depth-superficiality refers to the degree of familiarity that is stressed. Similarity is attractive because it reduces uncertainty and promotes trust (Busch & Wilson, 1976), which enhances affiliation (Spiro, Perreault, & Reynolds, 1977) and allows people to become more familiar.

Buyer-seller similarity positively influences sales across four dimensions: (1) similarity of expertise in product use experience, (2) similarity in attitudes, (3) similarity of physical and demographic variables, and (4) similarity of affiliation characteristics or communicator style.² Crosby, Evans, and Cowles (1990) report that similarity in expertise and demographic variables may be most influential in retail settings and other discrete sales interactions and relatively unimportant in a ongoing sales relationship. Nonetheless, sales people generally are advised to present themselves as similar by *adapting* to their clients' topic preferences (Micali, 1971), physical characteristics (Crosby, et al., 1990; Evans, 1963), or communicator style (Dion & Notarantonio, 1992; Miles, Arnold, & Nash, 1990; Weitz, 1978). In fact, the wide spread movement toward adaptive selling and a contingency approach further illustrates the sales industry's belief that buyers prefer relational messages of similarity.

Dominance and Equality

Dominance is associated with aggressiveness, persuasiveness, and controlling interaction while submission represents the opposite of these (Burgoon & Hale, 1984). Equality refers to corresponding relational status and equality of roles, not equal amounts (similarity) of characteristics or expertise. Equality is shown by respecting the

other's time constraints, honoring appointments, being attentive, and not monopolizing the talk time (Brammer, 1985).

Buyers prefer sellers who display low to moderate levels of dominance, tempered with cooperation. Day, Michaels, and Perdue (1988) found that buyers prefer collaborative (high assertive, high cooperation) or compromising (moderate assertive, moderate cooperation), buyer-seller interactions over competitive interactions. Moreover, salespeople who compete, rather than cooperate, with clients might decrease the clients' trust (Axelrod, 1984) and satisfaction with the sales context (Pruitt, 1981), because competitive behaviors represent a desire to take from, rather than invest in, the relationship.

Similarly, Soldow and Thomas (1984) found messages promoting perceptions of equality are more likely to result in negotiated agreement, perhaps because they allow a focus on task rather than relational negotiation (Soldow & Thomas, 1984). Similarly, DeCormier and Jobber's (1993) adaptive approach suggests that sellers should *match* buyers' levels of dominance (an equality message), while maintaining a warm manner.

In contrast, Stafford and Greer (1965) found that independent buyers might prefer aggressive salespeople who initiate and dominate the buyer-seller interaction. Moreover, Williams, et al. (1990) postulate that salespeople "should dominate the structure of the sales presentation" (p. 38) in order to be successful. So, the degree of salesperson dominance preferred by buyers is still unclear.

Formality-Informality and Task-Social Orientation

Formal sales people tend to be task oriented and informal sales people tend to be social interaction oriented. Apparently, there is value in both task and social orientations. Sheth (1973) advanced a tripartite model of communication style which differentiates between self, task, and interaction orientation. Drawing on Sheth's definition of task oriented sales people as those who are concerned with efficiency, controlling time, costs, effort, and making the sale, Williams and Spiro (1985) found that task oriented salespeople do not do well with any customer type (that is, task, self, or interaction oriented). In contrast, Brown, Boya, Humphreys, and Widing (1993) found both low and high socializing buyers focus on task-related issues and rate social issues as relatively unimportant in the sales call.

Conclusion

The preceding review provides insight into buyers' preferences for relational themes in buyer-seller interaction. Unfortunately, the findings are often mixed or inconclusive. Moreover, they do not reveal how buyers rank the importance of these relational themes. Because high

amounts of one relational message (for example, immediacy) could preclude high amounts of another relational message (for example, dominance), sellers need to know buyers' ranked preferences in order to communicate appropriately. As such, the following question remains:

RQ1A: What relational messages do buyers prefer during direct sales interaction?

Influence of Buyer's Communicator Style

Relational messages are tactics used in ongoing interactions; whereas, communicator style is a consistently recurring pattern of communication that creates expectations about the way one generally communicates (Norton, 1983). Most communicator style classification schemes group buyers and sellers along two dimensions, such as concern for self and concern for customer (Blake & Mouton, 1980), assertiveness and responsiveness³ (Merrill & Reid, 1981), willingness to disclose, and willingness to accept feedback (Hamilton & Parker, 1993). Although these two dimensional frameworks are parsimonious, they do not capture the complexity of relational themes represented in communicator style. Recognizing this complexity, Norton (1983) identified ten multicollinear dimensions of communicator style that, when taken together, form a communicator style profile. They are: friendly, relaxed, dominant, contentious or argumentative, attentive, animated, dramatic, open, precise, and impression leaving.

Weitz (1981) popularized the adaptive selling paradigm, emphasizing tailoring sales approaches to specific types of sales situations. In an ongoing sales conversation, communicator style profiles serve as contingencies that guide appropriate adjustments in seller style. The assumption is that buyers with different communicator styles prefer different types of relationships with their salespeople. If so, different communicator style profiles will be associated with different preferences for relational messages.

RQ1B: Do buyers' preferences for relational messages vary due to the buyers' own communicator style?

Study One: Method

Sample

Study One involved 100 advertising buyers from 100 different companies in a medium-sized city in the Florida panhandle. Participants were purposely selected to obtain a proportional representation of the various types of businesses within the community. Twenty-nine of the respondents were from the retailing industry, 29 were from the service industry, 14 were from industrial companies, 11 were from the automotive industry, 10 were from manufacturing, and 7 were wholesalers. Of these, 67% ($n = 67$) were male and 33% ($n = 33$) were female. Sev-

enty-nine percent ($n = 79$) were Anglo, 10% ($n = 10$) were Native American, 5% ($n = 5$) were African-American, 4% ($n = 4$) were Hispanic, and 2% ($n = 2$) were Asian. Ages ranged from 23 to 61. Buyers were contacted in person and completed all measures at their place of business.

Instruments

All buyers completed a Communication Questionnaire which contained Norton's (1983) Communication Style measure, Burgoon and Hale's (1984) Relational Messages Scale, and a set of demographic items including age, gender, level of education, ethnic background, and type of business.

Communicator Style

Norton's Communicator Style Measure (CSM) was used to assess communicator style. The CSM contains 50 five-point Likert-type items, with labels in the standard "strongly disagree to strongly agree" format. Six of the 50 items are filler items and were ignored. Four items measured communicator image, which was not relevant to this analysis. The 10 communicator style dimensions were each assessed by four of the remaining 40 CSM items. Scores for each of the style dimensions were obtained by summing subscale items. Subscale reliabilities were computed using Cronbach's alpha and were acceptable, ranging from .71 to .83.

In an earlier study, Norton (1983) conducted a smallest space analysis in order to determine which of the 10 communicator style variables were similar to each other. The SSA solution produced two continua. The first is anchored by attentive-friendly styles at one end and dominant-contentious styles at the other. The second is anchored by the dramatic-animated styles at one end and the relaxed style at the other. The presence of these two complex dimensions indicates that the CMS could be used to create four rich categories of communicator style profiles. We used cluster analysis to obtain those four categories.

Relational Messages Scale

A modified version of Burgoon and Hale's (1987) Relational Messages Scale (RMS) was used to measure buyers' preferences for relational messages. The RMS contains 38 five-point Likert-type items, in the standard "strongly disagree to strongly agree" format, designed to assess the eight relational themes. Following Burgoon and Hale's instructions we included the eight items measuring task versus social orientation because it is quite pertinent to this investigation. The RMS was modified to reflect preference as opposed to observed behavior in the exchange relationship (for example, I prefer salespeople who

are similar to me). Because the relational message subscales have varying numbers of items, subscale scores were standardized by dividing actual means by the number of items in each subscale, yielding possible means ranging from 1 to 5 for all RMS subscales. Subscale reliabilities were assessed using Cronbach's alpha and ranged from .55 to .92. With the exception of the dominance subscale (alpha = .55), the current reliabilities are higher than those obtained by Burgoon & Hale (1987).

Study One: Results

Research Question 1A

RQ1A asked what type of relational messages do buyers prefer during direct sales interaction? To answer this question, buyers' mean responses to each of the relational message subscales were rank-ordered, and a series of 56 paired *t* tests were run to determine if there were significant differences between these means. In order to adjust for family-wise error rate, alpha was set at .0017, using a Bonferroni Correction Procedure (Pedhazur, 1982). With 3 as the midpoint of each subscale, high scores ($M > \text{or} = 4$) represent those messages most preferred by buyers, middle range scores ($M > 3 < 4$) represent acceptable relational messages, and low scores ($M < \text{or} = 3$) represent those messages least preferred by buyers.

Results indicated that trust ($M = 4.54$), task ($M = 4.22$), and composure ($M = 4.13$) were buyers' most preferred relational messages. In the acceptable range were immediacy ($M = 3.66$), formality ($M = 3.55$), and equality ($M = 3.31$). Dominance ($M = 2.83$) and similarity ($M = 2.79$) relational messages fell in the least preferred range (see Table 1).

Paired *t* tests revealed most buyer preferences means were significantly different. The exceptions include: (1) task and composure, (2) immediacy and formality, (3) formality and equality, and (4) dominance and similarity (see Table 1).

Research Question 1B

RQ1B asked if buyers' preferences for sellers' relational messages vary due to the buyers' own communicator style. To answer this question we first had to determine categories of communicator style profiles and then conduct a manova with buyer style as the independent variable and the relational messages variables as interrelated dependent variables.

Communicator Styles

Following Norton's suggestion we collapsed the 10 communicator style variables and created four, rich communicator style profiles

using cluster analysis, specifying a four cluster solution. We combined the communicator style data from Study One and Study Two, which allowed us to type both buyers and sellers in a more powerful analysis. The analysis produced four clusters which we labeled Cooperative, Apprehensive, Social, and Competitive (see Table 2).

Table 1
Buyers' and Sellers' Rankings of Relational Messages

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Buyers' Preferences for Relational Messages		
<i>Preferred</i>		
Trust	4.54	.41
Task	4.22 _a	.54
Composure	4.13 _a	.53
<i>Acceptable</i>		
Immediacy	3.66 _b	.53
Formality	3.55 _{bc}	1.06
Equality	3.31 _c	.98
<i>Not Preferred</i>		
Dominance	2.83 _d	.54
Similarity	2.79 _d	.73
Sellers' Perceptions of Buyers' Preferences		
<i>Preferred</i>		
Trust	4.30 _a	.49
Composure	4.25 _a	.67
<i>Acceptable</i>		
Task	3.75 _b	.87
Immediacy	3.75 _b	.50
Equality	3.62 _b	.87
Similarity	3.47 _b	.53
<i>Not Preferred</i>		
Dominance	3.07 _c	.53
Formality	3.04 _c	.65

Note: Buyers' preference means with the same subscript were not significantly different at the corrected alpha level of .0017. Sellers' perception means with the same subscript were also not significantly different at the corrected alpha level of .0017.

Cluster One, the *Cooperative Style*, blends a social and task orientation. Cooperatives are attentive, friendly, and precise. They are likely to appear competent and promote trust. Cluster two, the *Apprehensive Style*, is relatively friendly but anxious and submissive. They probably want to avoid making mistakes and conflictual interaction. Cluster Three, the *Social Style*, is expressive, dominant, and dramatic but not argumentative or precise. They are likely to be informal, immediate, receptive, and dominant but not aggressive or task oriented. Cluster four, the *Competitive Style*, is task oriented and controlling. Competitives are precise and expressive, but not open about per-

sonal issues. They are likely to be argumentative and dominant yet relatively composed.

Table 2
Communicator Style Profiles

CLUSTER 1 Cooperative (<i>N</i> = 116) buyer <i>n</i> = 45 seller <i>n</i> = 71		mean scores	CLUSTER 3 Social (<i>N</i> = 14) buyer <i>n</i> = 9 seller <i>n</i> = 5		mean scores
Attentive		15.38	Expressive		18.07
Impression Leaving		14.95	Dominant		17.21
Friendly		14.84	Dramatic		16.64
Relaxed		13.34	Impression Leaving		16.64
Precise		13.07	Friendly		15.14
Expressive		12.88	Open		15.14
Open		12.66	Attentive		13.00
Dominant		12.28	Relaxed		11.43
Dramatic		10.96	Argumentative		9.21
Argumentative		10.32	Precise		9.00
CLUSTER 2 Apprehensive (<i>N</i> = 38) buyer <i>n</i> = 13 seller <i>n</i> = 25		mean scores	CLUSTER 4 Competitive (<i>N</i> = 65) buyer <i>n</i> = 33 seller <i>n</i> = 32		mean scores
Friendly		12.61	Impression Leaving		16.05
Expressive		12.58	Precise		15.88
Precise		12.24	Expressive		15.88
Argumentative		12.24	Attentive		15.34
Impression Leaving		12.13	Argumentative		15.29
Attentive		12.11	Dominant		15.09
Dramatic		9.87	Friendly		14.81
Open		9.21	Dramatic		14.63
Dominant		9.13	Open		14.32
Relaxed		8.34	Relaxed		13.63

Buyers' Preferences by Style

A multivariate analysis of variance was computed, with buyer communicator style as the independent variable and the eight relational messages as the dependant variables. The overall *F* test using Wilkes Lambda criterion was significant, $F(24) = 1.98, p < .05$. Only two of the eight univariate tests were significant (see Table 3). Task ($F(1,99) = 3.52, p < .05$) and immediacy ($F(1,99) = 7.02, p < .05$) varied significantly across buyer communicator style types. A Student-Newman-Keuls range test with task as the dependent variable showed that cooperative ($M = 4.30$) and apprehensive ($M = 4.49$) buyers place higher emphasis on sellers' task messages than do competitive ($M = 3.99$) or social ($M = 4.04$) buyers.

A SNK for immediacy showed that *Social* buyers ($M = 4.07$) prefer higher levels of immediacy than all other buyers (Competitive $M = 3.70$, Cooperative $M = 3.68$, Apprehensive $M = 3.16$). In addition, *Apprehensive* buyers prefer lower levels of immediacy than all other buyers.

Despite these two significant differences among task and immediacy means across buyer styles, there was considerable agreement across all buyer style rankings of their relational message preferences (See Table 3). Using a Bonferroni correction procedure to protect family-wise error rate, we computed six Spearman Rho rank-order correlations comparing each buyer style ranking with all other buyer style rankings. Results showed that all buyer style rankings are quite similar (cooperative-apprehensive $\rho = .95$, cooperative-social $\rho = .91$, cooperative-competitive $\rho = .95$, apprehensive-social $\rho = .86$, social-competitive $\rho = .95$).

Study Two: Seller Perceptions

Study Two was designed to determine the extent to which sellers are aware of buyers' preferences for relational messages and if sellers' own communicator style affects their perceptions of buyer preferences.

Lambert, Marmorsten, and Sharma (1990) found that salespeople in ongoing buyer-seller relationships are unable to identify buyer preferences. However, as they noted, their small sample size calls their results to question. In addition, the Lambert, et al. (1990) study combined perceptions of telephone and outside salespeople. Outside salespeople have more nonverbal cues to buyer perceptions than telephone sales people. This added information should elevate the ability of outside salespeople to ascertain relational preferences and contribute to their sales success. Therefore, by combining the two groups, Lambert et al. may have confounded their results, meaning their findings may not adequately reveal the extent to which direct sellers understand buyers' preferences.

RQ2A: Are sellers aware of buyers' preferences for relational messages?

People with one type of communicator style versus another often are thought to be more successful salespeople. Dion and Notarantonio (1992) supplied tentative support for this idea when they found that different combinations of *seller* communicator style are associated with different degrees of sales success. Specifically, they report that salespeople with friendly, precise communication profiles are perceived more favorably and are more successful than those who are either just friendly or just precise. However, there is no evidence linking seller

communicator style with buyer preferences for appropriate behavior. As such, the following question was advanced:

Table 3
Means and Univariate *F*'s for Dependent Variables by Buyers' Style

Dependent Variable	Cooperative	Apprehensive	Social	Competitive
Trust <i>F</i> 1.27 Grand <i>X</i> = 4.59	4.54 (1)	4.54 (1)	4.80 (1)	4.64 (1)
Task <i>F</i> 3.52* Grand <i>X</i> = 4.24	4.30 (2)	4.49 (2)	4.04 (3)	3.99(3)
Composure <i>F</i> .13 Grand <i>X</i> = 4.13	4.14 (3)	4.12 (3)	4.04 (4)	4.16(2)
Immediacy <i>F</i> 7.02* Grand <i>X</i> = 3.66	3.68 (4)	3.17 (5)	4.07 (2)	3.70(4)
Formality <i>F</i> 2.31 Grand <i>X</i> = 3.55	3.67 (5)	3.92 (4)	3.57 (5)	3.10(6)
Equality <i>F</i> 1.59 Grand <i>X</i> = 3.31	3.26 (6)	2.96 (6)	3.20 (6)	3.65(5)
Similarity <i>F</i> 1.75 Grand <i>X</i> = 2.79	2.74 (7)	2.48 (8)	3.00 (8)	2.98(7)
Dominance <i>F</i> 2.06 Grand <i>X</i> = 2.83	2.73 (8)	2.91 (7)	3.14 (7)	2.89(8)

Note: *indicates significant *F*'s at the $p < .05$ level. Numbers in parentheses are rankings.

RQ2B: Do salespersons' own communicator styles affect their perceptions of buyer preferences for relational messages?

Study Two: Methods

Sample

The seller sample included 133 direct salespeople who attended a southeast regional advertising sales meeting sponsored by their company. Of these, 46% were male ($n = 61$) and 54% were female ($n = 72$), with age ranging from 19 to 75. Racially, the sample was 70.6% Anglo ($n = 94$), 12% Native American ($n = 16$), 6% Hispanic ($n = 8$), 3% African American ($n = 4$), and 8.4% some other racial background ($n = 11$). All sellers completed the instruments at the same time during their sales meeting.

Instruments

Sellers completed the same Communication Questionnaire described in Study One, except the seller version of RMS was modified to assess their perceptions of buyer preferences (for example, buyers prefer salespeople who are similar to them). All reliability assessments fell within the previously noted ranges.

Study Two: Results

Research Question 2A

RQ2A asked the degree to which sellers are aware of buyers' preferences for relational messages. To answer this question, sellers' perceptions of buyer preferences were averaged, rank-ordered, and classified as described above. Then, a Spearman's Rho was calculated to measure the degree of relationship between the buyer and seller rankings.

Results indicated that sellers' perceived trust ($M = 4.30$) and composure ($M = 4.25$) as buyers' most preferred relational messages. Means indicated that sellers' perceived the remaining relational messages as acceptable: task ($M = 3.75$), immediacy ($M = 3.75$), equality ($M = 3.62$), similarity ($M = 3.47$), dominance ($M = 3.07$, and formality ($M = 3.04$) (see Table 1).

Paired t tests revealed that the trust and composure means were not significantly different from each other, but both were significantly different than all other means. In addition, the task, immediacy, equality, and similarity means were not significantly different than each other but were different than both the task and composure means (which were significantly higher) and the dominance and formality means (which were significantly lower) (see Table 1). This indicates that sellers' perceived dominance and formality are the least preferred relational messages.

The Spearman's Rho calculated the degree of relationship between the buyer and seller ranks and indicated that the two rankings were substantially related, $Rho = .86$, $t = 3.40$, $p < .05$ (see Table 1).

Research Question 2B

RQ2B asked if sellers' own communicator style affects their perceptions of buyer preferences. Seller communicator style was typed using the four solution cluster analysis described above. Cluster placement is listed in Table 1. A multivariate analysis of variance was computed with seller communicator style as the independent variable and the eight relational messages as the dependant variables. The overall F test using Wilkes Lambda criterion was not significant ($F(24) =$

.71, $p > .05$), indicating that seller communicator style does not affect sellers' perceptions of buyers' preferences for relational messages.

Discussion

This two-study project focused on buyers' preferences for relational messages in ongoing, direct sales relationships. The findings prescribe important rules for appropriate behavior within the direct sales relationship and suggest that sellers may not completely understand these rules, specifically when it comes to social interaction. Moreover, the relational message preference hierarchy, coupled with the lack of communicator style profile effects, indicates that salespeople should adapt their behaviors to buyers' preferred relational messages *not* buyers' communicator style. In contrast to the adaptive selling paradigm, this project revealed that buyers are more interested in trustworthiness and a task orientation than they are in similarity. As such, it may be unnecessary, if not ineffective, for sellers to adapt their communicator style to the buyers' communicator style.

Buyer Preferences

Study One helps resolve five notable issues regarding appropriate communication in the sales context. First, all types of buyers prefer sellers who appear composed, task oriented, and most of all, trustworthy. These findings are in line with the extant research highlighting trust as the foundation of the ongoing buyer-seller relationship (for example, Brown, 1990; Crosby, et al., 1990; DeCormier & Jobber, 1993; Hawes et al, 1989; Miles, et al, 1990). The high ranks for task and composure indicate that buyers are quite concerned about the professional nature of the buyer-seller relationship. This suggests that in order to be customer oriented, salespeople should focus on task, rather than social interaction. That is, instead of adopting buyers' communicator styles, sellers should build trust and rapport by adopting a task oriented demeanor with all types of buyers, just as Miles et al. (1990) suggested.

Second, sellers should temper their focus on task by treating buyers with warmth and respect, without becoming too disclosive or informal. The immediacy, equality, and formality rankings again illustrate that social interaction is important, but secondary to task oriented interaction.

Third, salespeople should balance immediacy with credibility. Taken together, the high task and trust rankings, moderate immediacy rankings, and low dominance and similarity rankings suggest that the relationship between buyer preferences and seller nonverbal immediacy may be curvilinear. As Comstock, Rowell, and Bowers (1995) reported, moderate immediacy behaviors may produce more positive

affect than low immediacy (dominant) or high immediacy (similarity). Low immediacy detracts from trust and approachability, while high immediacy detracts from credibility and task accomplishment. In simple terms, too little or too much immediacy may turn the buyer off.

Fourth, sellers should be cooperative, not competitive or dominant during direct sales interaction. The low rank, but moderate mean, for dominance indicates that buyers want sellers who are confident and assertive, but not aggressive or controlling. This conflicts with Stafford and Greer (1965) and Williams, et al. (1990) who advise sellers to initiate and dominate sales interaction. In addition, these results question the counselor selling model (DeCormier & Jobber, 1993) which advises sellers to match buyers levels of dominance. Matching dominance is self-oriented behavior which decreases trust (Axelrod, 1984) and precludes attaining agreement (Soldow & Thomas, 1984). Therefore, sellers should demonstrate a desire to invest in, rather than take from the relationship.

Fifth, and perhaps most important, Study One suggests that salespeople *should not* adapt different relational styles with different buyers based on buyers' communicator style. The low ranking for similarity reinforces the conclusion that sellers should not be concerned with emulating buyers communicator style. As Crosby et al. (1990) report, buyers are not influenced by similarity, especially in an ongoing selling relationship. So, despite previous proclamations from the adaptive selling paradigm, there are basic rules for appropriate direct sales interaction that transcend individual preferences associated with communicator style.

Seller Perceptions of Buyers' Preferences

Unlike Lambert, et al. (1990) we found that outside sales people are generally aware of the type of sales interaction buyers prefer. The substantial agreement between buyer preference and seller perception rankings demonstrates that sellers understand that in order to be successful, they need to be perceived as trustworthy, task-oriented, and composed. However, the relatively low formality and high similarity rankings indicate that sellers may slightly overestimate buyers' desire for social interaction. Therefore, managers and trainers should reinforce the value of building trust and rapport through task oriented sales approaches and de-emphasize the focus on irrelevant social interaction.

Communicator Style Profiles

This project successfully created four distinct, multidimensional categories of communicator style profiles: (1) *Cooperative Style*; (2) *Apprehensive Style*; (3) *Social Style*; and (4) *Competitive Style*. Nonetheless, on the surface, it appears that communicator style profiles are

of little consequence in the buyer-seller relationship. After all, neither buyer preferences nor seller perceptions varied across communicator style profiles. However, we do not advocate abandoning the communicator style variable. Although they may not differentiate sellers' knowledge of buyer's preferences, communicator style profiles illuminate the individual characteristics that facilitate or inhibit sellers' competent sales interaction.

For example, the *Cooperative Style* is characterized by receptivity, precision, friendliness, and a lack of contentiousness. These attributes are identical to the relational messages preferred by all buyers. Therefore, Cooperative sellers have the knowledge *and* skill necessary to competently interact with buyers.

On the other hand, the *Competitive Style* is characterized by precision, argumentative disclosures, and a desire to control interaction. The *Social Style* is highly focused on social, but not task, interaction. The *Apprehensive Style* is relatively friendly but not composed or assertive. Therefore, in order to effectively interact with buyers, Competitive, Apprehensive, and Social sellers must learn to transfer their knowledge of buyer preferences into appropriate communication skills and they must be motivated to make that transference. In other words, sellers with a *Cooperative Style* profile are most likely to be successful when motivated, while sellers with other styles may require communication skills training and motivation in order to reach optimal success.

Limitations and Future Research

This project has three sample related limitations. First, both samples were selected from homogeneous professional groups: sellers were advertising salespeople and buyers were advertising purchasers. Although the advertising context suited the purposes of this study, we realize that there may be something unique about the advertising industry that could limit generalization of these results to other direct sales contexts. Replication of this project with subjects from other direct selling contexts is warranted.

Second, the buyer preference data may be skewed toward a masculine orientation. The buyer sample was predominantly male (67%), which reflects the prominence of male decision makers normative in the southern United States. However, males typically value instrumental over intimacy aspects of their personal relationships while females value intimacy over instrumental rewards (for example, Ainsworth & Johnson, 1983). If this tendency generalizes to direct selling relationships, our data may match male buyer preferences more closely than female buyer preferences. Unfortunately, due to sample size constraints, we were unable to test that possibility in this project.

Third, our data may not generalize to a culturally diverse population of buyers or sellers. Both our buyer and seller samples were comprised mainly of Anglos. Future research should ascertain whether or not racial differences affect preferences for buyer-seller interaction.

NOTES

¹ Soldow and Thomas's (1984) study of relational communication in the sales interaction inappropriately dismisses the relational function served by nonverbal communication behaviors saying that (1) nonverbal communication behaviors serve primarily a regularity – not relational function, (2) people are not adept at controlling or interpreting nonverbal cues, and that (3) nonverbal communication has not been pursued in terms of a relational communication framework. Unfortunately Soldow and Thomas ignored the vast amount of communication literature demonstrating that all three of their reasons for ignoring nonverbal communication were unjustified.

² Fine and Gardial (1990) mention the three categories listed and include affiliation along with similarity of physical and demographic characteristics. However, because of the focus of this project and because affiliation is a communication activity, we create a fourth category for affiliation and added communication style, and important variable which Fine and Gardial omitted.

³ Merrill and Reid (1981) actually focus on three dimensions: assertiveness, responsiveness and versatility. However, they contend that only assertiveness and responsiveness comprise communicator style. Versatility represents a person's ability to handle their own behavioral preferences.

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