

The Relationship Components of Communication Competence in the Direct Selling Process in Malaysia

NUREDAYU OMAR
Universiti Utara Malaysia

ABSTRACT

The key purpose of this paper is to explore the nature of communication competence in the direct selling context by investigating the case of direct sellers in Malaysia. The growth in direct selling worldwide has a large influence in Malaysia. In 2016, more than 3.9 million people were involved as direct sellers and 62% of these were women. This phenomenon requires a better understanding of direct selling as a communication process. For this study, eleven informants were selected from different environments of the direct selling business. This design can incorporate a diversity of direct selling context. This research employed observations and interviews to explore what constitutes communication competence in the Malaysian direct selling process by taking direct sellers conceptions of their work as the point of face-to-face interaction with potential buyers. This study found that the relationship components of communication competence play an important role in the direct selling process. Friendly attitude, similarities, and fairly calm were among the ten relationship components that have been identified in this study. Obviously, the relationship components emerged in the five direct selling communication phases namely as the preparation phase, initial meeting phase, meeting phase, closing phase, and the communication disruption. This study advocated that direct sellers should attain to communicate competently in order to develop new relationships with their potential buyers.

Keywords: *Communication competence, face-to-face communication, direct selling, observation, interview.*

INTRODUCTION

The key purpose of this paper is to explore the nature of communication competence in the direct selling context by investigating the case of direct sellers in Malaysia. A greater understanding of direct selling activities in the Malaysian context may reveal what constitutes communication competence in the face-to-face communication between direct sellers and their potential buyers, and what consequences result from differences in direct seller's communication competence.

According to the World Federation of Direct Selling Associations (WfDSA), direct selling is growing in Malaysia and elsewhere. In 2013, direct selling worldwide had increased from USD 157 billion to USD183 billion in 2016. Meanwhile, the total estimated global sales force had increased from 97 million direct sellers in 2013 to 107 million in 2016. In 2016, the growth in direct selling worldwide had influenced more than 3.9 million people which were involved as direct sellers in Malaysia and 62% of these Malaysian direct sellers were women. The WfDSA has identified Malaysia as one of the leading ASEAN countries in the development of direct selling (<http://wfdsa.org/global-statistics/>, 2017). Zain, Quraeshi and Idris (2000) have found that direct selling activities are expected to increase at a healthy rate in the 21st century while Malaysia is recovering from economic difficulties.

In spite of its popularity, it is hard to find research on direct selling and communication field in Malaysia. Therefore, there is a considerable attention that needs to be investigated in the understanding of the direct selling context in Malaysia. Zain et al. (2000) were the few scholars to publish an article on Malaysian direct selling and their focus was more on the development of Malaysian direct selling in the late 1990s. One of the key points made by Zain et al. was that in the late 1990s, only about five to six percent of the direct sellers were successful and able to earn a high income in the direct selling industry in Malaysia. They noted that many of the most successful direct sellers had undertaken direct selling as a professional career and undergone training. They found that the key success of Malaysian direct sellers was related to the motivation involved in becoming direct sellers. Therefore, more up-to-date research is required to provide more insights into the current Malaysian direct selling practices and identify what other factors that lead to the success of direct selling.

While multiple factors may underlie the success of direct selling, direct selling is fundamentally a communication process and, therefore, sellers' communication competence would seem to be a primary factor in direct selling success. Direct selling is a person-to-person marketing approach and in the context of this study, it involves a face-to-face process and it requires direct sellers to have substantial abilities in interpersonal communication. It is important for direct sellers in Malaysia to be communicatively competent in persuading customers to buy products and join the business. This is a major means to achieve their sales target.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The popularity and growth in direct selling, specifically in Malaysia, requires a better understanding of direct selling as a communication process. In the marketing context, the need for a planned communication process has been highlighted by Grönroos (2004). Therefore, combined with the fact that communication competence is likely to be the center of direct selling effectiveness, this study is needed. A lack of understanding of the nature of communication competence may discourage direct sellers from utilizing and developing their communication competence in their direct selling activities. A clear understanding of communication competence may assist direct sellers to distinguish the best communication practice in the direct selling processes. However, without the support from direct selling companies, it may create difficulties for direct sellers to learn appropriate ways of becoming competent communicators (Omar, 2015). Being a competent communicator allows the direct seller to achieve his/her targeted goals and the achievement can support their companies' missions and visions. Training and series of workshops of communication strategies contribute to the direct sellers' sales performances.

Limited studies have been done to understand the success and sales performance in the direct selling context (e.g., Kustin & Jones, 1995; Luk, Fullgrabe, & Yi, 1999; Merrilees & Miller, 1999). Those studies have found that success in direct selling has different contributing success factors in each country context. For example, success in direct selling in China is highly associated with *guanxi* (relationship), *renqing* (a set of social norms by which one has to abide in order to get along well with other people), *ganqing* (friendship - when two friends are very loyal to each other, in which they are willing to share any fortunes and confront with any disasters together), and *giving face* factors (Luk et al.). Additionally, the knowledge of product elements and the customer need-satisfaction are also the indicators of success in direct selling in China. Thus, 'Chinese consumers' purchasing behavior for

consumer products is not only affected by the benefits of the product but has major influences on the quality that is embedded in the relationship. For success in China, direct sellers should offer the marketing approach which considers the Chinese culture that fits with Chinese consumer's behavior, in which *guanxi* acknowledgment is essential. Therefore, it can be assumed that a factor for success in Malaysian direct selling is the acknowledgment of the importance of Malaysian culture and its co-cultures.

Some *guanxi* components like reciprocity, friendship, trust, and overall personal relationships, as well as the knowledge of product elements, have been identified as strong indicators of the Australian salesperson effectiveness (Merrilees & Miller, 1999). By replicating Luk et al.'s research design and comparing findings, Merrilees and Miller have discovered that *guanxi* elements do not fully apply to customers in Australia. They found that the term of *guanxi* has a rich meaning of "relationship" in Chinese culture. However, the term is not currently applicable to the Australian context as bonding through relationships in Australia is less important than in China (Merrilees & Miller, 1999). Therefore, Merrilees and Miller have recommended that reciprocity, friendship, trust, and overall personal relationships should be discussed as separate variables from the *guanxi* concepts which has contributed to the success in direct selling in China. They accept the notion that the relationship approach in direct selling in Australia is not as high as in China.

The negative perception of direct selling may be one of the reasons why direct selling in Australia is different from in China. Kustin and Jones (1995) have found the negative perception lies in direct selling itself and the seller-buyer relationship when the customer is making purchasing decisions. In spite of the product quality and price, a negative perception is still encouraged by a pushy salesperson and the pressure that builds at the moment of purchase. In addition, consumers perceive non-store retailing for the products purchased as not significantly advantageous. Unlike the popularity of direct selling in China, Kustin and Jones (1995) have stated that "Australians appear to have a basically suspicious attitude and mistrust towards direct selling" (p. 6).

Although there were few studies specifically on success factors in direct selling, other studies have identified success factors in sales more generally. Personality traits (Lamont & Lundstrom, 1977; Mat, 1995), sales strategies (Jaramillo & Marshall, 2004), sales training (Jantan, Honeycut, Thelen, & Attia, 2004), buyer-seller relationship (Boles, Brashear, Bellenger, & Barksdale, 2000; Parsons, 2002), communication style (Williams & Spiro, 1985), and emotional intelligence (EI) (Deeter-Schmelz & Sojka, 2003) have been found as influential variables for sales performance. Meanwhile, adaptive selling behavior (Spiro & Weitz, 1990; Weitz, Sujan, & Sujan, 1986), intercultural disposition (Bush, Rose, Gilbert, & Ingram, 2001), and cultural sensitivity (Harich & LaBahn, 1988) are strong indicators of success in a selling relationship.

Communication style has been found as a determinant of the success of sales interaction. As William and Spiro (1985) have noted, "[s]uccessful selling depends on successful interpersonal communication" (p. 434). William and Spiro have defined *sales communication style* consists of three dimensions: task orientation, self-orientation, and interaction orientation. The salesperson who applies task orientation is likely to conduct sales by focusing on sales goals. The self-oriented salesperson is preoccupied with him/herself in an interaction, and the interaction orientation salesperson is more social and personal in communication. Williams and Spiro have found that the combination of salesperson and customer communication styles have an effect on the sales success. Both a

salesperson and customer who are interaction-oriented led to a sale; a task-oriented salesperson combined with an interaction-oriented customer does not lead to a sale; a task-oriented customer and interaction-oriented salesperson also do not lead to a sale; and sales increased if the customer is a task or self-oriented and the salesperson is self-oriented. The result indicates that communication style is one of the behavioral dimensions influencing a sale and salesperson's success. The complexity of communication process can be adapted if organizations acknowledge the need of establishing powerful communication among sellers and customer relationships (Cruceu & Moise, 2014). Further, the nature of seller-customer relationships may lead to the realization of the nature of direct seller communication competence and success in the Malaysian context.

As communication underlies all the strategies for success in a sales process, direct selling in this study may be described as a communication process. Direct selling as a communication process requires direct sellers to have a wide repertoire of communication strategies and skills in face-to-face communication in an attempt to influence potential customers by negotiating meanings about products and services. The communication in direct selling process will typically begin with the introduction of the direct seller's self to the buyers towards the end of the direct selling conversation. In this process, direct sellers who can communicate competently may perceive themselves and be perceived by buyers as competent direct sellers. Communicative competence in the direct selling process may be an indicator of direct sellers' success in communication performance which later may lead to achieving sales performance.

The study of communication competence has gained considerable attention from many scholars. Although scholars have some disagreements on the meaning of communication competence (McCroskey, 1982), a general definition of communication competence will be provided as a basis for this discussion. One definition commonly used is by Rubin (1990), in which communication competence is the "knowledge about appropriate and effective communication behaviors, development of a repertoire of skills that encompass both appropriate and effective means of communicating and motivation to behave in ways that are viewed as both appropriate and effective by interactants" (p. 96). This definition seemed to provide a common understanding for researchers of the importance of such dimensions that are associated with communication competence such as a person's knowledge, behavior, skills, and motivation.

Jablin and Sias (2001) have claimed that a dynamic of communication competence requires a person to actively identifying, developing, maintaining, and enhancing communication over time. "People are likely to be influenced by individual, group, organizational, and sociocultural factors" (p. 836). They have agreed that communication competence perspective seeks and focus on the same circumstances—appropriateness and effectiveness. They have acknowledged that the behavioral researchers recognize appropriate behavior or goal achievement, and the cognitive researchers identify cognitive components, thoughts, as indicators of communicative competence. Communication competence components are identified as multifaceted. Therefore, in the direct selling context, direct sellers must prepare themselves with extensive and diverse knowledge and skills that are related to the sales communication with buyers. Sellers who can identify and apply their abilities appropriately to the context and demonstrate them through communication behavior in which culture is embodied at the specific time and place can be more successful in their direct selling process. Thus, all aspects that influence the direct

sellers' communication should be considered, which means it is necessary to identify the components that make up the direct seller's traits and characteristics.

In Jaramillo and Marshall (2004), they have found that five sales techniques to be the best predictors of group membership in the banking sector, which are (1) prospecting, (2) approach, (3) sales presentation, (4) closing, and (5) follow-up service. Thus, to identify communication competence characteristics among direct sellers in the face-to-face direct selling process, the direct selling phases should be identified. Communication competence characteristics may occur naturally in all contexts or only emerge in the specific context of direct selling conversations. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to discuss the nature of communication competence in the direct selling conversations process in the context of Malaysian direct sellers and their potential buyers.

METHODOLOGY

This study applied an interpretive approach. Studies of communication competencies used the positivism paradigm in which quantitative methods were a popular method during the 1970s throughout to the 1990s (e.g., Monge, Bachman, Dillard, & Eisenberg, 1981; Wiemann, 1977), while limited studies used the qualitative method or case study design until the late 1990s (e.g., Olson, 2002; Rouhiainen, 2005; Stake, 2006; Zorn, Page, & Cheney, 2000; Zorn & Ruccio, 1998). The aim in choosing this approach is to understand the dimensions of the uniqueness of the cases of direct sellers with regard to the prerequisites, concepts, effects and ideal conceptions of the direct sellers and potential buyers and the frameworks of the industries concerned.

For this research, the application of interpretive approach was encouraged by Trujillo's (1992) explanation. Trujillo emphasized that interpretive researchers focused on the subjectivity, the pluralism, and the dynamism of an organization. In this research, the interpretive approach can provide the understanding of certain characteristics of symbols that reflect on how direct sellers and buyers make sense of their direct selling communication experiences. Emphasis on the subjectivity helped the interpretive researchers not to focus on objects such as technologies and hierarchies but on how people use communication to interpret the meaning of the objects (Trujillo, 1992). The dynamism of specific situation can be understood by understanding the people who are involved in the active process (Trujillo, 1992), so that for this study, an interpretive approach will allow me to observe the actions and interactions of the direct selling process and sense why certain meaning is created in certain situations.

In exploring what constitutes communication competence in the Malaysian direct selling process, I took direct sellers conceptions of their work as the point of interaction with potential buyers, and I also employed observations and interviews. The aim of the observations and interviews are to capture possible variation in conceptions of communication competence in a rich and comprehensive way. Accordingly, interviews are highly useful techniques to inquire into people's perceptions, meanings, the definition of situations and interpretations of "truth" (Punch, 2005), and are a beneficial technique in understanding episodic and infrequent phenomena (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Meanwhile, the observation method provides opportunities for researchers to employ the complex combination of sensation (sight, sound, touch, and smell) and perception for check and balance on what subjects explain on their attitudes and behaviours in practice, with what researchers 'see' beyond subject's opinions and self-interpretations (Gray, 2004).

For this study, eleven informants were selected from different environments for the direct selling phenomenon so that this design can incorporate a diversity of context. Yin (1988, p. 53) has suggested from the positivism standpoint that at least nine cases are needed to give a reliable research finding in which two or three cases would be literal replications, and four to six cases might be designed to pursue different patterns of theoretical replications.

In selecting the informants, I intended to find eleven direct sellers from eleven direct selling companies. However, these eleven direct sellers only represent eight direct selling companies due to rejections to participate in this study at the very last minute. For this research, I introduced myself as a researcher to direct sellers prior the interview process. In the fieldwork, I asked for the direct sellers' consent to allow me to observe their direct selling activities. This will allow me to understand the process of the context study from the interpretive perspective. Potential buyers are chosen in the process of observations of direct selling conversations. Potential buyers were selected based on the direct sellers' preferences in conducting their direct selling processes. Only 32 direct selling conversations of eleven direct sellers had been observed when the research ended.

Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within the data (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). In this study, the thematic narrative analysis is a strategy for analyzing the semi-structured interviews and direct observations to provide information for the research questions. Precise and careful thematic narrative analysis in the forms of functionalist, romantic and critical styles were applied in order to relate to the research questions. Some alteration or elimination of the initial ideas of the initial themes and later the analysis will be equivalent to the observations and interview data, which were formed from the understanding of communication competence meaning and the constituents of communicative competence in the direct selling process. The findings will provide the "truth" of communicative competence in the Malaysian direct selling process.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Relationship Components

The relationship components play an important role in the direct selling process. In enabling communication competence, the relationship components were revealed in the interviews and observations as natural practices in the direct selling phases. Thus, the findings found that the preparation of punctuality and the preparation of business tools were two elements that had been exercised in the Preparation Phase. Elements of punctuality, adopting the friendly attitude, mindful towards similarities, attentive listening, non-verbal messages practice, and a good sense of humor were the identified communication activities that emerged in the Initial Meeting Phase and the Meeting Phase. Providing relevant business information also occurred in the Meeting Phase. In Phase 4 – the Closing Phase, the relationship component that emerged from the data was terminating session punctually. The prominent theme that emerged in the final phase – The Disruption of Communication Process was to remain calm. Fairly calm was identified as the controlling action of any disruption or swirling situation in all direct selling phases (Refer Table 1).

Table 1: Communication competence in the direct selling phases practiced by the informants

Communication Competence Component/ Direct Selling Phase	Relationship components	Outcome of practicing the relationship components
Phase 1 – Preparation	Preparation for punctual arrival Preparation of business tools	Ready to develop a positive attitude
Phase 2 – Initial Meeting	Punctuality* Adopt a friendly attitude* Search for similarities * Listen attentively* Practice non-verbal messages* Make jokes*	Demonstrate a positive attitude Develop rapport Develop trust Communicate appropriately
Phase 3 – Meeting	Provide relevant business information**	Communicate eloquently
Phase 4 – Closing	Terminate session punctually	Enhance the newly-developed trust
Phase 5 – Disruption of Communication Process	Remain calm***	Emotionally stable

*These elements were consistently practiced by the informants in Phase 2, 3, and 4, but with more emphasis in particular during the Phase 2.

** These elements were practiced by the informants in Phase 3, and 4, but with more emphasis in particularly during the Phase 3.

***This element was practiced at any time in all direct selling phases.

The preparation of punctuality

Punctuality plays an important role in an organization (Ballard & Seibold, 2006) and in a meeting (Messmer, 2001). This study found that the preparation of punctuality is not undertaken when a meeting was not planned. In the First Phase - Preparation, this element enabled informants to be ready to develop a positive attitude with potential buyers which can create a positive relationship. From the interviews and observations, the preparation of punctuality is the communication competence element that is carried out by the informants before meeting their potential buyers. This study revealed that arriving on time was one of the elements that enable conditions of communication competence. For example, during the interview with Informant 9, she said, *“I’m planning my timetable because I want to ensure that every hour is filled with meeting prospects. I don’t want to waste my precious time”*. The observation notes below illustrate her actions in preparing herself to be punctual.

I saw Informant 9 open and write something in her planner. Then she called one downline and asked the downline when she was free. Then, I heard she said, ‘I hope you can set a meeting with your friends and then I will come over and talk on your behalf...’ I also saw Informant played with her pen and looked like she was thinking of something, then later she jotted down something on her planner, or she picked up her phone and called someone and later discussed to meeting them (Observation notes).

The preparation of business tools

Preparing business tools are the second element of the relationship components that enables communication competence in Phase 1 – The Preparation Phase. In this study, preparing business tools means that the direct sellers have prepared themselves by bringing the products and product samples, reading materials, and any necessary documents required for their business. This preparation is parallel with the actions carried out by other business people and direct sellers in the USA (Bernstein & Associates, 1984) before meeting clients.

For example, in the interview, Informant 11 said, *“We need to bring the products in the car. When the prospect is interested in buying some products and I have those in my car, it can help me to close the deal”*. My observations of her meeting with her prospect reflected her comments:

During the meeting, Informant eleven had not brought any business files or products into the prospect’s premises, but she had put a variety of products in her car boot. Thus, when her prospect – Madam N, who is the owner of a spa salon interested with the suggested products, Informant eleven simply asked, *“What type of products do you want?”* And how many items do you want?”. Madam N excited when Informant 11 said she has the products in the car (Observation notes).

Informant 11 was confident when communicating with her prospect because she is always ready for their needs. She did not feel nervous and remained calm when prospects place an order for the suggested product. At the hand of her preparation, Informant eleven did not display nervousness but showed confidence. This kind of preparation helps informants to be ready to communicate appropriately and later develop positive attitudes towards potential buyers. The outcome was an indication of the relationship components of communication competence, which direct sellers need to develop in advance so that they are ready to develop or enhance the relationship between new and existing potential buyers.

Punctuality

Punctuality or promptness leads a person to be perceived as can be trusted and later can build a good relationship with sellers and customers (Gill, Flaschner & Shachar, 2006). The interviews and observations showed that punctuality is one of the relationship components of communication competence activities that informants were particularly aware of as important and enacted during the Phase Two – Initial Meeting. By being punctual, all informants demonstrated their promise to meet the potential buyers on time and to use the appropriate time allocated. The practice of punctuality can be described from these explanations:

Five minutes before meeting your customers, you have to be there. If we are going to be late, we need to call and tell them that we will arrive later. For me, it is important because we don’t really know the person we are going to meet. So we need to gain his/her trust in us (Informant 7).

If possible, we need to use a short and simple approach because they don't want to waste their time. We have to tell her that we need 10 minutes to explain this business, so she can understand (Informant 9).

From the passages, it is shown that direct sellers who want to be perceived competence in communication, were aware of the importance of punctuality, and demonstrated it in their initial meeting with potential buyers.

Adopting friendly attitude

Adopting a friendly attitude such as relating a casual manner and casual conversation between two people can increase positive relationship communication (Abu Bakar & Mustaffa, 2008). Adopting a friendly attitude was found to be the second important communication activity that was enacted in Phase Two – The Initial Meeting. The informants applied their friendly attitude once they met the potential buyers. All informants explained that they have to be friendly with their potential buyers in the interview sessions and this attitude was observed during the observations. In the interviews, the concept of friendliness detailed as below:

We must be friendly. Treat them like the way we treat our friends (Informant 3).

If we are not friendly, people will feel ignored. So to be friendly, we need to be honest and gain trust from them (Informant 5).

A competent communicator is friendly and likes to make friends (Informant 10).

The excerpts showed that being friendly is vital. For the informants, the friendliness involved making others comfortable by communicating as they would communicate with their own friends. The informants understood that they need to adopt a friendly attitude when meeting their potential buyers so that they are able to communicate competently. The observation notes of Informant 2 and her potential buyer – Madam A, provided the example of a friendly conversation:

They continued chatting. The topics become wider, from latest gossip about Malaysian artists, to the stability of Malaysia's economy. I observed that they sometimes smiled, laughed together loudly, and became serious [as the conversation moved towards the business topic]. I could sense that the conversation was going smoothly (Observation notes).

This observation notes showed that chatting casually is one method of adopting a friendly attitude. Choosing appropriate casual topics while chatting shows that informants can be seen as friendly. Adopting a friendly attitude made the potential buyers feel comfortable with the conversations, which later facilitated a positive development and initiate the enhancement of new and existing relationships.

Mindful towards similarities

Creating and searching for similarities either in face-to-face conversations or using communication technology can encourage a development of trust and create good relationships between two people or more (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2013; Gill et al., 2006). In this study, being mindful towards similarities occurred during the Initial Phase and the Meeting Phase. The informants were trying to find common territory with the potential buyers, such as stories, issues, sympathies, and ideas. Seven informants explained about it in the interviews but only six of them applied this action when communicating with their prospects during the observations. Being mindful towards the common likeness allowed the informants to make the conversations genuine, trustworthy, warm and pleasant. The creation of this positive atmosphere was seen as a way to develop and enhance a relationship. The following excerpts are examples of this practice:

While meeting potential buyers, I try to find some similarities with the prospect to make the situation more comfortable (Informant 1).

If they have similar stories like mine, I will share. It can make us feel closer. I gain trust from them (Informant 8).

In the observation notes, Informant 3 showed her actions of searching for similarities:

Madam K explained that she did not know how to manage her kitchen. Then Informant 3 told Madam K that she used to have the same problems. Then Informant 3 shared lots of tips for making Madam K's kitchen makeover. Madam K is happy [I can hear her happy voices and from her gestures]. She lets Informant 3 to do the makeover of the kitchen. It means Madam K trust Informant 3 (Observation notes).

Attentive Listening

Listening is one of the communication skills that are significant to sellers in achieving their sales goals (Itani & Inyang, 2015). Lack of listening can create dysfunctional relationships (Kaufman, 2012). The findings found that listening attentively has been identified and naturally occurred during the Initial Phase and Meeting Phase. If Informants plan to be perceived as competent communicators, they need to listen carefully and ambiguity can be reduced (Oluga, 2010). This study found that listening attentively is crucial to develop a positive relationship with prospects. All informants mentioned their concern that if they do not listen attentively, it will be difficult for them to run their business. Below are the selected passages of the interviews:

For those who are incompetent, they don't understand their customers very well. Actually, for direct sellers, listening is very important. We always need to listen to our customers, if not we cannot gain trust from them. Gain trust is not easy. Once we get it, we can easily create a new friendship (Informant 4)

I like to give the person the chance to speak first before I speak...Then, I need to know and understand when and where I need to interrupt (Informant 6).

Below is the observation notes of Informant 10. Informant 10 was seen as being an attentive listener.

Madam Z told Informant 10 that her body was not healthy and she has had to rely on hospital medicines since she was young. Madam Z kept telling about her story until she says, "I think I have told you lots, sorry if you feel bored". Then immediately, Informant 10 says, "No, no, it's okay. I really want to know more about your problem. Please tell us [referring to me] more". Then Madam Z continues her story... Later Madam Z wanted to find new networking for Informant 10 (Observation notes).

From the passage, Informant 10 had made her potential buyer feel comfortable. By listening attentively, she was not only able to develop a positive new relationship with Madam Z, but she gained trust from Madam Z by getting a chance to get new potential customers recommended by Madam Z.

Practicing of non-verbal messages

Practicing appropriate non-verbal messages can increase the other parties' satisfaction (Marcinowicz, Konstantynowicz & Godlewski, 2010). In the interview process, all informants expressed that non-verbal cues are important for them. Observation activities of all informants with their potential buyers shown that non-verbal cues such as making eye contact, smiling eyes, displaying appropriate body positions, expressing appropriate voice tones, displaying appropriate facial expressions were practiced by all informants in the Initial Meeting Phase and throughout the direct selling phases. Selected passages from the observations are given:

Informant 6 met Madam B at Madam B's house at 8.30 at night. When they communicate, they sat opposite each other. When Madam B expressed herself that she was not satisfied actions Informant 6 did to her in the previous meeting, Informant 6 just looks into Madam B' eyes [soft look], nodding her head, made vocal expressions of acknowledgment [mmmm, mmmm, mmmm] and she apologized. Until the end of the conversations, the Informant still made eye contact with Madam B. Madam B seems okay with actions taken by the Informant (Observation notes).

When Informant 9 talked to Madam H, she moved her body positions towards Madam H who sat on her left side. Informant 9 showed her empathy in her eyes, sometimes nodding her head, and making vocal expressions of understanding [oooo, oooo]. Madam H seems satisfied with the expressions showed by Informant 9 (Observation notes).

Making jokes and having a sense of humor

Making jokes and having a sense of humor can develop and enhance good and long-lasting relationship (Abdul Rashid, Ismail, Abdul Rahim & Mamat, 2017). The interview data found that all informants knew the importance of making jokes and having a sense of humor when communicating with prospects. Not all, however, have the ability to make jokes. These

situations occurred primarily in the Initial Meeting Phase until the Closing Phase. Below are some quotations from Informant 2 and 9 which demonstrated the need to make jokes and have a sense of humor:

Do you think that a prospect will join in if she sees us being so serious?
(Informant 2).

We also need to have a sense of humor because we want other people to like us and we, ourselves, don't like people who are so serious (Informant 9).

Below are the observation notes that describe the situation of Informant 1 who was able to make her potential buyer laugh. The potential buyer, Madam R said to me before I went home:

Madam [referring to me], I like Informant 1. She is so funny and I laugh lots. I like talking to her, but please say sorry to her because I cannot join the business (Observation notes).

From the case of Informant 1, making jokes and having a sense of humor can make others comfortable. Indirectly the humor leads to the positive feelings which contribute to a positive relationship. Though all Informants agreed on the need of making jokes, it can be identified from the observation process that Informant 1 is the only Informant that can make jokes naturally. Her advantage of knowing to make others laugh showed that she is able to create comfortable feelings thus develop the relationship well.

Informant 1 is really natural to make her potential buyers and me laugh. All conversations between her and all potential buyers are really fun and happening. She changes the business conversations to very friendly conversations, though it is the first time she meets them (Observation notes).

Providing relevant business information

An effective communicator is a person that can provide accurate information during a certain situation and later is capable to build trust and relationship (Maskor, Krauss, Muhamad & Nik Mahmood, 2013). Providing relevant business information is the action that would help the informants communicate eloquently and develop a good rapport. This element occurred during Phase 3 and Phase 4 of the direct selling's conversations. This study revealed that providing relevant business information such as information about their direct selling company, products, marketing plan, and motivation were practically having been practiced by all informants. From interviews, all informants knew that they need to provide relevant information. Some excerpts described the situations:

I provide all information they want especially on our products. We will not share information that we do not know (Informant 2)

If we are not sure of the information that they ask, we need to tell them the truth and provide the information later (Informant 4)

During the observation process, all informants were seen as very eloquent in explaining and sharing information during their conversations. I stated in the Observation Notes once I ended sessions with the first six informants. However, this thought is justified for all eleven Informants that I observed.

After meeting my 6th informants, I can confirm that all of them sometimes just shared information without any business materials such as brochures, books or planner. Sometimes they bring their own laptops and shows videos of the products, factories, testimonials, and also a successful direct sellers photos. The conversation starts to become serious when they start sharing their business proposal and plan. Each conversation was set differently and it was set in accordance with the clients' situations and moods (Observation notes).

Terminating in session punctually

This element occurred in the Closing Phase. In the interviews and observations, all informants knew about the use of time for the direct selling conversations. From the observations, all informants were seen terminating session punctually less than 60 minutes. As they mentioned in the interviews:

I don't want to take so long for each conversation. It is not appropriate to take so much time to share information (Informant 5).

When I see the clients start feels uncomfortable, I will end the conversations. I learn their tiredness, not interested, or feel bored through their body language (Informant 9).

Remain calm

Calm or emotional stability (Balmaceda, Schiaffino & Godoy, 2014) influence the human communication process. When a person has a stability in his/her emotions, it can increase satisfaction and develop a good rapport with others (Al-hawari, 2014). Remaining calm occurred in any direct selling phases either from the beginning of the phase or at the end of the conversations. In the interview, all informants claimed that they need to remain calm all time when dealing with their potential buyers. Remaining calm helps informants to be seen as good in handling their emotions, which being stable emotionally can create a positive relationship. Excerpts of interviews describe remaining calm:

When I keep myself cool and stay calm, I can create a positive aura in the conversation (Informant 4).

Yes, many people see us and want to deal with us if we are calm and have emotionally stable (Informant 11).

The observation notes provide some explanation about remaining calm in the different phase of the direct selling conversation process:

In the beginning of the meeting, the Informant 5's client talks about her angry feelings on many direct sellers. She said generally many direct sellers create rosy pictures of their business and products. Informant 5 just smiling and nodding her head without backfiring on the client even though the client tried to provoke her... Informant 5 tried to change the topic. Once the situation becomes naturally calm, she starts to share the business information utterly (Observation notes).

During the serious talk of the direct selling business plan, the client's mother showed up from her room. Informant 4 was being observed when the mother explained that she got a stage 4 of cancer. I saw her uncomfortable facial expressions, but when she realized about her attitude, she immediately shows a normal facial expression and naturally showing empathy through her eyes. The mother told everybody that all supplements won't help people. Informant 4 just keeps quiet, says nothing but just nodding her head. She has discontinued the meeting and set another plan. She said to me that she didn't want to make situations worse (Observation notes).

Direct selling conversation is a communication process to develop relationships (William & Spiro, 1985). This study finding supported Grönroos (2004). He has claimed that a well-planned communication process can offer a valuable relationship between customer and marketers. In this study, all informants naturally planned their communication processes with their potential buyers to purposely create relationships with them. The direct sellers strategically plan their communication process in order for them to naturally communicate competently with their potential buyers. By being communicatively competent, the chances to develop relationships with others are promising. This study has shown that direct sellers in Malaysia are practicing similar actions as direct sellers in China (Luk et al., 1999) which they communicate competently to create trusted relationships with their counterparts. However, the relationship components that occurred in this study are different from *guanxi* concept that was found by Luk et al. (1999) and Merrilees and Miller (1999). This study also found that once the informants develop good rapport and gain trust from the potential buyers, they change their strategy.

This study also extends the understanding of different phases in the selling context by Jaramillo and Marshall (2004). The findings showed that each direct selling phase required specific communication process which allows the direct sellers to establish a relationship with others gradually. This study has identified that the Initial Meeting Phase is the crucial stage for the informants in demonstrating their ability to communicate competently with others. Once they gain trust from these new relationships (Maskor et al., 2013), they start to level up their conversations to the next phase, the Meeting Phase. At this stage, they just focused on their own task which is to achieve their business meeting's goal. Along the direct selling process, it can be identified that in order to be seen as competent communicators, all Informants stayed calm. Staying calm and in control improve their ability to enhance the newly-developed relationship. From the actual direct selling conversations, this study also provides a clear understanding the details of relationship components that are needed for direct sellers to be recognized as competent communicators.

All informants naturally are adapting to and are adapting for the potential buyers' situations. This statement shows that to be competent, communicators need to adapt and should change their communication abilities as to the situations needed them to do it so. These findings have been discussed by scholars from the marketing and personal sales (Grönroos, 2004; Cruceru & Moise, 2014), yet still need huge attention from communication scholars. However, Jablin and Sias (2001) have claimed that a dynamic of communication competence requires a person to actively identifying, developing, maintaining and enhancing communication over time. Their statement indicates that none of the communication processes are static and the research findings have established their debate.

Overall, the study findings provided some insights for direct selling companies to look closely at the communication competence components. A strong organizational culture in enhancing sellers' performances to become lucrative future leaders is admirable (Omar, 2014). However, extra attention on the communication competence context can pull all direct sellers and their companies to achieve success at many levels, such as sales, relationships, satisfaction and organizational performances. It is suggested that a module or syllabus of communication competencies, focusing on relationship components is necessary to be built, and training on this specific module should be considered by all direct selling companies, especially in the context of Malaysia. By being considerate about this matter, probably all 3.9 million people in Malaysia who is involved as direct sellers can become valuable direct sellers of their companies and their networking.

CONCLUSION

To be perceived as competent communicators, all direct sellers need to understand the importance of developing strong relationships with others. Direct selling is not about selling products per se, it is about creating numerous new relationships and ensure those relationships can maintain in periods of time. Without a clear understanding of the nature of the direct selling process, people who are interested to get involved in this business might not be able to communicate naturally with others. This study focused only on face-to-face direct selling communication process. Thus, it is suggested that in any future research on this topic would be able to determine the nature of communication processes in developing online relationships among direct sellers and their potential online buyers. By understanding this context, it can support the idea of becoming a competent communicator either in a face-to-face communication or via online direct selling business. In conclusion, it is time for all direct selling companies to assist, strategize, and plan together with their direct sellers to value their powerful communication exclusively which later it can greatly contribute to an outstanding the company's growth.

BIODATA

Nuredayu Omar is a Senior Lecturer at School of Multimedia Technology and Communication, College of Arts and Sciences, Universiti Utara Malaysia. Email: nuredayu@uum.edu.my

REFERENCES

- Abdul Rashid, R., Ismail, R., & Abdul Rahim, N. A. (2017). Humor dan komunikasi dalam industri pelancongan di Malaysia. *Malaysian Journal of Communication*, 33(1), 184-198.
- Abu Bakar, H., & Mustaffa, C. M. (2008). Relationship between superior-subordinate relationships quality and group commitment: The mediating factor of superior-subordinate communication. *Malaysian Journal of Communication*, 24, 20-33.
- Al-hawari, M. A. (2014). Emotional stability and switching barriers in the retail banking context. *Managing Service Quality*, 24(5), 469-486. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1108/MSQ-12-2013-0280>.
- Ballard, D. I., & Seibold, D. R. (2006). The experience of time at work: Relationship to communication load, job satisfaction, and interdepartmental communication. *Communication Studies*, 57(3), 317-340.
- Balmaceda, J. S., Schiaffino, S., & Godoy, D. (2014). How do personality traits affect communication among users in online social networks?. *Online Information Review*, 38(1), 136-153. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1108/OIR-06-2012-0104>.
- Bernstein, R. A., & Associates. (1984). *Successful direct selling: How to plan, launch, promote, and maintain a profitable direct-selling company*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- Boles, J., Brashear, T., Bellenger, D., & Barksdale, H. J. (2000). Relationship selling behaviors: Antecedents and relationship with performance. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 15(2/3), 141-153.
- Bush, V. D., Rose, G. M., Gilbert, F., & Ingram, T. N. (2001). Managing Cultural Diverse Buyer-Seller Relationships: The Role of Intercultural Disposition and Adaptive Selling in Developing Intercultural Communication Competence. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 29(4), 391-404.
- Cruceu, A. F., & Moise, D. (2014). Customer relationships through sales forces and marketing events. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 109, 155-159.
- Deeter-Schmelz, D. R., & Sojka, J. Z. (2003). Developing effective salespeople: Exploring the link between emotional intelligence and sales performance. *International Journal of Organizational Analysis*, 11(3), 211-221.
- Duffy, D. L. (2005). Direct selling as the next channel. *The Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 22(1), 43-45.
- Eisenhardt, K. M., & Graebner, M. E. (2007). Theory building from cases: Opportunities and challenges. *Academy of Management Journal*, 50(1), 25-32.
- Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., & Shaw, L. L. (1995). *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Gill, A. S., Flaschner, A. B., & Shachar, M. (2006). Factors that affect the trust of business clients in their banks. *International Journal of Bank Marketing*, 24(6), 384-405. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1108/02652320610701726>
- Gray, D. E. (2004). *Doing research the real world*. London: Sage Publications.
- Grönroos, C. (2004). The relationship marketing process: communication, interaction, dialogue, value. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 19(2), 99-113. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1108/08858620410523981>
- Harich, K. R., & LaBahn, D. W. (1988). Enhancing international business relationships: A focus on customer perceptions of salesperson role performance including cultural sensitivity. *Journal of Business Research*, 42, 87-101.

- Itani, O. S., & Inyang, A. E. (2015). The effects of empathy and listening of salespeople on relationship quality in the retail banking industry. *International Journal of Bank Marketing*, 33(6), 692 – 716.
- Jablin, F. M., & Sias, P. M. (2001). Communication competence. In F. M. Jablin & L. L. Putnam (Eds.), *The new handbook of organizational communication: Advances in theory, research, and methods* (pp. 819-860). California: Sage Publications.
- Jantan, M. A., Honeycut, E. D., Thelen, S. T., & Attia, A. M. (2004). Managerial perceptions of sales training and performance. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 33, 667-673.
- Jaramillo, F., & Marshall, G. W. (2004). Critical success factors in the personal selling process: An empirical investigation of Equadorian salespeople in the banking industry. *The International Journal of Bank Marketing*, 22(1), 9-25.
- Kaufman, B. (2012). Anatomy of dysfunctional working relationships. *Business Strategy Series*, 13(2), 102-106. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1108/17515631211220887>
- Kiyosaki, R. & Lechter, S. (2003). *The cashflow quadrant*. New York: Grand Central Publishing.
- Kustin, R. A., & Jones, R. A. (1995). Research note: A study of direct selling in Australia. *International Marketing Review*, 12(6), 60-68.
- Lamont, L. M., & Lundstrom, W. J. (1977). Identifying successful industrial salesmen by personality and personal characteristics. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 14, 517-529.
- Luk, S. T. K., Fullgrabe, L., & Yi, S. C. Y. (1999). Managing direct selling activities in China: A cultural explanation. *Journal of Business Research*, 45, 257-266.
- Marcinowicz, L., Konstantynowicz, J., & Godlewski, C. (2010). Patients' perceptions of GP non-verbal communication: A qualitative study. *British Journal of General Practice*, 60, 83-87. doi: <https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp10X483111>.
- Maskor, N. A., Krauss, S. E., Muhamad, M., & Nik Mahmood, N. H. (2013). Communication competencies of oncology nurses in Malaysia. *Asian Pacific Journal of Cancer Prevention*, 14(1), 153-158.
- McCroskey, J. C. (1982). Communication competence and performance: A research and pedagogical perspective. *Communication Education*, 31, 1-7.
- Merrilees, B., & Miller, D. (1999). Direct selling in the West and East: The relative roles of product and relationship (guanxi) drivers. *Journal of Business Research*, 45, 267-273.
- Messmer, M. (2007). *Human resources kit for dummies* (2nd ed.). Indiana: Wiley Publishing, Inc.
- Monge, P. R., Bachman, S. G., Dillard, J. P., & Eisenberg, E. M. (1981). Communicator competence in the workplace: Model testing and scale development. In M. Burgoon (Ed.), *Communication Yearbook*, 5 (pp. 505-527). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- Oluga, S. O. (2010). Ambiguity in human communication: Causes, consequences, and resolution. *Malaysian Journal of Communication*, 26(1), 37-46.
- Omar, N. (2015). The importance of organisational culture towards direct sellers' communication competencies. *Advance Science Letters*, 21(5), 1448 – 1451.
- Parsons, A. L. (2002). What determines buyer-seller relationship quality? An investigation from the buyer's perspective. *The Journal of Supply Chain Management*, 38(2), 4-12.
- Przybylski, A. K., & Weinstein, N. (2013). Can you connect with me now? How the presence of mobile communication technology influences face-to-face conversation quality. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 30(3), 237-246.

- Punch, K. F. (2005). *Introduction to social research: Quantitative and qualitative approaches*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Rouhiainen, M. (2005). The communication competence of leaders in a knowledge-based organization. *Frontiers of E-Business Research 2005*, 625-636.
- Rubin, R. B. (1990). Communication competence. In G. M. Phillips & J. T. Wood (Eds.), *Speech communication: Essays to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Speech Communication Association* (pp. 94-129). Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Spiro, R. L., & Weitz, B. A. (1990). Adaptive selling: Conceptualization, measurement, and nomological validity. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 27(1), 61-69.
- Stake, R. E. (2006). *Multiple case study analysis*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Trujillo, N. (1992). Interpreting (the work and the talk of) baseball: Perspectives on ballpark culture. *Western Journal of Communication*, 56(4), 350-371.
- Weitz, B. A., Sujan, H., & Sujan, M. (1986). Knowledge, motivation, and adaptive behaviour: A framework for improving selling effectiveness. *Journal of Marketing*, 50(4), 174-191.
- Wiemann, J. M. (1977). Explication and test of a model of communicative competence. *Human Communication Research*, 3(3), 195-213.
- Williams, K. C., & Spiro, R. L. (1985). Communication style in the salesperson-customer dyad. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 22, 434-442.
- World Federation of Direct Selling Associations. (2017). Retrieved July 07, 2017, from <http://wfdsa.org/global-statistics/>
- Yin, R. K. (1988). *Case study research: Design and methods* (Vol. 5). Newbury Park, California: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Zain, O., Quraeshi, Z. A., & Idris, M. A. (2000). Direct Selling in Malaysia. *Journal of Asia-Pacific Business*, 2(4), 83-101.
- Zorn, T. E., & Ruccio, S. E. (1998). The use of communication to motivate college sales teams. *The Journal of Business Communication*, 35(4), 468-499.
- Zorn, T. E., Page, D. J., & Cheney, G. (2000). Nuts about change: Multiperspectives on change-oriented communication in a public sector organization. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 13(4), 515-566.