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I, Me, & My: Little Words that Make a Big Difference in Agent-Customer Interactions

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INSIDER: The Art of Everyday Assertiveness

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INSIDER: Show Up: Unlocking the Power of Relational Networking

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I, Me, & My: Little Words that Make a Big Difference in Agent-Customer Interactions

Grant Packard, PhD, Sarah G. Moore, PhD, and Brent McFerran, PhD

Responding to customer questions and complaints is no easy task. There are many aspects that come into play when talking to customers, one of which is a small category of words people use to refer to themselves and the customer—personal pronouns. Through five studies, we explored the impact of using “I,” “we,” and “you” pronouns on purchase behaviors and customer satisfaction in sales and service interactions. What we found challenges conventional wisdom and practice when it comes to talking to customers.



Popular Belief About Pronouns

Previous research on pronouns has shaped how these words are understood in customer interaction settings and beyond. For example, “I” pronouns (I, me, my) have been historically associated with a speaker’s negative traits, such as egotistical self-interest, while “you” pronouns (you, your, yours) seem the kind of thing an agent might say if they were oriented towards the customer’s needs. It is not surprising, then, that the findings of three pilot studies we performed show that managers and client-facing employees believe that customer interactions should emphasize a “firm’s concern for customers” and downplay a “concern for the self” (in other words, the agent). Linguistically, this practice might translate into an increased use of “we” (the firm) and “you” (the customer) pronouns, while avoiding the use of “I” pronouns. We predicted that this approach is not ideal.

Empathy and Agency

Why wouldn’t an increased use of “we” and “you” pronouns be the best approach for sales and service agents? Take the real estate context. Prior research tells us that if a home buyer perceives that their agent feels and acts on their personal behalf (empathy and agency, respectively), they’ll be more satisfied with the agent and likely to purchase a home with them. Contrary to conventional wisdom, we proposed that “I” pronouns might actually have positive benefits when it comes to these important service perceptions. First person singular pronouns may signal a more personal, one-on-one approach and a sense of caring, responsibility, and autonomy than plural references to the agent as part of the company (“we”) pronouns. Through five studies, we tested this prediction. Some of our studies also challenged managerial beliefs about the importance of referring to “you” the customer.

Relationships Between Pronouns and Purchases

In our first study, we analyzed over 1,200 customer-firm email interactions as an initial assessment of how pronouns affect purchase behavior. These interactions were provided by a large online retailer and linked to purchase accounts with purchase data before and after the interactions. We analyzed the relationship between the personal pronouns used in these email interactions with the customer's total purchases for 90 days after the interaction.

Our results indicated that, contrary to what people in service businesses believe, a firm agent's use of "I" pronouns is linked to increased customer purchases, while the use of "we" and "you" pronouns are not. We then turned to laboratory studies to validate the relationship we found in the field and to test our hypotheses about *why* these pronouns affect customers.

Our second study compared the effects of "I" versus "we" pronouns on customer satisfaction and purchase intent using carefully controlled language in which we only varied pronoun use. Participants played the role of customers in two unrelated interactions—an inquiry and a complaint. Real email responses from the agents of six companies were used for this study, which either reflected an original wording using "we" pronouns or a modified version using "I" pronouns. Participants were asked to indicate their satisfaction with the agent and purchase intentions toward the firm. Results showed that, compared with "we" pronouns, "I" pronouns led to increased customer satisfaction with the agent and purchase intentions with the company.

Our next study sought to prove that this result was due to a positive effect of "I" pronouns rather than a negative effect of "we" pronouns. Participants were shown agent's responses about an order pending delivery and asked to rate their satisfaction, purchase intention, and the agent's empathy and agency. The responses used either "I" pronouns (e.g. "I'm happy to help!"), "we" pronouns ("We're happy to help!"), or—our control group—no pronouns (e.g. "Happy to help!"). Consistent with previous results, this experiment revealed that (1), unlike "we" or no pronouns, "I" pronouns had a positive effect on customers and that (2) perceptions of agency and empathy were the reason why self-referencing "I" pronouns matter.

We did find, however, a limit to the positive impact "I" pronouns can have on customers, which we discovered in our fourth study. Participants imagined that they were approached in person by a sales agent with whom they had previously interacted. Depending on the condition to which they were randomly assigned, participants were approached with a salesperson using either "I" or "we" pronouns, and were either cued that they'd had positive prior experiences with the sales agent or were not given this cue. The results revealed that the positive effect of "I" pronouns use was weakened when customers had other stronger indicators of an agent's empathy and agency, in this case, a favorable past perception.

What About “You”?

Our last study explored manager and frontline employees’ beliefs about the positive effects of using “you” pronouns to refer to the customer. Participants imagined they had emailed a company about a product return. They were presented with one of three responses that either (1) used “you” pronouns to refer to the customer as the subject or actor (“You can look into your account”), (2) used “you” pronouns to refer to the customer as the object or



recipient of action (“Your account can be looked into”) or (3) used no “you” pronouns (“The account can be looked into”). As we predicted, there was no effect when “you” pronouns were used to refer to the customer as a grammatical object of the sentence, which is how managers and agents believe they should be referenced to make their “customer orientation” clear. That is, the positive benefit of customer referencing “you” pronouns wasn’t supported in this or other studies we ran. However, when “you” pronouns were used to refer to the customer as the actor or subject of the sentence, there was a negative impact, as customers perceived agents weren’t caring or working on their behalf. We speculate this is because they made it seem like “you” the customer are the one doing the work (e.g. “You can look into your account”).

Real Estate Applications

For real estate agents, simply replacing “we” pronouns with “I” pronouns when replying to customers should lead to increased customer satisfaction and purchase intention. In fact, data from our first study with one company suggested that applying this simple change could be linked to a revenue increase of up to 7%. Additionally, when answering customer questions or complaints, real estate professionals should be careful about their use of “you” pronouns. Agents should avoid using “you” pronouns to refer to a customer as the actor or subject of the sentence whenever possible, as this approach can decrease perceptions of the agent’s own empathy and agency on behalf of the customer. These small words could have big implications for how real estate firms and professionals talk to customers and can be implemented easily.

Recommended Reading

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Grant Packard's (PhD – University of Michigan) research explores self-concepts, motivation, language, perception, and interpersonal influence in interactions among consumers and with firm agents. His research has been published in top-tier journals and presented at leading conferences. Before entering academia, Grant was a marketing executive for Chapters/Indigo and Excite Canada and worked with advertising agencies DMB&B New York and BBDO Toronto.

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Coping with Stress in Real Estate

Jane E. Machin, PhD, Ann M. Mirabito, PhD, Natalie Ross Adkins, PhD, Elizabeth Crosby, PhD, and Justine Rapp Farrell, PhD



Stomach in knots because you just found out your real-estate transaction might be in trouble? Stress is a national epidemic that has severe consequences for physical and emotional wellbeing (American Psychological Association 2012; Bliese et al. 2017). Stress is especially problematic among real estate professionals (Tracey 2010), manifesting in the second highest rates of anxiety and depression among all occupations (Wulsin et al. 2015). Not

only do you work long hours dealing with emotional, tense clients, but you are subject to external events that, while out of your control, determine your ability to complete a transaction. Ultimately, your business depends upon your ability to manage your stress. Our research points to some novel ways to help.

Sources of Real Estate Stress

Real estate professionals typically deal with two broad categories of stressors, according to our research ([click to see figure](#)):

- **Industry Stressors**

Real estate cycle. A booming market attracts new agents drawn by the appealing work, attractive compensation, and relatively low licensing barriers to entry. Those new agents increase competition. When the market tanks, there is typically an exodus of agents, but remaining players must work harder to attract clients and maintain their income.

Market regulations. Requirements for independent appraisals have created a new industry of appraisal service companies who may be unfamiliar with local market nuances. Going forward, proposed federal regulations will permit homes up to \$400,000 (up from the current \$250,000) to be appraised without being evaluated by a licensed human appraiser. The computer algorithms may be cheaper and quicker, but reliability is unknown, potentially threatening transactions (Dezember & Podkul 2018).

Infrastructure changes. New technology-oriented real estate brokerages are offering an alternative to the traditional real estate model, sometimes helping clients skip working

with real estate agents altogether. Websites such as Zillow and Trulia give consumers free access to home values, listings, and recent sales, but sometimes that information is out-of-date or inaccurate and may mislead clients.

Industry reputation. Only 20% of consumers give real estate agents high marks for honesty and ethics (Gallup 2016). That puts pressure on ethical agents whose clients may be thinking the worst.

- **Transaction Stressors**

Project management. Tensions from managing all the moving parts in any real estate transaction is a common issue with which most agents struggle, but this is especially true of those working solo. Difficulties scheduling showings and paperwork roadblocks add to the pressure.

Client woes. Personality clashes, mismatched expectations regarding frequency of status updates, and clients who have unrealistic hopes for the value of their property are some of the more common interpersonal issues agents face daily.

Showing properties. Agents depend on sellers to prepare their home for showings. Unexpectedly walking into a messy home can turn off prospective buyers. Some agents have concerns for their personal safety when showing homes or holding open houses.

Negotiating and closing. Agents need sharp negotiating skills to craft appealing agreements. Closings rely on other parties to complete their work carefully and on time. Agents need strong relationships with lenders, appraisers, inspectors, and repair services to avoid hiccups and solve problems as they arrive.

Coping with Real Estate Stress

Imagine a home inspection identifies several structural issues that, in hindsight, you could have observed and cautioned your clients about, before they made an offer. Such an event not only threatens the successful outcome of the transaction and your commission, but as our research suggests, also hurts your *self-esteem* (“my clients will think I am incompetent”), *self-efficacy* (“I can’t resolve this”) and/or *self-compassion* (“why am I always missing such things?”) Damage to any of these three aspects of the self directly harms your mental and physical wellbeing (Anusic & Schimmack 2016; Pajares 2003; Paradise & Kernis 2002; Zessin, Dickhäuser, & Garbade 2015). How to cope?

Improve your self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to the subjective beliefs people hold about their abilities. Those beliefs are important; self-efficacy beliefs predict behavior better than objective assessments of actual ability (Bandura 1986). Many real estate professionals are, at heart, problem-solvers, and so they naturally cope by sharpening their ability. Some take real estate

finance classes or hire coaches to sharpen negotiation skills. Digital time management systems can carve out time for building referral bases and other activities that will build future revenue while balancing urgent matters

Strengthen your self-esteem. Self-esteem is a subjective evaluation of one's value (Mruk 2006; Neff 2011). It involves feelings of pride and self-worth, generated by comparing *actual* perceptions of oneself with *desired* perceptions (Karanika & Hogg 2016; Neff 2011). Individuals with high self-esteem feel they perform better than others or above a previous personal best (Neff 2011). Like other people, realtors often turn to self-esteem boosting strategies. Consider the popularity of so-called vanity advertising, featuring images of the agent on billboards, for-sale signs, and promotional material extolling their high sales figures. Many agents turn to social media to boost their self-esteem by accruing likes for new listings and closings.

Boost self-compassion. Self-compassion is being kind, caring, and understanding to oneself (Neff 2011). It involves seeing oneself as part of a bigger, common humanity and mindfully balancing



stressful situations, rather than just fixating on the negative (Neff 2011). Agents we interviewed described meditation to help them mindfully recognize, balance and accept both the positive and the negative aspects of stressful encounters. Others find that understanding each client has a different real-estate “love language” gives them permission to be kinder to themselves (Chapman 2015).

Where to start?

Pursuing self-efficacy and self-compassion hold particular promise; self-esteem boosting strategies can often turn out to be a source of stress in their own right (Karanika & Hogg 2015; Neff 2011). Agents appear to intuit this. One agent told us that early in his career he joined multiple civic groups, advertised everywhere, and accepted every client, strategies that boosted his image as a “successful realtor” but left him miserable. Now he has changed his strategy. He carefully manages client expectations, administers an in-take questionnaire, and even refuses clients he perceives may not be a good fit, in the interest of good self-care. Sometimes a coping plan can boost two facets of self-concept. For example, a broker facing competition from a new brokerage responded by carving out a clear market differentiation strategy. Not only did the differentiation strategy boost self-efficacy (they were more capable in the new market), but it also boosted the team's sense of self-esteem.

The real estate profession, like many other rewarding endeavors, can take a toll on participants. By mindfully attending to ways to build self-efficacy, self-esteem, and self-compassion, real estate players can improve their sense of well-being.

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Dr. Justine Rapp Farrell (PhD – University of Nebraska Lincoln) teaches digital marketing and social media at the undergraduate, MBA, and honors level. Dr. Rapp Farrell is also an avid researcher, focusing broadly on issues relating to consumer welfare and underserved population groups. She has published her work in journals such as the *Journal of Consumer Research, Journal of Service Research, Journal of Advertising, and Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, among other top business journals. She has also received two research grants in the area of transformative consumer research.

Do Opposites Attract?

Stephanie M. Mangus, PhD and Ayalla Ruvio, PhD

There has been a long-standing debate as to what determines a successful relationship. Is it the existence of similar traits between two individuals or the differences between them?

Assimilation and differentiation are two concepts that explain how individuals build relationships, and they are usually conceptualized as opposite ends of a simple continuum. However, these two characteristics are actually individual constructs that each plays its own key role in developing relationships, which are dynamic and ever-changing. Relationships are multidimensional and have external social factors acting on them to make them stronger or break them down. Therefore, it is imperative, especially in buyer-seller relationships, to utilize both similarities and differences between individuals to strengthen the relationship. Optimal distinctiveness theory (ODT) guides how assimilation and differentiation regulate how people behave with each other. According to this theory, an individual's behavior is not static and adapts itself to situations based on social cues that call for more or less assimilation and differentiation, respectively.

Assimilation and Differentiation Theories

There are two needs that drive the success of a relationship. The first, assimilation, is driven by a need to belong or to be a part of a group in society. An individual will draw from similar traits, experiences, or characteristics in another person to find similarities with themselves. Assimilation is often formed due to a need to be part of the group. Individuals will formulate ideas and opinions from interacting with peers.



The second need, differentiation, is based on a desire to be unique and define one's own identity. Differentiation causes individuals to act or make purchases based on their desire to be different from the group or from their peers and to stand out as distinctive in a good way. This behavior is seen in any interaction between two individuals who, while exploring similarities between them, would pointedly state those factors that set them apart in a crowd. Differentiation helps form a person's individual identity just as assimilation helps form their social identity.

The need for assimilation and for differentiation can both be utilized to build a strong buyer-seller relationship. Most individuals can identify these needs based on interactions and social cues and can adjust their behavior accordingly.

The optimal distinctiveness theory (ODT) conceptualizes how much one's need to be distinct influences behavior; however, it is important to expand on this theory to blend both similarity and distinctiveness traits to meet the buyer's needs. An effective way to accomplish this is to find out personal traits with which buyers identify and call on similar traits to create a network of individuals called an "in-group." This network would also fail to identify with individuals that do not share these personal traits, hence forming an "out-group." The existence of this "out-group" tends to strengthen the bond within the network.

Compatibility-Based Assimilation Strategy

Every relationship contains a social, personal, and professional component, and even a business relationship can be influenced by a personal bond. Every interaction after the first meeting between buyer and seller acts to strengthen or weaken this bond. Therefore, it is crucial that the seller meets both the assimilation and differentiation needs of the buyer.

The need for assimilation can be met by simple informal personal conversation or "small talk." Certain small, seemingly irrelevant details could emerge that may go a long way in causing the parties to identify with each other, building an initial bond. These facts may range from a similar movie or travel interest to similar dates or places of birth. These similarities form the foundation on which a strong relationship could be built.

Within a business, similarities are often key to successful relationships. Shared business goals or personal values strengthen the bond between partners and, in turn, lead to higher efficiency in the relationship. Adopting values and company morals that speak to customers also forms the initial subconscious link that will draw customers to the seller. Keeping these similarities in mind will help sellers manage seller-buyer relationships by influencing attitudes of the buyer through each stage of the relationship.

Value-Based Differentiation Strategy

As a real estate agent, your buyer's need for differentiation can be met by demonstrating the uniqueness of your offering. This may not be purely transactional in nature, as buyers want to be identified as unique or special and may be searching for a new home that will set him or her apart from peers. As their agent, you could show them a house or listing which is outside of conventional purchases. You could also differentiate *yourself* by offering services they could not get anywhere else, such as access to your personal network of lenders, real estate attorneys, contractors, etc. This would prove *your* uniqueness to the buyer and prove valuable in strengthening buyers' relationships with you. It is important to understand that the process of

identifying with a buyer through assimilation and differentiation can be done by adapting one's own behavior to a specific buyer's behavior and personal needs.

Managing Relationship Stages and Goals

Throughout various stages of a relationship, assimilation and differentiation strategies play different roles in the relationship. During the first stage in any relationship, the exploration phase, individuals aim to see whether the other person is similar to them or would fit into their social circle or group. In this phase, it is extremely important to emphasize similarities between the individuals. This can be achieved through personal anecdotes and “small talk.” In this phase, the customer looks for identifying factors that could show that individuals are in sync. In this phase, the only distinctiveness a customer may look for is the uniqueness for the product offering. It is imperative to highlight how building a bond with you would ensure that the services they receive are unlike and better than anything their peers and colleagues experience.

The second stage, the expansion phase, is where the relationship has been solidified, and a high level of assimilation, such as shared long-term goals for a successful transaction, promotes trust and confidence. Moderate differentiation is appropriate. Therefore, it is important to prove distinctiveness through considering new alternatives to meet buyers' needs. This can be done by drawing from a range of experiences that show buyers the diversity in the relationship. Agents should emphasize the unique value they bring to the table, creating a dependence on the resources they provide.

The final, or maturity stage, highlights the optimal balance between compatibility-based assimilation and value-based differentiation in both the personal and business domains. In this phase, there is a high level of trust that both parties are invested in mutual success. Also, there is a constant fluctuation between assimilation needs and differentiation needs due to the dyadic nature of the bond. In the maturity phase, it is important to recognize the value a customer relates to the most and meet that value by offering a unique proposition. For example, a customer who identifies with eco-preservation can be offered an apartment that invests in harvesting rainwater or consumes only eco-safe energy.



Conclusion

Due to the large transactions that occur between a buyer and seller in real estate, a well-developed, stable relationship is of utmost importance. It may no longer be sufficient to build a network; rather, strengthening the bond within it, takes priority. Understanding the needs of individuals to both associate with others and maintain their individuality can help guide agents to broker more powerful bonds. While it is evident that opposites do attract, there must also be similarities in interactions to begin a relationship and to foster longer-term compatibility. The correct balance between maintaining the need for assimilation and ensuring there is adequate differentiation between individuals is key to success.

Recommended Reading

Mangus, Stephanie M. and Ayalla Ruvio (2018), "Do Opposites Attract? Assimilation and Differentiation as Relationship-Building Strategies," *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, 35, 197-209.

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Marketing, Journal of Product Innovation Management, Journal of Business Research, and Leadership Quarterly. She is the co-editor of the volume on "Consumer Behavior" in the *International Encyclopedia of Marketing* and the book *Identity and Consumption*. Prior to joining the Broad College of Business faculty, she was an assistant professor at the University of Haifa and Temple University and a visiting professor at the University of Michigan. Her research has featured in numerous media outlets all over the world, including the *CNN, TODAY, Good Morning America, TIME, The New York Times, Forbes, Consumer Reports, The Daily Telegraph, The Atlantic, The Telegraph,* and the *Toronto STAR*.

Networking: The Difference in Knowing and Doing

Ko Kuwabara, PhD, Claudius A. Hildebrand, PhD, and Xi Zou, PhD

Engagement in networking does not always accurately reflect the level of awareness about the need for networking. This “knowing-doing gap” is profound; two-thirds of professionals in one study felt ambivalent as to the efficacy or ethicality of networking and were disengaged from the



networking process. Professional-instrumental networking, which we define as “proactive and purposeful efforts to build, manage, or leverage relationships towards professional goals” (Kuwabara, Hildebrand, & Zou 2018), is critical to the establishment, upkeep, and utilization of professional networks. Identifying and eliminating areas of disengagement from networking is key to maximizing gain and potential.

Our purpose in this study was to examine the “knowing-doing gap” in networking in order to understand how lay beliefs—in this case mindsets about networking—impacted a person’s motivation to engage in networking. The model for this problem illustrates the influence of a fixed view of social intelligence, social relations, and social capital, in contrast to a malleable, growth view. Individuals with fixed mindsets view behaviors and skills as innate and unchanging, connecting professional failures as personal since, to them, networking well is about talent and personality. Fixed views reduce the likelihood of individuals fully engaging. Alternatively, malleable viewpoints hold abilities and skills as learnable and the product of effort or practice, associating potential failure in networking as an opportunity to improve and expand skills for the next interaction in a continuous process of networking improvement.

The three levels of networking correspond to levels of engagement in networking:

- 1) Social intelligence: revolves around search—the building and creation of network connections
- 2) Social relations: revolve around maintenance—the management and nurture of relationships
- 3) Social capital: revolves around leverage—capitalizing on professional relationships and using the skill sets of other professionals to accomplish goals.

At play is how fixed views of these levels influence perceptions of utility and morality in the networking process.

This analysis shows that fixed views on social intelligence create negative perceptions of search, leading to decreased engagement in building networks, resulting in smaller-sized networks. Likewise, fixed views of social relations lead to negative attitudes regarding maintenance, resulting in less engagement with existing network members and little diversity in the network. Finally, fixed views of social capital sour attitudes on leverage, reducing the use of network links for personal or mutual benefit, and leave networks dispersed and loosely connected.

Mapping how their personal lay beliefs influence engagement in networking is important for real estate professionals. Tailored outreach and interactions with colleagues can bridge the gaps that form when people are hesitant to network. Greater exposure in networking allows for greater opportunity in both known and unknown fields. Whether helping a client identify a new, promising investment or putting a client in a new home, agents can find benefits in a vibrant, healthy, and engaged network.

Social Intelligence and Search

A fixed view of social intelligence impacts an individual's ability to form relationships and interact with others. Social intelligence supplies a person's foundational ability for networking, enabling them to socialize, make connections, and handle interpersonal situations. For those with a fixed view, networking depends critically on innate characteristics, such as talent or personality traits. Network engagement therefore reflects those unchanging abilities to network, reducing outreach and engagement.

Accompanying a fixed view of social intelligence is frustration over the usefulness and moral nature of search in networking. Since behaviors and traits are inherited for these people, perceptions of self-confidence and self-esteem bleed into perceptions of the results of networking. If a person with a fixed view of social intelligence deems themselves incapable of forming relationships with incompatible persons, they will diminish their own ability to network, as, for such individuals, networking is an extension of their natural ability to form relationships and connections. Further, because traits are inherited and unmoving in this view, a certain level of unfairness is observed between those that have "good" networking abilities and those with "bad" networking skills. Thus, networking itself can be perceived as manipulative and counter to merit-based rewards.

A fixed view of social intelligence contributes to a network that is stunted in its own potential. Hesitation over the effectiveness of networking or a belief that adding new professional contacts is unfair or "wrong" decreases the level to which professionals will network. This produces a network that is smaller in size because of disengagement, which is due to some perceived inability or inadequacy. Whereas their malleable colleagues actively engage in networking knowing their effort can bring improvement, fixed view holders on social intelligence withdraw from the process, with that withdrawal increasing as social intelligence decreases.

Social Relations and Maintenance

Fixed views in the area of social relations and maintenance inhibit the upkeep and continuity of professional ties. At this level, the fixed view regards human connections through a lens of natural fit or incompatibility, wherein relationships ideally form organically from points of connectivity. Like jigsaw puzzle pieces fitting together in just the right way, so too should relationships function, according to the fixed view. Since people migrate to those compatible with them, networking should happen easily and without effort.



Limitations at this level come about when expectations of “puzzle piece” relationships do not mirror reality. Rather than cultivating network ties as those with malleable views do, fixed-view individuals regard the need for cultivation as a sign of an unnatural connection, because all relationships should be natural and unforced. This serves to increase the disconnect between understanding and engagement in networking, with those holding a

fixed view seeing relational maintenance as useless and manipulative for making an unnatural connection last. As a result, these networks lack substantial diversity, favoring similarities that don’t need to be overcome.

Extremely similar backgrounds and characteristics allow for easier network connections under the fixed view. These types of relationships are the most naturally formed and fit in the right place like a puzzle piece, which is essential to relationships under a fixed view. These relationships can fall outside the normal expectations for a given individual holding a fixed view, but, as a whole, fixed view holders tend to lack diverse connections as most of those ties would require work and effort to grow and maintain. The extent of maintenance disengagement increases as personal and professional similarities lessen, an inverse relationship.

Social Capital and Leverage

Leverage refers to the ability of a person to make use of professional ties in pursuit of some other goal. When properly engaged, this level of interaction saves time—and therefore money—that would otherwise be spent forming new connections with potential clients, partners, or leads. Utilizing the professional networks of others offers networkers a varied portfolio of experience and opportunity. From there, what was formerly a disconnected blip on another’s network has a chance to be linked, incorporated, and called upon.

In contrast, fixed views of social capital and leverage are marked by discontinuity in networks leading to missed opportunities and lost connections among existing relationships. Exchanges and interactions between two people can be perceived as zero-sum, with one person benefiting at the expense of the other. Fixed view holders will avoid engaging their network to ask for assistance because these actions are seen as manipulative and a danger to the relationship. Further, when a third person is added to a networking interaction, making connections and closing structural holes—areas in which network contacts are disconnected and opportunities to close that gap exist—decreases due to a perception that linking the other parties makes the fixed view-holder irrelevant, bypassed, and less likely to find benefit or value.

As a result of a fixed view, network development at the social capital level is less integrated and cohesive, with existing ties loosely assembled and weakened by low contact and connection. Since these types of networks are highly similar, overall social capital is limited and forming connections to close structural holes is disincentivized. As with social relations, engagement with leverage decreases as similarity of contacts increases.

Implications

Networking can be a difficult issue for real estate professionals, and navigating that reality is key to successfully expanding professional ties to produce benefit for a firm, client, or project. The underlying reasons for motivation are often not conscious decisions, but involuntary responses based on individual perceptions and beliefs regarding the act of networking itself. Navigating the nuances of each individual's beliefs on networking allows the real estate firm to account for agents' disengagement and to boost agents' engagement and reward from professional instrumental networking.

Increasing engagement in networking is possible by looking within and without at the unique skills, abilities, and personalities of each person in an organization or environment. A plan of action is possible after identifying areas where the fixed view dominates to be aware of areas of improvement:

1. Reflect on internal moments of growth due to exercising flexible approaches to making connections
2. Allow this awareness of past growth to spark change in current beliefs about networking
3. Utilize more growth-centric beliefs to increase motivation for networking, maximizing connection and new opportunities

Shifting a person's belief about an issue is effective in changing behavior and reflections on personal or professional growth and can bring about a change in motivation and approach to networking. Engaging and taking part in the rewards of networking is possible for all professionals who find a willingness to continually grow and develop professional relationships alongside those around them.

Recommended Reading

Kuwabara, Ko, Claudius A. Hildebrand, and Xi Zou (2018), “Lay Theories of Networking: How Laypeople’s Beliefs About Networks Affect Their Attitudes Toward and Engagement in Instrumental Networking,” *Academy of Management Review*, 43(1), 50-64.

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Dr. Ko Kuwabara’s (PhD – Cornell University) research focuses on the motivational psychology of networking by examining players and engagement in networking, cross-cultural differences, and trust in peer exchanges. His work has been published in *American Sociological Review*, *Social Psychology and Personality Science*, *The Economic Sociology of Capitalism*, *American Journal of Sociology*, *Academy of Management Journal*, *Psychological Science*, and *Social Psychology Quarterly*, among others. Dr. Kuwabara has also served on the editorial board of *Social Psychology Quarterly* and as a reviewer for *American Journal of Sociology*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *American Sociological Review*, *Social Forces*, and *Social Networks*. He teaches a leadership course in the MBA program at INSEAD Singapore and was previously an Associate Professor of Management at Columbia Business School, teaching courses on negotiation, social networks, and organizational change in the MBA and various executive education programs.

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Associate, Spencer Stuart

Dr. Claudius Hildebrand (PhD – Columbia Business School) is a leadership and organizational culture expert who has worked with clients in multiple industries and lectured in Executive MBA programs. He has designed custom leadership curricula for top leaders and created leadership training plans for company-wide roll-out. During his career, Claudius has taken part in and conducted individual coaching sessions for CEOs and business unit leaders ranging from Fortune 500 firms to start-ups. In his work, Claudius pushes clients to sharpen their strategic perspective, shape the organizational structure, and refine personal leadership capabilities. At the organizational level, Claudius has transformed the culture of several Fortune 100 companies by identifying a company's core values and developing guiding principles to inspire employees.

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Dr. Xi Zou’s (PhD – Columbia Business School) research draws on social psychology to understand how culture and motivation shape people’s judgments, decision-making, and behaviors, and the implications for interpersonal dynamics and job performance. Her work has been published in top management and psychology journals such as *Research in Organizational*

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Cooperation in Client Relationships

Bruno Lussier, PhD and Zachary R. Hall, PhD

Salespeople (e.g., real estate agents) are responsible for the company's most important assets, their customers. The salesperson-customer relationship is founded on trust, understanding, and mutual respect to achieve profitable outcomes. A critical success factor that must be present in a salesperson-customer relationship is cooperation.

The purpose of this research is to analyze how salespeople's *actual* cooperation efforts influence how

customers *perceive* cooperation, and how customer perceived cooperation influences relationship outcomes (e.g., relationship quality and intention to continue the relationship).



Cooperation vs. Perceived Cooperation

It is well established that cooperation between salesperson and customer is essential to achieve positive relationship outcomes. However, prior research shows there is a noticeable disconnect between the cooperative efforts employed by a salesperson and the manner in which cooperation is perceived by the customer. The disconnect between the salesperson's cooperation and the customer's perception of the cooperation occurs because these cooperative efforts may not be apparent to the customer's expectations and perceptions. That is, cooperative cues used by the salesperson may not be perceived by the customer. In addition to cooperative cues between the salesperson and the customer, three important factors have been proposed by previous research to influence effects of salesperson characteristics on perceived cooperation: 1) customer-orientation, 2) relationship duration, and 3) self-efficacy. Lastly, we also evaluate the positive perceived cooperation on relationship outcomes when a customer views the salesperson as being an expert.

Our Study

For our study, we collected data from both salespeople and customers to understand the effects of purposeful salesperson cooperation and customer perceived cooperation on relationship outcomes. Prior research surrounding the salesperson-customer relationship has focused on one side of the relationship or the other, never on both sides of the relationship at the same time. Therefore, we successfully collected dyadic data from 175 salespeople and their respective customers across 17 firms. These firms represented four major industries—financial services, food and beverage, industrial, and pharmaceutical.

Analysis and Results

The research conducted throughout this study aimed to better understand the influences present in a salesperson-customer relationship with respect to cooperation and perceived cooperation and how different factors impact relationship outcomes. Overall, our study concluded that “the extent to which customers perceive salespeople to be cooperative matters more than actual cooperation” (Lussier & Hall 2018, p. 216). In other words, the customer’s interpretation of the salesperson’s cooperative efforts influences the relationship outcomes to a greater extent than the actual application of cooperation by the salesperson. Customers who perceive their salesperson as cooperative will be engaged in increased levels of collaboration that will ultimately be mutually beneficial for the business relationship (e.g., performance improves).

Additionally, the results indicated that customer orientation (how well the salesperson considers the customer’s needs) and relationship duration (relative amount of time the salesperson and customer are engaged in a business relationship) improved customers’ perceptions of salesperson cooperation. However, the third factor noted earlier, salesperson self-efficacy (the salesperson’s belief they can succeed at the task of selling), reduced customers’ perceptions of cooperation. Finally, our study concluded that perceived salesperson expertise by the customer also resulted in a positive influence on the relationship. These findings are important as they can be utilized by salespeople in various industries to improve their customer relationship outcomes and increase profits.

Real Estate Implications

While this research study was focused on the B2B side of selling, these key findings are certainly applicable for real estate agencies and real estate agents seeking to improve client relationships. Just like any salesperson-customer relationship, the real estate agent-client relationship relies on mutual cooperation in order for an agent to provide superior value and the other party to find their forever home. In particular, our findings suggest that real estate agents should focus time on developing emotional intelligence skills that will help them to better capture customer feedback and enhance customer perceptions of cooperation.

This type of training empowers the real estate agent to gain a greater understanding of a client’s emotions, and in turn, lead the client to perceive the cooperative efforts utilized by the agent to foster a successful relationship. Our research shows that a salesperson who has a high level of customer orientation and who has an understanding of the significance of the relationship duration is more likely to be perceived as cooperative *regardless* of their actual cooperation. Thus, agents can focus on listening skills and speaking the customer’s language to signal higher levels of customer orientation. In doing so, real estate firms and their agents can see the benefits of their relationship investments as clients will reciprocate through value-based activities that will result in profitable outcomes for both agents (e.g., customer referrals, loyalty, and retention) and clients (e.g., customer satisfaction).

Conclusion

This research shows that salespeople, as well as real estate agents and firms, must have a better understanding of the importance of perceived cooperation from their customer and clients.



Rather than focusing on persuasive tactics, agents should focus on portraying a customer-oriented selling approach. This can be accomplished through a concerted effort to understand the customer's demands and needs while providing tailored, beneficial solutions. This is particularly critical early in relationships as customers' perceived cooperation is lower and more susceptible to change early on in the relationship.

Recommended Reading

Lussier, Bruno and Zachary R. Hall (2018), "Cooperation in B2B relationships: Factors that Influence Customers' Perceptions of Salesperson Cooperation," *Industrial Marketing Management*, 69(February), 209–220.

About the Authors

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Dr. Bruno Lussier (PhD – Grenoble University) conducts research on sales force effectiveness, relationship marketing, positive organizational behavior, and ethics. His work has been published in various academic publications, such as *Industrial Marketing Management*. Prior to his academic career, Bruno had a 15 year career as a business analyst, consultant, trainer, and sales manager in several B2B firms.

Zachary R. Hall

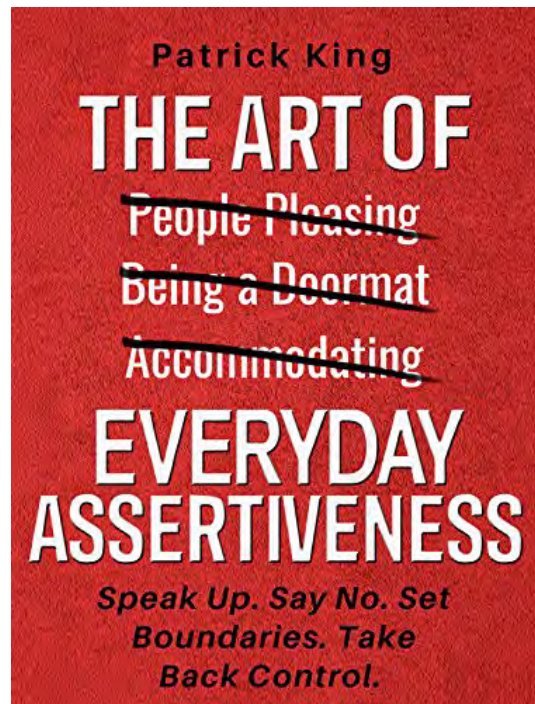
Assistant Professor, Texas Christian University

Dr. Zach Hall's (PhD – University of Houston) research examines factors that affect the performance of salespeople, sales teams, and sales organizations. His research focuses on investigating these performance issues from a dyadic perspective in both salesperson-customer exchanges and manager-employee relationships. His research has been published in the *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Marketing Research*, *Industrial Marketing Management*, and *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*. Before entering academia, Zach accumulated almost 10 years of experience in sales, financial analysis, pricing analysis, consulting, and marketing.

INSIDER: The Art of Everyday Assertiveness

Zack Snider, MBA Candidate

Have you ever found yourself in a situation you really did not want to be in because you just went along with what your peers asked of you? Ever done something you had no plans to do because you felt you owed it to a colleague, friend, or family member? In situations like these, assertiveness is the key to getting “unstuck” from other people’s routine and unlocking your own motivators to do what YOU want for the reasons YOU deem important. In *The Art of Everyday Assertiveness*, Patrick King explains that mastering assertion in your life will pay off when you live on your own terms in pursuit of your dreams. It can be difficult to assert yourself if you have historically allowed others to push you around in some area of your life. Thankfully, keeping the following key points in mind will clear up some misconceptions about assertiveness and help you to overcome your hesitations in assessing yourself. Changing overly compliant habits can unshackle you from non-assertive behaviors and outside pressures to face life confident and assertive in addressing your needs.



THINK POINT #1: Find the Right Balance

Assertiveness is the art of conveying your desires and needs, whether for connection, belonging, purpose, or stability. A balancing act comes into play between expressing one’s own needs and adapting to the needs of others. To avoid becoming unduly selfish, assertive individuals must be aware of the needs of others and work to help meet those needs while still accomplishing one’s own goals. On the other hand, King warns readers against being excessively aggressive in achieving their goals. Finding the right mix of dash and daring can help you seize available opportunities while preserving relationships along the way and mitigating the risk associated with bold moves.

One element of assertiveness that cannot be overlooked is that assertiveness is an individual behavior and attitude. At the end of the day, when action is needed, you are your only advocate. If you do not prioritize your needs and express them, they will not be met, your life satisfaction will be diminished, and the cycle of un-assertive life will continue. While we are supposed to “play nice with others,” this societal expectation to be accommodating and selfless can grow into an attitude of submissiveness to exploitation. Though it may be a surprise, being pegged as

“agreeable” can indicate to others that you are a people-pleaser, someone they can get to do whatever they need without pushback or an assertion of your autonomy and voice. Although asserting your own needs may be important at times, excessive agreeableness tends to put undue emphasis on other people’s problems. Often, the people that make use of this trait are only out for their own gain (being assertive for themselves in a negative way) and care little about you or your problems beyond the extent required to hook you into doing something for them. Do not be afraid to establish boundaries and decide whether an outside project will be considered or undertaken.

THINK POINT #2: Speak Up and Stand by Your “NO”

Amidst the hustle and bustle of everyday life, it can be easy to think our minds are operating on the same page as those around us. Under those assumptions, context and expectations are known and mutually agreeable for easy communication. Reality, however, is not so ideal a construct. Here is another area to foster assertiveness and open up the advantages of having our needs out in the open. In order to receive what we need, we must speak up and make our wishes known. To avoid ambiguity, clearly communicate what you want and your expectations surrounding it. When we keep silent, we require others to read our minds to get to what we really want, leading to friction and confusion. With each person placing a different value on every act, leaving things up for interpretation only leads to miscommunication, disappointment, and frustration. Prevent all of this by stating what you want and how you want it.

King explains that just as it is important to speak up to get what you want, never hesitate to say “no” when you *don’t* want something. Part of assertiveness is recognizing what is and is not useful, appropriate, or interesting to you. In an attempt at politeness, avoiding conflict, or preserving the status quo of a relationship, people may forego their own objections to please others, which is not assertive behavior. Understand that it is okay to refuse a request or to deny someone your time. In doing so, it is important to refuse requests in the right way. Too many refusals and important relationships may be jeopardized. However, too loose boundaries can lead to going along with unproductive or unwanted obligations. By establishing boundaries and setting standards for what you choose to take part in, you gain ownership of your life and everyday activities. Lastly, once you’ve said “no,” don’t let others change your mind; help them respect your boundaries by refusing to negotiate once you make the decision to say “no.”

THINK POINT #3: Free Yourself

A consistent theme that accompanies assertiveness is a choice not to let the whims of others interfere with your ability to provide for your core, fundamental needs. Do not fall victim to the trap of emotional blackmail, wherein fear of repercussion and a willingness to accept an unacceptable situation prevents you from asserting yourself against that abuse. Instead of ignoring the issue and thereby exacerbating the problem by not fixing it, realize that you are under no obligation to go along with whatever you are being pushed toward. Additionally, King

notes that you should liberate yourself from a false sense of responsibility for things outside your control. You are not always to blame when things go wrong. Rushing to apologize for something for which you are not responsible burdens you with unnecessary guilt. Our desire to be polite—a good trait when well-balanced—can override our important needs if we allow ourselves to fall into timidity as opposed to confidence and assertiveness.

A very simple starting point for overcoming a lack of assertiveness is to diagnose your individual communication style to highlight the areas needing most improvement. Are you a passive communicator who struggles to express your feelings when you feel wronged, stewing to the point of explosive outburst? Are you aggressive in communicating, placing yourself at the center of attention and crowding out the needs and feelings of others to meet your own self-validation? Are you passive aggressive, avoiding addressing the root issues while lashing out in a secondary area totally unrelated to the problem at hand? Or are you an assertive communicator, standing up for your interests, expressing your desires in a healthy and straightforward way? Identify your communication patterns and work to develop healthy, assertive ways of communicating with others that meet your needs while respecting the needs of others as well.

Conclusion

Assertiveness is much more complex than it appears at first glance. Knowing the factors that contribute to an assertive mindset and attitude helps us hone our assertiveness and practice a balance of our needs with healthy concern for others. Finding the strength to assert your views will make your life better when, in a productive and healthy way, you prioritize your own life requirements, stand up for yourself and your limits and boundaries, and resist allowing negative pressures and expectations to change who you are and how you assert yourself to others.

Recommended Reading

King, Patrick (2018), *The Art of Everyday Assertiveness*, Middletown, DE: Independently Published.

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Zack is a graduate student from Harker Heights, Texas. He received his BBA in Supply Chain Management and Management Information Systems with a minor in History from Baylor University. Prior to pursuing his MBA at the Hankamer School of Business, Zack worked in the grocery distribution industry with a focus in logistics operations. He is currently concentrating in Healthcare Administration with plans to transition into a medical device or pharmaceutical manufacturing role or a clinical administration role.

INSIDER: Show Up: Unlocking the Power of Relational Networking

Maria Arauz, MBA Candidate

As a real estate agent, you're likely familiar with networking—but how can you stand out when everyone else is familiar with it, too? In his book, *Show Up: Unlocking the Power of Relational Networking*, author David France provides personal stories and applicable advice to help improve your networking strategy. His recommendations may change how real estate agents make and cultivate connections.

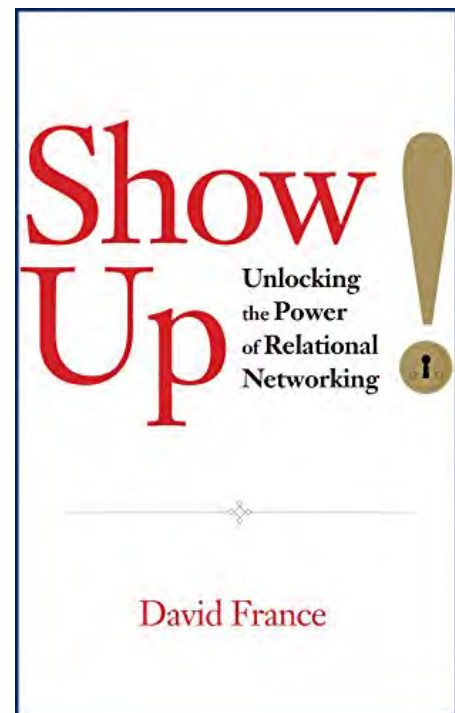
THINK POINT #1: Know Yourself

“Just be yourself!” Useful advice, right? Not really, if you don't unpack it. Before even thinking about building a network, France suggests asking yourself, “Who am I when disconnected from my profession?” “What gives my life meaning?” “What is my greatest fear?” Knowing who you are outside of your professional identity will help you create deep professional connections. By understanding yourself and your own needs in a more complex way, you are able to empathize better with others and, as a result, add value generously—giving more than what you expect in return.

This approach leads to authentic relationships and natural connections, strategies that concentrate on adding value to others over time, and on creating mutually beneficial relationships, regardless of professional industry. These strategies are the opposite of very common behaviors: only engaging in one-off interactions and dismissing people who don't fit an immediate need, which proves much less productive in the long haul.

THINK POINT #2: Ways to Build Natural Connections

You may have heard that you should study the people you will meet in advance, but did you know you can use hashtags to find out who they are? Before a conference or networking event, France shares that you can learn who will be attending by looking at who is using conference hashtags or active on an event's social media page. When you spot these attendees, you can learn more about them via LinkedIn, Twitter, and other websites. The people who consciously make themselves known before an event might just be the kind of people you want to meet. This is one of the ways you can build authentic relationships and natural connections.



Another strategy to build strong connections is used when meeting a speaker at an event. In short, France advises asking the speaker's advice, and then doing what you're told. This strategy entails asking an intelligent, short, and burning question you've been struggling with that matches the speaker's expertise. When you receive their advice, ask if you could send a follow-up after you apply their idea. This strategy creates a more memorable encounter and first impression than simply praising the speaker or asking for a selfie. If done right, it may trigger the speaker into caring about the work you do. After you apply the advice, send a follow-up explaining how you did it or how you modified their idea to fit your situation. Showing flexibility, willingness to grow, gratitude, and critical thinking are effective ways to connect with an influencer. This strategy and using hashtags are two of four ways France shares that can help you build natural connections.

THINK POINT #3: Push Your Networking Boundaries

As the title of the book suggests, you should show up—but where? France advocates that attending diverse events outside of your own industry broadens your spectrum of connections. In turn, having a diverse network will increase your chances of encountering unique opportunities. For instance, by attending The Venture Café, a weekly entrepreneurship networking event, France, who is a violinist, formed connections that led him to apply and be selected for the international Waypaver Delegation and later to apply for and win the Vanguard Fellowship, naming him one of the Top 40 Urban Innovators Under 40.

If you consistently push your boundaries and work to broaden your sphere of connections, over time, you will run into opportunities that others would only be able to describe as luck. For real estate agents this may mean, for example, attending chamber of commerce, city council, or school board meetings where you're likely to meet people who are involved in the community. Granted, in some instances you won't be able to naturally connect with anyone, but these less-than-ideal situations are negligible compared to the opportunities that may arise from showing up.

THINK POINT #4: Craft the Perfect Cold Call Email

Cold call emails are another way to build relationships and expand your network. You can follow a few principles to write persuasive emails that will elicit a response. The first is to *not* talk about yourself. France notes that you may be tempted to try to prove that you are worth a reply, but sending an introductory email about yourself will not get your message across. Instead, show authentic interest about the reader and his or her work by making the message about them. This approach is more likely to grab the reader's attention.

THINK POINT #5: Stand Out Through Your Follow-up

Following up is an important and often overlooked aspect of relational networking. Aside from connecting virtually to people you meet, you should also focus on future follow-ups. These follow-ups will make the difference between staying top of mind or not. France shares several tools he uses in his follow-up, one of which is creating a relationship document. Its purpose is to organize the information of significant people you meet. You can include, for instance, event and city specific information, a person's passions, who introduced you to them, and what value you can bring to them. This is a live document that will evolve as your relationship with each person grows and that will help you create personal messages when following up.



Conclusion

All the aforementioned points represent a few of the many applicable tips from France's book that you, as a real estate professional, can apply today to boost your networking strategy. Building a strong and diverse network by showing up will increase your chances of encountering unique opportunities that will help you achieve your goals, including finding and closing deals. Be it by knowing exactly how to look for contacts for an upcoming event or building a relationship document, France's advice will help you stand out from the rest and harness the real power of relational networking.

Recommended Reading

France, David (2017), *Show Up: Unlocking the Power of Relational Networking*, Independently Published.

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Maria Arauz earned her Bachelor of Science in Business Administration from Towson University. Her past work experience includes roles for companies such as Procter & Gamble and Dell. Maria is currently pursuing an MBA at Baylor University and plans to further her career in the technology industry.

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