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Communication Competence during the Preparation Phase of the Direct Selling Communication Activities

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Abstract

In understanding the communication competence components in the direct marketing business, this study was performed. The objectives of the paper are to identify the communication activities that represent communication competence components and the outcome of communication competence components in the Preparation Phase of the direct selling activities. Interview and observation method were employed. Acquiring knowledge related to the business and spirituality; and preparing to acquire *savoirs* have been demonstrated in the Preparation Phase. These preparations demonstrated direct sellers' cognitive, behavioural, and spiritual-affective abilities. The outcome that emerged from the findings were the preparation in developing their self-confidence, enthusiastic feelings, understanding of *savoirs*; and becoming knowledgeable of the business.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, direct selling is becoming a luxury platform for people around the world to at least increasing the combination of their life wellbeing, wealth and health. Everybody can become a direct seller as long as they have intentions to increase their income, consume or utilize the direct selling products, and pay some sum of money to become a member of the direct selling company. Without any kind of a professional certificate, direct selling business can well become a step stone for the great unwashed to fix wages or to create their career. However, this openness sometimes generates problems in the context of communication, particularly in the direct selling

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communication activities between direct sellers and the prospective customers. Therefore, in a way to understand the communication context that influence the direct selling communication activities, this study was conducted.

2. Background

Handling the direct selling between direct seller and the prospective customer need both communicators to achieve agreements towards the goal of the conversations. Normally, the direct seller is the one that initiates the conversation as a tactic to get to know the prospect in order to sell the product, increase the number of the members of the direct selling company, or at least to set an awareness of the product of the company to the prospective customer. The growth in direct selling worldwide had increased direct sellers in Malaysia from 4.5 million people in 2011 to 4.75 million people in 2012 (World Federation of Direct Selling Associations, 2014). The WfDSA has identified Malaysia as one of the leading ASEAN countries in the development of direct selling. Direct selling is a person-to-person marketing approach and it involves a face-to-face process, so that it requires direct sellers to have substantial abilities in interpersonal communication (Omar & Mustaffa, 2012). It is important for direct sellers in Malaysia to be communicatively competent as persuading customers to accept and listen to them, and show behaviour that correspond to the conversation goals can be the major means to achieve their direct selling's target.

Communication competence has been identified as a factor that lead to achieving certain desired outcomes in many research (Omar & Mustaffa, 2012). Communication competencies is defined as *a process of one's adaptation of, to, and for a particular situation that enables appropriate and effective interaction in that situation* (Omar & Mustaffa, 2012). By demonstrating appropriate communication cues, direct seller can attract the prospective customer to spending his/her precious hour(s) with the direct seller, agree with the direct seller's ideas, attract the prospective customer to buy product(s), and may up to the extent of having an interest feeling to become a member. According to Dwyer, Hill, and Martin's (2000) and Jaramillo and Marshall (2004) selling techniques are split into different phases. Hence, for this study the direct selling phases are divided into five phases: preparation, initial meeting, meeting, end of the business and swirling reaction situation. In managing direct selling with the prospective customer, direct seller need to accomplish the whole phases of the direct selling process. Here in this paper, direct selling phase that will be discussed is the Preparation Phase. Preparation is classed as a process that enables communication competence. Preparation Phase is when the direct seller are preparing and adapting for the forthcoming direct selling event by physically and mentally preparing themselves with relevant abilities to enable them to adopt and adapt to the communication abilities during the direct selling activities. Preparation of communication activities was essential and practiced by the direct sellers either a week or moments before the meeting. Though Jaramillo and Marshall (2004) did not include preparation of communication activities as part of the selling technique steps in their selling technique framework, and other communication scholars have yet to discuss preparation that leads to ideal conditions of communication competence, this study has included this element as it appeared so frequently and prominently in the interview transcripts. Other studies suggest that preparation has been demonstrated to be important for successful communication (McDermott, 1990), decision-making (Wade, 2004), and relationships (Evans, 2008), thereby justifying the importance of the discussion of the Preparation Phase in this study.

This study is important because it assists the direct seller to improve their communication competence when communicating with the prospective customer. Appropriate communication cues that direct sellers gain from this research could increase their understanding of accurate ways in dealing with situational and context during the Preparation Phase. This study also can give an understanding of the importance of communication competence in every phase of direct selling communication activities. Therefore, the findings could contribute to the field of communication competence in the sales context.

3. Research objective

The paper objectives are to identify the:

- Communication activities for acquiring knowledge that represents communication competence components in the Preparation Phase of the direct selling activities, and

- Outcome of communication competence components in the Preparation Phase of the direct selling activities.

4. Literature review

Cognitive researchers have assumed that communication competence exists if the communicator has a diverse range of social knowledge and the cognitive abilities required for effective communication (Jablin & Sias, 2001; Roloff & Berger, 1982). People who can understand and demonstrate the abstract of the meaning appropriately are more eloquent, perceive themselves as competent and others perceive them as competent communicators. Hence, many studies have investigated the relationship between cognitive resources and communication competence (Fix & Sias, 2006; Sriussadaporn-Charoenngam & Jablin, 1999; Sypher, Russo, & Hane, 2002; Williams, Parker, & Turner, 2007; Zorn, 1991). Meanwhile, behavioural researchers have focused on identifying the characteristics of communication behaviours and skills that are associated with communication competence (McCroskey, 1982; Rubin, 1990; Wiemann & Backlund, 1980). From this perspective, to be perceived as a competent communicator by both self and others, a person must know and demonstrate the appropriate behaviour. By acquiring related behavioural skills where the communication occurs, a person is then perceived as communicatively competent and as a result can communicate effectively and achieve his or her goals at the end of a communication process.

Limited studies have been done to understand the success and sales performance in the direct selling context. For example, Luk, Fullgrabe, and Yi (1999) found in their study on direct selling that knowledge of product elements and customer need satisfaction are indicators for success in direct selling in China. Additionally, 'Chinese consumers' purchasing behavior for consumer products is not just impressed by the benefits of the product but has major influences from the quality that is embedded in the kinship. Studies on salespeople's performance also found that knowledge is an essential element in doing business (Sujan, Sujan, & Bettman, 1988; Weitz, Sujan, & Sujan, 1986). In addition, sales strategies, sales training (Jantan, Honeycut, Thelen, & Attia, 2004), potential prospect-seller relationship (Boles, Brashear, Bellenger, & Barksdale, 2000; Parsons, 2002), and communication style (Williams & Spiro, 1985) have also been found as influential variables for sales performance.

Savoirs is a component from the intercultural competence component (ICC) for education (Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 2002). The English translation of *savoir* means knowledge (to know). For the purpose of this study we use the term *savoirs*, based on Byram et al.'s (2002) definition: "knowledge of social processes, and knowledge of illustrations of those processes and products; the latter includes knowledge about how other people are likely to perceive you, as well as some knowledge about other people" (p. 8). Knowledge of other people provides a seller with an advantage to develop relationships (Boles, Brashear, Bellenger, & Barksdale, 2000). Therefore, preparation of *savoirs* suggests that direct sellers took relevant actions and followed relevant processes to obtain knowledge of their potential prospects beforehand.

5. Methods of study

In this study, in-depth interview and observation methods were employed for this study to understand the details of essence of communication competence within the phenomenon of direct selling business in Malaysia. 11 individuals were selected from different environments for the direct selling phenomenon so that this design can incorporate a diversity of context. Interviews were highly useful techniques to enquire into people's perceptions, meanings, definition of situations and interpretations of "truth" (Punch, 2005), and was 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 checks and balances on what subjects explain on their attitudes and behaviours in practice, with what researchers 'see' beyond subject's opinions and self-interpretations (Gray, 2004). The aim of the observations and in-depth interviews were to capture possible variation in conceptions of communication competence in a rich and comprehensive way.

Direct sellers are busy with their working schedules like hunting and strategising for getting potential prospects. Interview with long questions might interfere with direct sellers' time management. Therefore, semi-structured

interviews allow the researcher to have freedom to conduct the interview process. The researcher present interview questions based on the respondent's perspective without straying from the main aim of the research (Punch, 2005). For this study, semi-structured interview was conducted in informal ways. Semi-structured interview design and observation guidelines were based on research concepts. The process of gathering the data took about six months. The procedure was tedious and had lots of challenges because the direct sellers were managing their business according to their own space, time, and availability (Omar, 2010).

6. Findings and discussions

From the interviews and observations of 11 direct sellers, two communication activities that enabling conditions of communication competence components were found had been practiced during the Preparation Phase. There were preparing to acquire knowledge related to the direct selling business and spirituality: marketing plan, products, and company background; and preparing to acquire *savoirs*. The practice of these elements have associated with the direct sellers cognitive, behavioural and spiritual-affective abilities. This preparation enabled direct sellers to adapt to the particular direct selling situation.

- Acquiring knowledge related to the direct selling business and spirituality

This study revealed that the relevant knowledge the direct sellers acquired in the Preparation Phase was relevant to the direct selling company, products, marketing plan, and spirituality. To acquire this knowledge, they demonstrated their cognitive, behavioural, and spiritual-affective abilities. As direct sellers, their essential objective is to communicate effectively with their prospective customers with regard to their business intentions, and for this they need to acquire relevant knowledge before going into the field (Bernstein & Associates, 1984). Preparing relevant knowledge as much as they can in advance provides opportunities for direct sellers to adapt to each situation. During the interviews the direct sellers described the knowledge they are required to learn and the need to simultaneously demonstrate their abilities. The followings are some of their comments:

If we don't know about the company and the products, it's going to be difficult. (R2)

To influence people to join the business, we need to know about the company, the products, and the marketing plan. (R5)

The knowledge about the company, products, and marketing plan are the main points that we have to share. (R11)

This finding supports the claim that relevant knowledge is needed in direct selling business (Bernstein & Associates, 1984; Berry, 1997; Luk, Fullgrabe, & Yi, 1999; Merrilees & Miller, 1999). The direct sellers obtained this knowledge through certain activities as described below:

'You have to go to training, and then use the products to get your own story [experience],' my leader told me. (R7)

I must attend the classes, listen to the CDs, read the materials regarding the science and the spiritual and the networking business. We have materials about the products. But when it comes to the spiritual part, we must look for other sources outside the company. By attending these courses and reading books, we can develop our knowledge and skills. (R8)

I have learnt about the products from various books. If I want to develop my network, I need to read additional books and learn from my upline. We have a group of successful people. I have to learn from them. I like to ask their opinion when I'm stuck in certain situations. (R4)

From the comments above, attending classes/training, and reading/listening to business/motivational materials were methods to gain knowledge. Attending training is one method to achieve success in business particularly related to communication abilities (Hunt, Tourish, & Hargie, 2000; Jantan, Honeycut, Thelen, & Attia, 2004; Jokinen, 2005). The importance of acquiring knowledge cannot be denied. To have selected knowledge, the direct

sellers have to use their cognitive abilities in the process of undertaking thinking activities, stimulating the mind and understanding the topics. Knowledge can only be obtained when the direct sellers demonstrate their behavioural abilities by practicing these activities. At the same time, spiritual ability was applied when the direct seller, like R8, learnt to employ her inner heart to stimulate feelings and understand knowledge she had obtained. Demonstrating and processing the messages that they hear, read, feel, and see will help them to become knowledgeable which, in turn, will effectively contribute to the knowledge preparedness, and facilitate them to develop self-confidence, and enthusiasm for their business.

When direct sellers had not encouraged their thinking, nor sought knowledge of the business, they encountered problems when communicating with their prospects. For example, R2 had difficulty with explaining the specific details of the marketing plan, such as how to calculate the bonus income in her early involvement in the DEF Company. Though R2 had knowledge of the company's marketing plan, she was perceived as being incompetent by the prospects. Later, by learning to calculate the bonus income R2 gained specific knowledge which then helped develop her self-confidence. Being knowledgeable gives the direct sellers the confidence to answer all questions. Developing these abilities can prevent stressful situations, because the direct sellers understand the prospects' needs and contexts.

6.2. Preparing to acquire *savoirs*

Preparing to acquire *savoirs* is the communication activities that enables communication competence in this Preparation Phase. All direct sellers demonstrated the acquisition of *savoirs* in the interviews, and all direct sellers were observed preparing themselves to obtain knowledge of the prospective customers beforehand.

- Following and observing leaders communicating with people

This study found that the direct sellers demonstrated behaviour abilities by following and observing their leaders as they communicate with people in the process of acquiring *savoirs*. This observation process has been identified as one of the strategies to gain tacit knowledge (Howell, 2002; Polanyi, 1962) whereby the direct sellers exercised their cognitive ability to understand the communication activities of their leaders. In this exercise, the direct sellers acquired *savoirs* of other people through general observation, rather than specifically of their own prospective customers. The direct sellers recalled the process of gathering *savoirs* when they were still new to the business. For example, R1, R4, and R11 described the process they followed when they observed their leaders' communication processes.

When I first started, I followed Sal as she sponsored my friends. I saw how she talked to them. Then I recorded what she said and practiced, using her words. (R1)
Once a week, my upline follows me to meet people. So I learn from her how to talk. (R4)
At first, our upline would guide us when we were prospecting. My upline told me, 'You have to follow me and observe what I do.' After she had showed me 3 to 4 times, she asked me to do it. So, I did the demo and then she just guided and taught me. At first in the prospecting process, we needed to listen and observe everything our upline said and did. Then, he/she would ask us to do it on our own. (R11)

From the comments, the direct sellers got first hand experience when they listened, and saw what their leaders were doing. At the same time, they visualised the knowledge they obtained during the events. Though at that time they did not practice communicating with the people the leaders had approached, using visual stimulation they memorised everything the leaders said, and learned the words and actions used. After following their leaders a few times, they gathered some techniques for communication, and an understanding of the characteristics of people. Acquiring *savoirs* in advance can develop self-confidence and later lead to becoming competent in the real context, as direct sellers are able communicate according to their prospective customers' contexts.

- Observing their own potential prospects without being noticed

The second behaviour ability that direct sellers used to acquire *savoirs* was to observe their own potential prospects without being noticed. At this stage, the direct sellers no longer had assistance from the leaders. This action was done when the direct sellers had no idea, or had never met their prospects at all. Thus, before approaching the potential prospects, they tried to gather a few clues regarding the person they were about to meet. In the interviews, the informants explained the process they undertook before they approached an unfamiliar person.

I observed first before I approached someone. When we are observing people, we need to see if there is somebody who is smiling and showing some interest. We should then go and approach the person. It means that the person is giving us a positive response. (R5)

When I observe a lot of people, I am able to understand more about other people. Before I went out to meet a prospect, I didn't go to meet the prospect straight away. (R6)

If I feel there is no chemistry, I go and find others first, and when the time permits, I will meet that 'no-chemistry' person again. I don't know, when I look at people, they have their own aura. We can feel good or we can also feel scared when we look at people's faces. (R8)

These three passages show that the direct sellers tried to obtain information about the potential prospects for a reason. They took the time to learn, and to gain some understanding of the people through observation. For example, R5 got a positive response, with a smile and a look of interest from the potential prospect. R5 could sense a comfortable feeling when she received that response. Simultaneously, her mind processes the knowledge that the response she received was positive. By believing in her own spiritual-affective and cognitive abilities, R5 knew she was able to approach the potential prospects. In both of these situations the direct sellers were able to process their thoughts and feelings simultaneously. Learning to trust their spiritual-affective and cognitive abilities during their observations can develop self-confidence. The aura surrounding an unknown prospect can give a useful signal to the direct seller. This study showed that when direct sellers have no clue about people, relying on their general knowledge is not enough, thus, trusting their own spiritual ability is imperative (Zohar & Marshall, 2000; Zohar & Marshall, 2004).

- Seeking information of prospective customers from downlines

Seeking information about prospective customers from downlines is another behavioural ability direct sellers used to acquire *savoirs*. No direct sellers explained this in the interviews, but the observation analysis shows that seeking information from the downlines was carried out by R1 and R9. Though I only saw these actions applied by two direct sellers, this process for seeking information has been cited as one of techniques used in gathering information about clients (Dwyer, Hill, & Martin, 2000; Jaramillo & Marshall, 2004).

Both R1 and R9 are direct sellers and in high ranking leadership positions in ABC Company. They no longer approach their friends as prospective customers as both said they had approached all their friends during their early involvement. In order to survive in the business, they meet prospective customers who are not their friends, but their downlines' acquaintances. They did not know anything about the prospective customers they intended to approach about the business, but they knew who their downlines were. This is the reason behind the process of seeking information from downlines. The example of R1's case follows: When R1 wanted to meet her prospective customer, R1P1, she did not go alone to the prospective customers' premises. She went to the premises with her downline and then they went together to the prospect's premises. The information seeking processes happened once R1 had met the downline. My observation was that R1 had no knowledge at all of who the prospective customer were. Thus, when meeting the downline, R1 had asked questions of the prospect's association with the downline that she had met:

What is her [the prospect] name?; How old is she?; Tell me what do you know about her?; Have you told her anything about our business?; Do we meet your friend alone or will you ask her to invite other people to listen me? (Observation note)

From the observation note, R1 wanted to know about the prospective customer's background for her to be able to

gain some understanding of them. While receiving information, R1 kept quiet and just nodded her head occasionally. Then suddenly, after the downline had finished speaking, R1 said, "Let's meet Kak Siti now". When R1 had received the information she needed, she processed the information carefully by exercising her cognitive ability. R1 has developed her understanding of the prospective customer before communicating within the real-time constraints. By my reckoning, R1 took less than two minutes to process the information she had received.

In this phase, preparation to acquire *savoirs* enabled direct sellers to be ready to communicate skilfully by being mindful of the prospective customer's context. Performing the explained actions will not guarantee direct sellers will be ready to communicate competently, unless direct sellers have coupled them to their thinking and feeling actions. Thinking with *savoirs* awareness, sensing the potential emotional response of the prospect, perceiving the aura of the prospect and prospect's context can make the actions of following and observing a mentor, and seeking knowledge from other associates become effective. Linking these abilities can provide direct sellers with certain outcomes: developing an understanding of others, developing self-confidence, and becoming knowledgeable.

7. Conclusion

Acquiring knowledge related to the direct selling business and spirituality; and preparing to acquire *savoirs* are two communication competence components that have been demonstrated in the Preparation Phase. These preparations demonstrated direct sellers' cognitive, behavioural, and spiritual-affective abilities. The cognitive abilities which had been exercised and subsequently led to developing communication competence were related with the mind process: stimulating the mind and understanding the required knowledge of direct selling business, spiritual, and *savoirs*. The knowledge and *savoirs* were then obtained when certain behavioural abilities were enacted: attending classes/training; reading/listening to business/motivational materials; doing exercises relevant to knowledge acquisition; following and observing leaders communicating with people; observing potential prospects from afar; and seeking information of prospective customers from downlines. Direct sellers had to prepare some knowledge of their prospective customers to enable them to sell their knowledge of business, therefore proving that the spiritual-affective abilities play a prominent role in creating a connection between direct sellers and prospective customers. Thus, stimulating an emotional response; understanding knowledge from within the inner heart; perceiving the atmosphere between interlocutors; and sensing an emotional response were four spiritual-affective abilities that have been described and observed in this phase. Practicing those abilities increased the capabilities of recognising the importance of contexts of the direct selling situations. Thus, understanding for the situations were direct sellers effort in developing their: self-confidence of the direct selling knowledge and *savoirs*; enthusiastic feelings; understanding of *savoirs*; and becoming knowledgeable of the direct selling business. Being ready with these outcomes can enable direct sellers to communicate competently during meeting with prospective customers.

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