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COMMUNICATING THROUGH TOUCH IN MANAGEMENT AND MARKETING

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Abstract: Body language and nonverbal communication in management and marketing have been studied extensively. However, the role of touch in business and negotiation has scarcely been tackled in literature. This study focuses on touch and touching, haptics, and haptic / tactile / touch communication in an attempt to assess its role in management and marketing communication. The study reviews the definitions of touch and haptics from a communicative perspective, the classification of forms of touch, and the variables of touching behaviour (age, cultural background, gender, status). A sub-chapter is dedicated to research on the role of touching in management and marketing.

• Introduction

Touch is critically involved "in sensory integration and, perhaps, even in psychological wellbeing; we humans need some degree of touching to survive and thrive". Moreover, "the touching involved in the grooming rituals of our prehuman ancestors may have been instrumental in developing conversation (in particular, gossip) and language". Touch is an important communication tool to convey comfort, encouragement, reassurance, support, and warmth. Compared to other means of communication, touch ranks third (6%), after sight (74%) and hearing (13%), but before smell and sound (3% each). Touch has been defined as a non-language message.

• Materials and methods

The materials used in this study consist in books and articles on the role of body language and nonverbal communication in management and marketing published in the last 50 years. The keywords used to select the references are touch and touching, haptics, and haptic / tactile / touch communication. Browsing the references allowed the author to review the definitions of touch and haptics from a communicative perspective, to classify the forms of touch, and to identify the variables of touching behaviour (age, cultural background, gender, status) from a management and marketing perspective.



• Results and discussions

Touch can be usefully classified into five types: arousal /sexual, expressing sexual intent; friendship / warmth, expressing idiosyncratic (individual or peculiar) relationship; functional / professional (in workplaces), expressing task-orientation and regards handshaking and professional touchers such as dentists, doctors, hairdressers, manicurists, masseurs, nurses, physiotherapists, politicians (occasionally), and priests; intimacy / love, expressing emotional attachment; polite / social (in workplaces), expressing ritual interaction.

There are two types of communicating through touch: adaptor gestures or adaptors (communicatively non-intended): body-focused movements, contact acts, expressive movements, manipulative gestures, self-manipulators, and self-touching gestures.

Touching in Management and Marketing is a matter of how people use their hands while working. Managers and marketers use them to touch themselves or objects and people. Self-touch is "the act of establishing physical contact with one's clothing or body parts". People touch their bodies "when emotions run high to comfort, release, or relieve stress. Self-stimulating behaviours – holding an arm/wrist, massaging a hand, pinching/rubbing scratching the skin, pulling one's earlobe, self-clasping, touching one's lips/mouth – increase with anxiety and may signal deception, disagreement, fear, or uncertainty". Because they reveal insecurity/scepticism/uncertainty, self-touch cues should be avoided while establishing credibility with strangers.

• Conclusions

From a management and marketing perspective, managers/marketers should be extremely careful when using communicating by touch: people having traumatic sexual experiences do not want to be touched at all; the type and length of appropriate touching depends on age, culture, family background, and gender; touch can be comforting, offensive or leading to a sexual harassment lawsuit; touch should be used with great caution; acquiring knowledge and skills in body language / nonverbal communication, one can get a more or less realistic impression about one's management / marketing opponent / partner (changes in) expectations / feelings / intentions / mood / thoughts.