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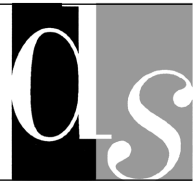
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# Managing prospect affiliation and rapport in real-life sales encounters



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**ABSTRACT** Detailed examination of audio recordings of business-to-business 'field-sales' encounters are used to report one way in which salespeople elicit verbal expressions of affiliation from their prospective customers – by reciprocating second assessments which affiliate with, trade off and build on prospects' own assessments. This article outlines the prototypical features of these junctures of assessment-affiliation and describes how salespeople can mobilize such assessments to build extended sequences of 'rapport' that take the form of adjacent and mutual expressions of substantive verbal affiliation. Consideration is also given to explicating both the interactional basis of these sequences as well as the socially obligating influence such affiliation and rapport can have on sales outcomes.

**KEY WORDS:** *affiliation, agreement, assessments, business communication, obligation, rapport, selling*

## Introduction

The ability of people to establish a rapport with others is widely held to be an important and consequential factor in many types of interpersonal encounters.<sup>1</sup> However, whilst there is a large literature documenting the communicative variables associated with rapport as well as the extrinsic factors which facilitate rapport, the processes by which rapport is constituted and cultivated has, as yet, received only limited attention from researchers.

This article seeks to rectify this lacuna by examining a verbal process by which salespeople can manage a rapport with their prospective customers (hereafter referred to as 'prospects') during real-life sales encounters.<sup>2</sup> We report how salespeople elicit agreements from their prospects by affiliating with prospects' assessments (i.e. evaluations about someone or something) and, more specifically, by reciprocating affiliative second assessments which trade off prospects' own assessments. We also describe how salespeople can extend these sequences to create a rapport that takes the form of mutual and adjacent expressions of substantive

verbal affiliation by these parties to one another. We propose that these sequences are a particularly important form of rapport as they comprise occurrences of these parties *showing* co-participation and social solidarity to one other. Moreover, such verbal, 'on-the-record' evidence of substantial affiliation, we argue, is treatable by both salespersons and their prospects as having some socially obligating, promissory impact on sales outcomes derived from these encounters.

Previous research in this subject area has tended to concentrate on determining the various non-verbal correlates of rapport, usually via experimental and quantitatively oriented research methodologies. Such correlates include facial, gestural and postural cues as well as spatial configurations between interactants, such as: (i) smiling, head nodding, animated facial expressions (including those which are compatible or expressive of mutual interest), high levels of eye-contact, facial synchrony; (ii) gestural synchrony, touching; (iii) postural sharing, convergence and 'mirroring', symmetrical arm positions, uncrossed leg postures, postures of involvement, open arm and leg postures; (iv) direct body orientation, close proximity, forward leaning; and, more generally, (v) non-verbal expressions of attentiveness, interest and involvement (Schefflen, 1964; LaFrance, 1979; Trout and Rosenfeld, 1980; Harrigan et al., 1985; Harrigan and Rosenthal, 1986; Bernieri, 1988; Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal, 1990; Heintzman et al., 1993; Drolet and Morris, 2000; Duggan and Parrott, 2001).

Verbal correlates that have been found to be significantly associated with rapport include restatements, minimal encouragers, reflections of feelings, silence (lasting between 5–33 secs) and verbosity (Sharpley and Guidara, 1993; Sharpley, 1997; Sharpley and McNally, 1997; Sharpley et al., 2000). Other studies, involving qualitative analysis of verbal action sequences in naturally occurring encounters, have shown that rapport can be created via joking and teasing, cooperative complaining, and echoing (in the form of repetition of a co-interactant's words/phrases) (Miller, 1995), and via reciprocated laughter (Lavin and Maynard, 2001).

The prevalence of actions displaying or expressing 'interactional synchrony and congruence' within this cited research links in with other studies showing that rapport is associated with interactants having some perceived or real extrinsic similarity to one another. Studies of the selling process, for example, have found that similarities between salespeople and their prospects (in terms of age, education, gender, height, nationality, political affiliation, race, religious preference, shared musical tastes and smoking) are associated with sales success (Evans, 1963; Woodside and Davenport, 1974; Churchill et al., 1975; Riordan et al., 1977). Other researchers have shown that the similarity between salespersons and their prospects can influence the trust, agreement or rapport that develops and which, in turn, can have a positive impact on sales outcomes (Gadel, 1964; Tosi, 1966; Busch and Wilson, 1976; though see Wilson and Gingold, 1981, for a critical overview of this research).<sup>3</sup>

Our study departs from the methodologies and analytical concerns of the vast majority of this research, particularly in terms of our focus on examining the

hitherto relatively neglected dimension of verbal rapport in a naturalistic setting. Furthermore, by adopting a data-driven approach and focusing on describing and accounting for both how the salesmen we studied evidently created a rapport with their prospects as well as the social and interactional 'rules' they tacitly attended to and capitalized on whilst doing so, we hope to show just how interactionally organized, subtle and effortful a real-life process of verbal rapport building can be.

### *The role of rapport in business-to-business sales encounters*

Because the link between having a rapport and achieving a positive outcome from an encounter seems inextricably intertwined, in certain situations interactants may not always leave rapport to chance. This is especially the case in business-to-business field-sales encounters. As this form of selling is characteristically a long-term business where sales (or at least the maximum number of potential sales) are only rarely obtained after a single sales visit, the quality of the personal relationship established between such a salesperson and prospect can play a particularly important role in the sales decision-making process.<sup>4</sup> This, perhaps, is also the main reason why such field salespeople tend to avoid employing 'hard-sell' tactics to secure a sale or otherwise persuade a prospect to 'sign on the [contractual] dotted line' at the end of any particular sales encounter.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, the outcomes of these encounters typically are more diverse than a basic 'purchase'/'non-purchase' dichotomy. Indeed, it is not uncommon for field salespeople to view a sales encounter as having been 'successful' even if no sale has been obtained. In this context, successful sales outcomes can also include receiving a positive, sales-enhancing response from a prospect, such as (i) an opportunity to tender for goods or services required by the prospect's company, (ii) a commitment to include a salesperson's stock lists/brochures in the company library, or (iii) even merely being allowed to contact the prospect again.

The salesmen we studied all drew attention to the importance of being alert for signs of having established a rapport with their prospects. A variety of verbal indicators of rapport were mentioned, such as (i) when a prospect switched to a first-name only basis of address, (ii) postponed or quickly finished a telephone call that had interrupted their meeting, and (iii) spoke in an agreeable, amenable manner throughout the sales encounter. The salesmen also spoke of rapport sometimes developing fortuitously, such as when an initially 'hostile' prospect 'warmed to' a salesman after the former realized they lived only two streets away from each other, or when one prospect, who initially was 'totally uncooperative' towards the salesman, 'radically changed his tune' after noticing they were both wearing an MG car-owner's club tie.

The salesmen also stated that they regularly worked at *verbally* building a rapport with their prospects. Although none of these salesmen had received any formal training in rapport building skills, one technique they all claimed to

employ was to ask their prospect questions not directly related to the business at hand, especially at the start of an encounter. The prospect's responses and, in particular, his or her enthusiasm to talk at length off the topic (aided by the ability of the salesman to keep what they called such 'small talk' going), served, the salesmen believed, as a barometer of how much the prospect 'liked' the salesman. Other verbal strategies the salesmen claimed routinely to employ included: 'being friendly', 'cracking the odd joke', 'being supportive and sympathetic', 'acting natural – being yourself', 'having an interest in what the prospect says', and 'laughing at every crap joke they tell'.

The salesmen we studied faced two rapport-related tasks. One was to provide their prospects with a favourable impression about themselves, the company they represented and the goods they offered for sale which was conducive to a purchase being made, if not immediately, then at some tangible future date. Their second task was to draw accurate inferences from a prospect about whether they had created or sustained a favourable impression. Given the diverse sales outcomes which may arise from any single sales visit, the salesmen had to rely on these inferences when determining what course of future action would be most appropriate, such as whether a sale or further sales was likely to occur or was worth pursuing. We shall see that the type of verbal affiliation and rapport examined in this article represents a particularly apposite means by which the salesmen could accomplish these tasks.

### *The foundation of verbal rapport – agreements, affiliations and assessments*

Agreements and, more generally, verbal expressions of affiliation are key elements of the type of rapport we examine in this article. One sequential environment where these actions are common is in the next turn to another speaker's assessment (Pomerantz, 1984: 63). With an assessment, speakers appraise or express an opinion about someone or something and, in so doing, present their evaluative 'line' (Goffman, 1967, 1970) with regard to that someone or something. In Extract 1, whilst answering the salesman's (S) question, the prospect (P) proffers an assessment (arrow A):<sup>6</sup>

#### **Extract 1**

- S: Did you see the programme on the, er, Australian wildlife er, last night?  
 P: I saw part of it, ye [s.  
 S: [Mm.  
 A → P: Interesting.  
 B → S: Yes, yes it was.  
 P: Considering you have to wait twenty five years to give birth to a f-, a seed [laughs].

In a study of conversational interaction, Pomerantz (1984) has shown that a relevant next action for a recipient of an assessment – when the referent in that

assessment is 'expectably accessible' (sufficiently knowable) to the recipient – is to agree or disagree with the assessment proffered (pp. 61–3). We also found, in an overwhelming number of cases, that whenever a salesman addressed a prospect's assessment in a next turn (as they recurrently did), the salesman agreed with that assessment. This happens in Extract 1 (arrow B).<sup>7</sup> In so doing, the salesman (as recipient of the assessment) affiliates with the evaluative line taken in the prospect's assessment and also co-participates with the prospect (as assessor) him/herself.

The sales encounters we examined were littered with sequences where a salesman affiliated with a prospect's assessment in this manner. Yet there were two reasons why these sequences did not, in themselves, constitute sufficient evidence of there being a rapport between these parties. First, although an agreement is evident, it is only the salesman who agrees with the prospect; the prospect is not agreeing with the salesman. As such, the salesman is not provided with any verbal basis from which he could reliably infer that he is getting on with the prospect.

Second, it also occasionally became apparent that certain post-assessment agreement forms such as "Yes", "Yeah it was", "That's right", "I agree", "True", "Absolutely", etc. were held by the salesmen and prospects as not even being sufficient (or reliable) evidence of agreement, let alone rapport. These types of agreements – which, for the purposes of this article, we call 'basic' agreements – can be nominal agreements because they do not make available the grounds or basis upon which one party agrees with the other. That is, such agreements claim or assert rather than show or prove agreement (Pomerantz, 1984: 66–7; Schegloff, 1984: 38–9; Sacks, 1992, e.g. Vol. 2: 252) and, as such, are always open to being perceived as instances of what Goffman (1967) calls a 'working acceptance' rather than a 'real' one. Indeed, these agreements may also not provide reliable or acceptable evidence of a speaker having understood or even having listened to what the other speaker has said.

Pomerantz (1984: 66–8) has shown that these forms of agreement are a characteristic feature of prefaces to disagreements and may, thus, be treated by a recipient as being weak agreement or even as implying disagreement.<sup>8</sup> Pomerantz (1984: 65) also reports that one way speakers *show* agreement with a prior speaker's assessment is by producing an affiliative second assessment in a next turn. This happens in Extracts 2 and 3 (reproduced, in a simplified form, from Pomerantz, 1984). In each case, speaker B shows agreement with speaker A in a way in which strong agreement characteristically is shown by one speaker with another – by proffering a second assessment which comprises an upgraded version of speaker A's assessment:

### Extract 2

- A: Isn't he cute?  
 B: Oh he's adorable.

**Extract 3**

A: You must admit it was fun the night we went down  
 B: [It was great fun.

Assessments are also a felicitous means of showing affiliation with a co-participant. Assessments are proffered as *products* of participation and one way of co-participating with a co-interactant who proffers an assessment is by proffering a second assessment (Pomerantz, 1984: 57–9). In showing a stronger, more substantial form of agreement via an affiliative second assessment (rather than via a basic agreement), the salesman also shows a stronger, more substantial form of co-participation with a prospect with regard to the activity *reported in* as well as the activity *occasioned by* that prospect's assessment.

Extract 4 comprises an instance where both the prospect and the salesman treat the salesman's basic agreements as being problematic evidence of agreement. The salesman has shown the prospect a piece of machinery that transpires to be higher in specification and price to that used by the prospect's company. The prospect remarks (somewhat affiliatively) that the repair kit for the item his company uses costs more than the item itself. On three occasions after the salesman affiliates with the prospect using basic agreements (arrowed as A) troublesome silences emerge (arrowed as B):

**Extract 4**

1 S: Crikey, so what sort of money is-, is that then?  
 2 P: We're talking about seventeen-, between seventeen and twenty quid.  
 3 S: Really?  
 4 P: a piece.  
 A → 5 S: Yeah.  
 B → 6 (0.3)  
 7 S: [So there's,-  
 8 P: [An' the last time I bought a repair kit for an item of that nature it was  
 9 about twenty two quid.  
 A → 10 S: Really, ye [ah.  
 11 P: [Mmm,  
 B → 12 (1.0)  
 A → 13 S: Yeah, I, I can believe that.  
 B → 14 (0.5)  
 15 P: Mm hmm,  
 16 S: 'hhhh And, an' as you say-, i- it er, it  
 17 isn't really necessary for you t[o have (0.4) as high a  
 18 P: [It isn't.  
 19 spec. item, (0.3) as this.  
 20 P: Not at all, no.

In each case, these silences appear to have surfaced as a result of the prospect holding off from starting to speak both after and because of the salesman's basic agreements. Moreover, the prospect's "Mm" and "Mm hmm" acknowledgements around the second and third of these 'agreement-silence' environments (lines

11 and 15 respectively), can be heard to indicate he is expecting something more than the agreements the salesman has produced.<sup>9</sup> As well as displaying an understanding that the salesman may (or should) continue with his talk, these acknowledgments may also have prompted the salesman to add to his basic agreement responses. After each of these silences the salesman attempts to deal with the negative implications of the prospect not having yet produced a response.<sup>10</sup> First, he commences then stops producing further talk in overlap with the incoming prospect (line 7). Second, he produces a more intensified (yet still 'basic') agreement (line 13). Third, it is only when the salesman produces an assessment that *shows* affiliation with the prospect – by affirming that the item of machinery he has shown the prospect is too high in specification for the prospect's needs (lines 16, 17 and 19) – that the prospect responds in a more affiliating fashion (lines 18 and 20). Thus, more substantive affiliating utterances and, more specifically, those formulated as affiliating assessments, can offset possible reservations a prospect may hold about a salesman's affiliation by virtue of the latter having affiliated with only basic agreement(s).

Therefore, from the salesmen's point of view, affiliating with a prospect via the use of basic agreements may actually hinder their quest to establish a rapport with that prospect. Indeed, persistently agreeing with what their prospect says in this fashion may leave the prospect with the impression that the salesman is a sycophantic 'yes man', in the business of slavishly and effortlessly attempting to ingratiate himself.

### *Seller-initiated assessments*

The salesmen could, of course, independently proffer their own assessments, thereby supplying their prospects with a more substantial means for making inferences about them. One advantage of the salesmen doing this is that they may, in return, secure an affiliative response from their prospects. This is because, as we have seen, an assessment provides the relevance of an agreement/disagreement response from the recipient of that assessment. Yet the salesmen rarely did this. Assessments were most often produced, at least initially, by prospects.

The trouble with a salesman independently initiating an assessment is that it entails some risk, namely that there is an ever-present possibility that their prospect might *not* affiliate with what the salesman has said. This happens in Extract 5. The prospect mentions that her company purchases two types of machinery (badged as "ABC", line 9) in quantities of "five or ten" and "a hundred" at a time (lines 1 and 2). Subsequently, the salesman proffers the assessment that whilst the equivalent machinery his company sells has a different name (i.e. "BCD"), they are "probably made all by the same people" (arrow A). The prospect's response "Possibly" (arrow B) is a downgraded, indeed contrastive, version of the evaluative line taken by the salesman (indicated by "probably") and, as such, implies or prefigures disagreement (Pomerantz, 1984: 68–70):



**Extract 5**

- 1 P: (...) we only buy five or ten at a time on those but the others, 'hhh we'd  
 2 buy-in a hundred at a time.  
 3 S: Yes.  
 4 (0.6)  
 5 S: Ah, ri [ght.  
 6 P: [At very keen prices.  
 7 (0.5)  
 8 S: A [h, right.  
 9 P: [(It's) the ABC ones we use at the moment.  
 10 S: ABC.  
 11 P: Mm [hmm,  
 A → 12 S: [Yes. Yes, well ours are BCD which are probably made all by the  
 13 same people.  
 B → 14 P: Possibly.=  
 15 S: =But whether we are, compet [itive we'll have to see on that.  
 16 P: [Mm hmm,  
 17 P: Yes.

Moreover, the salesman treats the prospect's "Possibly" as implying or prefiguring disagreement; immediately after this response, the salesman qualifies and thereby backs away from the evaluative line he had taken in his prior, independently initiated assessment (line 15). In so doing, the salesman succeeds in restoring the encounter to a more affiliative footing in that the prospect affiliates with his now revised position (line 17), albeit with a basic agreement.

Thus, in affiliating with a prospect or attempting to elicit affiliation from a prospect the salesmen faced two problems. First, affiliating with prospects' assessments by proffering basic agreements may be treated by prospects as not being sufficient evidence of agreement (in any case, these agreements do not provide the salesmen with any substantial evidence that their prospect is in agreement with them). Second, if the salesmen were to initiate their own assessments in the expectation (or hope) of obtaining expressions of agreement from prospects, there was the ever-present possibility that they may actually receive damaging, non-affiliating responses in return. These problems appeared to give rise to a series of verbal procedures that obviated these difficulties and, recurrently, enabled the salesmen to elicit affiliation from and move further toward establishing a rapport with their prospects.

*Reciprocating second assessments*

Instead of (or, more usually, in addition to) affiliating with a prospect's assessment with a basic agreement, the salesmen often produced a stronger, more substantive agreement in the form of an affiliative second assessment. Second assessments are 'assessments produced by recipients of prior assessments in which the referents in the seconds are the same as those in the priors'

(Pomerantz, 1984: 59). Typically, the salesmen's second assessments not only shared the same referent as their prospect's assessments, they also provided new information to that contained in the prospect's assessment – information which traded off and built on the evaluative line taken in the prospect's assessment. In so doing, the salesmen provided the relevance of an agreement/disagreement response from their prospect to their own second assessment and also encouraged (indeed, perhaps even constrained) the prospect to affiliate with the salesman in a next turn. We now examine three ways in which the salesmen affiliated with, traded off and built on their prospects' assessments – with 'reformulated', 'embellished' or 'predictive' second assessments.

#### 1. REFORMULATED SECOND ASSESSMENTS

With this type of assessment, the salesman reiterated the prospect's assessment in a different form. In Extract 6 the salesman responds to the prospect's assessment – a somewhat self-congratulatory claim that “there are four or five of us [i.e. buyers working in his office] that are all, a bit adaptable here” (arrow A) – with the affiliative second assessment “you wear a few hats”, (arrow B):

#### Extract 6

- P: (...) we concentrate on, erm, seeing, six, eight people a week, between us,  
 S: Mm hmm,  
 (0.6)  
 P: Erm, we're concentrating on, on the export side, you know?  
 (0.5)  
 A → P: We-, we-, erm, we figure- there are four or five of us that are all, a bit adaptable here,  
 (0.6)  
 B → S: Right, you wear a few hats,  
 (0.8)  
 C → P: That's right, yeah.

By proffering that the prospect wears “a few hats”, the salesman reformulates the prospect's prior expression of his own occupational versatility. Here, as was typically the case, the salesman's second assessment elicits an affiliative response in the prospect's next turn (i.e. “That's right, yeah”, arrow C).

We can now begin to account for how such second assessments can secure affiliation from prospects. First, the salesman's assessment is qualitatively different to the basic agreement response form contained in Extract 1 and discussed earlier. Now the salesman *shows* rather than claims or asserts agreement with the prospect. Saying that the prospect wears “a few hats” not only provides an affirmation of the prospect's occupational versatility, it also displays the salesman's analysis of what being adaptable could mean.

Second, by virtue of proffering an assessment that is a different, non-repetitive version of the prospect's assessment, the salesman, in effect, posits that his assessment is independently held. In so doing, the salesman also generates a heightened sense of his assessment being a spontaneous, unilateral expression of

affiliation that shows, in effect, that the salesman is 'genuinely' at one with the prospect and, more specifically, with what the prospect has just said.

Third, in attending 'backwards' to what the prospect has just said (by affiliating with the evaluative line taken in the prospect's assessment) and also in moving the sequence 'forwards' (by adding new information that remains consistent with the evaluative line taken in the prospect's assessment), the salesman's second assessment literally reciprocates the prospect's assessment. Furthermore, just as the prospect's assessment provided the relevance of an agreement/disagreement response from the salesman, the sufficiently different content within the salesman's second assessment re-initiates the relevance of an agreement or disagreement in a next turn, now from the prospect, to the salesman's own (second) assessment.

Fourth, given that the salesman's affiliative second assessment has traded off the evaluative line of the prospect's own assessment (e.g. in Extract 6, by having reformulated the prospect's account of the adaptability of the buyers in his office), in being structurally constrained to address the salesman's second assessment the prospect also is structurally constrained to produce an affiliative response in return. After all, the salesman has just reiterated what the prospect has claimed in a different form. If prospects then were to disagree with such an affiliative second assessment it seems likely that they would either have to (i) contradict the evaluative line taken in their own prior assessment, or (ii) do special work to display that they were *not* contradicting the evaluative line taken in their prior assessment. As we see later in this article, the prospect's confirmative agreement at this juncture (arrow C) also plays an important role, both in consolidating the emerging agreement between these parties as well as providing for the extension of this three-turn sequence into a sequence more characteristic of rapport.

## 2. EMBELLISHED SECOND ASSESSMENTS

Instead of reiterating a prospect's assessment in a different form, a salesman may more markedly embellish it in an affiliative fashion. This happens in Extract 7. The prospect is reporting the relative merits of CAD (computer-aided design) systems:

### Extract 7

- A → P: (. . .) and as long as-, as long as the amount of work you put in up front, warrants a- what you get out of it then-, then great.
- S: That's right,
- P: but there's not many CAD salesmen that will actually tell you the truth about what you need up front.
- S: Mmm,  
(0.7)
- B → S: 'hhhhh This-, that's the trouble as well isn't it? (He says). 'cause I know, I bought myself a- sort've a personal computer recently, I've just got a couple of new programmes for it and you spend hours.

P: [laugh]  
 just trying to work out how to use the syst<sup>em</sup>  
 C → P: [That's right, yeah,

The prospect's assessments that "as long as the amount of work you put in up front, warrants a- what you get out of it then-, then great" and "but there's not many, CAD salesmen that will actually tell you the truth about what you need up front" (arrow A), display reservations about the merits of CAD systems and CAD salespeople. His reservations are concerned mainly with the inordinate amount of programming effort required to create a computer-aided design, when compared with the appearance of the finished design on a computer screen. It is this line of 'inordinate amount of preparatory work' leading to 'disappointing end results' that underpins the subject of the salesman's second assessment (arrow B). Here, the salesman builds on and trades off the prospect's assessments by talking about his own experiences of learning to use a new computer. In the salesman's second assessment, the theme shifts slightly to the inordinate amount of time, and by implication effort (i.e. "you spend hours") he has taken "just trying to work out how to use the system".

Once again, after having traded off and built on the prospect's assessment, the salesman's affiliative second assessment elicits an expression of affiliation from the prospect in a next turn (i.e. "That's right, yeah" – arrow C, and also his laughter).

### 3: PREDICTIVE SECOND ASSESSMENTS

A third way the salesmen traded off prospects' assessments were with predictive second assessments. Here, because the evaluative line taken by the prospect was more implicit, it was 'predicted' or otherwise anticipated by the salesman. In Extract 8, the prospect reports having recently received a number of purchasing requisitions from within his company. These requisitions contain products that the prospect's company has not previously purchased (i.e. "never dealt in, b-before", line 9):

#### Extract 8

1 P: (...) you know if we've got an- e-, i-, inquiry for thirty items, I mean, for  
 2 instance we've just got, two or three orders with, between twenty and  
 3 fifty items in it,  
 4 S: Mm hmm,  
 5 (0.6)  
 A → 6 P: and, erm, if we cut it it adds up to a lot of money  
 7 (. )  
 8 S: Ri<sup>ght</sup>  
 9 P: [But it, also includes things that we've never dealt in, b- before,  
 10 [laughs] tarpaulins and things like th<sup>at</sup> you know.  
 11 S: [(What?) Really? Crikey.  
 12 [laughing] Yeah. 'hhh=  
 13 P: =Erm-,

14 (0.3)

B → 15 S: But you don't turn your nose up, you, =C → 16 P: =No, that's right-

Predictive assessments provide a candidate version of a putative line that is only implied or embedded in the prospect's own assessment. It is the predictive accuracy of this line, expressed more explicitly in the salesman's assessment, which serves to show affiliation with the prospect. In Extract 8, the salesman's second assessment ("but you don't turn your nose up", arrow B), in stating that the salesman would not turn down submitting a tender for such orders – given the opportunity – projects a course of action that the salesman assumes the prospect would expect companies like the salesman's to take if asked to tender for orders that included items which his (S's) company did not usually stock or supply. This is a course of action which expectably could be inferred from, but nevertheless, has not been stated explicitly by, the prospect.

Indeed, at first glance it appears that the salesman's second assessment has been initiated independently. The prospect's turn immediately before the salesman's assessment does *not* contain an assessment; it reports only what the purchasing orders he has received consists of (i.e. "things that we've never dealt in, b- before, [laughs] tarpaulins and things like that", lines 9–10). There is, however, an assessment in an earlier segment of the prospect's talk (i.e. "and, erm, if we cut it it adds up to a lot of money", arrow A). The salesman had responded to this assessment, initially, with only a basic agreement (line 8). Yet it is this utterance that appears to have provided the salesman with the materials for the particular type of affiliating second assessment he subsequently provides. It proffers an assessment of the prohibitive cost (or lack of profit) that would accrue if the prospect had to split up the purchasing requisition and seek tenders for the items listed in it from more than one company.

We can notice, again, that the prospect produces an affiliating response to the salesman's second assessment in a next turn (i.e. "No, that's right", arrow C).

Let us now review our findings so far. By reciprocating a second assessment which both affiliates with the evaluative line taken in the prospect's assessment and also trades off a prospect's assessment by adding new information to that contained in the prospect's assessment, a salesman sets up a constraint by which a non-affiliating response from a prospect is rendered less appropriate, and an affiliating response more fitting. Through proffering such second assessments and receiving such affiliating responses in return, a salesman could show, and a prospect could then confirm, that they were in agreement with one another. Through these types of actions the salesmen could obviate, to some greater extent, the interactional difficulties that can arise by virtue of affiliating with prospects using a basic agreement and/or producing self-initiated assessments.

### *Managing rapport by extending sequences of mutual affiliation*

Although agreements elicited from prospects (such as those examined earlier) are an important component of rapport, they did not seem to be treated by the salesmen or their prospects as being, in themselves, sufficient evidence of these parties having a rapport with one another. Partly, this was because the agreement responses that prospects proffered to the salesmen's second assessments usually took the form of basic agreements.<sup>11</sup> These agreements, we have argued, in claiming or asserting agreement rather than showing or proving agreement, may be held as not being adequate or genuine agreement. Nevertheless, in receiving such an affiliative response, the salesmen were then provided with an opportunity – in the form of a 'free utterance space', unencumbered with any sequential turn constraints generated out of, for instance, the prospect's/prior speaker's turn – to follow up and build on that affiliative response. The salesmen we studied often followed such affiliative responses with an action that provided the relevance of (and recurrently elicited) additional expressions of affiliation from their prospect, thereby creating a sequence more indicative of rapport. This occurs in Extract 9. The prospect is talking about the difficulties he has faced in deciding which sales representatives to buy from and proffers the assessment that "it's all trial-, trial an' error", arrow A):

#### **Extract 9**

- A →P: it's all trial-, tri[al an' error,  
 S: [(Well) this is it,=  
 P: =yeah,  
 y'know.=
- B →S: = This is it, it takes a long time to evaluate  
 thes[e things really.
- C →P: [(Well that's it. ( )].  
 (0.5)
- D →S: But er, [anyway it's a start [(I mean.)
- E →P: [( ) [(Well that's it, you've got your foot in the  
 doorway [laughs]

The salesman's second assessment ("it takes a long time to evaluate these things really", arrow B), in providing a candidate instance of one of the vagaries of the salesperson selection process facing professional buyers like the prospect, affiliates with, builds on and trades off the prospect's assessment. The prospect affiliates with this second assessment, employing the basic agreement "Well that's it" (arrow C). The salesman then extends this three-turn sequence with a further affiliative assessment ("But er, anyway it's a start", arrow D), and this elicits another expression of affiliation from the prospect (i.e. "Well that's it, you've got your foot in the doorway [laughs]", arrow E). In doing this, the salesman obtains an additional and consecutive response confirming that the prospect is in agreement with him.

This more elaborate five-turn sequence typically proceeds as follows:

- (1) P: Initial assessment (Arrow A)  
 (2) S: Affiliating second assessment (Arrow B)  
 (3) P: Initial affiliating response (Arrow C)  
 (4) S: Third assessment (Arrow D)  
 (5) P: Second affiliating response (Arrow E)

This sequential pattern is also apparent in Extract 10. The salesman and prospect are talking about computer games:

**Extract 10**

- A → P: (. . .) we've got one called erm, Aviator, which I think is IBM's own one, erm, but that's quite difficult,  
 (.)  
 S: That's ri ght  
 P: [It takes a lot of controls.  
 B → S: Well, it's-, it's a question of r-remembering what keys you've got to press for what, is [n't it?  
 C → P: [Yeah, that's the trouble.  
 D → S: And you get to the stage when you're pressing X when you should be pressing Y.  
 P: Yeah.  
 (0.4)  
 P: True.  
 (0.3)  
 E → P: I've got one at home, on my PC at home, on my-, it's not a PC it's a y'know, home computer, and it's er, a simulation of the air traffic control at, Heathrow,  
 S: Oh yeah, [small laugh]  
 P: And the idea is to get aircraft in within half an hour real-time, an-, and- I'm on level one, I've had it for two ye ars,  
 S: [laughing] Yeah,  
 P: I'm still on level one, 'hhh which is the simplest level (. . .)

Some typical properties of these longer sequences of mutual affiliation can now be reported. First, the salesman's utterances that extended the first three turns of these sequences traded off and built on what the prospect had affiliated with thus far. For example, in Extract 10 the salesman's assessment (arrow D) comprises an embellishment of his prior (second) assessment (which had, in itself, traded off the prospect's own initial assessment) about difficulties in using computer keyboards (arrow B). From talking initially, and in general terms, about "remembering what keys you've got to press for what", the salesman then provides a more specific illustration of this difficulty in practice (i.e. "you're pressing X when you should be pressing Y"). In proffering another assessment that, again, contains new information, the salesman provides the relevance of the prospect to address this assessment with an agreement or disagreement response in a next turn. By producing an additional affiliative assessment that maintains the evaluative line taken in both the prospect's initial assessment and the salesman's second assessment – an evaluative line that the prospect already affiliated



with in response to the salesman's second assessment (arrow C) – the salesman further constrains the prospect to proffer an affiliating response in a next turn. Indeed, in electing to extend the first three turns of these sequences in this fashion, the salesman creates the conditions where the prospect's next response is now even more likely to be an affiliative response. After all, the salesman had already received one expression of affiliation from the prospect to an assessment taking the same evaluative line as the salesman proceeds to take in his subsequent assessment.

Second, when a salesman extended the first three turns of these sequences with an additional assessment and received a second affiliative response from a prospect, that second response was, overwhelmingly, a relatively more substantial expression of affiliation than the prospect had provided to the salesman's prior affiliative (second) assessment. More specifically, at this juncture prospects' responses usually took the form of affiliative *assessments* rather than only basic agreements. In Extract 9, for example, the prospect's first affiliative response is "Well that's it", a basic agreement (arrow C), whereas his second response contains the affiliative assessment "you've got your foot in the doorway" (arrow E). Thus, by extending this sequence with a further assessment a salesman may (and most often would) receive a response that not only confirmed but also *showed* the prospect's agreement with him. In producing a more substantive second affiliating response the prospects display an attention to the progressive and developmental character of the affiliation sequence that was emerging, as well as to the consequent propriety, if not obligation, to move beyond claiming or asserting agreement and, instead, showing or proving it.

Third, each of the prospects' second, and usually more substantive, affiliative responses (arrow E) tended to trade off and build on the salesman's own traded-off third assessments (arrow D). For instance, in Extract 9 the prospect's assessment (i.e. "you've got your foot in the doorway", arrow E) is a reformulation of the salesman's prior assessment "anyway it's a start" (arrow D). Both assessments refer to the salesman having passed the hurdle of obtaining a first order from, and thereby gaining entry as a potentially regular supplier of goods to the prospect's company.

In Extract 10 the prospect's affiliative assessment embellishes the salesman's prior (third) assessment. Once more, the topic is 'having difficulty with computers'. The salesman has talked about the trouble he has experienced using a computer keyboard while playing computer games (arrow D). The prospect then affiliates with and expands on this theme by talking about the trouble he has faced playing one particularly difficult computer game (arrow E).

That the prospects at this juncture tended to produce such affiliatively 'safe' extensions to what has mutually been agreed to thus far suggests the existence of a heightened constraint to do so. One factor which appears to confirm this claim is that the affiliative assessments produced by the salesmen and prospects during these sequences in general and at this juncture in particular were commonly formulated as clichés, idioms or figurative speech. This did not seem to be



coincidental. One is tempted to conclude that the constraint to show affiliation substantively at such short notice is what accounts for the prevalence of such stock utterances during these sequences. However, Drew and Holt (1988) have shown that figurative expressions such as “You wear a few hats” (Extract 6) and “You’ve got your foot in the doorway” (Extract 9) seem to be treated as being beyond empirical challenge. In the context of selling, and especially at the junctures we have examined where the salesmen and prospects are, in their own different ways, each constrained somewhat to produce affiliation (and substantive affiliation at that), deploying figurative expressions and the like is a felicitous means of reducing what surely is an ever-present possibility of that utterance subsequently being treated non-affiliatively by a co-participant.

In these extended sequences one can now see both a prospect and salesman affiliating and then re-affiliating substantively with one another in adjacent turns of talk – actions indicative of there being a verbal rapport between these parties at that particular juncture of their encounter. Indeed, the means employed by the salesmen and prospects to affiliate with each other in Extracts 9 and 10 can be (and in our corpus regularly were) utilized to extend these sequences of mutual affiliation even further.

### *Dealing with prospects’ non-affiliation*

Even when a salesman’s assessment had affiliated with and traded off a prospect’s assessment that salesman’s assessment did not always then yield an affiliative response from that prospect. Such assessments display a recipient’s own analysis of the evaluative line taken in another speaker’s prior assessment and, in the encounters we examined, the evaluative line taken in the salesmen’s second assessments did not always transpire to concur with the evaluative line their prospect had taken or subsequently claimed to have taken. When a prospect expressed some reservations about, took issue or disagreed with a salesman’s affiliative assessment, a situation of non-affiliation and non-rapport between these parties becomes apparent. Consequently, the salesman may act to remedy this occurrence and attempt to restore the interaction to a more affiliative footing.

This happens in Extract 11. At the end of a report listing the international locations of her company’s new offices and outlets, the prospect produces the assessment “So, we’re doing extremely well, thank goodness” (lines 6 and 8). This eventually receives the affiliative assessment “Not very many companies can sort of say that these days” from the salesman (line 11). It then becomes apparent that the prospect has some reservations about what the salesman has just said:

#### **Extract 11**

- 1 P: (. . .) we’ve offices in France and erm, in  
 2 Germany now [as well, ‘hhhhh er, and we’ve  
 3 S: [Ah, right.

- 4 P: distributors in Australia and Los Angeles.=  
 5 S: =Phhhshhhew.  
 6 P: So, we're doing extremel [y well.  
 7 S: [Yes you are, [good.  
 8 P: [thank goodness.  
 9 S: Good, that's nice to hear.  
 10 (0.3)  
 11 S: Not ve [ry many companies can sort of say that these days.  
 12 P: [(Yes it is)  
 13 (0.3)  
 14 S: But er,  
 15 (0.8)  
 16 P: Gl [ad we can.  
 17 S: [Good.  
 18 (0.7)  
 19 S: I'll make a note about the catalogue anyway.  
 20 P: Please.

The prospect, for instance, holds off from addressing the salesman's assessment (lines 13 and 15). This silence is broken, though only momentarily, by the salesman's "But er" (line 14). This partial start, in containing two speech items common to the beginnings of troubles recognition/exit utterances, hints at the salesman's cognizance of his second assessment being incongruous with what the prospect has said. The utterance the prospect then produces (i.e. "Glad we can", line 16), in addressing the salesman's assessment only insofar as it applies to her company, has a downgraded character; the prospect continues to hold off from affiliating with the salesman's attempt to affiliate with her. The salesman treats this response as a set-back by changing the topic (line 19), the result of which, like the remedial action discussed in Extract 8, elicits affiliation from the prospect, albeit in the form of a basic agreement.

There were two characteristic features of these non-affiliation sequences. First, the salesmen invariably attempted to repair their earlier, now problematic affiliative assessments and they did so in a manner which avoided imputing blame to the prospect for the disparate evaluative lines that had emerged. The most common ways the salesmen attempted to repair such assessments was by moving off the topic, revising their problematic assessment or by backing away from the evaluative line they originally had taken (and, presumably, had inferred that their prospect had taken) and affiliating with the prospect's 'new' line. The prevalence of these remedial procedures at these junctures indicates that the salesmen treated the emergence of non-affiliating responses from prospects as having some negative consequence for their quest to present a favourable impression of themselves to, elicit affiliation from and build a rapport with their prospects.

Second, when a salesman's affiliative assessment received a non-affiliating response from a prospect it recurrently turned out that the salesman's assessment was treated by the prospect in one of two ways: (i) as if the salesman had

misunderstood the evaluative line taken in the prospect's assessment; or (ii) as if the salesman had co-assessed something the prospect now asserts or implies the salesman did not appropriately have access to assess. Both these forms of incongruity allow for a prospect to address their salesperson's affiliative assessment in a non-affiliative way.<sup>12</sup>

For instance, in Extract 11, the source of the salesman's incongruous assessment seems to stem from him misreading what the prospect meant by "thank goodness" (line 8). This phrase expresses a combination of appreciation and gratitude that the company for which she works is "doing extremely well". The salesman affirms the unusual nature of this success with "Not very many companies can sort of say that" (line 11), and also proffers a basis for that success being unusual (i.e. "these days", line 11). At the very least, both "thank goodness" and "these days" speak to the capricious, uncertain nature of the business world these parties inhabit. But by focusing on non-success as well as asserting that non-success is the current business norm, the salesman's assessment, although affiliative in character, can also be heard to contrast with and thus sully somewhat the prospect's report of her own company's experience. Indeed, the salesman's assessment could also be heard as him implicitly positing that, in the economic climate of "these days" the prospect's report is an instance of insensitive or naive, overweening pride.

### *Discussion and conclusion*

Reciprocating an affiliative assessment that trades off and builds on a prior speaker's assessment is one way of structurally encouraging (if not constraining) affiliation from that prior speaker. This activity is likely to feature in encounters where affiliation is deemed to be worthy of cultivation by at least one party and where no expressions of affiliation and expressions of non-affiliation from the other party are liable to have a compromising impact on their encounter or any outcome derived from it. This was the case in the business-to-business field sales encounters we examined. These salespeople, it seems, viewed affiliation and rapport to be so important to their quest to create a good impression and to secure a positive sales outcome that they undertook special verbal work to manage affiliation from and build a rapport with their prospects.

In our data, there was a marked tendency for the salesmen to agree with prospects' assessments, to proffer affiliative second assessments that traded off their prospects' assessments, to build on and extend the affiliation they recurrently received and to attempt to repair expressions of prospect non-affiliation whenever they arose. These actions are consistent with the salesmen working from the premise that the more instances of affiliating responses (particularly substantial affiliating responses) and the fewer non-affiliative responses they received from prospects, the more likely their chance of obtaining a positive sales outcome, if not indeed a sale, from their encounter. Yet whilst these verbal procedures and the rapport sequences they recurrently generated did not directly refer

to, occasion or determine a sales outcome there are at least two reasons why it would be erroneous to treat them as being a residual and unimportant feature of the selling project the salesmen were, after all, primarily engaged in.

First, in field-sales, where the possible outcomes which may arise are diverse and non-equivalent, such junctures of affiliation and rapport allowed these parties safely to express and infer both whether they were 'getting on with' each other and what such a getting on implied (e.g. whether or not a sale was likely to occur). Such activities (i) obviated the salesmen having to sell in a manner which officially asked for or explicitly attempted to persuade a prospect to make a purchase; and (ii) obviated prospects having overtly to resist or reject a salesman in his quest to obtain a sale. Both of these activities, in generating potentially face threatening situations (Goffman, 1967), can undermine whatever relationship is established by these parties during their current encounter as well as any future relationship between the companies these parties represented.

Second, such 'small talk' seemed not to be of small economic consequence. The activities described in this article, we propose, serve as a major way for prospects to express and salespeople to deduce whether or not a sale (or at least a positive, sales related outcome) is likely to occur because prospects' verbal expressions of affiliation and non-affiliation each implicate particular, non-equivalent types of sales outcomes.

Goffman (1970) proposes that the conduct of interactants has a 'promissory character' (p. 14). This creates tacit moral assumptions, reliances and expectations that commit each interactant to a particular type of future conduct which is consistent with the shared 'definition of the situation' they collaboratively and inferentially establish during their encounter. The type of rapport we have described is a particularly important 'predictive device' (p. 241) in this regard. Each verbal expression of affiliation (and non-affiliation) from a prospect comprises an 'on the record', accountable yardstick of the state of the relationship prevailing between these interactants. And these activities are treatable as having predictive relevance not only for (a) what subsequently occurs in their encounter being consistent with what already has been established in that encounter, but also for (b) any outcome that may result from their encounter being consistent with what was established during that encounter.<sup>13</sup>

Presumably, in responding to the salesmen affiliatively, prospects recognized (or were soon likely to learn) that agreements and, in particular, affiliative assessments were liable to encourage the extension or re-initiation of these episodes of affiliation. By so doing, the prospects tacitly consented (and could be heard by their salesman to tacitly consent) both to the verbal rapport that usually then emerged and to an outcome that was consistent with what that mutually constituted verbal rapport implied – a heightened obligation to either proffer or agree to a positive outcome if not, indeed, a sale.<sup>14</sup>

Such sequential processes and the associated structural constraints that they invoke are not unusual in interaction in general or selling encounters in particular. For instance, as Heritage (1984: 278) points out, pre-sequence utterances

are commonly mobilized in conversation to pre-emptively and non-explicitly solicit the active collaboration of a recipient in forwarding preferred actions (e.g. by obtaining an implied consent to an as yet unannounced invitation, story/joke telling etc.) and avoiding (by aborting) dispreferred actions. In responding positively and affiliatively to a pre-sequence utterance an interactant is, in effect, rendered under some heightened obligation to consent to the action the pre-sequence utterance prefigures (e.g. an invitation) when it subsequently and officially is announced.

With regards to selling encounters, research suggests that salespeople can sell more effectively by securing purchase implicative commitments from their prospects. In studies based on video analyses of real-life sales encounters, Clark and Pinch (1988, 1992, 1995) describe how street market pitchers and mock auction scam workers prospectively manage sales success by soliciting ostensibly innocent expressions of 'interest' in or involvement with the goods offered for sale from shoppers. These salespeople then retroactively invoke such displays of interest or involvement as having been purchasing implicative expressions in order to place such shoppers under a more ineluctable obligation to purchase those goods.

Thus, checking out the likelihood of something being consented to (e.g. with a pre-sequence utterance) and prospectively managing the likelihood of something being consented to (e.g. via soliciting purchase implicative responses from a sales prospect) are but two peas from the same 'project based' interactional pod. Nevertheless, they tend to differ in the degree to which latter process less obviously and thus less anticipatably displays the instigator of the action sequence (in our case a salesman) (i) engaging in 'pre-sequence work', and (ii) relying on or capitalizing on the constraints such prospective work invokes to secure a preferred outcome from the encounter.

On a more general level, these episodes of mutual affiliation are more than displays of a salesperson and prospect showing co-participation and social solidarity with one another. Assessments, in evaluatively presenting a person's sense of or personal experience of someone or something, also comprise moments where an aspect of one's 'self' or 'identity' is revealed to a co-participant. Of course, this self or identity need not be 'genuine'. Likewise, affiliative second assessments perform equivalent, revelatory and veridical roles for the co-participant – with two important provisos. First, such assessments, in being affiliative, also show an acceptance of the self/identity claimed by the prior speaker and, on that basis, confirm and give added credence to the prior speaker's presented self/identity. Indeed, in our data, the pressure on the salesmen to create a sociable, affiliative relationship with their prospects often seemed to encourage prospects to indulge in presenting a self/identity that otherwise would not be socially acceptable for them to reveal, let alone revel in. Nevertheless, the task of listening to, affirming and encouraging the self-aggrandizing that prospects often engaged in during these encounters seemed a cheap (but surely onerous) price the salesmen had to pay for the opportunity this afforded them to elicit

affiliation from, manage a rapport with and attempt to secure sales from their prospects.

Second, whilst reciprocated, affiliative assessments show that the salesman's self/identity is 'at one with' that of the prospect, that self/identity so presented also may not (and need not) be 'genuine'. Indeed, the pressure on a salesman to show affiliation with a prospect in our sales encounters provides a very strong basis for the self/identity that the salesmen presented *not* being genuine. Nevertheless, in affiliating with such reciprocated assessments, the prospect tacitly accepts (and, as we have seen, is somewhat constrained to accept) both the self/identity the salesman presents himself at that juncture to be and their resulting similarity to and affinity with one another that the prospect's affiliative response(s) evidently establishes. But the purchasing implicative obligation that such a show of acceptance is likely to generate for a prospect is also likely to carry both an interactional and an economic cost which that prospect may subsequently have to pay.

In our data, a rapport between a salesman and a prospect did not only (or even significantly) emerge fortuitously. Nor did it evidently stem from, or noticeably depend on, extrinsic factors such as the inherent similarity of the salesman and prospect to one another. Indeed, the manner in which the salesmen obtained expressions of affiliation from and occasioned a rapport with their prospects indicated the presence of a series of related communicative procedures that obviated them having to rely on these types of factors to establish a rapport. With the verbal procedures we have examined, the salesmen we studied attempted to sell to their prospects by selling a particular version of themselves. The self or identity of the salesmen (and, undoubtedly, the prospects) that emerged during these sequences, and the relationship, similarity and rapport that developed between them was essentially an interactionally accomplished social artefact, expressed in, managed through and inferred from the ongoing, seemingly economically consequential 'small talk' of the sales encounter itself.

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#### NOTES

1. Researchers have claimed or shown that rapport can have a significant if not decisive impact on the success of, for instance, counsellor–client interactions (e.g. Sharpley and McNally, 1997; Nguyen and Bowles, 1998; Sharpley et al., 2000; Joe et al., 2001), police interviews with victims of crime (Sandoval and Adams, 2001), athlete–coach relationships (Douge, 1997), instructor–student encounters (Bernieri, 1988; Perkins et al., 1995), staff perceptions of supervisors (Heintzman et al., 1993), physician–patient consultations (Harrigan and Rosenthal, 1986; Duggan and Parrott, 2001), researcher–subject access and quality (e.g. Berk and Adams, 1976; Luff, 1999; Lavin and Maynard, 2001; Sherif, 2001; Springwood and King, 2001)

- and business relationships, performance and outcomes (e.g. Wilson and Gingold, 1980; Miller, 1995; Nancarrow and Penn, 1998; Drolet and Morris, 2000).
2. Our study is based on an examination of transcribed audio recordings of 14 real-life business-to-business 'field-sales' encounters – where salespeople travel to meet and sell to prospects at the latter's business premises or work-sites. These involved 4 salesmen from one UK distributor of engineering products (valves, pipe-line etc.) and 14 prospects (such as buyers and engineers), from 13 different UK companies. This corpus was collected by one of the researchers following each salesman for one day and recording all the sales encounters that took place (either 3 or 4 encounters were recorded for each salesman). The researcher was present, though typically silent, during each of these encounters. We feel confident that the researchers' presence and the use of pocket-sized recording equipment had a minimal impact on these encounters. In the UK, this process of 'shadowing' a salesperson and being present as a silent third party during a field sales encounter is commonly used by this type of company (and accepted by their prospects) as a means of training neophyte salespeople and monitoring the performance of sales staff.
  3. Although there are wide variations in how rapport is defined and operationalized in these studies, there are, nevertheless, some recurrent themes which we now summarize: rapport comprises a relationship between two or more people, characterized by feelings of mutual positivity, harmony, cohesive bonding and co-interactants being 'at one with' each other. These feelings are borne from interpersonal encounters characterized by reciprocated displays or expressions of other-involvement, such as attentiveness, empathy, friendliness, warmth, interest, liking, approval, agreement, interest, enthusiasm, understanding, cooperation, support, closeness, and the like. (More detailed treatment of the conceptualization of rapport can be found in Blanck et al., 1986; Harrigan and Rosenthal, 1986; Bernieri, 1988; Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal, 1990; Argyle, 1990; Hendrick, 1990; DePaulo and Bell, 1990; and Drolet and Morriss, 2000.) The verbal rapport we examine in this article embraces, to a greater or lesser degree, all the constituent features of rapport listed earlier.
  4. In addition, factors such as the specification, price and delivery times of the products these salespeople attempt to sell are often not prohibitively dissimilar to those of their competitors.
  5. From our interviews with these salesmen it was readily apparent that having a rapport with their prospects was deemed to exert a decisive influence on the success of their encounters and, more specifically, on whether a sale was likely to occur. For example, one salesman said, "If they [prospects] don't like the sales rep they won't buy your gear, it's as simple as that". Another claimed that this type of selling was "predominantly if not exclusively about selling yourself".
  6. An explanation of the transcription symbols we have used is provided in the Appendix. Our transcription process is a simplified version of that developed by Gail Jefferson and employed by conversation analysts (see e.g. Sacks et al., 1974, and Atkinson and Heritage, 1984: ix–xvi).
  7. Pomerantz (1984: 77–95) shows that certain types of assessments such as self-deprecating and self-critical assessments invite (and engender) disagreement as the structurally preferred next action of a recipient. There were no examples of these assessments in our corpus and, thus, the agreements the salesmen provided to their prospects' assessments were, in every case, a structurally preferred next action.
  8. The classic preface to disagreement being constructed along the lines of 'Yes [or some other form of basic agreement], but . . .'
  9. One possible basis for this prospect doing so is that, in our data at least, basic



agreements regularly preceded the more substantive affiliative assessments within a speaker's turn – see, e.g., Extracts 6–9 (each arrowed as B) and Extracts 9 and 10 (both arrowed as E). In Extract 10 (between arrows D and E) it is the salesman who seems to be waiting for more substantive agreement from the prospect.

10. For an account of silences in conversational interaction, see e.g. Sacks et al. (1974); Jefferson (1989). For analyses of silences projecting troublesome responses in conversation, see e.g. Davidson (1984); Jefferson (1989). See also Clark et al. (1994) for a study of silences projecting prospects' non-acceptances of sales proposals during telephone selling encounters. Conversely, one often finds that affiliation and agreement are also marked sequentially (Pomerantz, 1984: 69–70). For instance, the salesmen and prospects in our study often produced affiliation in overlap with the other speaker's talk. This is evident in many of the sequences in this article, Extract 9 providing a particularly explicit case.
11. This is the case, for instance, in Extracts 6–8 (arrow C) and in Extracts 9 and 10 (also arrowed as C).
12. Prospects, as recipients of affiliative second (or subsequent) assessments that can be treated as having misunderstood what was said in an initial assessment are, of course, *not* constrained to disaffiliate with what the salesman has said. A prospect may, instead, let the misunderstanding pass; they may even affiliate with their salesperson's incongruous assessment, employing one of the weaker, basic agreement forms. In our data, prospects who took the opportunity to disaffiliate with a salesman's affiliative assessment were displaying one way of resisting and discouraging the salesman's attempt to secure affiliation and build a rapport. Another way a prospect could pre-empt the emergence of sequences where that prospect may end up being constrained to affiliate with the salesperson (not dealt with here) is by initiating assessments which are not expectably assessable to that salesperson.
13. Further research is required to ascertain whether the various nonverbal correlates of rapport cited earlier operate in the same rapport-constituting, obligation-inducing manner as we have proposed to be the case with the verbal actions outlined in this article. However, the social obligation that activities such as rapport building and rapport confirmation can generate (and, presumably, are utilized in order to generate) appears to be more readily achievable in and through verbal rather than nonverbal elements of action sequences.
14. Preliminary inspection of outcomes from these encounters seem to provide at least a crude confirmation of our claim. For instance, the two encounters which had the highest number of instances of prospects expressing affiliation with their salesman's reciprocated assessments achieved a sale. In one of these encounters, the prospect agreed to a sale during the encounter; in the other encounter, the prospect made a purchase one week later. Conversely, the two least positive sales outcomes followed encounters where the number of such prospect affiliations were much lower and the number of prospect non-affiliations with a salesman's reciprocated assessments were highest. These outcomes took the form of one salesman being told by a prospect that he was 'happy' with his current supplier and the other salesman remarking to the researcher that he was 'certain' he would be allowed to visit the prospect again only 'if or when the need arises'. It may also not be coincidental that the two salesmen involved in the most successful encounters were not the same two salesmen involved in the least successful encounters.



## APPENDIX: INDEX TO TRANSCRIPTION

*Identities*

S: Salesman

P: Prospect

*Intervals within and between talk*

- (0.8) Silence within a speaker's talk or between speakership exchanges: the number within parentheses is the time that elapsed in seconds and/or tenths of seconds.
- (.) A micro-pause, a silence which is estimated to have a duration of less than three tenths of a second.
- 'hhhh Audible breathing: each 'h' lasts approximately one tenth of a second.
- , & . Commas indicate upward intonation and projectably incomplete turns; full-stops indicate downward intonation and potentially completed turns.

*Contiguous utterances*

=

= Aligned 'equals' signs indicate that the second speaker's talk occurs immediately after (i.e. is latched to or 'pushed up against') the end-point of the prior speaker's talk.

Ta

lk  
[ Talk The position where overlapping talk begins is marked with a left-hand bracket linking an ongoing with an incoming utterance.

*Other features*

- (Talk) Elongated parentheses, sometimes empty, are used to represent the occurrence of talk that was difficult to hear and transcribe. An estimation of what was said may be provided within these brackets.
- Talk Talk that is underscored is spoken louder or emphasized by prolonging the words (usually by stretching a vowel).

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