
Mimicry: The latest negotiating strategy



By Aileen Huang

Negotiating online? New research shows that imitating your counterpart's writing style can help seal you a better deal, proving that imitation is indeed the better part of flattery...

Mimicry is a form of human behaviour commonly used for currying favour, - indeed, studies of real-world interaction have shown that waitresses who consciously mimic their customers' tone of voice receive bigger tips. But can it be utilised online? That is, without seeing or even hearing the other person? A new study says it can, and the methods can even improve your online business results.

Most businesses would regard online negotiations, without video or audio, as a finite process. There's only so much you can gain in talks where neither party can see the other. How effective can online, text-based communication be when building trust and rapport is needed but the absence of physical interaction has stripped away critical non-verbal cues?

Research by INSEAD professors Roderick Swaab, William Maddux and Marwan Sinaceur found that mimicking — in this case imitating the linguistic

patterns in someone's writing style — can help negotiators be more effective in online interactions that do not involve vision or sound, whether it's by copying the text language used, using the same acronyms or emotion icons, and so on.

"In online contexts in particular, and negotiations in general, establishing positive interpersonal capital is crucial because it facilitates trust between parties," explains Roderick Swaab, an assistant professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD.

But, hold the smiley icon, it's not just the mimicry but the timing of it that is important.

The researchers found that mimicry is effective early in negotiations but not at the end, because "the most critical time for people to develop trust is at the beginning of their interaction, when the relationship is more malleable", Swaab says. Furthermore, the content of the mimic is just as important. Mimicking text language with positive emotions is more likely to foster trust than mimicking neutral or negative emotions.

Two behavioural studies, conducted in Thailand and the United States, placed pairs of subjects labelled 'recruiters' and job 'candidates' together to negotiate hiring terms via a real-time chat programme. Recruiters were told to imitate the candidates.

The results showed that the 'recruiters' were more satisfied with the outcomes of the negotiation when they imitated 'candidates' within the first 10 minutes of their talks. However, when the recruiters imitated their counterparts late in negotiations the candidates achieved a more favourable result.

The researchers attribute this to the language content during different stages of the talks. For instance, the early stages of the talks involved more positive emotions as negotiators became familiar with each other, which in turn engendered trust in the candidate and enabled the recruiter to earn better outcomes through language mimicry, Swaab says.

But late mimicry was causing recruiters to use accommodating language, because later in talks negotiators are more likely to compromise to seal a deal. "You are no longer protecting your interests at the time when you most need to do so," says Swaab. "Mimicry helps online negotiations, but timing and content are critical to leveraging mimicry's effectiveness."

One final note is to keep the mimicry subtle. “Because humans tend to mimic naturally anyway, few people notice when it is happening,” says Maddux, “and no participants in the studies noticed any mimicking either.” But in the unlikely event that it’s detected, he says, all bets are off.

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