

Finding the right emotional 'match' makes for better business relationships

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When it comes to creating successful business interactions, exchanges between buyers and sellers with similar emotional abilities may lead to more lucrative outcomes than an animated or ambitious employee alone.

Erick Mas, a postdoctoral fellow at the Owen Graduate School of Management at Vanderbilt University, and his research partners studied how differing levels of deep-level interpersonal similarity using [emotional skills](#)—such as expressive speech, eye contact, touch and other expressions in communication—impact business relationships and consumption decisions.

With regard to establishing successful long-lasting relationships, "We found that two people with low emotional ability interacting with each other are equally as successful as two people with high emotional ability," Mas said. "Disparate levels of emotional ability can lead a client to feel uncomfortable with what he or she considers too much or too little use of emotion in communication."

The study, "Birds of a Feather Feel Together: Emotional Ability Similarity in Consumer Interactions," was published recently in the *Journal of Consumer Research*. Mas' co-authors are Blair Kidwell and Virginie Lopez-Kidwell from the University of North Texas and Christopher Blocker from Colorado State University.

Past research has indicated that by drawing on emotional intelligence in interactions, a person with high emotional ability should be able to fine-tune their emotional expression to match the other's preference and carry the interaction with their counterpart. But this new research shows that may not be the case.

Mixed signals

The researchers found that a mismatch in emotional ability actually has a detrimental effect on interactions.

"The problem is that for somebody who is lower in emotional ability interacting with somebody who's higher in emotional ability, they both

end up feeling invalidated because their communication needs are not matching up," Mas said.

This "emotional ability similarity" phenomenon impacts all levels of interactions, from frontline sales and service employees interacting with consumers (e.g., real estate agents and homebuyers) to personal relationships among people who live, purchase and consume together (e.g., romantic partners, families, friends and roommates).

"When you can't see someone, such as when talking on the phone or emailing, you can't read a person's emotions," Mas said. "So the gains received from having emotional chemistry or being a match in terms of emotional ability are diminished."

Experiments

The researchers conducted multiple unique studies to examine the effects of emotional ability similarity on consumer relationships and marketing exchange outcomes.

A longitudinal field study with salespeople from a top real estate firm and their customers demonstrated how similarities in emotional ability influenced consumers' perceptions of customer–salesperson interactions in a real-world setting.

In a lab experiment, the researchers paired subjects who were similar and dissimilar in their level of emotional ability. In other experiments, they disrupted participants' ability to exchange [nonverbal communication](#) with their partner by having them sit facing away from each other or speaking via Zoom conferencing software with the video component disabled.

The experiments ended with similar results: When both parties could

exchange nonverbal communication with their partner, people with matching emotional ability levels had better interactions than those with conflicting emotional abilities.

More information: Blair Kidwell et al. Birds of a Feather Feel Together: Emotional Ability Similarity in Consumer Interactions, *Journal of Consumer Research* (2020). [DOI: 10.1093/jcr/ucaa011](https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucaa011)

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