

How to Sell Using Your Body

by ©1998 Robert C. Brenner, MSEE, MSSM

An interesting method for selling clients on you, your company and your services is to use nonverbal communication, subtle messages conveyed without words. These include posture, facial expressions, gestures, mannerisms and your appearance. People buy based on their senses, and everything that you can do to positively affect their senses can and will affect your ability to sell to them.

Psychologists claim that the impact you make on others depends on what you say (7%), how you say it (38%), and by your body language (55%). Since how you sound also conveys a message, 93% of emotion is communicated without actual words.

The master speaker, S.I. Hayakawa once commented that "In this era of television, image is more important than substance." Some believe that Richard Nixon won the presidency because he was a master at using color to convey character. He wore a dark blue suit at a television debate in which the set background was light blue. The light blue background with Nixon in his dark blue suit produced an aura of honesty, integrity and sincerity. He won that election.

It's often not what you say that influences others; it's what you don't say. The signals that you send nonverbally suggest attitude, understanding, empathy and ethics.

The moment you meet a prospective client, they judge you by what they see and feel. The process takes less than 10 seconds but the impression is permanent. Whether you make or break a sale can literally depend on the silent signals that you send during this first contact.

It's critical for entrepreneurs to understand and use body language. Once you know what to look for, you can literally read your client like a book. Court room trials could be decided quickly if the judge and jury could read body language. One group skilled in this technique are oriental business people. They are usually expert at recognizing and using nonverbal signals. This ability makes them formidable negotiators. Many entrepreneurs fail to recognize and use body language, although women are inherently better at sensing emotion and intent than men.

The human body can produce over 700,000 unique movements. These movements have been partitioned into about 60 discrete and symbolic signals and around 60 gestures. Knowing just some of these can help you communicate better. A nodding head can signal yes. Pointing two fingers at your eyes can mean "watch". Running your fingers through your hair can indicate frustration. A smile or a grin is a universal signal for happiness. Likewise, crying

suggests sadness or, in conjunction with a smile, extreme delight.

However, some nonverbal signals have several meanings. Crossed arms can indicate defensiveness, or simply a comfortable position. Touching the nose can suggest doubt in what the person is hearing. Or it could be a response to an itch or soreness from a recent cold. Likewise, an unbuttoned jacket can signify openness and cooperation. It could also be an overweight person trying to fit into an old jacket. The hitchhiking pose, arm extended with thumb pointed up, can give a negative message in other cultures.

The key is that a nonverbal signal is not a complete message. Watch for a pattern of signals that all have the same meaning. The body language should match the verbal expressions. It should also match the context of the situation. So look for body language in clusters of signals with common meanings. Once you understand body language, you can use your own voice and body to help make a sale.

Take the handshake for example. A handshake can be soft, firm, brief, long, or even painful. The way you shake hands provides clues to your personality. Aggressive people have firm handshakes. People with low self esteem often have a limp handshake. Politicians typically shake your hand with their other hand covering the shake or holding your elbow. Domineering men often squeeze the hand of women during a greeting. The clever woman moves her index and little finger in toward her palm preventing a crushing handshake. This negates his dominant act and keeps her in equal control. So adopt a handshake that is firm, yet not crushing. Convey confidence and professionalism, not dominance.

Posture is another aspect of body language. A slouch can suggest lack of interest or enthusiasm. Standing straight with your weight balanced on each foot makes you look confident and relaxed. Try to stand or sit up straight; don't slouch.

Rather than saying "Trust me", subtle actions can convey the message "I can be trusted". The mannerisms of honest people produce belief. Even animals sense this. One particular mannerism involves the way palms are shown. Holding a hand out to a dog with the palm down sends a dominant message to the dog. It may snap at you if you're a stranger. Shaking hands with your palm down conveys the same message. Showing an open hand with palm up suggests honesty and sincerity. To an animal it conveys trust. Hands pushed into pockets convey hidden agendas or secretiveness. Show your palms, and help build trust.

Open hands with your palms visible should be accompanied by an open posture and a sincere facial expression. Your arms should be unfolded, not crossed. And your eyes should be focused on your client. Darting eyes suggest deceit. Looking left as you speak can suggest truth. Looking right when you speak may transmit dishonesty. Looking down when speaking conveys low self esteem.

And get rid of the sunglasses. Dark glasses prevent a client from seeing your eyes and “reading your soul.” It’s been said that a person’s eyes cannot hide a dishonest intent.

My best advice to women is to go with your feelings. Women have an innate ability to process messages simultaneously in both their right and left brain. They can sense much about others. A woman can “tell” if you aren’t sincere. They can “feel” intent. Unfortunately, some women don’t follow their instincts, and this has gotten them in trouble. Your “sixth sense” is the part of you that tunes in on non-verbal messages. Learn how to read and use these messages in business, and you’ll substantially increase your probability of sales success.

When you meet a client, use honest, open gestures. Outward and upward movements of your hands are positive actions. Putting the finger tips of one hand against the finger tips of the other is a form of “steeping” that conveys confidence. But clasping your hands behind your head as you lean back in a chair can suggest arrogant confidence and turn prospects away. Placing your hands on each side of your waist is called “standing at the ready”. This pose shows confidence and attracts others. Many catalog clothing models are photographed standing in this pose.

Unbuttoning a suit jacket in front of a prospect will signify an open attitude, that you’re willing to talk, to negotiate. Taking off your jacket is really powerful. And rolling your shirt sleeves up suggests that you’re ready to get down to the final price.

As you talk with a prospect, watch their body language. If they cross their arms, use positive signals and statements that will cause them to unfold their arms and open up to your sales approach. When their arms and legs are uncrossed and their hands are open, a sale is possible. When you notice them “mirroring” your movements and gestures, you’ve got them locked on to your sales presentation. Mirroring indicates maximum communication with the other person. If you move your arms apart opening your palms, and they do the same, you are both in synch. The messages and the words of the sale are being received and accepted by the other.

With a technique called “tracking,” you mirror their body language, and then gradually move them toward a more positive posture and psychological openness. As they shift their posture to mimic yours,

their attitudes will shift, and you can close on the sale.

If they cover their mouth, touch their nose or touch near an eye, they are withdrawing. Something that you said has turned them off. Back up and resell using another approach. Gently refocus on the prospect. Encourage them to share their concern. Open your palms to them and occasionally touch a palm to your chest as you speak. This is a strong signal of honesty.

I was “told” by a deaf person that you can tell if a signing person is actually deaf by observing if they touch themselves. A hearing person will “sign” words, but seldom touch the body. A deaf person often touches their chest as they “sign”. The same gesture accompanies sincere statements by hearing and non-hearing people. Touching a palm to the chest usually doesn’t occur unless a person is making an honest comment.

Avoid fidgeting or appearing nervous. Even if this is the first serious prospect in a week, you must act as though your business plate is relatively full. If they appear defensive or hostile, don’t react in like manner. Use all positive signals. Lean slightly forward to put energy into the conversation. Spread your arms, and open your hands with your palms up.

The adage “Don’t point” is appropriate. Pointing at a person is an aggressive act. In my communication skill classes, I present dozens of magazine photographs showing political leaders pointing at each other or chopping their hands down in a defiant gesture. These actions antagonize. They don’t sell.

Visualize your customer wearing a traffic signal. Positive nonverbal messages signal “green” to go ahead and approach a close on the sale. If the client’s body language changes from positive to defensive or non-believing, the signal is “yellow” and caution must be observed. Slow down and advance carefully. Try to get them to exhibit openness. A defiant, arms and legs “double-cross” with a scowl on their face is a definite “red” signal. You cannot close a sales unless you have a “green” light. If you can get your prospect to mirror your movements they’ll be in synch with your presentation and receptive to the sale.

If you are still unable to close, thank the person for listening. Approach sales like renting an apartment. It typically takes five showings before a rental is achieved. Likewise, it can take up to five inquiries before you close on a sale. If they’re number four, the next prospect should be the one that buys. And the person who decided not to buy today, will consider you again if they are left with a positive impression of you and your company. Impress them with your professionalism and integrity. Your attitude can affect future sales. Take “turn downs” in stride.

Use your body in the selling process and keep upbeat. If you believe in your services and the quality of

your work, others will too. A positive, honest message conveyed by your nonverbal communication will generate far more opportunities than you think. Nonverbal messages can move prospects from suspicion to openness and receptiveness. They can sway “fence –sitters” into buying. You can also use body language to calm hostile or dissatisfied clients.

Learn more about body language and nonverbal communication. Then look in the mirror. Watch how you appear when speaking on the phone or talking

with someone else. Look for the signals of openness. Watch customers and follow their cues. Smile from within and without. They'll sense this and be receptive.

Dishonest entrepreneurs will be exposed when buyer's become aware and use body language to read the insincere service provider like a book. Then these prospects will turn to you, the honest professional, for their business solutions.

Adopted from the book “Pricing Guide for Web Services.”