



## Body Language

### *Things You Say without Opening Your Mouth*

*Carol Smith*

When Mrs. Jones calls to complain about the attitude of a service rep, the service rep's repetition of the conversation may sound completely courteous. While the *words spoken* may seem friendly, what Mrs. Jones found objectionable might have been the silent message sent by the service rep's *body language*.

Spoken words may sound positive on the surface, but no matter how reassuring the verbal message, the true feelings of the speaker can sneak through in non-verbal ways. According to linguists who study communication, the non-verbal elements of a conversation form 55 percent of the message. Tone of voice contributes another 38 percent. This leaves 7 percent for the words involved.

Body language silently communicates our attitude to our customers. This visual speech can either contradict or reinforce the verbal message. We frequently send messages to customers without realizing it with our posture, facial expression, gestures, eye contact, and tone of voice. Knowledge of body language can help us reinforce our intended message. As a fringe benefit, this insight often helps us better understand the message the customer is sending.

Besides communicating a courteous attitude, body language reinforces professionalism by conveying self-confidence. Speaking with conviction in a calm voice shows customers you are comfortable with the message; often this aids in obtaining their agreement and cooperation. This holds true with colleagues, your boss, and in your personal life.

#### ***Eye Contact***

Staring holes into someone is uncomfortable and some people even consider it aggressive. Look at your customer's eyes until you know he knows you looked at his eyes. To break eye contact, look down. Since working with customers almost always includes some paperwork, look at the paperwork then resume eye contact with the customer. This is preferable to looking off to the side which can make the customer think you saw something more interesting to pay attention to.

#### ***Facial Expressions***

Show customers you enjoy your work and enjoy helping them by smiling at appropriate times. If you smile even when you are not feeling your best, your brain does not know the difference, it thinks you are happy. The result can be that you cheer yourself up. If some tense moments arise, use a calm, caring, and interested expression. Avoid signs of impatience or exasperation such as rolling your eyes.

#### ***Gestures***

The manner in which you gesture, especially during tense conversations, can mean the difference between sending a message of trust and cooperation or defensiveness and hostility. Placing your hands on your hips (especially in confrontational situations) conveys annoyance. Exhaling in a heavy, forceful way does the same. Arms across your chest suggest distrust or defensiveness.

In meetings where you are seated, avoid crossing your legs when you want to reinforce trust and cooperation. Sit or stand asymmetrically. Keep your arms open. Good communication can occur when people are open to each other; demonstrate this attitude with your gestures.

Be aware, too, of how you handle your briefcase, the blueprints, clipboard, or other items. Slamming something down abruptly can suggest you are angry when it might be better to keep that information to yourself.

### ***The Business Handshake***

A business handshake is palm to palm with the hands positioned straight up and down—*perpendicular to the floor*. If you shake hands with your palm down, that implies dominance; with your palm up, you send a message of submissiveness. Neither is appropriate. Shake hands as equals. Avoid both bone-crushing, or limp, fingertip grips. Shake about three times and let go.

### ***Posture***

Slouching and leaning send the wrong message—I'm tired, bored, not interested in you or your concerns. Military posture is unnecessary, but an alert and interested appearance is reinforced by good posture. Lean slightly into the conversation.

### ***Tone of Voice***

Your tone of voice can be interested and caring, aggressive, or submissive. Interested and caring works best for most customer situations. Notice the tone of voice of others with whom you speak and the feeling it creates in you. Then pay attention to your own tone of voice. Be certain it conveys the feelings you want it to reveal. This is especially important on the phone when other visual clues are missing from the conversation. Sarcastic or harsh tones can hurt or anger customers; sincerity and responsiveness are the attitudes you want to demonstrate.

### ***Involve Both Buyers***

Many builders have unintentionally created ill-will with the woman of the household by directing most of their conversation about construction of the home to the man of the household. Avoid this by using eye contact and gestures to keep both parties involved in the discussion. Listen to what each has to say without interrupting and answer all questions completely. Include both parties equally in all conversations.

### ***Appearance***

Besides the obvious matters of personal grooming, be sensitive about the condition of your vehicle—a coat hanger holding the muffler to the back bumper might suggest to a customer that you are inattentive to details or just as bad, that you are unsuccessful and cannot afford needed repairs. Check out your briefcase, portfolio, clipboard and other items customers see you using.

The littlest details are noted by today's customers. Make certain that you use all available tools to benefit the image of your company and ensure your success with customers.