

THE USE OF READING NONVERBAL MESSAGES FROM CUSTOMERS

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About 50 percent of communication is nonverbal. Nonverbal messages sent by customers are conveyed by body language. The five channels of body language communication are body angle, face, arms, hands and legs. No single channel can be used to determine the feelings or attitudes of customers. Salespeople need to analyze the body language pattern composed of all five channels to determine when a customer is nervous, bored or suspicious. In addition to asking questions and listening, salespeople can learn a lot from their customers' nonverbal behaviors. This article is about how salespeople can use the three forms of nonverbal communication – body language, space, and appearance – to convey messages to their customers. In business and social situations, buyers often use nonverbal cues to try to be polite. As a result salespeople often have difficulty knowing what a customer is really thinking. Salespeople can use nonverbal communication to convey information to customers. Salespeople need to know the appropriate distances between themselves and their customers for different types of communications and relationships. Salespeople should learn to use their physical appearance and dress to create a favorable impression on customers.

Keywords: body language, physical contact, appearance.

The article's JEL code: M310

Intoduction

The moment salespeople meet prospective customers, the customers are being judged by how they look and what they do. The process takes about seven seconds, but the impression lasts. Making or breaking a sale often depends on the nonverbal signals that are exchanged during this initial contact. Attire, body positions, expressions, facial movements, and eye contact are all factors to be understood and managed by the successful salesperson. Masterful negotiation results from being able to correctly read between the lines of what people are saying. One of the most powerful ways to do this is to acquire an understanding of body language. Effective negotiators recognize when they need to slow down or speed up the negotiation process. They know how to relieve anxiety and calm difficult situations. Rather than relying solely on verbal cues, however, the primary way they gauge what is happening is by watching for nonverbal behavior that signals someone's unconscious, and therefore unmonitored, motivation.

1. Reading nonverbal messages from customers

In addition to asking questions and listening, salespeople can learn a lot from their customers' nonverbal behaviors. In this article I discuss how salespeople can collect information by observing their customers' body language.

1.1. Body angle

Back-and-forth motions indicate a positive outlook, whereas side-to-side movements suggest insecurity and doubt. Body movements directed toward a person indicate a positive regard; in contrast, leaning back or away suggests boredom, apprehension, or possibly anger. Changes in position may indicate that a customer wants to end the interview, strongly agrees or disagrees with what has been said, or wants to place an order.

1.2. Face

The face has many small muscles capable of communicating innumerable messages. Customers can use these muscles to indicate interest, expectation, concern, disapproval, or approval. The eyes are the most important area of the face. The pupils of interested or excited people tend to enlarge. Thus by looking at a customer's eyes, salespeople can often determine when their presentations have made an impression. The average blink rate for a relaxed person is 10 to 20 blinks per minute (bmp). During normal conversation, it increases to about 25 bmp. Bmp over 50, and particularly over 70 bmp, indicates high stress levels.

Eye position can indicate a customer's thought process. Eyes focused straight ahead mean a customer is passively receiving information but devoting little effort to analyzing the meaning and not really concentrating on the presentation. Intense eye contact for more than three seconds generally indicates customer displeasure. Staring indicates coldness, anger, or dislike. Customers look away from the salesperson while they actively consider information in the sales presentation. When the customer's eyes are positioned to the left or right, the salesperson has succeeded in getting the customer involved in the presentation. A gaze to the right suggests the customer is considering the logic and facts in the presentation, and gazing to the left suggests more intense concentration based on an emotional consideration. Eyes cast down offer the strongest signal of concentration. However, when customers cast their eyes down, they may be thinking, *How can I get my boss to buy this product?* or *How can I get out of this conversation?* When customers look away for an extended period, they probably want to end the meeting.

Significant cultural differences dictate the appropriate level of eye contact between individuals. In the United States salespeople look directly into their customers' eyes when speaking or listening to them. Direct eye contact is a sign of interest in what the customer is saying. In other cultures looking someone in the eye may be a sign of disrespect. In Japan looking directly at a subordinate indicates that the subordinate has done something wrong. When a

subordinate looks directly into the eyes of his or her supervisor, the subordinate is displaying hostility. In Muslim countries, eye contact is not supposed to occur between men and women. In Korea eye contact is considered rude. Brazilians look at people directly even more than Americans do. Americans tend to find this direct eye contact, when held over a long period of time, to be disconcerting. Skin color and skin tautness are other facial cues. A customer whose face reddens is signaling that something is wrong. That blush can indicate either anger or embarrassment. Tension and anger show in a tightness around the cheeks, jaw-line, or neck.

1.3. Arms

A key factor in interpreting arm movements is intensity. Customers will use more arm movement when they are conveying an opinion. Broader and more vigorous movement indicates the customer is more emphatic about the point being communicated verbally. Always remember cultural differences. For example, it's rude to cross your arms in Turkey.

1.4. Hands

Hand gestures are very expressive. For example, open and relaxed hands are a positive signal, especially with palms facing up. Self-touching gestures typically indicate tension. Involuntary gestures, such as tightening of a fist, are good indicators of true feelings. The meanings of hand gestures differ from one culture to another. For example, the thumbs-up gesture is considered offensive in the Middle East, rude in Australia, and a sign of OK in France. In Japan the OK sign made by holding the thumb and forefinger in a circle symbolizes money, but in France it indicates that something is worthless.

1.5. Legs

When customers have uncrossed legs in an open position, they send a message of cooperation, confidence, and friendly interest. Legs crossed away from a salesperson suggest that the sales call is not going well. Crossing your feet and showing the bottoms of your shoe soles are insulting in Japan.

1.6. Body language patterns

The patterns of signals that generally indicate the customer is reacting positively or negatively to a salesperson's presentation. However, no single gesture or position defines a specific emotion or attitude. To interpret a customer's feelings, salespeople need to consider the pattern of the signals via a number of channels. For example, many men are comfortable in informal conversations with their arms crossed. It doesn't necessarily mean they're against you or what you're saying.

In business and social situations, buyers often use nonverbal cues to try to be polite. As a result salespeople often have difficulty knowing what a customer is really thinking. For example, smiling is the most common way to conceal a strong emotion. Salespeople need to know whether a customer's smile is real or just a polite mask. The muscles around the eyes reveal whether a smile is real or polite. When a customer is truly impressed, the muscles around the eyes contract, the skin above the eyes comes down a little, and the eyelids are slightly closed. Some other signals that customers may be hiding their true feelings are as follows:

- Contradictions and verbal mistakes. People often forget what they said previously. They may leak their true feelings through a slip of the tongue or a lapse in memory;
- Differences in two parts of a conversation. In the first part of a conversation, a customer may display some nervousness when asked about the performance of a competitor's product and give a flawless response outlining the product's benefits. Later in the conversation, the evaluation of the competitor's product may be much more convoluted;
- Contradictions between verbal and nonverbal messages. For example, facial expression may not match the enthusiasm indicated by verbal comments. Also, a decrease in nonverbal signals may indicate that the customer is making a cautious response;
- Nonverbal signals such as voice tone going up at the end of a sentence, hesitation in the voice, small shrugs, increased self-touching, and stiffer body posture suggest that the customer has concerns. When customers disguise their true feelings, they are often trying to be polite, not deceptive. To uncover the customer's true feelings and build a relationship, the salesperson needs to encourage the customer to be frank by emphasizing that she or he will benefit from an open exchange of information. Here are some comments a salesperson can make to encourage forthright discussion: *Perhaps there is some reason you cannot share the information with me; Are you worried about how I might react to what you are telling me?; I have a sense that there is really more to the story than what you are telling me. Let's put the cards on the table so we can put this issue to rest.*

2. Sending messages with nonverbal communication

The preceding part described how salespeople can develop a better understanding of their customers by observing their body language. Salespeople can also use their own body language, spacing, and appearance to send messages to their customers.

2.1. Using body language

During a 30-minute sales call around 800 nonverbal signals are exchanged. Astute salespeople use these signals to communicate more effectively with customers. For example, salespeople should strive to use positive signals. Cooperative cues indicate to customers that the salesperson sincerely wants to help them satisfy their needs. On the

other hand, salespeople should avoid using negative cues. These cues will intimidate customers and make them uncomfortable. The most effective gestures are natural ones, not those you are forcing yourself to perform. A buyer can spot nongenuine non-verbals.

2.1.1. Facial Muscles

Nonverbal communication is difficult to manage. Facial reactions are often involuntary, especially during stressful situations. Lips tense, foreheads wrinkle, and eyes glare without salespeople realizing they are disclosing their feelings to a customer. Salespeople will be able to control their facial reactions only with practice.

As with muscles anywhere else in the body, the coordination of facial muscles requires exercise. Actors realize this need and attend facial exercise classes to learn to control their reactions. Salespeople are also performers to some extent and need to learn how to use their faces to communicate emotions. Nothing creates rapport like a smile. One recent study of tradeshow attendees found that 80 percent were more likely to have a positive perception of a company or product if the seller was smiling. The smile should appear natural and comfortable, not a smirk or an exaggerated, clownlike grin.

2.1.2. Eye Contact

Appropriate eye contact varies from situation to situation. People should use direct eye contact when talking in front of a group to indicate sincerity, credibility, and trustworthiness. Glancing from face to face rapidly or staring at a wall has the opposite effect. However, staring can overpower customers and make them uncomfortable.

2.1.3. Hand Movements and Hand Shaking

Hand movements can have a dramatic impact. For example, by exposing the palm of the hand, a salesperson indicates openness and receptivity. Slicing hand movements and pointing a finger are very strong signals and should be used to reinforce only the most important points. In most cases pointing a finger should be avoided. This gesture will remind customers of a parent scolding a child. When salespeople make presentations to a group, they often use too few hand gestures. Gestures should be used to drive home a point. But if a salesperson uses too many gestures, acting like an orchestra conductor, people will begin to watch the hands and miss the words.

In terms of shaking hands, salespeople should not automatically extend their hand to a prospect, particularly if the prospect is seated. Shaking hands should be the prospect's choice. If the prospect offers a hand, the salesperson should respond with a firm but not overpowering handshake while maintaining good eye contact. Chances are that you have experienced both a limp handshake - a hand with little or no grip - and a bone-crunching grip. Either impression is often lasting and negative.

Women should shake hands in the same manner men do. They should avoid offering their hand for a social handshake (palm facing down and level with the ground, with fingers drooping and pointing to the ground). Likewise, a man should not force a social handshake from a woman in a business setting.

The salesperson selling in an international context needs to carefully consider cultural norms regarding the appropriateness of handshaking, bowing, and other forms of greeting. For example, the Chinese prefer no more than a slight bow in their greeting, whereas an Arab businessperson may not only shake hands vigorously but also keep holding your hand for several seconds. A hug in Mexico communicates a trusting relationship, but in Germany such a gesture would be offensive because it suggests an inappropriate level of intimacy. Germans tend to pump the hand only once during a handshake. Some African cultures snap their fingers after shaking hands, but other Africans would see this act as tasteless. And some Eastern cultures also use the left hand for hygienic purposes, so offering a left hand to them would insult them.

2.1.4. Posture and Body Movements

Shuffling one's feet and slumping give an impression of a lack of both self-confidence and self-discipline. On the other hand, an overly erect posture, such as that of a military cadet, suggests rigidity. Salespeople should let comfort be their guide when searching for the right posture.

2.2. The role of space and physical contact

The physical space between a customer and a salesperson can affect the customer's reaction to a sales presentation. *The intimate zone* is reserved primarily for a person's closest relationships; *the personal zone* for close friends and those who share special interests; *the social zone* for business transactions and other impersonal relationships; and *the public zone* for speeches, teachers in classrooms, and passersby. The exact sizes of the intimate and personal zones depend on age, gender, culture, and race. For example, the social zone for Latinos is much closer than that for North Americans. Latinos tend to conduct business transactions so close together that North Americans feel uncomfortable. Customers may react negatively when they believe that salespeople are invading their intimate or personal space. To show the negative reaction, customers may assume a defensive posture by moving back or folding their arms. Although approaching too close can generate a negative reaction, standing too far away can create an image of aloofness, conceit, or unsociability.

In general, salespeople should begin customer interactions at the social zone and not move closer until an initial rapport has been established. If the buyer indicates that a friendlier relationship has developed, the salesperson should move closer.

In terms of touching, buyers fall into two touching groups: contact and noncontact. Contact people usually see noncontact people as cold and unfriendly. On the other hand, noncontact people view contact people as overly friendly and obtrusive. Although some customers may accept a hand on their backs or a touch on their shoulders, salespeople should generally limit touching to a handshake. Touching clearly enters a customer's intimate space and may be considered rude and threatening - an invasion.

2.3. Appearance

Physical appearance, specifically dress style, is an aspect of nonverbal communication that affects the customer's evaluation of the salesperson. Two priorities in dressing for business are (1) getting customers to notice the salespeople in a positive way and (2) getting customers to trust the salespeople. If salespeople overdress, their clothing may distract from their sales presentation. Proper attire and grooming, however, can give salespeople additional poise and confidence. During a given day a salesperson may have to visit his or her company's and customers' offices, each of which may have a different dress code. And sometimes the buyer will have dress codes that even salespeople who visit them must follow.

Conclusion

Using nonverbal communication as a business tool means becoming conscious of what was previously a mostly unconscious process. Instead of just having a feeling about someone, the salesperson can learn which body signals led him/her to that insight - and then decide whether their conclusion was valid. Instead of just hoping that are making a good impression, the salesperson can learn the nonverbal signals of confidence and credibility.

The ability to perceive and use nonverbal cues to one's advantage gives the business person the power to be successful. Nonverbal communication includes any part of the body used by a person to send a message to another person. A person's dress, attitude and movements are all contributions to personal business transactions. These cues can help a business owner get the message across or be able to correctly interpret a message received from a customer. Often the nonverbal messages express true feelings more accurately than the actual words.

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