



# WHAT YOU'RE SAYING WHEN YOU'RE **NOT** **TALKING**

Before you open your mouth at a meeting, during a presentation or a larger speech you are already communicating a message. We make statements before we even say a word, how we dress, our posture and how we move and interact all send messages.

Like it or not, without fail or exception, your audience is judging you. They're looking at the way you are standing, how you're dressed, your eye contact, etc. and are making silent judgments about you. In fact, my own research suggests that people make decisions about you in the first seven seconds they see you.

What's so interesting when I work with clients is, many aren't even thinking about this aspect of speaking. Instead, they spend hours honing their scripts, seeking to choose exactly the right words, only to pay no attention whatsoever to the visual judgments that audiences are making about them every time they get up to speak. And guess what – with no attention given to these critical non-verbal cues, all that practice on the verbal aspect won't make up what's ultimately grabbing your audience first: your appearance.

## DRESS TO IMPRESS

Any job-seeker when looking for advice on landing the right position will no doubt see countless articles and how-tos that recycle the phrase, “dress for the job you want, not the job you have.” While those articles may be geared toward someone trying to get a job, the tenet still applies to you: your job is to win the confidence of your audience, educate them, and inspire action. Are you “dressing” for that job?

It’s more than the actual clothes – it’s how you look. The way you look makes a very strong visual statement about how you see yourself. So, how do you avoid negative first impressions and get your presentation off on the right foot without unnecessary distractions?

Look in the mirror.

No, really – look in the mirror and be as objective as you can about what you see. While you’re practicing and right before you go on, pretend like you’re an actor in a dressing room. Look into a mirror and begin to visualize how you want your presentation to play out. When looking in the mirror ask yourself the following questions:

- What do I look like? Don’t be overly critical of your appearance but be objective. Did you cut yourself shaving? Clean it up. Are you wearing a suit or ensemble that doesn’t quite fit right anymore? Find another set of clothes. Having a bad hair day? Take the time to fix your hair. Smudged makeup, food in your teeth, a spot on your blouse or suit – really look at yourself.
- Is how I look potentially distracting to my audience? Maybe you’ve dyed your hair blue on purpose to make a point – in which case that’s a part of your plan. But, what you don’t want to do miss parts of your appearance which will unintentionally distract like for instance, “Hmmm ... something’s out of place here. His tie is too short. His button is unbuttoned. Her blouse is covered with lint.” Because once an audience starts thinking about your appearance they’re not going to remember a word you say.

## ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER

While I spend a lot of time working with clients on their actual speech and how they deliver it verbally... non-verbal communication is just as, or more important in some instances. We all know the old adage, “actions speak louder than words” – and when it comes to speeches and body language, that can certainly apply. How you move your body, use your eyes, utilize your arms, etc., all send messages to those around you.

Do you come off as an open individual – interested in what you’re communicating and interested in the reactions of others? Or do you look like you’d rather be elsewhere, or that you’re unsure of what you’re saying? Either of those impressions will destroy your message and ensure that no one walks away inspired or motivated to act on your words.

One of the best TED talks available is given by Ann Cuddy, who speaks to the fascination we have with others’ body language, as well as importance of our body language and how it not only affects how others feel about us, but also how we feel about ourselves in our thoughts, feelings and physiology.

In her presentation, she shares the exploration of her hypothesis that individuals can influence their feelings and behaviors by changing their

body language. She wondered, is it possible for people to “fake it till they make it” – can someone take on certain body language characteristics to then influence their behavior? Her findings found that our nonverbals do in fact govern how we think and feel about ourselves.

Imagine the power in that. People are already reacting to your body language, but they’re also responding to how you are feeling about yourself based on the nonverbals postures you are using.

## HELP YOUR BODY HELP YOU

So, your verbal message is important, but your nonverbal is just as important – we’ve established that. But how do you make sure you’re sending the right messages when you speak? A major part of this is to figure out how to help your audience feel what you are feeling. The following are some techniques to employ that will help you maximize your body language and generate more effective communication:

- 1. Ask yourself what you want to convey.** Many people call this your “vibe.” You see it in musicians—the proverbial “rock star” vibe. Before you begin a speech, whether you’re walking into a boardroom or stepping on stage, think about the situation that you are in and make a clear choice about the attitude you want to project. Do you want to look powerful? Vulnerable? Confident?
- 2. Where and how you stand in space:** Status and power are nonverbally conveyed by height and space. Standing tall, pulling your shoulders back, and holding your head straight are all signals of confidence and competence.
- 3. Approach:** After a speech or a meeting, when the camera is off, is when the magic usually happens. You’ve given a speech, and if you provoked a reaction, someone is going to want to approach you. So smile. Your smile is a sign to the world that you are friendly and approachable.
- 4. Eyes Speak:** What are your eyes saying? The eye can be a window into your soul. If you are looking straight into someone’s eyes, it’s very difficult for them to look away. They feel an immediate attachment and they look back. Try making a practice of noticing the other person’s eye color, which is one way of staying focused.
- 5. Shake hands:** It’s the quickest way to establish rapport. It’s what we use to reach out and say, “I am happy to meet you. I’m pleased to meet you. What a pleasure.” Shake their hand, not too tight, not too loose. It shouldn’t be limp because that’s what they’re going to remember. Just a firm handshake.
- 6. Gestures:** Avoid looking rehearsed, like you’re a trained robot. Use your hands when you are giving a speech just as you would in ordinary life. Just be natural. Wherever your hands happen to end up, that’s where they end up. We’re not gymnasts, who need to stick a landing and say, “Hey, look at me, I nailed it.”

We make statements before we even say a word, not only in how we dress but with our posture and body language as well. The fact is, how you present yourself visually will affect your audience and their ability to really “hear” you. So, go ahead and take a look in that mirror...and SEE what you’re saying when you’re VERBALLY not saying anything at all.