

We often think of "communication" as the words we speak. But words convey only a tiny part of our message. If we speak with insincerity or uncertainty, our bodies will betray us. Appropriate body language can make the difference in winning or losing a sale.

"Make sure your nonverbal and verbal behavior are congruent, that they work together," says Patricia Ball, president and founder of Corporate Communications in St. Louis. "The best way to do that, of course, is to believe what you're saying. But also, have an honest feeling for the people you're dealing with. Suppose you say, 'I feel for your grief; I understand how you feel,' but you're leaning backwards, your leg is crossed away from the person, your arms are crossed. Your body demeanor is saying, 'I don't care for you.'"

By leaning forward in your seat, you indicate your concern for your customer, Ball says. "Sometimes people lean backwards because it's more comfortable, but leaning forward is a more positive nonverbal movement. It shows that you're interested in them almost enough to touch them." Other positive signals include:

- Keeping your feet flat on the floor. That, Ball says, tells the other person, "I have my feet solidly planted."
- Maintaining good eye contact. Shift your eyes periodically to avoid giving the impression of staring your customer down, but not so often that your customer will think of you as shifty eyed. When shaking a customer's hand, "Try to remember their eye color," says Ball. "It forces you to look deeply in their eyes for that moment. It helps make stronger that physical contact you are making."
- Keeping your hands vertical during a handshake. Shaking hands horizontally indicates either that you want to run the show, if you present your hand palm down, or, if you present it palm up, that you are not in charge.

Just as you mind your own body language, you need to monitor your customer's. A clenched fist or pointed finger suggests tension or anger. So does a finger under the collar. In an uncomfortable situation, a white person's skin may redden. "If you see any of these things," Ball says, "rethink what you've said and see if there's a way you can soften it or

make it more palatable to the people you're dealing with."

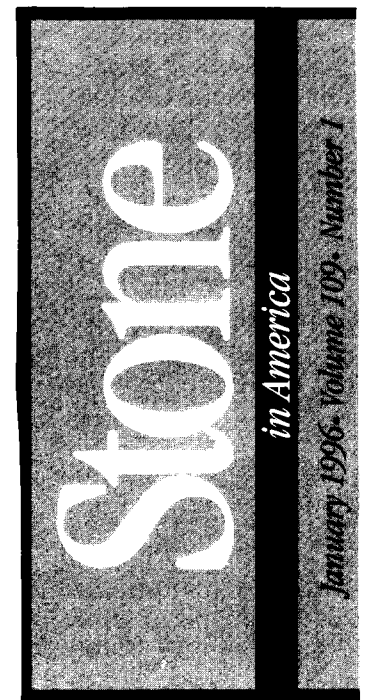
Keep in mind, though, that individual behaviors may mean nothing at all, says certified speaking professional and author Patti Hathaway, of The Hathaway Group in Columbus, Ohio. "Most people have been taught that if a person has their arms crossed, it automatically means they're resistant, they're aloof, they're disinterested. In many cases, it doesn't mean any of those things. People are just more comfortable that way."

"You look for what are called 'clusters' of clues," Ball says. "Someone scratching their eye, for example, may simply have an itch. Or it may be a nervous gesture. But combined with a wringing of the hands a couple of minutes later or with a frown, that can indicate that this person is concerned about whatever is being said."

"One very important thing to look for is an abrupt shift in movement. If the person has been leaning toward you, both feet flat on the floor, for example, and suddenly they lean back, cross their arms, cross a leg away from you ... there's a whole cluster of nonverbal clues. That means a shift in thinking—and it's a negative shift, because of the way the body moved away from you."

Gestures a woman makes might have different meanings than those a man makes. Women often nod, for example, to indicate that they're listening or that they understand what you are saying. Men, on the other hand, usually nod to show their agreement.

Rather than guess at what a customer is communicating nonverbally, you can use a technique called "mirroring," that is, *(Continued on page 17)*



Silent Selling

"What you are shouting so loud, I can't hear what you say."

Keep your hands vertical when you shake. A horizontal, palm-down style says you expect to be in charge; a palm-up style can suggest you have no power.



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imitating the customer's body language.

Move with the customer's rhythm, Ball says, but not so much as to mock that person. "What you're saying is, 'I think like you.'"

"Each person has their own unique nonverbal language," Hathaway says.

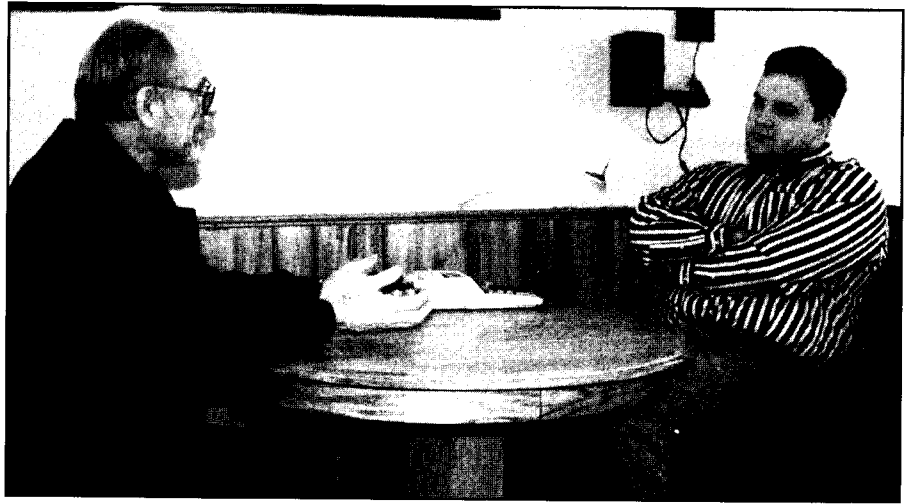
"When a customer comes in, they're not thinking to themselves, I have my hands in my pockets, or, I have my hands crossed across my chest; they just do that naturally. When you mirror someone, they don't even know you're doing that."

It seems like a tough assignment, to speak your piece as you monitor your own body language and someone else's. But you can listen to and process words faster than someone can say them. "We know from research that most speakers speak at about 150 words per minute," Hathaway says, "but we can listen and process that information at about 500 words per minute. The problem is, the salesperson is thinking ahead how they're going to sell the person without listening to what the customer wants. With mirroring, you can't really jump ahead, because you are now listening not only to the words they're saying but you're also listening to the nonverbal."

Using a similar technique, you can lead a customer to the behavior you want. Say the customer disagrees with you and makes broad gestures or waves a pointed finger and raises his or her voice. In that case, Hathaway says, "I would not mirror gestures. But I would mirror or match their tone of voice. For instance, I might say, 'Mrs. Smith, I can see that you're really upset about this. Let's sit down and talk about it, and I'll write this all out and we'll come to a resolution.' You start at the same tone of voice, then you slowly bring your tone of voice down to a level which is more comfortable and more cordial. If you've developed sufficient rapport with that customer, they will naturally begin following your lead."

In general, though, you want to follow the customer's lead. If the customer smiles, you smile. If the customer shows a more serious demeanor, you do the same. If the customer steps back from close contact, let him or her keep a distance.

Take the customer's cue even in the way you dress. "That's going to be hard," Hathaway says, "because you're going to have some people dressed up, some in



jeans. The point is, if you're dressed in a suit and a customer comes in in jeans, the simplest thing to do—if you're a man—is to take your suit coat off and loosen your tie. Because then you look like them.

"We like people who are like us," Hathaway says, "and we want to do business with people who are like us. If you can really develop a sense of rapport, people want to do business with you because they trust you. That's what mirroring is all about—developing trust."

Still, Hathaway says, you need to pay careful attention to verbal communication—especially your customer's. And that, she says, requires learning the value of silence. "Unfortunately, most of us gather our success from how much we've spoken and not from how much we've listened. The number one skill a salesperson can have is to find out what the needs of the person are, so they can give them what they need. It's important to listen.

"If you rearrange the letters in the word 'listen,'" she adds, "it's equivalent to 'silent.'" ♦

If Damon Mollenkopf, on right, manager at Fuller Monuments in Delaware, Ohio, leans back in his chair and crosses his arms, he might send the message that he's not interested in what the client has to say. If he leans forward, he signals he's paying attention.