



Unit 14

The Importance of Body Language in Sales

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Apply your knowledge of body language to improve communication
- ✓ Understand the impact of space in a conversation
- ✓ Understand the nuances of body language from a range of areas including your face, hands, arms, legs, and posture

Unit 14

Body Language: Reading Body Language as a Sales Tool

Body Language

Making the Grade

Body language is present in every communication experience that we have, even if you are speaking with someone over the phone. This course will help you to make the most of body language in your sales career and can also be applied to plenty of other experiences.

Body language is very subjective, so when you begin speaking with someone it's important to do a quick check-in, or **calibration**, to gauge the mood of the people who are in the room. Are arms crossed because the room is chilly, because people's emotions are aroused, or because there are no arms on the chairs and it's one way to get comfortable?

Fortunately, we are the grateful recipients of all kinds of research about body language, and we can apply what we've learned to our sales interactions.

We know that body language communicates a lot of our message, and it's a topic (and statistic) that is hotly debated in communication classrooms. While our body language can be effectively used to emphasize what we say, build trust during a conversation, and develop rapport, we also know that our body language can easily contradict what comes out of our mouths. Therefore, it's important for sales professionals to become skilled at reading their customer's body language and controlling their own non-verbal messages.

Have you ever played poker? If so, you may be familiar with the term "**poker face**" and a card player's determination not to reveal his hand to the other players. A "poker face" means that the face is kept blank and that the card player does not exhibit any gestures, glances, or other non-verbal signals that might reveal their hand.

These nuances of our behavior are referred to as a "**tell**" and can be read by people who know what to look for. If you are able to read the "tells" that your prospect or customer demonstrates, you'll have the ability to alter your presentation, regain their interest if it wanes, provide them with information they'd rather have, and work on building a trusting relationship.

As the environments we work in become smaller, it's also important for you to consider **cultural implications** of your own body language. We really do work in a global village, meaning that most of us

meet people from other cultures quite regularly. Since you are in the business of building relationships, it's important that you know your audience.

For example, if you tend to cross your legs so that your foot lies across your thigh, creating a number four with your legs, you end up pointing the bottom of one foot off to the side. In some cultures, this is seen as extremely rude, as if you were indicating that the other person is beneath you.

The way that you shake hands, hold eye contact, offer your business card, sit at a meeting, and carry yourself all have a bearing on what kind of relationships that you build and the amount of trust that you engender. Since we don't make purchases from just anyone, and human nature says that we will pay more for a product we can obtain from someone that we *like* rather than someone who just offers us the best price, it's important that we project a trustworthy nature and likeability.

Looking into Ourselves

List ten things related to trust and likeability that you can display in a conversation that we have not already mentioned.

Give Me Some Space!

Whether you are in a sales meeting or you are speaking with someone for other reasons, the space that you reserve for yourself and grant other people is important. The amount of personal space that we prefer has cultural aspects to it, in addition to being a behavior that we grow up with and have our own ideas about.

We can think of space in terms of circles around us. The circle closest to us is considered to be that first 12 to 18 inches around ourselves. In North America, this is considered to be **personal space**, and we generally save that space for ourselves and people that we are intimate with.

Although we tend to blur the line between personal and professional interactions, we generally want about three feet (or a little less than a meter) between us for **professional discussions**. In some cultures (Asia and Africa in particular) three feet is a minimum; if you cross that line, you may be interpreted as intimidating.

Chris Bowden, a communication expert, uses **peripheral vision** to help us judge the appropriate distance. He teaches that if you can see the other person's feet in the lower range of your peripheral vision (without tipping your head down), then you are about the right distance away.

What's Your Face Saying?

Your Face is the Base

Your face is like a palette, but instead of being speckled with brightly colored paints, it is a tapestry of signs and signals. Our mouths have a lot to say, even when they are closed. **Smiles** can range from lips pressed together and corners barely turned, to the open-mouthed, uninhibited laughter of children playing.

Downward turns of the mouth are often perceived as negative, while upward turns are seen as positive. Some people however, don't move their mouths much. In a sales meeting, it's not unusual for the prospect to try to hide their feelings about your product, meaning you have to work harder in order to see what they are not saying.

Look at their **lips**. Are they relaxed and soft, or tense and anxious? Are they pursed as though the person is thinking, or are they holding back an objection?

What about the client's **head**? If it is straight up and down and their eyes are focused, it may seem like they are listening. However, when someone is really focusing on listening, they will often tilt their head slightly to one side, almost as if they are trying to help the sound get into their ear more efficiently. You can also tilt your head slightly to indicate you are listening to them and to mirror their behavior (more on that later).

People often make unintentional gestures, even when they think they are keeping a poker face. In many years of studying human behavior and deceit, Dr. Paul Ekman and his contemporaries have isolated many small, involuntary expressions (called **micro expressions**) that can help spot a lie. (These include very small muscular changes.) While they can denote deceit, they can also be the result of nervousness, so they have to be interpreted very carefully.

Some of the facial gestures include:

- Rubbing the eye (a sign that the individual wants you to ignore the deceit they are presenting, or an itchy eye)
- Rolling the eyes (a dismissive or superior gesture)
- Looking over the top of the glasses (critical)
- Rubbing or touching the nose (don't like the subject)
- Hand or fingers in front or to one side of the mouth (can mean they are holding back something – a thought, an opinion, or even a lie)
- Stroking the chin (making a decision)
- Thumb under the chin with index finger pointing up the side of the face (critical judgment and/or negative opinion)

By understanding your client's signals, you can adjust your presentation, provide more information, or simply learn when to stop talking. This way you can redirect your energy to relationship development and building trust, rather than coming across as pushy or overbearing.

Tips to Try

Identify your most frequently used gestures. Do you do anything that could be perceived as negative or intimidating to your prospects? Eliminate these gestures from your approach and see what happens to your results!

Facial expressions that demonstrate happiness, sadness, fear, surprise, disgust, and anger, seem to be consistent around the world. When we see those expressions, we know what we are seeing. There are some differences, however, when it comes to how often happiness is displayed. It doesn't mean that the smile is different from one region to another, but it means that some communities express happiness more often than others.

Smiling is a great sales tool because it is easy to produce, although people who are skilled in reading body language can read a false smile quite easily. The false smile is characterized by the following:

- They are usually held much longer than authentic smiles.
- They may appear put together, in that the elements of the smile are added to the face separately, rather than being a natural result of the mouth curving.
- They tend to be confined to the lower half of the face, rather than including the muscles at the corners of the mouth and around the eyes.
- They may not be symmetrical. The neural pathways in a genuine smile create a symmetrical result, but a lopsided smile is produced by the face receiving mixed instructions as someone tries to hide their real feelings. Voluntary messages are telling the face to behave one way, which the individual is trying to mask their true feelings and suppress the genuine emotion.

Oddly, people tend to react to the lopsided smile as though it is a genuine smile, perhaps because we are more concerned that people smile at us than we are about the motivation behind it.

The Eyes Have It

The **eyes** are often referred to as the most expressive part of our face. We often talk about people who smile just with their mouths as less attractive than someone whose smile extends up into their eyes. It is the telltale nature of our eyes that leads some poker players to wear dark glasses. It is also a good reason for sales people not to wear sunglasses!

Eyes will react to a variety of stimuli and some of these reactions are involuntary. If you ever wondered how, as a youth, your parents caught you in a lie, it might have had to do with the size of your pupils, which can dilate during a lie. (Of course, there are plenty of other reasons for your pupils to dilate, including an adrenaline event.)

Even a slight squint can impact what the listener sees on your face. Are you lying? Or do you need glasses?

As a frame to our eyes, **eyebrows** are also very expressive. Eyebrow expressions mean different things in different places, however. You might be used to both eyebrows going up when someone reacts with surprise. However, the Inuit in Northern Canada use the same movement to indicate “yes.” (They do not nod up and down as we frequently see in North America and other areas.)

In fact, the idea of nodding to say yes is NOT universal. In some countries, like Thailand, Laos, and the Philippines, the non-verbal signal for “yes” is tossing the head backward. In Greece, nodding your head up and down means “no” (as it does in several regions in the Middle East). Make sure you know your client’s customs and check with a travel guide to get things right.

What’s Your Body Saying?

Speaking with your Hands

Do you talk with your hands? If you are nervous, do you talk with your hands more than usual? Talking with our hands can help to emphasize what we say, although being too expressive can actually distract the listener, who begins to look at your hands instead of listening to your message. In some regions, including Asia and Britain, hand gestures are not that common. In other places, such as Italy, Spain, Portugal, Russia, and countries where those people have immigrated, hand gestures are a part of the conversation.

If you tend to over-talk with your hands, you need to know that some listeners will see you as too demonstrative and perhaps even aggressive. If you are nervous, your hands may be busier than usual, so you'll need to remember to rein yourself in.

Arm and hand gestures can be used to help you to emphasize an occasional point or to express yourself. For the listener, there are some gestures that make you seem more trustworthy than others. In his work as a communication expert, Chris Bowden refers to something called the “**truth plane**” as an ideal place to have your hands and to express yourself with honesty. The truth plane is the area around the middle of your abdomen, above your navel. If you keep your hands in front of that area, you appear more trustworthy. It allows you to keep your elbows close to the side of your body and to use your hands to gesture in front of you.

If you use your hands in a **symmetric pattern**, it is a more trustworthy signal than having your hands do different things. If your hands are **too high** and obscure your face or throat, that could signal that you are not being honest. If your hands move **too far** from your body, it could be a signal that you are getting desperate to make your case or close the sale.

If your hands are clasped in front in a **downward manner**, in front of your genitals, this can signal that you are feeling vulnerable or have something to hide (as if you are protecting yourself).

Keep your hands **in front of your abdomen** for the best results, using them to emphasize without saying too much. You can fold your hands together in that position or put fingertips from one hand against the other to express yourself. Just be conscious if they start moving too much and distract from the conversation.

Tip

In our aim to be friendly, we can really mess things up. You have probably seen people use their fingers in a V to signal “peace.” Many people use this gesture very casually nowadays, almost as a replacement for hello or goodbye. However, you must be careful in how you present the gesture. Your first and second fingers should form a V, with the hand held up so that your palm faces the other person. If you turn your palm toward yourself (particularly if you are in the United Kingdom), you are making a very vulgar gesture, the equivalent to North America's flashing of the middle finger.

Getting a Leg Up

If you've ever looked at paintings of **Henry VIII**, he is often shown with his hands on his hips and elbows pointed outward. This is an aggressive stance and one that conveys dominance. In this posture, the individual tries to make their body look as wide as possible, with the feet shoulder width apart, while standing very straight. Another aggressive stance is one where the dominant person is wagging a finger

at someone. They may also have their chin jutting up in the air in a superior manner. Loud, bearish voices are also associated with dominance.

A **dominant** person tries to make themselves look BIG. A **submissive** person tries to make themselves look small. They will slouch, put hands in their pockets, keep their elbows tucked in, and stand with their feet close together. When seated, their legs remain close together, since sitting with legs and feet well apart is another dominant sign.

You need to make a conscious decision about the image you are projecting and what signals your body is sending. The position of your legs is an important part of the message that your body is sending.

If you think for a moment about the people you normally see, what are their legs doing? More importantly, **what are your legs doing?**

Someone who sits with their legs well apart is displaying dominance. Some people sit facing their customers as if they had turned a chair around and were sitting across the back of it. The other extreme of this gesture is to sit with the knees together and ankles crossed. Both are equally submissive gestures.

You have to **sit in a way that is comfortable** for you, of course. More importantly, you also need to sit in a way that is also comfortable for your client or customer. This means that you should avoid a gaping view of your crotch. As well, keep your legs comfortable, but no wider than about six inches or so, unless you are trying to aggressively control the conversation.

We recommend not crossing your ankles, even for women, since this can appear submissive. This may also expose the sole of your shoes, which is rude in some cultures. As well, keep in mind that the bottoms of our shoes are often dusty or dirty. Showing the bottom of your dirty shoe in contrast to your polished suit sends a mixed message at best. Sit so your feet are flat on the floor.

Some sales meetings will make you nervous; there is no doubt about it! Perhaps you have a new product or an important meeting where you want to make the sale. Perhaps this is an awkward client who tries to rattle you every time. If you tend to channel nervous energy through your legs by fidgeting or jiggling, you need to get that under control. Practice some relaxation techniques so that they do not see – or feel – your leg jiggling under the table. If you appear nervous to your client, you are going to erode your credibility and potentially lose business. Keep calm, at least on the outside.

Tools of the Trade

What kinds of techniques can you employ to make sure that your client does not pick up signals of nervousness or lose trust in you?

Pre-Assignment Review

Sales is about a lot more than body language, but there is no denying that our ability to understand the body language of others as well as the way that we present ourselves is very important.

As a pre-assignment, we asked you to get out in a public place for a 30 minute observation exercise and consider the questions below. Discuss your results with your group now.

Who looks really engaged in what they are doing (whether it is conversation, walking across the room, or sitting alone and quietly)?

Who looks tired?

Who looks rushed?

Who looks neutral (neither engaged, tired, nor rushed)?

What do you notice about each type of person? Observe their facial expression(s), their posture, whether they have their arms or legs crossed, what they are wearing, etc.

Mirroring and Leading

Creating Relationships

If sales follow the creation of strong trusting relationships, then we need to spend a bit of time talking about rapport and how those relationships get their start. Typically, **rapport** has been defined as a sense

of mutual understanding, respect, and friendliness. It is the presence of a co-operative relationship based on trust and honesty.

By applying what we have learned about **neuro linguistic programming** (NLP), we can take rapport one step further by explaining it as the *unconscious relationship* between two people. NLP can help you get in touch with another person so that you're speaking the same conscious and unconscious language, making it easier to create a winning outcome.

Rapport means showing someone that you understand and respect them as a human being and that you support them. This doesn't mean that you have to agree with everything that they say, but in accordance with NLP principles, you understand where they are coming from and why they believe in particular things.

It is important to understand when it is appropriate to create rapport and how deep to go. Let's say that you are a computer sales representative. You probably want to create a good rapport to help the customer meet their needs, and hopefully come to you again for more service, but since your interactions will be short, you don't need to get to an extremely personal level. And, if you're negotiating, you might need to break rapport to make a good decision.

Matching and Mirroring

Introduction

There are a few different ways to create and strengthen rapport. Once you have established a basic connection, perhaps by identifying something in common (like how computers are such a necessary tool for the work we do these days) and a mutual sense of trust (I always follow up when I say I will and arrive on time for appointments), then you can work on developing and deepening rapport.

You must use these methods in a discreet manner to avoid irritating or insulting the other person. Not every technique will be appropriate in every situation. It is important to remember that these are just guidelines, not hard and fast rules.

Matching and Mirroring

One of the easiest ways to develop rapport is to mirror or match the other person's body language and non-verbal signals. We can't stress how important it is to do this subtly so that the other person doesn't feel like they're talking to a parrot! Let's look at some of the techniques that you can try.

Body Language

It is generally very easy to subtly *match* another person's body language, such as their posture, breathing rate, and gestures. If they lean back, you might do the same (subtly, a few moments after they do so). Or, you might perform a *reciprocal movement*; that is, if you start tapping your pencil, I might subtly start tapping my foot in the same rhythm. You might even *mirror* them; if they tilt their head to the left, you might tilt your head to the right.

Of course, you should only mirror the aspects of their body language that feel natural to you.

Voice Characteristics

Never, ever attempt to do an imitation of a person's voice or to match their accent. This is almost always insulting. You can, however, mimic some basic voice features, including:

- Volume of their voice
- Speed (fast or slow)
- Tone (high or low)

Pacing and Leading

Pacing

Pacing techniques can help you achieve a deeper level of rapport. Part of pacing is the matching and mirroring techniques that we just discussed. Another part is including true statements in your conversation to give more credibility to other statements. (Research shows that you must use at least three true statements in a row for this to work.) Hearing several true statements in a row also lowers their guard and makes them more open to agreeing with you.

Imagine that you're at a seminar listening to a sales pitch.

Scenario One

The speaker starts out with, "Thanks for coming! I'm going to tell you about my new product that you'll just love."

Does that grab your attention? Are you convinced that you'll love this product? Or do you feel as though someone is trying to sell you something you do not want?

Scenario Two

Now let's try a different approach. The speaker says:

- It's a beautiful sunny morning!
- It's really early.
- We've all come here for a reason.

Let's assume that these are all true statements. Then, he might move into some more speculative statements:

- I know you're all happy to be here because I can see it in your faces.
- I imagine that you're interested in our new product.
- I bet that you would like to do more in less time.

Next, he might introduce the statements that are new to you:

- You are going to love this product.
- It comes in several sizes, so you can get the amount that you need.
- You won't want to wait to get your hands on this.

How do you feel now?

Leading

Once you have established rapport, you might be able to influence the other person's behavior without them realizing it! Test this with a small gesture, like adjusting your posture or tugging your earlobe. If the person mirrors or matches your gesture in some way, you're all set to continue leading! If not, you'll need to deepen rapport some more.

If the person that you are communicating with is now in a receptive state, you can use your body language to influence their state of mind. For example, if they seem to be disengaged from the conversation, you can try leaning forward and using more gestures (both engaging behaviors). Remember that the key is to incorporate influencing behaviors subtly and naturally so that the other person isn't offended or annoyed.

Monitoring Your Posture

Looking at Your Posture

Earlier, we mentioned how sitting and standing can make us look domineering or submissive. In this section, we'll talk about posture specifically because it is so important in terms of your sales success.

Good posture sends a likeability signal. It also looks confident (even when we don't really feel that way!). It seems that posture has become less important over the past few generations, with more people becoming obese and tending to slouch. However, in sales (as in several other careers), posture really sends a message about you. Few of us exhibit really good posture most of the time.

Often, poor posture develops gradually. Signs of **poor posture** include any or all of the following items. Often, one sign of poor posture contributes to another. Any of them can also contribute to body pain.

- Weak core muscles (the ones that stabilize your abdomen, lower back, and hips)
- Rounded shoulders
- Tilted hips (causing a swayback; visible if your belt sits lower in the front than in the back)
- Forward head posture (demonstrated when someone sits in their car and their head is forward from the headrest)

Working on Your Posture

There are lots of reasons that we develop poor posture, but one of the biggest factors is our core muscles. Weak core muscles come from a lack of exercise and prolonged periods of poor body positioning. Improving those muscles can help you develop better posture.

Before you start any exercise regime, you should consult your doctor. To motivate yourself, think of the boost to your health and your career, if you can transition from someone who has poor posture to someone who has a confident stance and takes care of themselves.

Here are some ways to improve your posture that you can incorporate into your regular exercise regime after you speak with your doctor (and perhaps an exercise therapist).

- Core strengthening exercises focus on your abdominal muscles, lower back, and hips. These can include stretches, yoga, crunches, swimming, etc.
- Rounded shoulders need support from strengthened weak upper back muscles as well as work on chest muscles, shoulders, laterals, and hips. As the upper back gets stronger and other areas loosen up, your shoulders will naturally move back where they belong.
- Tilted hips can be corrected with abdominal exercises and exercises that focus on the hamstrings and gluteal muscles.

- Forward head positioning comes from stooping during prolonged sitting, like we tend to do while watching TV, driving, and working in front of a computer or machinery. Exercise that corrects the weak and tight areas around your neck will allow you to stand and sit so that your ears are in line with your shoulders.

Dressing Up

One hallmark of the professional salesperson is the way that they dress. People who take their sales career seriously dress well. Even if they have to wear a uniform or a branded t-shirt, they make it look good. We're not saying that it's fair that people judge a book by its cover (or judge us by what we wear), but that's the way it is and we have to work with it.

Plenty of people we know really detest the idea of dressing up for anything. They will wear yoga pants and rubber garden shoes anywhere they can get away with it. That's great for going to a yoga class, but if you want to be taken seriously in your sales career, your clothes need considerable attention. This doesn't mean that if you sell yoga clothing or surfing gear that you will wear a suit. You need to pay attention to what you wear and to dress at least as well as your customers do. Stop trying to work around it or get out of it, and accept that what you wear is part of the non-verbal package.

Dressing well to complement your business role will help you focus on the other elements of your body language. Since we know that people form impressions about you very quickly, your attention to what you wear will be saying something about you before you have even opened your mouth to say hello.

List some rules of dress for your sales role.

Shaking Hands

During the important first few minutes of a new relationship, a handshake is usually the only body contact between two people. It can communicate warmth, a genuine concern for the other person, and

an image of either strength or gentleness. It can also communicate indifference and weakness. Developing a professional handshake is one of the most valuable business skills you can cultivate.

The message that you communicate with your handshake is determined by several factors.

Degree of Firmness

Your grip should be firm and friendly. A weak handshake is a really poor form of introduction, so you need to aim for something that portrays confidence but won't hurt the other person. Be considerate if you are shaking hands with someone in a receiving line and has many more hands to shake, someone wearing a lot of rings, or someone who is obviously elderly and perhaps fragile.

Dryness of Hand

We all prefer to shake a hand that is dry, but some of us also sweat more than others. While you typically don't want to obviously dry your hands before greeting someone, it is perfectly acceptable (and even expected) to wipe your hands on a napkin if you have been holding a cold glass or eating at a cocktail party.

Depth of Grip

A handshake should be completed palm to palm. Place your hand so that the web between your thumb and forefinger meets the web of the other person's hand briefly. Your hands should remain perpendicular (straight up and down) to the ground. If your palm is facing up, this may be construed as a sign of submissiveness. If your palm is on top, it can be seen as a sign of aggressiveness. Avoid merely grasping fingers, which is a sign of weakness.

Duration of Grip

The perfect handshake lasts for about three seconds. You can gently pump once or twice but it is not necessary. Pull back your hand after that contact, even if you are still talking.

Eye Contact

In North America, we expect the person shaking our hand to make eye contact with us, but this varies from one culture to another.

To master the whole introduction process, make sure you have something to say as you shake hands. You don't have to be witty; you can even use the old standard, "Pleased to meet you." These few words can set the stage for the small talk that is often at the beginning of a new business relationship.

Notes

If you use two hands in your usual handshake (enveloping the other person's hand with both of yours), the action may signal warmth and affection. However, it can also seem too familiar for an introductory handshake. Save this handshake for a meeting with an old friend.

Shaking hands is not a customary greeting in all cultures. For example, many Orthodox Jewish men and women do not touch members of the opposite sex or non-Jewish members of the same sex. Muslim women are not permitted to shake hands with men outside of their immediate family and should not be pressured by us to extend their hand.

If you meet someone and are not sure about their custom, you have a couple of polite options. You can wait until they extend their hand first. Or, you could lightly clasp your own hands in front of you or place your hand on your chest as you say, "Pleased to meet you."

Remember that part of demonstrating proper etiquette is to give a professional impression and to manage encounters to the best of your ability.

How Are You Doing?

	Less Trustworthy	More Trustworthy
Scenario A		
Scenario B		
Scenario C		
Scenario D		

Other Notes
