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Tools, Techniques, and Ideas for the Articulate Executive

Presentations

Leveraging the Power of Nonverbal Communication

Humans communicate with far more than words. Becoming adept at nonverbal communication will increase your power and persuasiveness as a business speaker.

by Gary Genard

NO MATTER HOW KNOWLEDGEABLE a speaker and how sophisticated his audience, speeches rest on a primitive aspect of communication. Humans experience basic and visceral reactions to signals they receive from other human beings. It's the reason we conduct our most important business in person; we know instinctively to rely on the clues evolution has provided to help us make decisions concerning other people's honesty and trustworthiness.

In other words, we are paying careful attention to nonverbal communication. How comfortable a speaker is in his own skin, how he stands and moves, how he looks at others in the room, his tone of voice, even the clothes he wears—together, these variables constitute a constant flow of data running underneath whatever the speaker is saying.

It's therefore useful to think of giving a presentation in terms of physical performance, because, like an actor, a speaker communicates with far more than words. So the key questions for businesspeople are: How do you shape your performance at the head of the conference table or behind the podium to reinforce the messages you want to convey? How can you ensure that the messages you broadcast physically—quite apart from anything you say—increase your credibility, authority, and persuasiveness in the minds of listeners?

The answers lie in these three key areas of nonverbal communication for speakers.

1. Vocal dynamics

Few things work better in getting an audience to listen to your message than a lively, dynamic, and empathetic speaking voice. Empathy in this sense is an "in-the-moment" quality that tells your listeners you're connecting with them on an individual and emotional level. And it's our voice that carries that message loud and clear—or not—for our audiences.

Listeners use these vocal clues to judge whether they should trust us when we speak. Susan Berkley makes the point clearly in her book *Speak to Influence: How to Unlock the Hidden Power of Your Voice* (Campbell Hall Press, 1999): "The 'first brain' of the people listening to you responds to vocal pitch, inflection, and tone," she writes, and you'll lose your listeners "if anything in your voice seems threatening, boring, phony, or hostile."

So stay in the moment with your listeners, and allow your voice to reflect your goodwill toward them and your commitment to your message. Pay attention to the four important tools of vocal delivery: emphasis, pitch variety, pacing, and rhythm. You'll not only be staying on message, you'll also be showing your listeners how much their opinion matters to you.

To imagine how this would play out in a speaking situation, listen to the difference you hear in these two sentences: "We think this is exactly the message that our customers want to hear." And: "We think this is *exactly* the message our customers WANT to hear."

Wouldn't it be beneficial to use the vocal delivery in the second example, not the first, when speaking to your sales force?

2. Visual thinking

In our media-saturated age, all speeches and presentations must include a visual component. But this goes beyond the ubiquitous and stultifying PowerPoint, beyond handouts and leave-behinds. What is now needed, given every audience member's daily and sometimes hourly immersion in media-generated images, is a "third eye" with which you as a presenter see yourself commanding the space around you and moving with power and grace.

What does it mean to command the space around you, and how do you accomplish this? First of all, keep in mind that audience members make decisions about your credibility and professionalism just by watching how you carry yourself and how you relate to their presence in purely physical terms. They know that these things are part of your "show," and they're conditioned by television and movies to consider the visual element of any performance as central to its message.

Ask yourself, then, how you move through space. Do

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you "own" the territory that becomes the stage upon which you are a physical and visual component? That is, are you expansive enough in your movements and gestures to appear confident—not only in occupying the space your physical presence requires, but in claiming the region around you as befits your status as a leader? Leaders know how to move boldly and decisively. There is nothing tentative about their movements and gestures—instead, they literally command the space through which they move.

Physical ease and confidence are also marked by a fluidity of movement, rather than stiffness, jerkiness, or statue-like immobility. When audience members ask you questions, for instance, do you welcome them into your space by your hand gestures—e.g., an open palm—or do you point to them with an outstretched finger that seems to stab the air between you?

Lean toward the audience at key moments in your presentation.

Other physical expressions that can send subtly hostile messages include:

- Nodding repeatedly as an audience member asks a question. This indicates impatience on your part and a desire to get to your answer.
- Taking a hunched-over or defensive posture in meetings or Q&A sessions. This telegraphs your discomfort with a topic.
- Using overly large and abrupt movements. This reduces listeners' confidence that you're a leader who can remain firmly in control.

Incorporating visual awareness and physical command into your presentation style will increase your confidence as a speaker—and your "onstage" presence should improve dramatically. Use this new awareness in combination with the age-old advice about maintaining eye contact with your listeners. Most of us sound more genuine when we're simply having a conversation with another person, and the sense of relationship created will allow your listeners to be comfortable asking you questions when they need to. It's just one more aspect of your focus on thinking visually.

3. Gestures and facial expressions

An ocean's worth of ink has been spilled about appropriate gestures in public speaking. And it's generally good advice. The danger is that a superficial concern with, say, hand gestures guarantees that the speaker's awareness of her physicality will remain shallow. Physical expression isn't something that can be brush-stroked onto a presentation once the content and all the other aspects of speaking style are taken care of. Instead, it's behavior that we naturally and unselfconsciously employ to amplify our message.

To demonstrate the importance of this aspect of nonverbal communication, think of the people you consider to be truly dynamic speakers. Now, how many of them are not adept at using gestures to express themselves? Well-defined (i.e., with a clear beginning and end), strong, nonrepetitive, individualized gestures are essential components of who you are as a communicator. They should be used freely and confidently.

One way to build this level of confidence is to recognize that gestures mean much more than simply allowing your hands to get into the action. By using the whole arm, from the shoulder on down, and widening a gesture, for instance, you'll include audience members at the sides of the room or auditorium. Since we tend to lean toward those we are trying to persuade, lean toward the audience at key moments in your presentation. If you want to indicate amazement, don't rely on just words. Shrug your shoulders—this is a gesture that speaks volumes. If you want to convey your frustration with the status quo, go ahead and shake your head as you outline what's wrong with the way things stand now.

Does this mean you need to become an accomplished mime as a public speaker? Of course not. It simply means using your physical gestures to express the fullness of your commitment to the ideas and emotions inherent in your speech. Very few people have trouble experiencing the thoughts and feelings that are important to their message. Yet many find it difficult to transform a level of strong personal commitment into effective speech performance. Reminding yourself that you can express yourself with the whole of your physical self, and using specific gestures to do so, will help you achieve that transformation.

Finally, don't forget your facial expressions. Your face usually reflects what you're thinking and feeling even more revealingly than your gestures—and that's a realization any speaker ignores to her own peril. The human face is a wonder of expressiveness, so put it to work! As speech expert Sue Gaulke describes the process in her book *101 Ways to Captivate a Business Audience* (Amacom, 1997): "Animate your face. Use your eyebrows, eyes, cheeks, mouth, lips, nose, neck, and teeth to express emotion."

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